

Echoes of Displacement and Unravelling Scars: A Poetic Exploration of the Refugees in Jean Arasanayagam's *Apocalypse '83*

Samuel Gnanaraj. R., Assistant Professor of English, Bishop Heber College (Autonomous), (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University), Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu (India). drrsam.eg@gmail.com ORCID-0000-0002-28371175.

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Abstract

Jean Arasanayagam's Apocalypse '83 paints a stark portrait of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict through the lens of poetry. This paper delves into the verses, using them as a gateway to comprehend the profound hardships encountered by Sri Lankan refugees. By exploring their memories, the analysis goes beyond the battlefield, illuminating the human cost of war and the psychological impact on civilians. The paper examines how these refugees remember their struggles, aiming to unearth the historical context embedded within the poems. Through this exploration, the research sheds light on the social fabric of these minority groups and the deep injustices they endured. Ultimately, the analysis focuses on the refugees' journey, using their memories to reclaim their identities shattered by war.

Keywords: Identity, Memory, Refugee, Sri Lanka, Trauma.

Introduction

The Sri Lankan Civil War was a devastating conflict that ravaged the island from 1983 to 2009. The war creates a deep and unerasable scar on the collective memory of Sri Lanka. While the physical destruction of infrastructure and landscapes was immense, the war's most profound impact may lie in the psychological trauma it inflicted on civilians, especially those forced to flee their homes and become refugees in their own land. Jean Arasanayagam, a Sri Lankan writer who experienced the war first-hand, captures the profound human cost of displacement in her powerful poetry collection, *Apocalypse '83*. Through raw emotion and personal experience, her poems offer a poignant and unflinching testament to the sufferings endured by Sri Lankan refugees. Jean Arasanayagam, a Dutch Burgher, was born on 2 December 1931, and she was married to a Tamil Sri Lankan. Her life during the war placed her in a precarious position. She is a poet, playwright and short story writer who powerfully portrays the trauma she has experienced during the anti-Tamil riots of 1983 in Sri Lanka. Her collection of poems had its beginning in the camps where she and her family, along with thousands of other victims, found themselves in different camps, where she continued writing her poems. She records the lived experiences in the refugee camps during that traumatic period of fear and despair. *Apocalypse*

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'83 concentrates on the essence of hatred, the sufferings of the innocents and the inhuman behaviours of the perpetrators. The paper delves into Arasanayagam's work to explore the multifaceted refugee experience. By delving into the portrayal of anguish and displacement, the complex role of memory in healing, and the enduring psychological scars left by war, one can gain a deeper understanding of the refugees' unravelling scars.

The study employs textual analysis to examine the themes of displacement and trauma in Jean Arasanayagam's poetry collection *Apocalypse '83*. The research involves a close reading of the poems to reveal the emotional and psychological experiences of refugees portrayed in her work. The poems are interpreted through symbolic and thematic lenses to contextualise how the Sri Lankan refugee crisis is represented in literature. This methodology aims to focus on the refugees to study the fragmented voice and to explore how poetry serves as a powerful tool for witness, resistance, and healing.

Refugees in Recent Times

According to the Cambridge Learner's Dictionary, the word 'refugee' refers to "a person who leaves his or her home or country to find safety, during a war" (Refugee). The meaning highlights the forced and involuntary nature of refugee displacement, which is often triggered by violent conflict, persecution, or large-scale human rights violations. In recent years, the number of refugees across the nation has increased dramatically. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reports significant increases in refugee populations from countries such as Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine, and South Sudan, nations ravaged by ongoing war and political instability. The aftermath of the Second World War, along with numerous civil wars and conflicts, the world had already witnessed the displacement of millions which drove the international community to establish legal frameworks and conventions such as the Refugee Convention in 1951 and its Protocol in 1967 to safeguard the rights of displaced individuals. These instruments aimed to ensure the humane treatment, protection, and rehabilitation of refugees under international law.

