

A Hierarchy of Grief and the Politics of Mourning: Reflecting on Sri Lanka in the shadow of Palestine

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On 18 May, Sri Lanka marked the 15th anniversary of the end of war. In 2009, many Sinhala people in the South took to the streets to spontaneously celebrate what they imagined as a new beginning for Sri Lanka—a rebirth that could forget the past. The birth of Israel on 14 May 1948 was “predicated on the injunction to remember [the Jewish people’s] history of destruction” (Sundquist 2009, 601). Today, the slogan ‘never again’—that signified the world’s moral commitment to memory and education in preventing genocide—is an empty signifier. Instead of preventing genocide, Israeli leaders and their allies are using the Holocaust to frame their collective genocide of Palestinians in Gaza as ‘a battle for civilization in the face of barbarism’. The death toll in Gaza has surpassed 35,000 since 07 October 2023. More than 50 percent are children and women. Conservative estimates put the number of Tamils killed during the final phase of Sri Lanka’s internal war at 40,000 with another 70,000 unaccounted for (Petrie 2012). In this essay we draw attention to the fraught politics of historical memory and the consequences of forgetting the thousands of lives lost during Sri Lanka’s war by reflecting on the hierarchy of grief and the politics of mourning that continues to shape our history and our hopes for the future.

Our essay is concerned with life and death, grief and mourning. Palestine is a reminder that we too live in a country of perpetual grief where death is denied and discounted, and mourning deferred; a painful reminder of our past, a past that is eternally present because, although we in Sri Lanka grieve, the State refuses to recognise our right to mourn.

After months of anger, outrage, and unspeakable sadness for the loss of lives in Palestine, many of us have been left feeling powerless in the face of profound indifference of world leaders who have authorised themselves as the arbiters of geopolitics and remain silent, and, therefore, complicit in the genocide that Israel is inflicting on Palestine. We in Sri Lanka know the terrible weariness that descends when months, years, then decades go by without justice and restitution for lives lost and still missing. Years of being exposed to the horrors of civil war, the violence of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna’s second insurrection and the State’s spectacular counter-terror, and, more recently, anti-Muslim violence, have not made us immune to loss but have left us in a limbo between the trauma of death and the pain of learning to live without the people we love—mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers, wives and husbands, friends and neighbours—whose lives mattered.

V. V. Ganeshanathan (2011) reflects that, “It is a way of humiliating people, to say that their dead are not dead, to say that people are not even allowed to mourn”. In this essay, we focus on the continuing struggle by the families of the disappeared in Sri Lanka, the quiet grief of Muslim

families whose loved ones were cremated during COVID-19, and the families of Tamil combatants who struggle to commemorate the lives that were sacrificed to the war, to reflect on how and why grief and mourning are political acts.

Grief and Mourning

Grief and mourning are not interchangeable terms but describe a process through which we come to terms with death. Grief is our emotional response to the death of a loved one; it is the internal constellation of thoughts and feelings: shock, anger, denial, fear, loneliness, sadness and so on (Wolfelt 2003). Mourning is the outward expression of our grief (Mulemi 2017; Wolfelt 2003).

Cross-cultural rituals of mourning involve both social and religious practices that facilitate the personal and collective expression of grief including crying and wailing, talking about, and remembering the person who died, caring for and respecting the dead body, and commemorating and celebrating a loved-one's life on special dates. Psychologists underscore the importance of mourning for moderating grief and integrating loss into our lives, for healing from the shock of losing a loved one (Wolfelt 2003), and for "coming to terms with the loss and reorienting ourselves to a world without our loved one in it" (Shear 2012). "Mourning [is] an existential imperative [...] that facilitates the enactment of grief [and] the alchemy of healing" (Omar 2023). To grieve without mourning is dangerous and destructive to our emotional, physical, and spiritual selves (Lang et al 2022; Wolfelt 2003).

We acknowledge the concrete terms of death through the rituals of mourning conducted over the body of the deceased, making the body vital to integrating loss into our lives. How then do we mourn in the absence of the deceased body? What happens when the State denies a death has even occurred? Or when it confirms death, but the rituals of mourning are prohibited?

The Politics of Memorialisation - Mourning as Resistance

Each year, the Sri Lankan State leads commemoration of soldiers killed during the war. The killing of civilians, particularly Tamils and Muslims, is erased in these State-sanctioned acts of mourning. Events to mourn and remember Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighters in the North and East are surveilled and stifled as an existential threat to the Sri Lankan State. The annual *Maaveerar Naal* commemoration of LTTE combatants is held in defiance of the State's inevitable crackdown.

