

Ethnic Conflict and Literary Perception: Tamil Poetry in Post-Colonial Sri Lanka

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The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has had a direct impact on literary production in Tamil, comparatively greater than in the case of Sinhala. This is largely due to the fact that it has been the Tamil-speaking communities who were most directly and severely affected by the ethnic conflict throughout the postcolonial period.

The Tamil language is shared by three distinct ethnic communities in Sri Lanka, namely the Sri Lankan Tamils, the Muslims and the Malayaha (= hill country) Tamils, with their own dialect variations. This linguistic pluralism and the associated ethnic distinctions reflect in literary production too. Hence, when we speak of Tamil literature or Tamil poetry in ethnically divided contemporary Sri Lanka, the term encompasses a multi-ethnic socio-political context and reality.

In my essay, I briefly discuss the historical background of the ethnicity formation and polarization of the Tamil-speaking communities and their literary production, with special reference to poetry.

Sri Lankan Tamils: Linguistic Nationalism, the Separatist War and Poetry

The Sri Lankan Tamils are among the early settlers in this country (Indrapala 2005), coexisting and interacting with other social groups from the beginning of the historical period. Although Tamil has coexisted with Sinhala from the early historical period in Sri Lanka, a continuous Tamil literary history can be dated only from the 13th century. However, a few poems appearing under their author's name, *Eelaththu Puuthan Theevanar* (Puuthan Theevan from Elam [Sri Lanka]) are found in the Sankam anthologies that belong to the first three centuries of the Christian era. Even though the author's Sri Lankan identity cannot be firmly established from his poems, we can assume that there probably would have been Tamil literary activity in ancient Sri Lanka, since we have strong archaeological evidence for the existence of a rich megalithic culture parallel to the one found in South India that produced a rich amount of classical Tamil poetry during that period (Ragupathy1987). Apart from this, a couple of Tamil verses are found among the *Sigiri Graffiti* that

belong to the period from the 8th to the 10th centuries, providing further evidence for the existence of Tamil literary activity in the country before the 13th century (Paranavithana 1956).

Although there is a fairly long history of Tamil literature in Sri Lanka, there is no evidence of an ethnic consciousness or conflict finding expression in Tamil literary works until the late 19th century. Ethnic awareness and ethno-nationalisms emerged in the form of religious and cultural revivalism in Sri Lanka from the mid-19th century (Wilson 2000). Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic revivalist movements were active in formulating and consolidating ethnic identities with political overtones in the respective communities. As far as Tamil writing was concerned, Arumukanavalar and Siddhi Lebbe played a major role in this respect in the late 19th century.

Ethnic consciousness and polarization based on political interests gradually developed in Sri Lanka during the first half of the 20th century owing to the introduction of universal franchise and electoral politics in 1931 under the Donoughmore Constitution (Russell 1992). Political opportunism led political parties to mobilize the people on ethnic lines. The mishandling of ethnic issues by the parties for their immediate political benefit intensified the conflicts and paved the way for the emergence of political militancy, terrorism and civil war in post-colonial Sri Lanka. The Official Language issue was one such mishandling, leading shortly after Independence to the first ever Sinhalese-Tamil riots and ethnic polarization (Kearney 1967). The Sinhala Only Official Language Bill was passed in Parliament in June 1956, and it was a turning point in the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. From the early 1950s, Sri Lankan Tamils were politically mobilized against the Sinhala Only official language policy of the major Sinhala political parties, which, giving into pressure from chauvinist factions, changed their earlier policy of Sinhala *and* Tamil as official languages.

In the general election held in 1956, the Official Language Policy was a major issue and the MEP (Mahajana Eksath Peramuna – Peoples' United Front) led by S W R D Bandaranaike, who promised to implement the Sinhala Only policy within 24 hours if he came to power, won the election with a great majority, while the Tamil Federal Party (FP) swept to victory in the (largely Tamil-speaking) North and East. Tamil nationalism emerged thereby as a political ideology of the Sri Lankan Tamils. In Colombo and the North and East, the FP organized agitations and *hartals* against the government's policy which were violently suppressed by the police. In one such incident, I remember, a promising young poet, Eruvil Moorthy from Batticaloa, lost both his eyes in the firing carried out by police in front of the Kachcheri in 1961.

Increasingly, Tamil literature, especially Tamil poetry, in Sri Lanka began to reflect the ethnic sentiments of the Tamils and linguistic nationalism became a dominant issue in their articulations. Throughout the period from the 1950s to the early 1960s, which includes the race riots of 1958, hundreds of Tamil poems reflecting with verbal militancy the poets' devotion to their language and the ideology of linguistic nationalism were produced by a number of poets from the North and East, including Mahakavi, Murugaiyan, Neelavanan, Sillaiyur Selvarajan, Rajabarathi and Kasiyananthan. *Suthanthiran*, the official weekly of the Federal Party, was the main vehicle for this form of nationalist writing. Some of these poems were included in a few anthologies under the titles *Thamil Enkal Aayutham* (Tamil is our Weapon), *Uyir Thamilukku* (Life is to Tamil) and *Senthamil Selvam* (The Treasure of Tamil), published in the early 1960s.

The main themes of these poems were the poets' devotion to the Tamil language, protest against the domination of Sinhala and the victory and the freedom of Tamil and the Tamils. Some of the titles and lines of these poems given below may give the reader an idea of the content and the verbal militancy of these poems.

1. *Urimaik kuralai thirukath thakumoo*

Is it possible (for you) to crush the voice of rights?

2. *Padaiyoodoru padayaay nada*
March with an army as an army

3. *Paathi Ilankaiyai aalka*
Rule one half of Lanka

4. *Saavathu poorinil sarkkarai enroru sankoli keedkuthada*
My friend, I hear the sound of a conch
Telling
Death in war is sweet.

5. *Parayelaam athirka nam palamelaam thiralkave*
Paathinaa denkaluk kaakaven relukave

Let the drums sound, let our strengths gather
Let us rise, to claim our half of the land.

The poet Neelavanan in one of his poems tells his wife, referring to his son by his name, to send him to the front if he dies in the battle to win the rights of Tamils. To many of the poets, the denial of their language rights was equal to the denial of their very existence and it was their duty to fight unto death for them. They used some of the motifs and diction of the heroic poetry of the *Sangam* age in their poetry. They were also motivated by the language devotion and linguistic nationalism cultivated by the Dravidian movements in South India against Sanskritization and Hindi domination. The poets created an imaginary warfare, and aroused the people using highly sensitive and emotive language and rhythmic verses to induce them to involve themselves in the battle. Tamil Arasu (the Tamil State), the political agenda of the Federal Party, was transformed into an aesthetic image in their poems.

However, the poetry of the linguistic nationalism of the '50s gradually came to an end after the 1958 riots. The reason might be the poets' realization of the inhuman and violent consequences of the ethnic political upsurge and the developing progressive trend in mainstream politics from the early '60s with the coalition of the left political parties. It is interesting to note that none of the major poets like Mahakavi, Murugaiyan and Neelavanan wanted to include their poems of linguistic nationalism in their poetry collections published later during their life time. This exclusion indicates a change in their political ideology. [1]

Long before the entrenchment of Tamil nationalism as a political force and the cultural expression of the Tamils in the 1950s, Marxism and left wing politics had enjoyed widespread popularity among the Sri Lankan literati, dating from the '30s. The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) was formed in 1935. Owing to ideological differences, a breakaway group, the United Socialist Party was formed in 1940 and it was renamed the Communist Party of Ceylon in 1943. There was a strong left political and cultural tradition among the Tamils from the late 1930s. A. Vaithialingam, P. Kandiah, M. Karthikesan and N. Shanmugathan were some of the founders of the communist movement in Sri Lanka and among the Tamils.

