

# A Certain Critical Intimacy: Reading Indian Writings on the Sri Lankan Civil War

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## Abstract

The paper is a critical evaluation of Indian writings on the Civil War in Sri Lanka. It reads Samanth Subramanian's *This Divided Island: Life, Death, and the Sri Lankan War* (2015) and Rohini Mohan's *The Seasons of Trouble: Life Amid the Ruins of Sri Lanka's Civil War* (2014) as singularly balanced reportages about people's lives in the island nation during and after the conflict. Drawing on the writings of E. Ann Kaplan, it suggests that these works resist the conventional, unfair and discriminatory politics of gazing that often entails events of large-scale civil unrest in the contemporary times. So, instead of aligning with the west in viewing and representing a south Asian country like Sri Lanka as having a necessarily violent aspect to all events of great socio-political churning in its history, the two accounts portray the Sri Lankan Civil War from a perspective that is simultaneously critical and intimate. The paper also offers careful critical commentary on the way Subramanian and Mohan render the War in the island country in their respective narratives. It brings out the similarities and differences in the style of their presentation without losing sight of the unique points that they individually bring to the table. Overall, written a couple of years after Sri Lanka has marked the tenth anniversary of the end of the Civil War, this paper is a comprehensive and thorough examination of Indian representations of the conflict.

**Keywords :** Civil War; Intimacy; Resistance; Sri Lanka; Western Gaze.

## Introduction

The two years following the terrible suicide bombings in churches and hotels of Sri Lanka on the 21<sup>st</sup> of April 2019, Easter Sunday, have reminded us that violence, bloodshed, and tragedy have been the characteristic features of the recent socio-political history of the island nation. These bomb-

ings, sadly, had the protracted Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009) fought between rebel Tamil Tigers (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the name is often abbreviated as LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government as their precursor. If estimates are to be believed, around 100,000 people lost their lives in the conflict while 20,000 or so were severely injured.

As the publication of the much-acclaimed reportage *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (1998) – by Philip Gourevitch, about the 1994 Rwanda Genocide that killed about 1,000,000 Tutsis and Hutus – would indicate, writing about large-scale socio-political conflicts and environmental disasters in the twentieth century has hardly been scarce. The Sri Lankan Civil War, too, has been no exception in this regard. Individuals, organizations, and various government and non-government agencies from within and outside Sri Lanka have reported on the conflict since its very beginning. The Indian journalist Anita Pratap, for instance, published *Island of Blood: Front-line Reports from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Other South Asian Flashpoints* in 2002 and, since then, a spate of Indian writings on the subject has been witnessed.

In fact, the present essay is a critical commentary on Indian writings on the Sri Lankan Civil War as, unlike works by native or European commentators, they seem to be appropriately balanced in their representation of the conflict. Samanth Subramanian's *This Divided Island: Life, Death, and the Sri Lankan War* and Rohini Mohan's *The Seasons of Trouble: Life Amid the Ruins of Sri Lanka's Civil War*, for example, maintain a steadiness in the tone of their reporting even as their searing account of Sri Lankan lives during and after the War touches an emotional chord with most readers. This paper reads these works as painting a simultaneously critical and intimate portrait of the conflict. It peruses them as accounts of the Civil War in the island nation that resist a conventional politics of gazing i.e., either the west looking at south Asian countries as sites necessarily prone to violence, conflict, and lawlessness or a south Asian nation justifying its majoritarian policies and actions in the name of claiming its rightful place among the most developed constituents of the world.

In this way, the paper presents a Global South look or perspective on the Global South itself. It deliberately does not seek to subject Sri Lanka and its recent past to the Indian gaze as it follows E. Ann Kaplan's suggestion in her celebrated work *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (1997) that 'look' and 'gaze' differ significantly from each other. Look, according to Kaplan, is "a process, a relation" while gaze suggests

“a one-way subjective vision.” Looking connotes curiosity towards the other, a curiosity and a desire to know that need not be oppressive all the time. Gazing, on the other hand, involves extreme anxiety as it involves no attempt to know, no attempt to engage with the other. (Kaplan, xvi-xvii)

Kaplan suggests that looking is a process but gazing can never be a process because it involves an anxiety-ridden subject who actively seeks to (re)establish ‘his’ autonomy and security in the face of what he takes to be a threat from the object. Hence, while gazing, the subject desires to place, rationalize, and ultimately deny the very existence and significance of the object. This sort of orientation, Kaplan argues, places the subject and the object in a relationship of mutually-exclusive activity and passivity respectively. (Kaplan, xviii)

Accordingly, the paper is divided into three sections. The first part, ‘Commonalities’, traces the themes and techniques that are similar in Subramanian and Mohan’s accounts. Its second section, ‘Singularities’, discusses the points that are unique to their respective narratives, and the concluding segment, ‘Variations’, underlines the differences in the way they approach their writing about the Civil War in Sri Lanka.