The paper addresses the Sri Lankan refugee crisis, a tragic outcome of the decades-long civil war between the Sinhalese-majority government and the Tamil minority, led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The war, which lasted from 1983 to 2009, was marked by strong violence, ethnic tensions, and widespread human rights violations. As a result, thousands of Tamil civilians were forced to flee their homes, seeking asylum in neighbouring India and across the nations. Even after the end of the war, continued militarisation, lack of political reconciliation, and complete marginalisation in Tamil-majority regions have obstructed refugee expulsion. Anders Sjobohm, a Librarian and an acclaimed Swedish Literary Critic in his introductory remarks highlighted an interview of Arasanayagam: "I was alien to my husband's family. I was alien in society because I was married to a Tamil. I was made to feel I didn't belong. I had to answer a lot of questions. I became my own interrogator" (Arasanayagam 17). Gnanaraj, in his article, writes that those who escaped the Sri Lankan island in the aftermath of violence not only carried the trauma of displacement but also witnessed the atrocities of war:

The island was divided mainly because it denied rights to the people. The division was among the rulers and insurgents because of political gain. The land underwent many strikes and divisions, which led to high-level devastation. The notion of travelling with people is indeed a certain indication and transition in witnessing the violence. The

victims, refugees and the ones who escaped from the country during the violence are the only survivors of the war (Gnanaraj 282)

Engaging with the Trauma of War

As critic Nigel C. Hunt writes, “Our understanding of war trauma can be enriched by the study of works of literature, novels and poems written by war veterans and others” (Hunt 171). The collection of poems selected for the study offers a broad view of the war between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils. Arasanayagam expresses deep anguish and a silent protest against the war’s brutality and its devastating impact on humanity through her writings. As a survivor of the war, she highlights the violence endured by the minority Tamils in their land, homes and refugee camps, reflecting on her own experiences and suffering during the war.

Arasanayagam employs poetry as a tool to uncover the truth about the war. Being a survivor-victim, she records the painful history of war crimes in her poems. Arasanayagam’s poems include *Kindura* (1973), *Poems of Season Beginning and a Season Over* (1977), *Apocalypse ‘83* (1984), *A Colonial Inheritance and Other Poems* (1985), *Out of Our Prisons We Emerge* (1987) are deeply personal and also project the tragic state of human affairs in the war-torn island. It is significant to understand Arasanayagam’s commitment, as articulated by the historian Salgado: “. . . My responsibility and commitment is to report and document the truth—whether it be massacres of minority or majority ethnic groups... I speak for the victim, the sufferer” (Salgado 79). Likewise, Arasanayagam speaks for the sufferers and the marginalised; she positions herself as an observer, called upon to document the events and sufferings around her. Furthermore, Caroline Schwenz highlights in an article that “Arasanayagam makes it clear that the identity of those who are victimised is not a deciding factor in her work. Rather, she speaks for all victims and sufferers” (Schwenz 318). Recognising that the statement ‘speaking with the refugee’ can be made universal, the poet delves into the complexities of collective traumatic memory, implying the psychological impact of the organised war crimes on civilians. As Thomas W. Smith writes in “Human Rights and War Through Civilian Eyes,” “Not surprisingly, experiences of trauma are pervasive among those who have fled the war” (Smith 104). Arasanayagam acts as both witness and advocate, attempting to give a voice to the silenced experiences of the victims and refugees. By speaking with them, she transforms personal trauma into collective testimony to articulate the trauma of war that often goes unheard. In the poem “Refugee”,

I’ve no country
I’ve got no name
I’ve no bag
And I’ve no claim
I’m a refugee
I’ve no home
No kith and kin
If I want a country
I must plead and cringe
I’m a refugee
(Arasanayagam 1-10)

The emotional suffering experienced by the speaker shows the trauma of war, which echoes

the deep emotional trauma and existential crisis experienced by the refugees.

Refugees and the Trauma of Displacement

Refugees must involuntarily leave home, community, and family and friends, often with limited resources or preparation and usually without knowing whom they can trust and where they can find safe passage and a safe haven. Thus, both prior to and during the displacement, refugees often suffer from psychological traumatic experiences, including having their community or homes attacked or destroyed due to war; racially, gender-based, or ethnically targeted genocide or terrorism; institutionally orchestrated deprivation and violence; along with torture, atrocities, rape, witnessing violence, fear for their lives, hunger, lack of adequate shelter, separation from loved ones, and destruction and loss of property. (Ford 313)

Displacement is an act of forcing people to leave the place where they normally live. In other words, one can say displacement means forced separation. In the poem “Innocent Victim - Trincomalee,” Arasanayagam’s trauma of displacement evokes a profound sense of alienation and emotional estrangement.