The impact of Marxist ideology on Sri Lankan Tamil literature can be seen from the late 1940s. A.N. Kandasamy and K. Ganesh were the pioneers of progressive writing in Tamil. The Progressive Writers' Association was formed in 1946 on the initiative of K. Ganesh and P. Ramanathan and it was reactivated in 1954. Ilankeeran, S. Ganesalingam, K. Daniel, Dominic Jeeva, N. K. Ragunathan and Neervai Ponnaiyan were the prominent writers who wrote fiction in the '50s and '60s on the themes of class and caste contradictions from an avowedly Marxist perspective.

There was an important change in the political content of Sri Lankan Tamil poetry during the 1960s and 1970s. Marxist or Socialist ideals were in the foreground of the literary activities in Tamil during this period owing to the change in the political climate in the country. Marxism and Maoism were playing a prominent role in the post-colonial Third World during this period, in the struggle against imperialism and its local allies. Sri Lanka was not an exception to this political trend. In the '60s, the left parties that chose the parliamentary path to socialism joined the major Sinhala nationalist party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) to form a coalition, and this came to power in 1970. The numerically minority Maoist groups which rejected the parliamentary path to socialism adopted Mao's concept of New Democracy and propagated a revolutionary path to achieve socialism through uniting workers and peasants across ethnic boundaries. It was during this period that thousands of Sinhala youth, mainly from the rural poor in Sri Lanka, took up arms to topple the government, many sacrificing their lives for their revolutionary idealism.

Most of the writers and poets were under the influence of socialist ideals in varying degrees and aligned with or were sympathetic to the left movements. They identified themselves as progressive writers. The Sri Lanka Progressive Writers' Association played a leading role in propagating Marxist ideals in Tamil literature. They believed in social equity, ethnic integration and national unity. They also firmly believed that socialism was the only solution to the ethnic conflict. Social issues such as caste oppression, class contradiction and economic exploitation were some of the main themes in Tamil fiction and poetry during this period. Pasupathy, Supaththiran, Puthuvai Ratnathurai, Saarumathi, Shanmugam Sivalingam and S. Sivasegaram were the prominent poets of the communist movement of this period. They thought that the proletariat would unite across ethnic boundaries on the basis of class consciousness and fight for their liberation. The following poem by Puthuvai Ratnathurai is an example of their writing. [\[2\]](#)

*Podimenike will take up the gun in Matara
Kandiah will take up the rod in Mathakal
Cassim Lebbe will take up the knife in Nathandi
The unwilting philosophy of Karl Marx will guide them
The toiling proletariat will reach the heights
Definitely, wait and see!*

Here the personal names Podimenike, Kandiah and Cassim Lebbe symbolize the working class of the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim ethnic groups, respectively, and the poet proclaims that they will join hands to establish the socialist state.

However, Tamil nationalism in politics did not fade away during this period. In fact it was alive and some times burst into flames because of the failure of successive governments to address the ethnic issue and because the Tamil nationalist party wanted to keep that issue alive for its political survival. Parliamentary opportunism played a major role in activating Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms during this period. The parliamentary left parties also compromised their socialist ideals, allying with Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism for their political survival. The 1972 constitution, drafted by the leftist Minister, Colvin R de Silva, was patently discriminatory with regard to religion and language. For the first time in the post-colonial Sri Lankan history, Buddhism was constitutionally elevated to the status of state religion, transforming the secular nature of the earlier constitutions; Tamil was not afforded the status even of a national language. In the same year, the Government adopted a policy of standardization for university admission, which severely affected the Jaffna youth. These developments paved the way for the emergence of Tamil militancy in the North and separatism among the Tamils. In 1976, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) was formed and declared its policy of a separate Tamil state, Eelam. In the general election of 1977, the Tamil nationalist TULF swept to victory in the North and East and became the main opposition party in parliament. The incumbent left-oriented United Front government was severely defeated, obtaining only 8 seats, not

because of their ethnic policy but because of their economic failure, and the right wing United National Party (UNP) overwhelmingly won the election, with 80% seats in parliament. This was the first and last instance when the rival Tamil and Sinhala nationalisms were in opposing positions in parliament.

The UNP, with its vast majority in parliament, had a good opportunity to address the ethnic issue and resolve the conflict. Unfortunately, this did not happen and the conflict developed into a protracted separatist war that took thousands of human lives, displaced nearly a million people internally and externally, and seriously damaged ethnic relations, economic development, democracy and human rights in the country.

1977 was a turning point in the ethnic conflict and Tamil literary production in Sri Lanka. Tamil nationalism became the dominant ideology in politics and literature, marginalizing the leftist ideology that was prominent in the 1960s and early 1970s.

1977 was the beginning of a second phase of the frequent anti-Tamil riots that took place after 1958. Jaffna town was set on fire and looted by government security forces. The riots spread to the South. Tamil refugees were sent to Jaffna by sea. Sinhala students and lecturers from the University of Jaffna and the Sinhala civilians who were settled in Jaffna were moved to the South. The physical separation of Tamils and Sinhalese started. The Government introduced the repressive Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) in 1979, giving the armed forces unlimited power to finish off terrorism in Jaffna by arresting, abducting, torturing and killing hundreds of youths and terrorizing the people in a short span of time, events that fertilized the ground to grow militant movements in the North and East. The 1977 riots were followed by further riots in 1981. Violence directed against Tamils reached its peak with the 1983 pogrom. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and other militant groups emerged as strong separatist forces after 1983, with training and arms provided by India. Ultimately, through suppression of the other militant groups, the LTTE became the strongest force, starting after 1985 to control certain "liberated areas" and entering into a war with the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in 1987. For more than the past two decades the war between the LTTE and the Government forces has continued, resulting in hundreds of thousand of deaths and the displacement of millions internally and externally.

This was the political background for the emergence and development of a new genre of poetry of political protest in Sri Lankan Tamil literature from 1977 onwards, different in form and content from that of the poems of linguistic nationalism written in the 1950s.

The literary landscape changed drastically in the 1980s. Tamil nationalism took over Marxist ideology in literature. Some of the extreme left poets transformed themselves into extreme Tamil nationalists. For example, Puthuvai Ratnathurai, a 'revolutionary poet' of the '70s became a bard of the LTTE, the extreme Tamil nationalist militant group, in the '80s. Some of them became frustrated and even committed suicide. Subathiran, a committed poet of the communist movement was depressed by the changed political environment, became an addict, got involved in a petty family dispute and ultimately committed suicide. Others, for instance Sivasegaram and Shanmugam Sivalingam, managed to keep a balance and wrote poems critical of nationalism, ethnic chauvinism, violence and war.

I wrote two poems in Tamil entitled *The Devil of the Gun* and *the Fate of Man and Yesterday's Evening and Today's Morning* immediately after the atrocities committed by the security forces in Jaffna in 1977. These were some of the very first instances of the genre of the poetry of political protest in Sri Lankan Tamil literature. Following these, during the past three decades thousands of poems and more than a hundred poetry collections were published in Sri Lanka and abroad, leaning towards a mixture in varying degrees of the ideology of Tamil nationalism with Marxism. A large

number of poets of the younger generation, male and female, emerged from the late 1970s on. V. I. S. Jayapalan, Cheran, K. P. Aravindan, Balasooriyan, Urvashi, Selvi and Sivaramani are some of the prominent names among them. Writers and poets also emerged from the militant movements.

The first collection of such poems, Maranaththul Vaalvoo (Let Us Live Amidst Death), consisting of 82 poems by 31 poets, was published in 1985 (Cheran, et al). The main editors of this anthology, R. Cheran and A. Yesurasa, were two of the prominent poets of the younger generation that Tamil nationalism and the ethnic conflict produced. Of the 31 poets included in this anthology, only three are from the East, one is from Malayalam and one from the Muslim community. The others are from Jaffna. This shows that the poets from the North dominated the production of protest poetry.

Below I give few examples of the poems of political protest.