### **Commonalities**

Only a careful reading of Subramanian’s and Mohan’s reportage about the Sri Lankan Civil War reveals similarities in some of their concerns as, ostensibly, they seem to be very different in terms of their approach to the subject as well as in terms of the techniques of representation utilized by them. Subramanian’s account, for instance, is closer to a conventional reportage or travelogue where the narrator meets different people at different times and strikes meaningful conversations with them. Mohan’s writing, on the other hand, focuses on three individuals – Mugil (an ex-Tamil Tiger), Sarva (a former Tiger trainee), and Sarva’s mother – whose lives are caught amidst the throes of the conflict.

Yet, as it turns out, Subramanian and Mohan share a pronounced discomfort with their own position i.e., of being Indian journalists who visit Sri Lanka periodically with the express purpose of producing a narrative about lives in the country during and after the Civil War. Both reportages indicate that the Sri Lankan Tamils disapproved of the Indian government’s action of extending military support to their own government. Moreover, they were extremely disappointed with the (lack of) monetary and material assistance received from Indian Tamil politicians and private

agencies even after the conflict came to an end in 2009. The Sinhalese, on the other hand, were critical of what they perceived as India's covert support to the cause of Tamil Tigers. They believed that India assisted the Tigers in their attempt to establish a separate Tamil nation-state, Eelam, comprising mostly of Sri Lanka's northern areas (Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Mannar, northern Vanniya, southern Jaffna – colloquially referred to as Vanni) and some eastern regions. The unease and embarrassment are particularly noticeable in Subramanian's account as he is not only an Indian journalist but happens to hail from Tamil Nadu, the Indian state with the largest and majority Tamil population. No wonder then that he writes:

In the years after the war, for a visitor to Sri Lanka to be both Indian and Tamil was to evoke distrust from every quarter. The Tamils detested the Indian government for not doing more to halt the carnage of the war's last weeks, and it was difficult to fault this view. The Sinhalese loathed India for covertly training and arming the Tigers in the 1980s, and they considered India's Tamils to be meddlers who supported the Eelam cause, and it was difficult to fault these views too. I was a bloodless victim of my country's disastrous foreign policy, and I had to learn very quickly to strike the appropriate note of apology. (Subramanian, 47)

Large-scale displacement of people often takes place during events of civil unrest and natural disasters. But, the peculiar case of Sri Lankan Tamils displaced from Jaffna and its neighboring areas in the Vanni during the last few weeks of the Civil War attracts the attention of both Subramanian and Mohan. Subramanian visits the port of Kankesanthurai in Jaffna in the aftermath of the War and finds wrecked, empty houses which appear to have been deserted in a hurry by people fleeing from some powerful force. Quite naturally, he wonders as to why the houses remain unclaimed even as Jaffna had not seen fighting for a while since the conflict ended in 2009. Mohan appears to answer his query when she informs her readers that the Sri Lankan government made the thousands displaced from the Vanni move into make-shift camps which did not even have essential facilities of food, sanitation, and healthcare. Additionally, on the rare occasion that these Tamils were allowed to move out from the camp after having spent several months there, they could not return to the homes where they had lived with their families for decades. Instead, they were relocated to areas of the government's choosing for large swathes of land in the Vanni had come to be occupied by the military and the Sinhalese families after the War. Unsurprisingly, Mugil suggests that their hard-won freedom from being 'imprisoned' in the camp is not freedom at all as

they are not allowed to return to their homes – “The release was a fraud, Mugil thought. Bussing people to strange places instead of their homes was hardly granting them their freedom.” (Mohan, 218-219)

It is to their credit, however, that despite recounting the immense pain and suffering of Tamils during and after the Sri Lankan Civil War, neither Subramanian nor Mohan is swayed to condone the violence, terror, and perversion that had come to characterize the Tamil Tigers’ attempts to establish Eelam. Subramanian, for instance, notes that by 1982, the Tigers had consolidated their position as the most significant insurgent or separatist militia outfit for they outnumbered dissenters as well as competitors like the PLOTE (People’s Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam). In the Vanni, they also took it upon themselves to punish thieves, moonshiners, and rapists. In most cases, the ‘accused’ were first beaten up mercilessly and then tied to a lamppost and shot. (Subramanian, 140-141) In a similar vein, Mohan too suggests that the Tigers dealt with any contradiction, dissent, disloyalty or treachery with an unforgiving ruthlessness. It did not at all matter to them as to who the ‘deviant’ was. Death was summarily awarded to anyone who was believed to harbor a personal ambition or exhibited even an iota of critical thought. In this context, Mohan reports the specific instance of the terrible treatment that was meted out to Rajini Thiranagama by the Tigers.