But the dead are a powerful mediator of identity and resistance through rituals of mourning. The *Maaveerar Naal*, held last year at the site of a desecrated LTTE cemetery in Kilinochchi, is a symbol of resistance to the Sinhala State post-war, in present-day oppression. There is explicit political valence to mourning deaths that are marked ungrievable in the national lexicon. It asserts a particular identity, locates the struggle in the present, resists the imposition of labels, and reinforces political will and imaginings.

Political scientist Eqbal Ahmad (1981) critiquing the "pathologies of power" in the Third World, asserts that the post-colonial State preserves the structures of the colonial State including centralised power and a paternalistic bureaucracy and was created to serve the imperial metropolis. And while people in the Third World (Ahmad often references Pakistan) aspire for economic and social justice, political democracy, and cultural freedom, their leaders fail to deliver. Ahmad's critique resonates deeply with Sri Lanka's historical and present-day political trajectories. The oppression and injustice embedded in the Sri Lankan polity—as experienced by a variety of groups including ethnic minorities, the poor, the working class—reflect Ahmad's contention that the growth in the apparatus of the State far outstrips society's ability to sustain it, and as such does not have the capacity to serve the needs or demands of the society it is meant to serve, much less keep up with the changes in it. A State constructed on the unequal disposition of power demonstrates that equality is a façade, and that there is a fundamental hierarchy whether living or dead.

The *Aragalaya* in the heady months of 2022 appeared to strike at this embedded inequality, bringing attention to the experiences of differently-valued bodies. Muslims, who resisted racist government policy during the pandemic, publicly broke fast during the weeks of *Ramadan*. Activists marched with images of those killed by the State, including the LTTE, underscoring Tamil war-survivors' refusal to stop mourning their unrecognised dead. People pushed to the margins took up space previously only meant for elites. The refusal by some Tamil activists and organisations to participate in the *Aragalaya* that was perceived as a Sinhala-dominated, South-driven struggle was equally powerful, and nearly two years later with little change, perhaps even prudent.

But Palestine teaches us that resistance is a long and difficult road, littered with bodies that keep pushing, and often falling, against the power of the metropole.

The politics of mourning - Disappearances and Cremations

Rituals of mourning deferred: The disappeared

Sri Lanka has a long history of violence. This includes a 26-year ethnic conflict between the Sinhala-Buddhist Sri Lankan State and Tamil militant organisations as well as two anti-government youth insurrections in 1971 and 1987-1989. As a result, Sri Lanka has one of the highest numbers of forcibly disappeared people in the world. Relatives of the thousands of disappeared have mobilised over the years. They represent Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims who have grieved their disappeared loved ones for years without the opportunity to mourn through ritual.

Families of the disappeared in the North and East, some of whom marked seven years of continuous protest in February 2024, are asking where their family members are, particularly those who surrendered to the military in the last days of the conflict. The absences for which the families demand an accounting represent rituals of mourning that have been deferred for want of answers, a body, and a grave.

Mobilisations around loss and grief in the context of inequality, oppression, and marginalisation are political acts. The existence of groups such as the Association of Relatives of Enforced Disappearances, North and East (ARED) are not just acts of resistance against the unequal nation State, they also embody rituals of mourning that are deferred due to violence and injustice. Like other activist movements for the disappeared found around the world, such as the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, the families mobilise around the search for answers and the collective expression of sorrow. The State's refusal to engage with the questions posed by these groups truthfully and sincerely reifies the oppression in which the disappearances occurred, transposing it to the present.

This is why the arrests of protestors in January 2024, in this instance belonging to the Association of Relatives of the Enforced Disappeared in Vavuniya, for demanding answers is a familiar trope, a palimpsest of past protests and civil disobedience where Sri Lankans have demanded answers for their dead and their missing. The State has responded with baton, teargas, court order, and detention, because the State fears its dead.

Ahmad (1981) presents the national security State as one which views the "State as absolute, the individual as unimportant". National security transcends "military considerations; it is enmeshed in political, economic and social issues..." (174). Dissent, in the national security State, is crushed. Sri Lanka is a national security State, where the callousness and brutality of the system are well represented in the treatment of Sri Lankans looking for their disappeared loved ones. The State's structural disregard for protesting families is what enables seven years of continuous protests and no justice. But these families have refused to concede their missing to denialism or amnesia, waiting for Sri Lanka to finally confront the violence of its past.

Rituals of mourning erased: COVID-19 and the Muslim dead

Islamic funeral practices are precise, detailing steps including ablution, the shrouding of the body, the funeral, and burial. The practices are essential to Muslim identity. Their violation, as occurred during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka, was an attack on how Muslims mourn loss.