The first one is by A. Yesurasa, an important poet from Jaffna who started writing in the late 1960s. He also edited, for more than a decade, a Tamil literary journal *Alai* (Waves) promoting Tamil nationalism in literature which had a pronounced impact on modern Sri Lankan Tamil writing. His poem *Your Fate Too* tells the reality under the reign of the PTA in the North and the feelings of the people. [3]

Your Fate Too

You stroll back home
from the beach
or may be from the cinema.
Suddenly a rifle cracks
boots scamper away.
You'll lie dead
on the road.
In your hand
a dagger sprouts
a pistol too may blossom.
"A terrorist,"
You'll be dubbed.
No one
dare ask questions.
Silence freezes.
But
deep in the people's mind
indignation bubbles up.

(trans. A J Canagaratna)

Cheran is one of the prominent poets of the younger generation who emerged in the '80s. His was among the strongest poetic voices of protest against state oppression in the 1980s. He was also critical of the internal conflicts among the militant groups and of their violations of human rights. His poem, *Amma, Do Not Weep*, expresses the angry mood of an oppressed people. The inter-textual reference to the anklet and the Pandyan king from the *Silappathikaram*, a classical Tamil epic, gives the poem a Tamil nationalistic texture.

*Amma, do not weep.
There are no mountains
to shoulder your sorrow*

*no rivers
to dissolve your tears.*

The instant he handed you
the baby from his shoulder,
the gun fired.

On your tali, lying there in the dust,
blood spread.

In the heat of the splintering bomb
All your bright dreams withered.

What splattered from your anklet
were neither pearls
nor rubies:
there is no longer a Pandiyan king
to recognize blood guilt.

On sleepless nights
when your little boy stirs restlessly
screaming out, "Appa".
what will you say?

When you pace the night, showing him the moon
and soothing him against your breast,
do not say,
"Appa is with God."

Tell him this sorrow continues
tell him the story of the spreading blood
tell him to wage battle
to end all terrors.

(trans: *Lakshmi Holmström*)

Another prominent poet of protest, S. Vilvaratnam, has recorded many of the violent incidents against the Northern Tamils in his poems. *The Grief-stricken Wind*, a somewhat longer poem by Vilvaratnam, narrates the story of a lonely, deserted village, left with the corpse of an elderly person after a military strike. It is a narration about the confused wind searching with desperation for the human smell in the village. Here are its last few lines.

.....
*How could the wind know
The people
Had sneaked out of the village
Their belongings bundled in gunnies*

In the dead of the night
When it was slumbering?
Sighing deeply
The wind went back inside
And hunching like a corn

Sat beside the corpse.
Then it came out
Burying its face
A thorny bush peeping into the street
The wind walked slowly
Like a grief-stricken mother
Searching for her runaway son.

(trans: A J Canagaratna)

The well-known poet, V. I. S. Jayapalan, began to write in the mid-1970s. He started within the left movement and became a Tamil nationalist with leftist ideals in the 1980s. His voice for Tamil-Muslim unity, and against violence directed against Muslims is very strong. He became a wandering Tamil diasporic poet in the late 1980s. *The Song of a Refugee* is one of his collections of poems about his refugee life. The lines given below are taken from his poem *The Memory of Autumn* and poetically depict the agony of the displaced life of the Tamils.

.....
My son in Jaffna
My wife in Colombo
My father in Vanni
At this old age
My mother in Tamilnadu
Relatives in Frankfort
One sister in France
But me
In Oslo
As a camel that has strayed to Alaska losing its way.
What is our family?
Is it a cotton pillow
Torn and flung into the wind
By Fate the monkey?
.....

Ethnic Conflict and the Muslim Voice in Poetry

The ethnic conflict was mainly restricted to the Tamil and Sinhala nationalist forces until 1985. However, after 1985 the Muslims were also dragged into the conflict and it became a more complex one in the North and East. This came to be reflected in literary production too.

The Sri Lankan Muslims, formally known as Ceylon Moors, are the second largest minority community in Sri Lanka. They constitute 8% of the total population and are distributed in a scattered fashion all over the country. Nearly one third of them live in the predominantly Tamil-speaking North and East and most of them are monolingual Tamil speakers. The other Muslims who live predominantly in the Sinhala-speaking areas in the South are mostly bilinguals, speaking Tamil and Sinhala with equal fluency though most of them invariably use Tamil as their home language and for their in-group communication. Moreover, nearly 80% of them have chosen Tamil as their medium of education.

The Muslims have been asserting their separate ethnic identity on the basis of their religion since the late 19th century, in response to Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and Tamil domination in the socio-

political domain during that period (Nuhman 2007).

Although the Muslims have lived in this country for nearly 1000 years (Dewarajah 1994), their continuous consolidating literary activities in Tamil are evidenced only from the early 19th century. We may assume that that was the period during which their social formation finally consolidated. Before the 19th century, the Sri Lankan Muslims might have been using Arabic Tamil, the variety that was widely used in Sri Lanka and South India for literacy and for religious education. They might also have been using the religious literary works produced by the Tamil-speaking Muslims in South India from 16th century.

Traditional scholar poets like Badurdeen Pulavar, and Asanar Lebbai Pulavar from Jaffna, Sinna Alim Appa and Ahamadu Kudidi Pulavar from the East, Abdul Cader Pulavar and Abdul Rahman Pulavar from Kandy and Shaihu Ismail Pulavar from Puttalam were some of the important literary personalities who produced a rich variety of religious poems during the 19th and early 20th centuries. This trend of producing religious literature continued till the middle of the 20th century. These poets' concern was more with religion and religious moral values than with voicing the socio-political development of the community. However, their work contributed to the consolidation of the religious-cultural identity of the Muslims. The canon of Islamic religious poetical works produced in Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka, later identified as Islamic Tamil literature, became one of the symbols of identity of the Muslims from 1950s, first becoming a subject for academic research in Sri Lanka.

M. M. Uwais, a Sri Lankan Muslim scholar, dedicated his whole life to the study of Islamic Tamil literature. He submitted his M.A. dissertation on the Muslim Contribution to Tamil Literature to the University of Ceylon in 1949. That was the beginning of his search. When he started his study, only two Muslim literary personalities, Umaru Pulavar and Masthan Shahib, were known to the outside world. As a literary archaeologist he was able to unearth more than 2000 titles of Islamic Tamil literary works with the help of others before he died in 1996. He also produced three volumes on the history of Islamic Tamil literature (Uwais 1986/1990/1994). His appointment as the first Professor of Islamic Tamil Literature at the Madurai Kamaraj University in India in 1979 also helped him in his endeavours.

The Sri Lankan Muslim intelligentsia actively participated in establishing a genre of Islamic Tamil literature as an aspect of their identity politics. The first ever Islamic Tamil Literature Conference was held in Maruthamunai, a Muslim village in the Ampara District, in 1966. Subsequently, two international conferences on Islamic Tamil literature were held in Colombo, in 1979 and 2002. These conferences reflected the aspirations and the identity politics of the Sri Lankan Muslims.

The impulse of Islamic literature is exclusively religious and traditional. However, a new trend of producing non-religious but socially committed literature associated with a new generation of modern Muslim writers and poets emerged in the 1950s. Puradchik Kamal and Annal, two prominent poets from the East pioneered modern Muslim poetry in Sri Lanka, starting in the early '50s. Annal, from Kinniya in the Trincomalee district, was known for his love poems. He also wrote poems on social themes. *Puradchik* Kamal, from Eravur in the Batticaloa District, was inspired by Kamal Atatürk of Turkey and, prefacing his pen name Kamal with an adjective Puradchi (meaning "revolution"), wrote some dynamic poems expressing his ideas for the social mobility of the Muslim community. He wanted to transform society from the ritualistic to one that was value-based. Unlike Atatürk, who tried to completely westernize Turkey in the name of modernization, Puradchik Kamal was a reformist deeply rooted in the Islamic faith. He may be considered an Islamic modernist who advocated the socio-economic and political advancement of the Muslim community through the emancipation of men and women from traditional and conservative bonds. Some of his poems are directed against the veiling of Muslim women. He strongly reflected the emergence of a Muslim ethnic consciousness in the '50s in Sri Lanka. In a sense Puradchik Kamal can be considered the

poet of Muslim identity in the '50s and '60s. However, his ethnic and religious footing did not hinder his egalitarian vision and humanist idealism. It is worth quoting a few lines from one of his most famous poems *Naalai varuvaan oru manithan* (A man will come tomorrow) in this respect (1963):

*A man will come tomorrow
To adorn the directions of the globe,
A man will come tomorrow*

A scientist who rules the world as
One caste and one colour
One religion and one language
One justice and one status...