Rajini Thiranagama, a former combatant, wrote about the atrocities committed by the Sri Lankan army and the Indian army stationed in the north in the late eighties, as well as similar crimes of the Tamil militias, including the LTTE. It was the Tigers who killed her in 1989. Thiranagama’s co-authors, professors from Jaffna University, fled the country, fearing the same fate. (Mohan, 91-92)

### **Singularities**

Even as the substance of Subramanian’s reportage is about the dangerous intermingling of Buddhist faith and government machinery that came about quite strongly once the Civil War came to an end in Sri Lanka, he does comment on the excesses committed by the Sri Lankan army during the last phase of the conflict. The army, as it becomes apparent from various conversations in his book, shelled entire villages inhabited by civilian Tamil populations. Bullets were showered and air-attacks conducted even in ‘no-firing zones’ like hospitals and government schools. It seemed that the army was operating with a particular vengeance accompanied with

nothing but contempt for questions of human rights and internationally agreed modalities of operation and procedure to be adopted during civil conflicts. For the Tamils and especially for those like Dr. Thurairaja who was a Tamil doctor in the Sinhalese-majority military, there was an incipient “racist tendency” in the way they had been attacked. Subramanian reports the circumstance when this feeling was shared with him thus:

...But human rights violations definitely happened during the last days of the war. In all that shelling, they were trying to wipe out the next generation of Tamils. There’s a racist tendency, even now, that is characteristic of a majority community. It’s as if the Sinhala mentality is geared to wipe out Tamils. Even when I was treating Sinhalese patients down south, they would say: “We need to bomb them all.” I’d get annoyed, but I’d say nothing. (Subramanian, 60)

The alleged mentality in the Sinhalese to cleanse Sri Lanka ‘pure’ by erasing all traces of Tamils, as implied by Dr. Thurairaja, is also mirrored in the manner in which the country’s government dealt with the Tigers who were captured during the Civil War. Subramanian indicates that all senior Tigers were summarily put to death. The island nation was not at all tolerant of even those who had surrendered. It perceived all the Tigers as a disease, as cancer that could spread and corrupt the entire body-politic. The only means left, in such circumstance, to arrest the growth of the festering tumor was to perform an absolute chemotherapy which, of course, had to be denied in all official government statements and on all public fora. (Subramanian, 261)

The coming together of Sri Lankan military triumphalism and Buddhist socio-political aggression had begun in 2006 but the combination came to acquire threatening fruition three years later with the end of the Civil War. Subramanian identifies primarily two aspects that enabled the effective functioning of this interaction. The first is the way the Sinhalese-dominated government machinery covertly supported the (re)claiming of the entirety of Sri Lanka’s ‘glorious’ past as Sinhalese-Buddhist. And, the second is the manner in which Buddhist extremist political groups and organizations like the Bodu Bala Sena, Sinhala Ravaya, and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) came to attack citizens belonging to religious and ethnic minority groups in Sri Lanka, especially the Muslims and Christians.

The case of the Buddhist ruins at Kandarodai, which are believed to be more than two thousand years old, presents an instance of the past becom-

ing a bone of contention in the post-War context in Sri Lanka. The question as to who built the ruins has come to matter much. Even as there was almost no public discussion about the ruins before the conflict ended in 2009, scholars and archaeologists had always believed them to have Tamil origins. They suggest that either Kandarodai was a Tamil settlement or it had been established by Dravidian settlers who came from south India in pre-Christian times. In fact, till the 10<sup>th</sup> century or so, there was no mention of the ruins in any of the Sinhalese texts. Yet, from 2009, Buddhist scholars and self-proclaimed historians have repeatedly asserted that the ruins at Kandarodai were built by the Sinhalese and not the Tamils. In this context, Subramanian astutely remarks that the victory of the Sri Lankan army in the Civil War has only emboldened Buddhist-Sinhalese attempts to make such patently illogical and absurd claims about the country's rich heritage. (Subramanian, 194-195)