The government order for mandatory cremation of anyone who died or was suspected to have died of COVID-19 resulted in the denial of Islamic funeral rites to Muslims, including a 20-day-old baby cremated against his family's wishes. The months of government refusal to rescind the order, despite World Health Organisation guidance to the contrary, was a painful time for Sri Lankan Muslims like Fathima* who had a visceral reaction to the possibility of being denied an Islamic burial. "I used to wonder why this is happening to us ... as a believer, I [didn't] want to go that way ... I was wondering why when the whole world is burying the bodies, [why] they cremated these bodies [and] whether they were taking revenge on us."

The idea that the Sri Lankan State would seek revenge on its Muslim minority stems from pervasive anti-Muslim racism exacerbated post-war and further reinforced by the 2019 Easter Sunday atrocities. Being viewed as a monolithic bloc, and encountered through a cultural frame of interpretation, makes it acceptable for a government minister to call for "the Muslim community" to "look at themselves critically and rectify any shortcomings". The atrocities being committed in Palestine reify that societies are fundamentally constructed and contested in relation to the "Other". This historical, social, intellectual, and political process allows for hierarchies of loss and grief, for the interpellation of "Sri Lankan" and "Sri Lankan-ness" as primarily Sinhala and Buddhist, for the erasure of mourning rites.

Resistance to the government's policy occurred in the refusal of families to consent to the violation of their dead; a violation made further obscene by the State demanding a fee to cover the cost of cremation. The cremations, which completely disregarded the wishes of Muslim families affected, were an explicit loss of agency, according to Aisha*. "To know that [if] someone of yours [got] COVID and die[d], they [had] no choice, nobody [had] a say in it and the government [had] already decided for you even though the WHO guidelines said otherwise." Mandatory cremation also underlined the precarity and provisional existence of minorities in the Sri Lankan state. And since it is the State which decides who is a legitimate subject, whose rights are respected and whose rights are denied, mandatory cremation, in effect, became a denial of Muslim citizenship.

Grief, mourning, and the search for justice

"When someone's forgotten, it means he's no longer existing ... Even if I die, just remember me, remember my cause, remember my people, remember why we are fighting, remember why we are here. Only this. I don't want anything else" Bisan Owda from Gaza.

Loss is not a singular occurrence with a neat cut off point. It is messy and refuses to be bound by expectations of overcoming it and moving on from it. Loss occurs within a particular set of historical and social relations. Its meaning can contain multitudes and is open to contestation. Therein lies the politics of mourning because grief and mourning are sites of struggle where certain bodies are always more vulnerable to suffering and death. The politics of mourning refers to the fact that loss cannot be extricated from the material realities in which it occurs, and when that reality is deeply unequal, it becomes a struggle to make these vulnerabilities matter.

We are over 200 days into the genocide in Gaza. Palestinians exist in a "permanent condition" of pain, their lives enclosed and violated in different forms by the Israeli death machine. Their

mourning, even deferred, desired and encouraged by the coloniser. Palestinians can only begin to mourn in a context which fully acknowledges the reality of the colonial condition. But they refuse to be seen only as victims or objects of pity; Palestinians resist to live fully and freely.

Sri Lanka supports Palestine symbolically by voting for ceasefires at the UN General Assembly while materially supporting the Israeli genocide by sending Sri Lankans to replace Palestinian workers and sending a ship to oppose the Yemeni blockade in support of Gaza. It is the behaviour of a deeply cynical State for whom “justice” is a matter of superficial gestures and distinct from actual policy. This is consistent with the Sri Lankan State’s insincere gestures toward “transitional justice” in the years after committing its own genocide in 2009. The reality of justice is not the State’s hypocrisies but years of real and enduring grief and loss. Grief for the dead dismissed or neglected by the State, for the ungrievable life, speaks to the inequality and unfreedom of the living.

The Mullivaikkal remembrance event at Galle Face in May 2022, at the height of the *Aragalaya*, reminds us that mourning the dead who exist on the margins of the nation state is resistance. This event was the first time, in the thirteen years since war’s end, that the tens of thousands of Tamil civilians killed in the military’s propagandised “humanitarian operation” were remembered in a space which manifests exclusion. This is a pre- and post-colonial seat of power. It was the site of the 1956 protest against the Sinhala-Only Act. It hosts the yearly Independence Day parade of war machinery signifying resources not spent on health and education. Bringing the memory of civilian dead to the locus of their erasure, however briefly, is to refuse to participate in the State’s narrative of the war.

* Names changed to maintain confidentiality. The quotes are extracted from research interviews conducted in September-October 2020.

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Tania Perera

Asha L. Abeyasekera

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