Under the roof of the sky
In the large home of the world
To embrace humanity's children
As his own child
A man will come tomorrow.

There were a number of younger generation Muslim poets who emerged in the 1960s and 1970s from all parts of Sri Lanka, and many of them are, understandably, from the East, where the Muslim concentration is high. As I mentioned earlier in this paper, this was the period of left ideological domination in Tamil literature. The Muslim writers and poets too were affected by this trend to varying degrees. Prominent writers like Ilankeeran, H. M. P. Mohideen and Abudalib Abdul Latheef who started writing in the 1950s had close associations with the island's communist parties, as editors of their Tamil journals. When the communist movement ideologically broke into two camps in the mid '60s, Ilankeeran and Mohideen aligned themselves with the Maoist wing while Latheef remained with the Moscow wing. All had affiliations with the Progressive Writers' Association. Most of the Muslim writers and poets of the younger generation also reflected this trend. Maruthoor Koththan, Maruthoor Gani, and several others from the East had sympathies with Maoist ideology and wrote poems and short stories on the theme of class contradiction and social change. I too wrote poetry and other works of this nature during this period. A. Iqbal, Fazeel Kariyapper and S. L. M. Haneefa from the same region, M.H.M. Shams and Dikwallai Kamal from the South, M.L.M. Mansoor and Pannamathu Kavirayar from the Central Province wrote poems or short stories on social themes under the influence of socialist ideology.

Dr. Badiuddin Mahmud, a prominent Muslim political leader and one of the founding members of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), who hailed from the South and who was left leaning, organized a new political party, the Islamic Socialist Front, putting forward the new concept of Islamic Socialism in the early 1970s to draw the attention of the younger generation of the Muslim left in order to get their support for the SLFP. His party also published a Tamil weekly *Insaan* and most of the writers of the younger generation contributed to it. Many of these poets and writers tried to maintain a Muslim identity with left political ideology, not strictly Marxist, although a few of them identified themselves as secular writers leaning towards Marxism.

This trend of active participation of the Muslim left in politics and literature almost came to an end when Muslim identity politics reached a peak in the 1980s because of two distinct political developments, namely, the emergence of separatist politics with the Tamil militant movements in the North and East, and the emergence in West Asia of Islamism as a global political force contesting Western imperial power and domination. The Sri Lankan Muslim left had to choose either to involve itself in Muslim ethnic politics or to remain silent.

At the initial stages of the Tamil militant movement in the early 1980s, the North-East Muslims were supportive of its cause, and a number of Muslim youths joined the ranks of the different militant groups, some of them in fact playing leading roles in their struggles. However, the situation changed quickly because of the politically unwise mishandling of Muslim community by the militant groups in the East. They used the same tactics and methods of fund raising in the Muslim areas that they used in the predominantly mono-ethnic North. They demanded money from Muslim landowners and businessmen, confiscated their vehicles and abducted them for ransom or killed those who resisted them. This led to Muslim-Tamil riots in 1985.

The communal violence between Tamils and Muslims caused by militant activities had a far-reaching impact on Muslim-Tamil relations in the East. The Muslims were pushed towards the government and its security forces for their safety and protection even as the Tamils were pushed towards the militant groups in response to the atrocities of the security forces in the Tamil regions, especially the North, during the 1980s and after.

The development of Tamil militancy and its hostile attitude towards Muslims from 1985 created a strong feeling of insecurity among the Muslims, intensifying and raising their sense of ethnic identification to unprecedented levels in the region. This paved the way for the formation of a separate political party for Muslims, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), which became a major political rallying point of the Eastern Muslims. The SLMC almost monopolized Muslim politics in the East after the first Provincial Council election held in 1987 and claimed the status of sole representative of the Muslims in a manner similar to that of the LTTE vis a vis the Tamils. This had a severe repercussive effect on the Muslims. The LTTE started its ethnic cleansing campaign in 1990. More than 1000 Muslims were killed in the Eastern Province that year and the entire Muslim population, more than 70,000, were forcibly evacuated from the North, preventing them from taking any of their belongings. Violence against the Muslims, killing and displacement persisted sporadically in the East even after the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Government in 2002.

The main theme of the poems by the Muslim poets after 1985 was this reality of violence against Muslims and their sufferings. A number of younger generation Muslim poets emerged from the East and also among the Northern Muslim refugees. They have published a number of poems and several anthologies during the last two decades. Solaikkili, Ashraf Shihabdeen, Oddamavadi Arafath, N. Athma, A.G.M. Sadaqa, A.M.Rashmi, Mullai Mushriba, Uwais Gani, Zulfika, Anar and Penniya are some of the pre-eminent poets of this period.

Like the 1985 anthology, *Maranaththul Vaalvoo*, that echoed the sorrow and anger of the Tamils under the oppressive violence by the armed forces, an anthology of 100 poems by 50 poets entitled *Meesaan Kaddaikalil Meela Elum Paadalkal* (Songs Arising from the Graves) was published in 2002 at the World Islamic Tamil Literary Conference held in Colombo (Shihabdeen, et al. 2002). This anthology echoes the sorrow and the anger of the Muslims under the oppressive violence of the Tamil militant groups especially the LTTE. It was edited by Ashraf Shihabdeen, A. G. M. Sadaqa and S. Naleem from the East who started writing after 1980. Of the 50 poets included in this volume only 5 are Tamils from Jaffna. They expressed their feelings and protest against the violence perpetrated against Muslims. Notably, there are no poems by Tamils from the Eastern Province in this volume. Understandably, the vast majority of the 45 Muslim poets included in this volume are from the East. The two anthologies mentioned in this paragraph provide good evidence of how the ethnic conflict ethnicizes the pain it inflicts as well as the poetry that pain engenders.

I myself did not write poems with specific reference to violence against Muslims, but many of the poems that I have written since 1977 are generally against ethnicism, ethnic violence, war and killing, and for peace. However, the only poem of mine included in the 2002 volume, entitled They

and You, depicts the parallelism between the violent nature of the armed forces and the militant groups. Given below is the translation of the poem.

*They came by jeep,
Knocked at your door
And dragged you off
For investigation*

Your mother cried,
Screamed and pleaded

When she went to their camp
And asked for you
No,
They denied it
They hadn't taken you

Your flesh torn,
Bones crushed and
Your blood mixed with the soil

Now it is your turn

You came from the forest
By foot
You knocked at my door
And dragged me away for
Investigation

My mother cried,
Screamed and pleaded

When she came to your camp
And asked for me
No,
You denied it
You hadn't taken me

My flesh torn,
Bones crushed
My blood too
Mixed with the soil

Solaikkili emerged as a prominent poet in the 1980s from Kalmunai in the Amparai District. He can be considered a product of ethnic conflict. He is a poet of nature too. As a humanist, his poetic consciousness sets itself against all kinds of ethnic and nationalist ideologies and violence. The poem *A Refugee Poet Talking to the Moon* is an expression of his bitter experience as a refugee due to the ethnic violence that took place in Kalmunai in November 1989 (Solaikkili 1991).