I slept on a mat
Among others
All who are strangers
When I wake up
I do not see
Either my father, my mother or my sister.
(Arasanayagam 9-14)

The poem serves as a backdrop for the searing pain of separation that the poet has experienced when leaving her parents. This forced separation casts her as an innocent victim. The poet articulates the trauma of forced separation, where the absence of families reinforces the psychological disorientation caused by displacement, her displaced identity as a refugee, where she doesn’t have a proper place to live. The basic needs for living became a question as the conflict intensified between the Sinhala military and the Tamil Tigers (LTTE). The prolonged violence disrupted access to essential needs, which fractured the societal fabric. Trincomalee is a place in Sri Lanka that endured immense hardship during the war. The trauma of inaccessibility to loved ones is a recurring theme which leads to immense suffering. The constant presence of the word ‘strangers’ in her poems reflects the deep psychological pain of isolation. Severed from their close relationships, the victims grapple with a distorted sense of reality. The displaced individuals struggle to place their trust with each other. This widespread conflict breeds suspicion and a lack of trust between people that casts a heavy shadow, for even displaced people in refugee camps struggle to trust their fellow members. The war disintegrates both community bonds and individual security. Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, writes, “it is one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons and exiles than ever before in history” (Said 332). The continuous war on the island disrupts normalcy. Camps and prisons become the victims’ residences. The victims yearn not only for peace and calmness but also for a return to their homeland they were forced to abandon, longing for quietness and the restoration of peace, a happiness that has been lost for decades. In the poem “Refugee,” Arasanayagam writes,

You send me out with a begging bowl
The world will fill it somehow how I know

It may be with crumbs or it may be with bombs
 Either way, it's the dice of the gods
 Because I am a refugee
 Where was my country
 I no longer know
 Maybe Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Laos
 Vietnam, Chad, Afghanistan,
 Does it matter?
 (Arasanayagam 58-67)

Hunt argues the impact of being a refugee in *Memory, War and Trauma*: "If a person becomes a refugee, then there will be a significant environmental and psychosocial impact. People who become refugees are often damaged more by their arrival and reception in the new country than they are by the events they witnessed or experienced in their homeland" (Hunt 59).

During the war, separation emerges as a deeply disruptive force, affecting individuals and the broader community. *Apocalypse '83* offers valuable insight about victims and refugees. Separation is a painful reality where one is forced to occupy the position of being a refugee in their own land. In the poem "Refugee Camp", the day-to-day life becomes unnatural because of the war that they encountered: ". . . a kind of temporary/ Flung into a van escorted by a uniformed men/ With guns for our protection" (Arasanayagam 2-4).

The poet expresses her outrage at the way civilians were taken to an unknown location. This forceful displacement highlights the brutal treatment inflicted on their people. Converting citizens into refugees is a blatant violation of human rights. The poem, "I Watch My Own Death: Refugee Camp 1983"

I watch my own death here
 It's happening all the time
 Bit by bit, the slow torture
 Of dying and yet not completely
 Dying, each part grows numb
 (Arasanayagam 1-5)

captures the psychological torment of the displaced individual through forced migration. The poet speaks of emotional death where their identity and dignity are slowly eroded. The words 'slow torture' convey the prolonged internal trauma where the speaker is physically alive yet living as dead. The uniformed men, armed with guns, effectively crammed the Tamil victims into the van, raising serious questions about their rights. These victims were taken from their homes and forced into refugee camps, essentially reclassifying them as refugees. In the poem, "Sentry", the poet speaks about the presence of armed men who symbolise the underlying issue. 'Were they truly protecting the civilians, or were they taking them under pretences?' "There's a man at the door alert/With a gun-a sentry – he smiles/And stands alone – for him there is no fear/ For me, unarmed, there's no defence" (Arasanayagam 1-4). From the lines in "Refugee Camp", one can understand the symbolism of state control and surveillance of the authority, "A uniformed officer wanders in/ 'Why do you shut all the windows? /Open them, everyone" (Arasanayagam 24-26). The lack of explanation regarding their destination and the purpose of this action remains unanswered. This situation evokes the image of a forced communal relocation. The question lingers: 'Would these escorts ensure the civilians' safety until the war

ends, or were they being taken for some unknown purpose?’ The silence surrounding this event is deafening. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra writes, “In traumatic memory, the event somehow registers and may be relived in the present, at times in a compulsively repetitive manner. It may not be subject to controlled, conscious recall. But it returns in nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety attacks, and other forms of intrusively repetitive behaviour characteristic of an all-compelling frame” (LaCapra 89). When the victims are isolated from their belongings, fear and anxiety collectively trigger to repressing of them. As LaCapra says, the registered event in one’s memory will repetitively create various traumatic reactions that will be recorded in the human mind. The poet acknowledges how the separation and fears come simultaneously in the poem “Night- Refugee Camp”, “I cannot sleep. /The searchlights on the trees never dim” (Arasanayagam 19, 20). The solitude is replaced by deep suffering, as displacement from their homeland to unknown lands brings a sense of discomfort and alienation.