As Subramanian underlines, the coming together of the Buddhist and the Sinhalese-dominated government machinery in order to sustain supremacy and mastery over minority ethnic and religious groups like the Tamils and the Muslims in post-War Sri Lanka is actually a socio-political gesture seeking to establish its legitimacy by drawing from the *Mahavamsa*, the great chronicle of Sri Lankan Buddhism. In this text, not only does the Sinhalese king Dutugemunu kill and thus triumph over his Tamil counterpart Elara, he is also advised by Buddhist monks that he need not be anguished over the carnage that he unleashed on the battlefield. He is told, in fact, that the Tamils "were heretical and evil and [fittingly] died as though they were animals" and by enabling the event, he had only further consolidated the cause of the great Buddhist faith. (Subramanian, 185-187)

The War left the Sri Lankan Tamils defeated, exhausted, and extremely insecure. As they no longer posed any credible threat to the powerful Buddhist-government combine, Muslims and Christians came to be targeted. Chauvinist Buddhist right-wing groups portrayed the Muslims in particular as eroding the island nation's heritage through their 'demonic' activities. What was especially disappointing, as Subramanian recounts, was that no one in Sri Lanka stoop up against such groups and they operated with total politico-cultural impunity. There thus prevailed an atmosphere of hatred and hostility in the entire country and Subramanian's deliberate, inventory-like description, evokes the same most effectively:

The newspapers were filled with reports of violence and with pronouncements from some Buddhist leaders on how they expected Muslims to behave. The JHU demanded the closure of

Muslim-owned butcheries that sold beef and forced the government to ban the certification of halal meat. The Bodu Bala Sena attacked a popular Muslim-owned clothing store in Colombo. Other anonymous groups painted pigs on the walls of mosques. Some protestors stormed into the Sri Lanka Law College in Colombo, claiming that its examination results were doctored to favour Muslims. Calls went around for particular mosques and Muslim shrines to be razed, ostensibly for being situated too close to Buddhist temples. Even proximity was unacceptable now. In the town of Dambulla, the chief priest of a local *viharaya* led a protest to 'relocate' a mosque, and he warned in the process: 'Today we came with the Buddhist flag in hand. But the next time, it would be different.' No one stood up to these threats; Sri Lanka absorbed them passively and sailed on. (Subramanian, 222-223)

Unlike Subramanian who focusses on the threatening proportions acquired by the coming together of chauvinist Buddhist elements and the government machinery in the aftermath of the Sri Lankan Civil War, Mohan's account is a subtle unravelling of the alienation that the Tamils in the island nation came to feel even from official governmental legislation and related constitutional apparatus. Mohan identifies two facets to this alienation. The first is the recognition of Sinhala as the only official language of Sri Lanka—a provision that was in force till 1987—and the official status accorded to the Sinhalese as the 'original' inhabitants of the country. The second aspect is the passage of 'majoritarian' and 'draconian' legislation like the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA, passed temporarily in 1979 and made permanent in 1982) that allegedly granted the government the impunity to keep its opponents and other dissenters in remand prisons or police stations for three consecutive months without even producing a charge-sheet.

To emphasize the sheer discordance that the 1956 law establishing Sinhala as the only official language of Sri Lanka produced among the Tamils in the rest of the country, Mohan relates to her readers the great sense of security and hope that existed among the inhabitants of the Vanni even as they enjoyed only a little autonomy in real terms. She writes:

... Vanni Tamils felt no language-based anxiety about going to the police, politicians or government agencies; miscommunication and discrimination were not everyday experiences as they were for Tamils living in the rest of the island. Only a handful here even spoke Sinhala, the national language and the only official



one until 1987. Few had even met a Sinhalese person other than the occasional government official.

Here they were among their own. Within these borders, unlike in the Sri Lankan nation, Tamils were the dominant community... (Mohan, 25-26)

Sarva's arrest in 2008, just before the Civil War ended in the subsequent year, under the provisions of the PTA gives Mohan the opportunity to throw light upon the systematic abuse that the detainees had to endure at the hands of the police. She underlines the fact that once the three months of detention allowed by the Act were over, the police invariably demanded more time to gather evidence and furnish the charge-sheet. They repeated the stratagem every two weeks and, as a result, detainees often spent about six months in remand without even being informed about what they were accused of. As it turns out, the manner in which the police were granted these fortnightly extensions of their detainees is a story that makes most of Mohan's readers shudder in horror. She reports:

In this basement, a man of authority sat on an old wooden chair at a metal table covered with files. In the sick white glow of a humming fluorescent light, he scanned the files and called out names or numbers. As the prisoner called came forward, the seated figure glanced up almost imperceptibly and stamped a sheet of paper. Next!