*Moon, I won't write
Poems today*

In this temporary house

I have no doors of my own,
No plant to pluck and smell
Its flowers by right

You too an alien moon to me
Your light that falls on my courtyard
And your light on this alien courtyard
Are not the same but trouble me

I am a refugee these past three days
And a victor salvaging this life
And the poems that spring from it

Those who have seen my house tell me that
Its nose has broken
The flower plants I loved
Have gone into the bull's stomach
And become dung

Here I do not have my own sky
The air I breathe too seems to
Belong to others

Moon, how can I write poems
When I have lost nine hundred thousand stars,
You and the sky,
Lost my butterfly and
The lizard that lives under my bed?

Cover your face with a cloud
If a poet sighs
Even the cold breeze
Will get charred

Some of the poets became refugees owing to the ethnic conflict while, conversely, some of the refugees became poets as a consequence of the same conflict. Uwais Gani, born and bred in Mannar, is one of the Northern Muslim refugees who started writing poems in the late 1990s after the expulsion of the Northern Muslims by the LTTE. In his preface to his first collection of poems he writes: "When the historic event that affected us in the late 1990s began to speak from the silence of a new poverty-stricken environment, the weapon of poetry alone began to love me very much." His poems depict the bitter experiences of displacement, but also his optimism. Below I give a few lines from his poems (Gani 2002).

*When the sword of grief fell
At the border of my
Truly backward village,
On the Jaffna roads,
In the Vanni forests,
In the places I prayed in
From the time my umbilical cord was cut
My land lost its peace
Even for caste and religion*

* *

This moon
Was born in fear
Within a different intervening space

* *

They asked one to eat
His hands were tied behind his back
And his face was bleeding
They didn't know that
The strength of the innocent
Does not weaken

* *

Although we are displaced
And scattered
Today
We bloom as
Wild jasmine

The last poem I would like to cite is entitled *A Letter to My Father*, by a young poet H. M. Jabir written in his teens, in memory of his father Hayathu Mohamed, who was brutally murdered by the LTTE along with 12 other innocent villagers at Valaichchenai in the Batticaloa district in June 2002 when the Memorandum of Understanding was in operation. It is said that this was his first poem. The killing of his father made him a poet as he sought to release his grief and pain (Shihabdeen, et al. 2002).

*Father,
I remember the Thursday
That we lost you*

*Father,
My heart boils like a cooking pot
As I think of your smile and your hard work*

What did they do to you?
Did they shoot at you?
Did they hack and cut your body into parts?
Did they smash your head with a rod,
Pierce your body with a crow-bar?
And did they rejoice and dance?

Father, the fish curry
Made of your catch
Still gives out its aroma in our pan

Mother and the younger brothers
Cry often asking about you

Convey the greetings of our village to
Ajward, Kaleel, Abusaly, Mohamed Hussain
And the others who came with you

Convey our salaam to brother Mubarak
Tell him his children are well
Tell him also the Kufa mosque
Weeps remembering him
Tell all of them the village is in darkness
Because their wives observe idda

Father,
Now you are on the swings of Heaven
Come often in my dreams, father.

Class and Ethnic Conflict: The Voice of the Malayaha Tamils in Poetry

The Hill Country Tamils, referred to as *Malayahath Thamilar* in Tamil, form a separate Tamil-speaking ethnic minority in Sri Lanka. According to the 2001 Census Report, which happens to exclude certain districts in the North and East, 855,025 Malayaha Tamils live in the country and they constitute around 5% of the total population. Their ancestors were brought to Sri Lanka from various parts of Tamilnadu, South India from the early 19th century to work in British-owned coffee, tea and rubber estates in the hill-country areas. At the time of Independence, there were nearly one million Tamils of Indian origin and they were a highly exploited labour force in the country, most of them illiterate and very poor. However, supported by the left political parties, they gradually organized themselves into effective labour unions. They had also formed their own political party, the Ceylon Indian Congress (CIC), which later became the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC).

The political impact of the Malayaha Tamils was strongly reflected in the 1947 general election held one year before Independence under the new Soulbury Constitution. The Left Parties secured 18 seats, many of them supported by the plantation workers. The CIC won 6 seats and together they formed the Opposition in the new parliament. The ruling United National Party (UNP), representing the Sinhala nationalists, sought to curtail the political force of the plantation workers and passed a Citizenship Bill in parliament in 1948. A great majority of them lost their voting rights and became stateless overnight. Various agreements were subsequently signed between the Sri Lankan and Indian governments from time to time, and on their basis certain portions of the stateless were sent back to India while others were granted citizenship. By 1985 nearly half a million people had been repatriated to India and a few hundred thousand absorbed into the population. Eventually, the rest of them were granted citizenship by an act in 1988.

Although the plantation workers significantly contributed to the build-up of the Sri Lankan economy, the Sinhala nationalist forces were opposed to their presence in the country from the beginning. D. S. Senanayake, who later became the Prime Minister in the first parliament, expressed his discontent over the influx of the Indian immigrant workers in 1926. He said “unless special steps are taken this country will soon be swamped by Indian immigrants, mainly unskilled labourers. This free influx from the adjoining mainland most necessarily affects adversely not only the rates of pay and the prospects of employment of indigenous labour but even of the needed labourers themselves” (Nadesan 1993: 125). This attitude of the Sinhala nationalists towards the immigrant workers continued throughout the colonial and post-colonial period. The Peoples’ Liberation Front (JVP), a Sinhala nationalist party with a left flavour which was mostly constituted at the time by unemployed Sinhala rural youths, and which emerged as a political force in the late 1960s, regarded the hill-country Tamils as a tool of “Indian expansionism.” Owing to this hostility and the later political developments and ethnic tension, the Malayaha Tamils became quite vulnerable to ethnic violence, being severely affected by the anti-Tamil riots of 1977, 1981 and 1983.

The Malayaha Tamils constitute the larger portion of the work force in Sri Lanka. The left parties and trade unions had been actively involved in transforming them into a conscious working class to fight for their labour and civil rights from the 1920s and, as we have noted earlier, they saw their political strength in the 1947 election. However, owing to the failure of the left movements in the country, the development of ethnic politics and the emergence of an ethnically-conscious educated middle class among them, they also emerged as a distinct, politically-conscious ethnic community from the 1960s. Their qualitative transformation from the derogatory *thooddak kaaddaan* (the term, literally meaning “plantation country brute”, that was once used to refer to members of this community by the upper class Jaffna Tamils) to the dignified *malayaha thamil* symbolizes this very significant social change. The concepts *malayaha thamil* and *malayaha thamil ilakkiyam* (up country Tamil literature) gained currency from the 1960s and became firmly established in the contemporary Sri Lankan socio-political and literary discourse among Tamils.

The literary activities among the Malayaha Tamils, apart from their folk literature, started in the 1920s. K. Natesa Aiyar, a veteran trade unionist and journalist who represented the Indians in the Legislative Council in the '20s and his wife Meenadchi Ammal were the pioneers of the politically-conscious Malayaha Tamil literature. C. V. Veluppillai, a trade union activist and the elected member of the first parliament in 1947 can be considered the founder of a new genre, *Malayaka Thamil Ilakkiyam*. He was a poet and a novelist who loved his people and the country. When the Citizenship Bill was debated in parliament in 1948 he expressed his love for this country in very poetic terms:

Mr. Speaker, nearly 85 years ago, my ancestors came to this country, and I have not gone to India. I have not crossed the Palk Strait. My love for this country is not less than that of the Hon. Prime Minister, but the difference arises here. I love the twigs and the grass and the mountains and the streams of the country, but the Hon. Prime Minister loves riches and power in this country. That is the difference (Hansard 1948. 553).

His poems entitled *In Ceylon's Tea Gardens*, written in English, express his strong feeling for the toiling workers, their plight and their pain, and also his anger as well as his optimism. Here are some lines from his poems (Velupillai 1954).