Remembering Struggles in Refugee Camps

The refugee camp is depicted as a disorienting place where the fellow residents are considered strangers. This highlights the refugees’ fear and suspicion of the unknown. Moreover, the separation from their familiar surroundings fosters a sense of ‘otherness’ in the minds of the perpetrators. Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* writes,

As long as the victim maintains any other human connection, the perpetrator’s power is limited. It is for this reason that perpetrators universally seek to isolate their victims from any other source of information, material aid, or emotional support. The stories of political prisoners are filled with accounts of their captors’ attempts to prevent communication with the outside world and to convince them that their closest allies have forgotten or betrayed them. (Herman 58)

On one hand, fear takes control of the refugees because of the ‘strangers.’ On the other hand, the perpetrators seek to confine them to a particular place, subjecting them to psychological torment. Arasanayagam writes in the poem “Now We Are Strangers:”

Now we are strangers
 Either we stay awake dark nights sleepless
 Throbbing with fugitive dreams
 Locked within a cell
 Wait for the release of death
 Or embark upon a ship
 That takes us routeless
 Without maps
 To fare forth
 On a Voyage without end.
 (Arasanayagam 31-40)

Debasement is the action of reducing the quality or value of something; it creates solitude in the victim’s life. Promod Nayar in *Human Rights and Literature* relates debasement to the two fundamental human actions. He writes, “Consumption and Excretion. Both involve a certain animalization, with the latter focused more sharply on filth and accompanying (animal) revulsion. In both consumption and excretion, food and filth become signs of the victim’s animality and attendant loss of humanity” (Nayar 48). The refugee camps reveal two fundamental human crises, ‘the self-erosion’ and ‘erosion of human identity’. They are forced

into a passive state of human dependency, where the refugees should remain hungry till food is provided. Aprajita, in her article, “Resettlement of Partition Refugees in Intizar Husain’s Selected Novels: Preserving Memories through Everyday Cultural Practices”, writes,

The refugees, bereft of a physical homeland, clung to the repository of memories which manifested itself through their daily practices, serving as a poignant reflection of their shared experiences and resilient identity in the face of displacement. Everyday life became a tapestry woven with threads of dislocation, nostalgia, and the persistent undercurrent of an altered socio-political landscape (Aprajita 474).

People are unaware of the source of their food, and they must line up in long queues to receive it. When provisions are insufficient, those at the end are left without food, where one is forced to remain hungry. This ambiguity surrounding access to basic food shows the precariousness and indignity of refugee existence. In the poem, “Refugees- As we move on, As we Move on,” Arasanayagam pens: “Stench from excreta and urine/ Disinfectant sprinkled everywhere is to/ Destroy bacteria, vermin, yet we like” (Arasanayagam 15-17). The poet’s haunting depiction of filth draws attention to the deplorable living conditions, addressing the refugees’ lack of proper living conditions. The scarcity of basic necessities, including forced separation and inadequate space, compels them to share a squalid environment. Their deep anguish is evident in the face of these unsanitary conditions.

Treated as sub-humans, refugees are forced to endure dehumanising conditions, often confined to environment characterized by filth and stench. Such imagery conveys the deplorable state of the refugee camps. These spaces inevitably give rise to severe health problems and are particularly hazardous for children. It reflects the physical condition, which reminds their diminished status.

The poem “1958 . . . ‘71 . . . ‘77 . . . ‘81 . . . ‘83” lays bare the escalating conflict in Sri Lanka. The fragmented title, a series of years, foreshadows the rising tensions and the relentless cycle of suffering. Arasanayagam paints a vivid picture of this period, where civilian casualties were high. The constant sounds of gunfire and mourning permeate the island, creating a palpable atmosphere of fear and despair.

History repeats itself
Or so I’m told
It is only in deeds of violence?