The process took a whole day, as several chains of prisoners were brought in and took turns going to the front. Through it all, the chains stayed on their wrists. No toilet breaks were allowed, all meals for the day were cancelled, no talking was tolerated. It was a soul-deadening exercise, exhausting and disorienting. Every time, Sarva imagined that the stamp was on his neck, like red-hot metal branding cattle. The prisoners called this *paathalam*, the hell underground. (Mohan 2014, 103-104)

## Variations

At the beginning of the first section of the present essay, it has been underlined that finding similarities between Subramanian and Mohan's accounts of the lives of peoples in Sri Lanka during and after the Civil War is not easy for their interests and approaches are different. The statement seems to suggest that the substantial variation in the reportages is in terms of their content. Nothing could be farther from the truth, in fact, as such

content-related variance is inextricably linked to the form and stylistics of the two narratives.

To draw an analogy from the distinction between the hedgehog and the fox made popular by Sir Isaiah Berlin, Subramanian's account appears to resemble the hedgehog at work. Despite the wide canvas of Sri Lankan lives that he paints and the sheer variety of characters that he meets and converses with, he struggles to reconcile all of his experiences under the umbrella of some large and accommodating truth. Unsurprisingly, he states at the very beginning of his narrative that:

This was how Sri Lanka sucked me deeper and deeper: by discussing itself incessantly. The more I listened to Sanjaya [Subramanian's friend and key associate in Sri Lanka], and then to others, the more the country and the history of its war revealed itself to me. A bigger, clearer picture always dangled just out of reach, around the corner of another conversation or two. Sanjaya made me realize that all I wanted to do was to wander around the island and talk about the one subject that everyone wanted to talk about. The war loomed too close to hand and too enormous for my senses to grasp it properly, like a wall that spread away to infinity in every direction. But in conversations, I heard stories of individuals—fantastic or tragic or melancholic or even happy stories, stories that had human proportions, and that could be multiplied in my head to gain a larger truth. (Subramanian, 16)

Mohan's account, however, does not betray any anxiety to establish "a larger truth" that would encompass the varied experiences of the three lives whose tenuous trajectories she traces with admirable tenacity and sincerity. Even as the ambit of her work might be narrower in comparison to Subramanian's, she remains open to the variety of experiences in the distinctive journeys of Mugil, Sarva, and Sarva's mother including, among others, of falling in love, of enduring betrayal, and of going through immense physical and emotional suffering. Therefore, if one were to persist with the hedgehog and fox analogy, her work resembles that of the fox—the fox who does not seek to fit the many things he knows about within the framework of a consistent and systematic worldview.

## **Conclusion**

There is indeed unmistakable, poignant, and even terrible irony in the fact that Sri Lanka marked the tenth anniversary of its victory over the

Tamil Tigers in the same year that its churches and hotels were bombed on Easter Sunday. The cruel, pathetic, and cowardly bombings not only disturbed peace and security in the country but also were a reminder that the emotional and political harmony that the government claimed to have established since the end of the War was only an empty boast. This sad circumstance reveals the truth then—the truth that the ‘victory’ announced by the island nation’s government in 2009 was not an exercise in modesty. The affirmation was not the sincerely kept promise of seeking a reconciliatory path ever since. Rather, the statement betrayed the pride felt by Sinhalese-Buddhists for they had finally vanquished their arch enemies, the (Tamil) Tigers, and were now going after (other) minorities in the country, especially Muslims.

In their balanced, critical, and yet heart-rending portrayals of people’s lives during and after the Civil War in Sri Lanka, Subramanian and Mohan have also underlined poignant ironies that came to characterize the post-War context in the island nation. Subramanian, for instance, has noted that the end of the War did not necessarily bring an end to the violence in the country as different socio-political elements continued to oppress religious and ethnic minorities with unfettered impunity. In a similar vein, Mohan rightly suggests that the War ended up blurring the line between ex-Tiger combatants and non-combatants as the army in the Vanni considered non-combatant Tiger supporters as active participants in the Tigers’ military operations.

Subramanian’s and Mohan’s reportages then, it can be said on the basis of the above discussion, can come to serve a dual purpose. They contain valuable lessons for how a postcolonial polity like Sri Lanka may handle a significant post-conflict situation in a way that does not alienate any segment of its population. The accounts also detail how a postcolonial national formation like Sri Lanka can (re)imagine its precolonial and colonial pasts without making it exclusionary, without making it appear as if the entirety of what happened in the past has been nothing but the vanquishing of the minority at the hands of the majority. If the powers that be in Sri Lanka were to pay heed to such a suggestion, the country will not only make progress economically but also strengthen its moral, social, and political fiber.

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