*My men!
They lie dust under dust
Beneath the tea,
No wild weed flowers
Or memories token
Tributes raise
Over their humble mould.
The sons trample,
Over the fathers' biers!
O shame what man
Ever gave them a grave?
Only God in His grace
Covered them with his grass.*

*

*My bronze bodied men
Noose the morning light;
From dell to dale
From uplands and inclines
Echoes rise and fall
To the rhythm of pickaxe*

Mammoty fork and crowbar.
Forkers and pruners
Ferners and sprayers
Each skilled in the task;
They enter the field.
Disturbed beehives their hearts
Their hands honey combs
Drip warm with the sweat,
Eight hours in a day
Seven times in a week;
Thus their life blood flows
To fashion this land
A paradise for some

*

From their vote less gloom
From their stateless doom
Of rights withered dross
Shall wake another dawn;
In that mating hour
Where once life decayed
Shall spring a fire-throb,
In the breathing of men

*

The tears and the sweat
That for a hundred years
Scattered on the dust
Gathered unto the night
Of a risen sun,
Shall beget a million men
To march upwards and on
To where great mornings wait
For the tom-tom's throb.

These poems by Veluppillai were later translated into Tamil and published, in 1969, by Sakthi A. Balaiya, another outstanding poet from Malayalam. Veluppillai's novel *Viidattavan* (The Homeless) symbolizes the "nowhereness" of the plantation workers and their sufferings as a working class and an ethnic community.

Veluppillai, as a leftist and a trade unionist, had a very close relationship with the Sinhalese. However, during the 1983 pogrom, he himself underwent the bitter experience of being a Tamil and he wrote his last novel *Ini Padamaaddeen* (No More Can I Suffer), an autobiographical novel depicting his personal experience of class and ethnic conflict.

Malayalam Tamil poetry is a voice of an oppressed working class as well as of a discriminated ethnic community. Most of the Malayalam poets who followed Veluppillai have expressed their reality in their poetry. One of the most popular Malayalam poets, Kurinchi Thennavan, a poet from the working class, wrote hundreds of poems on the sufferings of the plantation workers. His collection of poems was first published in 1987. I give two stanzas as examples:

Did I consume milk and fruit?

*Did I sleep on a soft mattress?
I writhed in hunger without kuul
I grew up sleeping on a tattered tarpaulin*

*

We worked at the top of the hill and
Got soaked there in the pouring rain
We lived in a twig hut but
Became a burden to this land

Vannachirahu, a young poet who was one among the hundreds of thousands of exiles from their birth place, has written some fine poems on the personal as well as the collective experience of his people. The following poem, entitled Dawn, is on the personalized collective experience of fear among the people during the periods of ethnic violence (Cheran, *et al.* 1985, 160).

*Our nights are uncertain
Dear,
Let us look at each other
Before we go to bed
This may be our last
Meaningful moment*

Firmly press your lips
On the cheeks of our children
Then, let us think about
Our relatives for a moment

Lastly, let us
Wipe our own tears

If we are not burnt
This night
May our fingers feel
At dawn
The touch of the tea leaves
That bear the pearls of dew

His farewell poem, entitled *Goodbye, Land of My Birth*, ends with a longing for a lost past:

*Goodbye, mountain ranges
When can I see you again?
Goodbye, comrades
When can we claim the hills together again?
Goodbye, rivers
When can I bathe in you again?
Goodbye, my people
When can we happily shake each other's hands again?
Goodbye, land of my birth
When can I play on your wide spaces?*

Religion, Ethnicity and the Politics of Reading

Buddhism is the official religion of the Sri Lankan state and the state has the constitutional obligation to promote and safeguard Buddhism in the country. Buddhism is fundamentally a religion of non-violence, preaching non-violence philosophically and practically. However, during the past three decades, the Sri Lankan people have experienced violence or have had to counter violence by the state and non-state actors. Ironically, no meaningful Buddhist voice has raised itself against this violence. In fact Buddhism is used for political purposes, as Islam is used in Pakistan and West Asian countries and Hinduism in India. Under a minority perception, Buddhism is seen as having being betrayed or sacrificed in Sri Lanka. S. J. Thambiah's book, *Buddhism Betrayed?* exemplifies this perception, and it was banned in this country. Poets like S. Villvaratnam, Hamsatvani, Sivasegaram and I myself have written poems on this betrayal of Buddhism, using the image of Lord Buddha. In this section I briefly discuss some of the readings of and responses to my poem *Murder* from religious or ethnic perspectives.

1981 was one of the peaks of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka, set off during the campaign for the first ever District Development Council election in Jaffna. The militant groups that were fighting for a separate state were opposed to the election and sought to disrupt it. One candidate and two policemen were shot dead and two others were injured in Jaffna. In retaliation, on the nights of 31 May, 1 June and 2 June, the police went on the rampage, destroying and setting fire to buildings in the city. The public market, the office and printing press of the local daily, *Elanaadu*, and the house of the Member of Parliament for the Jaffna electorate were burnt down, with some of the top ranking cabinet ministers present in Jaffna. The major casualty was the Jaffna Public Library, one of the biggest libraries in South Asia, with more than 90 thousand books and many rare documents, including a number of Buddhist scriptures. It was completely burnt down.

I was a lecturer at the University of Jaffna at that time and was one of the users of the library. The very next day I went to the town to see the destruction. It was terrible. My immediate response to the destruction was a poem *Puththarin Padukolai* (*The Murder of Buddha*). The image of Lord Buddha shot dead at the library came to my mind spontaneously. The English translation of the poem is given here.

Murder

Last night
I dreamt
Lord Buddha was shot dead
by the police,
guardians of the law.
His body drenched in blood
on the steps
of the Jaffna Library.

Under cover of darkness
came the ministers,
'His name is not on our list,
why did you kill him?'
they ask angrily.

"No sirs, no
there was no mistake.
Without killing him

it was impossible
to harm even a fly—
therefore . . . ,” they stammered.

“Alright, then
hide the corpse”
The ministers go back.

The men in civies
dragged the corpse
into the library.
They heaped the books
ninety thousand in all,
and lit the pyre
with the Cikalokavadda Sutta.
Thus the remains
of the Compassionate One
were burned to ashes
along with the Dhammapada.

(Trans. S. Pathmanathan)

The poem first appeared on the students’ notice board of the Jaffna University and subsequently, it was published in *Alai*, a literary magazine published in Jaffna. Soon it was translated into English and Sinhala. The responses to the poem from various sections of the ethnic communities and the underlying ideologies are important from a theoretical point of view.

The first Sinhala translation of the poem was published in *Vivarana*, a progressive Sinhala magazine, and a copy of it appeared on the students’ notice board at the University of Colombo. The reaction of Sinhala nationalists to the poem was significant. I was told that a group of angry students smashed the notice board railing against the poem, leading to it being removed. Later, a friend of mine who was an interpreter in Parliament warned me to be careful since there was an attempt by some extremist Buddhists to take the poem as an issue of blasphemy in Parliament; but for some or the other reason, it did not succeed. A Sinhala professor from the University of Kelaniya, who is known to me well and who is not an extreme nationalist, expressed his discontent with the poem, when I met him at the University. However, he had not read the poem, only heard about it from others. His objection was to the use of the image of the Buddha as a victim of the violation.

On the other hand, the response of liberal and progressive Sinhalese to the poem was positive. There have been a few more Sinhala translations of the poem by Sinhalese, including one by a young Buddhist monk. Professor Carlo Fonseka is an ardent propagator of the poem. He himself translated it into Sinhala and took it to the Sinhala public to arouse their conscience against the crime. He also used it during the general and presidential elections in the 1990s for his political propaganda campaign against the ruling party, the UNP, which had been in power for 17 years (from 1977 to 1994), during which period the ethnic conflict had developed into a separatist war. Fonseka wrote to me in the late 1990s that he had not read such a powerful poem during those years. Goonetilleke, a Sinhala academic, who included this poem in his anthology, *New Writing in Sri Lanka* (1992), comments, “...in *Murder*, Nuhman ponders the ethnic crisis and suggests how religion becomes a casualty in this type of violence.”