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History repeats itself
So the act has continuity.
(Arasanayagam 37-45)

The emotional responses like weeping, mourning, anger, and aggression are strong evidence of the psychological trauma inflicted by the war. The poem further exposes the perpetrators’ depraved behaviour, particularly towards refugees. Their actions reveal a dehumanised mentality, treating fellow human beings as unequal and subhuman.

In “Innocent Victim – Trincomalee,” the poet expresses her situation in the following lines, “When they came strangers [military] /Our house went up in flames” (Arasanayagam 39, 40). The above lines address, fear as a dominant factor against the strangers in the refugee camps. The burnt houses show the fury of the Sinhala perpetrators who were suppressing the Tamil minorities. Such organised events forced the Tamils to carry fear and anguish throughout their

life. Eager in the way of living and also wishing to proceed to the normal life is one of the desires that the poet proposes to have. The poet describes the miserable existence of the refugee camps and questions in her poem's title, "When Can We Live Again?" The title of the poem reflects the poet's eagerness for rest and peace from hatred and war. The interrogative title evokes the human mind and soul towards the atrocities committed by the perpetrators. The problems created by the state and dominant group in treating the Tamils in a disgraceful way because the Sri Lankan military kept the Tamils under strict vigil and made sure that no one escaped from the camp. But they can't escape anywhere because the military watches sharply, "Their eyes are wide awake" (Arasanayagam 6). Fear crushes them down under the hawk eyes of the military.

Men curse and grumble women weep
Hold close in their embrace other weeping
Strangers now grown close as kin,
Children scream and play they do not understand.
(Arasanayagam 10-13)

Both men and women suffered in the camp, strangers were once unknown later they became family in shared grief and survival. Though the refugees are forcibly separated from their places, they find solidarity by joining hands in their difficult times. This situation makes everyone shed tears because they have lost everything that they had. They have lost their family, their houses went up in flames, and they are also isolated from their place. Men rumble with anger towards the perpetrators, while women weep, clutching the shoulders of these unfamiliar figures. In the crucible of shared misery, strangers find kinship in their tears. Their shared pain transcends their previous unfamiliarity, forging a bond as strong as blood. The events reveal the resilience of the refugees, forced to adapt to their devastating losses and forge a new normal.

In the poem "Night - Refugee Camp," the poet shares her own experience in the refugee camps; this reflects the notion of being a suspect: "I cannot sleep/ The searchlights on the trees never dim" (Arasanayagam 20, 21). The poet employs suspicion as a concept both literally and figuratively. She reflects on her personal experience of doubting others, as well as the pervasive sense of suspicion that infiltrates not only her mind but also the collective psyche of the refugees in the refugee camp. Suspicion becomes a defining characteristic of wartime existence, particularly when surrounded by unfamiliar faces. The constant vigilance required in the presence of strangers fuels suspicions about their true intentions. Arasanayagam's *Apocalypse '83* offers a multi-layered exploration of the theme of displacement and trauma. In the poem, "Fear,"

Fear chokes the throat
Clogs the tongue
Fear of the mob
Fear of the night
Fear of the sunlight
Fear of the day
Which reveals the foe,
Fear makes the body
(Arasanayagam 1-8)

The poet powerfully captures the intense nature of fear in the life of a refugee. Fear likely stems from a combination of factors such as the uncertainty of the situation, the unknown

surroundings, and the presence of strangers. This concoction of fear and anxiety manifests in a deep suspicion of those around her. The poems powerfully capture the intertwined nature of fear and suspicion, a relentless mental torment that haunts the refugees and leaves its mark on their souls.

Conclusion

Arasanayagam's *Apocalypse '83* transcends a mere chronicle of war to become a powerful testament to the enduring suffering of refugees. Each line pulsates with the raw emotions of the victims, etching their inner turmoil onto the page. The desire for peace and the elusive hope for healing are further destabilised by the government's suspicion and ostracisation of refugees. The poetry exposes the dark underbelly of humanity during wartime, where fellow human beings, particularly the Tamil victims, are dehumanised and treated as subhuman. The resulting trauma leaves indelible scars in the refugees' memories. *Apocalypse '83* serves as a poignant historical record. Arasanayagam's evocative language paints a vivid picture of the refugee experience, capturing the profound sense of separation, fear and deep anguish that permeate their lives. The camps, meant to be sanctuaries, become a grim reminder of their displacement. Children are robbed of their innocence and forced to endure an abnormal reality. This powerful collection serves as a reminder of the human cost of war, an intense indictment of the suffering endured by refugees throughout history.

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