The Tamil nationalists, the general Tamil reading public and the critics understandably received the poem well and it was included in the collection of Tamil resistance poems, *Maranaththul Vaalvoo*,

and, also, republished in several magazines. They see the poem from the Tamil nationalist point of view. However, one criticism of a Tamil academic, Suresh Canagarajah (1993) is interestingly important for its revelation of the poet's ethnic perceptions. Criticizing the politics of anthologizing Tamil literature on the basis of a critique of Goonetilleke's anthology (1992), he says:

Tamil nationalism and the resulting armed struggle for self-determination does not find expression in this collection. The closest that comes to this theme is Nuhman's Murder - a Muslim writer's reaction to the burning of the Jaffna Public Library by the Sinhalese security forces in 1980. But this poem does not (and cannot be expected to) authentically express the aspirations such periodic state sponsored violence has given birth to among Saivite Tamils." (1993: 7).

Canagarajah's exclusive Saivite Tamil nationalistic perception, one that excludes even the Christian Tamils, is interesting. It is obviously based on the author's ethnic identity, but not on the content and theme of the poem. It seems that he cannot think that a Muslim writer can be as much a victim as a Saivite Tamil. It would appear that for him the authenticity of feeling is decided by the poet's ethnicity.

The Muslim nationalistic perception of the poem is also interesting. For many of them it was not their problem, but that of the other ethnic group, one that had developed hostility towards them. In an ethnically polarized society, one who is sympathetic to or supportive of the causes of the other ethnic community is not always welcome within his/her own group. I was identified as a "supporter of the hegemonic Tamil nationalist forces" by a group of young Muslim writers from the Southeastern Sri Lanka, where tension between Muslims and Tamils is high (*Peruveli* 3, May 2007). This is, possibly, because I had written poems, including *Murder*, on the military oppression in Jaffna in the '80s. Presently, this group of writers is involved in constructing the concept of the "literature of Muslim nation" as opposed to the literature of the Tamils. One member of this group, Nawas Saufi, a promising young poet, has published a few concept papers on the subject. He distinguishes the Muslim nation from other nations. According to him the "literature of the Muslim nation" includes exclusively the writing of the Muslims of Sri Lanka, though he concedes that a literary work by a Muslim writer written for the other nation might also be accepted as part of the literature of the Muslim nation. He says that "for an example the poem *Murder of Buddha* written by M. A. Nuhman can be considered a literature of the Muslim nation written for the other nation", but he categorically excludes the poem *Kathankudy* written by Cheran on the massacre of Muslims at the Kathankudy mosques by the LTTE in 1990, since it is written by a non-Muslim, even though it deals with the plight of the Muslims (*Peruveli* 2, Nov. 2006). This kind of conceptualization exposes the literary polarization reflecting the deep divide between the ethnic communities.

I never saw or thought of the burning down of the Jaffna Public Library as a crime affecting only a particular ethnic community. It was a crime committed against human values and civilization by the armed forces of a self-proclaimed Buddhist state. They committed the crime against the spirit of Buddhism itself. That is what the poem is all about. For me it was a matter of concern for all human beings irrespective of their racial or ethnic identity. But in an ethnically polarized society things are seen differently.

Ethnicity, Violence and Gender: Two Poems by Women Poets

Women form the most vulnerable group and are frequent victims of the ethnic conflict and war in Sri Lanka, as in many other countries in the world. Rehn and Johnson (2002), who discuss this matter within the global context, clearly point out that:

While more men are killed in war, women often experience violence, forced pregnancy, abduction

and sexual abuse and slavery. Their bodies, deliberately infected with HIV/AIDS or carrying a child conceived in rape, have been used as envelopes to send messages to the perceived "enemy". The harm, silences and shame women experience in war are pervasive: their redress almost non-existent (cited in Sitralega 2005).

Apart from such sexual victimization, within the patriarchal social order, women have also, in most instances, to bear the burden of their family upkeep as single heads of the families that have lost their bread-winners in the conflict.

Let me examine two poems by two women poets on sexual victimization. The first poem is *Koneeswarikal*, by Kala. This arose out of a gang rape and murder of a woman named Koneswari by the security forces in 1997 in the Amparai District. It was widely reported in the Tamil press. As usual, no Sinhala or English newspaper gave importance to this news. It was reported that, after the gang rape the woman was cruelly killed by a grenade thrown onto her genitals. The poet responds angrily to this incident. This is the poem in translation (Sarinikar, July 1997).

Koneswaries

Her death didn't give me pain
How can it shake me
When my feelings are numb?
Dears, my Tamil women
What have you done
For the peace for this Island?
So, come
Remove your dress
And be naked
You too, my mother,

Open your yoonis*
For those who follow the Buddha's path
And fight for peace
Pity them
Where can they release their perversity?

Heroes, come on
Fulfill your perversity
My school-going sister is also behind me.

Have you finished?
Don't stop there
Tomorrow's generation
May sprout out from our yoonis
So, smash them
Throwing grenades
Collect the pieces and bury them
To prevent our race sprouting any more

Sinhala sisters,
Your yoonis are free now

*yooni = female genitals

It is obvious that the poet's angry response is highly ethnic-sensitive. The sexuality and the gender of the victim are clearly ethnicised. Tamil women are separated from Sinhala women. The religion, Buddhism, is also brought in. This kind of response may be expected and common in ethnically-polarized societies. However, sexual victimization carries beyond ethnic and religious boundaries. For instance, thousands of young Sinhala women were arrested, tortured, sexually abused or killed during the JVP insurgencies in 1971 and 1989 by the same Sinhala armed forces and police. The story of Padmini Manamperi, a beauty queen of the Southern Province, is well known. She was sexually abused, tortured, paraded along the road naked and killed. There are also some stories of sexual abuse and killings of female cadres within some of the Tamil militant groups in the 1980s.

Immediately after the publication of the poem *Koneeswarikal* in *Sarinikar*, a weekly Tamil tabloid published in Colombo, a reader, Selvi Thiruchandran, a feminist scholar, responded critically to it.

The poem Koneeswarikal disgusted me deeply. Rape is a violent act in relation to female sexuality. When it is used as a subject of poetry, we cannot say that it is obligatory to express only its violence, its gendered nature, its content, the unrighteousness of the state and the agony of the women. There should at least be a civilized quality. Even though there might be no delicacy in the use of words, the meaning should be decent.

What is the meaning of the racial use of the phrases "O Tamil women" and "O, Sinhalese sisters"? ... women's sexuality has no caste, religion, class and ethnic differences. In the violence of male chauvinism these differences disappear....No woman should open anything to satisfy another's perversions...Do not seek justice for Koneswari by degrading femininity to such an extent (*Sarinikar*, July/August 1997).

Another reader, Dushyanthi, wrote in support of the poem:

After reading the poem I felt pain in my heart. Anger, frenzy and grief... and further different feelings tormented me for hours... what a poem has to do, it fulfilled. The feminist politics of oppressed Tamil women has emerged forcefully through the poem. I marvel at the power of the poet who could express the depth of the ethnic and gender oppression of Tamil women through such a small poem (*Sarinikar*, August 1997).

Several readers participated in the debate and most of them were, understandably, supportive of the poet and her poem. It appears that the overt ethnic sensitivity of the poem caused it to have a great impact on readers who were also ethnically sensitive and emotionally affected by the incident.

There was a similar incident in 1996, a year before this one. It happened in Jaffna. The victim was Krishanthi, a school-going girl. She was caught at an army sentry point, raped and killed. A promising young poet, Vinothini, responded to this incident with a poem (in Vinothini 2007). It is a very different response from *Koneswarikal*. The title of the poem, *Krishanthi*, is the name of the victim, as in the case of *Koneswarikal*, where, however, it is pluralized. But, except implicitly in the title, there is no reference to the ethnicity of the victim or the victimizers in the text. The translation of the poem is given below:

Krishanthi

As the birds sang
And the sun fell into the sea
Her death took place
At the open space of white sand
No one knew about it

When she was born a female child
She wouldn't have thought of such an end
Her mother neither

First their look pierced her like a thorn
Then their terrible hands seized her arms

No sound arose
She fell in a faint
They raped her senseless body
It happened
At the open space of white sand
She was buried
At the edge of the salty cremation ground

When she was born
Would she have thought of such an end?

It is interesting to compare the two poems. The poets' ideologies, attitudes and poetic sensitivities are different. Ideologically the poet Kala is openly a Tamil nationalist. The ethnic identities of the victim and the victimizers assume great significance in her textualization of her poem. The gender comes second, even perhaps rendered secondary. The gender, as well as the genitals, are ethnicised - the *yoonis* of the Tamil women and the *yoonis* of the Sinhala women. Thus, the poet's perception of the incident is obviously ethnically biased.

The poet Vinothini is ideologically feminist rather than nationalist. The ethnic identities of the victim and the victimizers are not highlighted by her. The title Krishanthi alone signifies (implicitly) the ethnicity of the victim; but it also signifies the gender. There is no signification of ethnicity in the body of the text. The gender of the victim dominates the poem.

Beyond Ethnicity and Nationalism: Poetic Responses to Ethnic Violence and War

Ethnicity and nationalism are ideological constructions that exclude the other and construct the other as enemy whenever a socio-political conflict arises with the other. These ideological constructions divide people, imposing different identities upon them, promoting hatred towards each other and degrading human values.

Poetry in a time of ethnic conflict plays two different roles. On the one hand it promotes the ideologies of ethnicity, nationalism and violence, directly or indirectly. On the other hand it exposes the ugly nature of these ideologies and calls for the meaningful reconstruction of human values and unity.

Some of the poems cited above, for example, *Your Fate Too* and *Letter to My Father*, can be interpreted in both ways. Some, like *Koneswarikal*, overtly promote ethnic sentiment and nationalism. On the other hand, poems like *Murder*, *A Refugee Poet Talking to the Moon* and *Krishanthi* are directed towards exposing the ugly nature of the violence and appeal to the human conscience.

In this concluding section I would like to cite a few poems written during the conflict that directly or indirectly stand up to the ethnic divide and violence and promote peace and harmony.

My poem *Identity of a Man* attempts to depict the contrast between the ideal and the real and expresses a longing for the ideal of humanity amidst the ethnic divides.

*God appeared in my dream,
Opened the doors of
Heaven and Hell*

"Who are you?" God asked me
"I am a man." I said

"What's your name?" he asked again
"Man." I replied
He inquired after my ethnicity
I said "Humanity."

"What's your religion?"
God asked me finally
"Humanness." I replied

God said with a smile
"Yes, you can enter Heaven now."

Alas!
When I awoke from my dream
I found myself
In Hell

Solaikkili in his poem *Crying with the Pen of My Own Race* expresses his contempt for the ethnic division of the society and ridicules it using the imagery of nature, his usual strategy (1993).

*Fence the moon
Divide the sun and share it
Count the stars
Apportion them according to ethnic ratio
We are the people of the civilized age.*

Measure the sea and take it
Cut the sky into pieces
If you get the chance
Abduct the air or
Destroy the brotherly race with tempests
One among us may land on Jupiter

Label ethnically even the ants
Teach caste and religion to the trees
Let the dove laugh at the other race
Let the sounds of lizard, snail, frog and insect
Reflect hatred
Come, butterfly,
This is the flower of your race, enjoy it!

The pity of it
The way mankind is divided

When I write this poem
The pen refuses to write and tells me
"I do not belong to your race"
O... it belongs to a different race.

Sivaramani, a former student of mine in the University of Jaffna, was a promising young poet in the latter half of the 1980s. She started writing poems in 1985 and actively participated in women's movements in Jaffna. She was critical of the ideology of nationalism and was opposed to violence and war. She committed suicide at the age of 23 owing to depression caused by socio-political and family conflicts. Her collection of poems was posthumously published in 1993. Her poem entitled *In the Time of War* expresses her deep concern for the children who lose their childhood because of the war.

*In the oppressive night
of our time of war,
our little ones
grow big.*

Their lovely morning,
like the shape of a little bird,
is waylaid by every
blood-soaked faceless human body
lying across its way.
Their laughter,
ringing with the thrill of life lived
is broken by
crashing stone walls.
Our children
are no longer
children.

The silence of the starry night
is shattered by the burst of a
single bullet; it shatters
to nought the meaning
of all their child talk.
In the remaining light of the day
they forget to make
chariots out of the seeds
of the palmyrah fruit,
to indulge in the raucous play
of killithattu.

Instead
they know
when it's time to shut the gate,
to listen to the dog's bark,
to know its suspicious call,
to not ask questions,
to keep quiet when there are
no answers
to their queries.

They have learnt like cattle
to habituate themselves
to all of this.

To pluck the wings of the dragonfly
fashion sticks and poles into guns
turning friend into foe
in the game of murder;
This has become
our children's play.

In the oppressive night
of our time of war,
our little ones
have become adults.

(trans. *Sivamohan Sumathy and Nirmala Rajasingam*)

Shanmugam Sivalingam, an important personality in contemporary Sri Lankan Tamil poetry, narrates a story of a metamorphosis, how a man is transformed into an earthworm because of the violent gun culture. His poem, entitled *Earthworm*, tells the story of the fall of the human person and of human values in a war-torn social environment.

*An earthworm like a dry leaf
Was crawling at the edge of the steps
I, being a man, looked at it with pity
For a moment and left
Suddenly I heard a noise and
Turned to look at it.*

The earthworm was standing on its tail
Opening a mouth full of sharp teeth
As I thought of its tongue
Flames came out of it
Does the earthworm have a tongue? ...teeth?
As I pondered, it dawned on me that
The earthworm had been transformed.

But I wasn't afraid
I bent to pick up a rod
As I raised it up
I saw a gun in the earthworm's hand
No, a gun in the snake's hand
No, a gun in the soldier's hand

I bent and slithered like a snake
Became an earthworm like a dry leaf
Crawling at the edge of the steps.

I would like to end this essay with my own poetic proclamation, one that I wrote in 1990 when the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka had reached one of its peaks. It is on equality, peace and freedom. It proclaims that the equality of different ethnic communities is a precondition for peace and that

peace is a precondition for freedom. These preconditions apply to family, community, country and the whole world, requiring that they maintain harmonious relationships.

If we want to meaningfully resolve the ethnic problems and conflicts, to neutralize the tension among the ethnic communities and to create harmony and peaceful coexistence, equality of ethnic communities must be guaranteed. My poetic proclamation, entitled *My last Words*, reads as follows:

These are my last words
Equality, peace and freedom

Where there is no equality
There is no peace
Where there is no peace
There is no freedom

These are my last words
Equality, peace and freedom

You deny my equal rights?
You lose your own sense of peace
And your freedom

You point the gun at my rights?
It is the enemy of peace
Freedom's adversary

These are my last words
Equality, peace and freedom

Shout out loud, all you people
Shatter the silence of the skies

Equality
Peace
And freedom.

M A Nuhman

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Footnotes

[1] Murugaiyan alone departed from the practice, including some of his poems on linguistic nationalism in one of his latest collections (2001).

[2] Unless otherwise mentioned the translations of the poems cited in this paper have been done by the author, M A Nuhman.

[3] The English translations of the poems included in this section are taken from Kanaganayakam 2001.