

Trauma and Tenacity in Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage* and *A Passage North*

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ABSTRACT

Conflict forces individuals to steer through loss, excruciating suffering and the breakdown of familiar realities. This paper explores the intricate relationship between trauma and human tenacity in conflict situations through an analysis of Anuk Arudpragasam's novels, *The Story of a Brief Marriage* and *A Passage North*. Both novels have as their background the ethnic conflict and civil war in Sri Lanka. Arudpragasam's novels explore the deep mental and emotional scars that violence leaves behind in people displaced by war and violence. His characters are tenacious and they show tenacity and resilience in quiet, little ways instead of grand, rebellious acts. This can be observed in their focus on the body, its functions and in their search for meanings and connections. Instead of focussing on collective suffering, Arudpragasam shows how individuals attempt to survive in war zones. His novels also highlight the importance of memory and thought in resisting erasure of both the human and the historical. His characters do not overcome suffering but learn to coexist with it; their endurance itself becomes an act of defiance. Drawing upon trauma theory and affect studies, the paper shows how Arudpragasam's novels are a touching rendition of the human capacity to adapt and to be flexible when confronted with trauma.

Keywords: *trauma, tenacity, resistance, affects*

Introduction

Conflict forces individuals to navigate loss, unbearable suffering and the collapse of common realities. Anuk Arudpragasam's novels, *The Story of a Brief Marriage* and *A Passage North* have the ethnic conflict and civil war in Sri Lanka as their background. Arudpragasam's novels explore the deep mental and emotional scars that violence leaves behind in people and communities displaced by war and violence. His characters are tenacious and they show tenacity and resilience in quiet, little ways instead of grand, rebellious acts. This can be observed in their focus on the body, its functions and in their search for meanings and connections. Instead of focussing on collective suffering, Arudpragasam shows how people

attempt to survive in war zones. His novels also highlight the importance of memory and thought in resisting erasure of both the human and the historical. His characters do not overcome suffering but learn to coexist with it; their endurance itself becomes an act of defiance. Instead of a conventional depiction of suffering, Arudpragasam shows how individuals survive within violent spaces. This paper will use trauma theory and affect studies to illuminate the intricate interaction between traumatic historical events and humanity's ability for resistance and adaptation in Arudpragasam's works. The paper argues that Arudpragasam portrays this interplay between trauma and tenacity subtly rather than overtly and reiterates the idea that tenacity is not about overcoming trauma but about enduring and finding meaning within the circumstances.

Trauma theory and affect studies are two important frames that focus on emotions and the body but from different angles and with different emphases. Trauma theory gives affect studies historical and ethical depth by rooting affect in specific events like war or genocide. Affect studies on the other hand, expands trauma theory by focusing on the bodily, sensory, and nonverbal dimensions of trauma. Trauma and affect provide critical tools for understanding how war and violence is represented in *The Story of a Brief Marriage (SBM)* and *A Passage North (PN)*. Arudpragasam centres the body as the primary site of meaning and concentrates on sensation, routine and the environment rather than overt action. The narrative technique of interior monologue captures the violence of war and reveals how trauma is often processed much later through silence or an unforgettable memory.

Trauma in the novels

Trauma theory examines the effects of traumatic experiences on individuals. It originates in the idea that trauma is not fully experienced in the moment; it returns through flashbacks, silence and other symptoms. Cathy Caruth sees trauma as an “unclaimed experience” that resists understanding and narration, an event that is so overwhelming that it is ‘belatedly’ assimilated into the conscious and narrative (181). Dominick LaCapra connects trauma theory to history, ethics, and memory even as he differentiates between ‘acting out’ and ‘working through’ trauma (148-9). Shoshana Felman explores the experience of “bearing witness to a crisis or a trauma” as ‘testimony’ (1). Trauma theory helps us to understand the ruptures in

time and poignant silences in both novels. As Caruth states, the trauma is not comprehended completely or immediately; it is "unclaimed" as the present is indecisive, the future is bleak and the past cannot be dealt with. This can be seen in the disjointed and multi-directional ways in which traumatic memories come up in Arudpragasam's stories. The focus of both novels is on the survival of trauma rather than the statement of trauma. Trauma theory recognises that trauma is not just an individual experience; it can be a collective experience that shapes the cultural memory and identity of an entire community. The ethnic conflict in Sri Lankan left a permanent scar on the Tamil psyche and society. Arudpragasam explores how this collective trauma is inscribed in the landscape, the ordinary routines and the very sensibilities of the protagonists and yet the focus remains on the individual and not the collective.

In *A Passage North* the central protagonist, Krishan, feels trauma indirectly. He is journeying to the northern part of Sri Lanka to take part in the funeral of Rani. Rani is the former caregiver of his grandmother and a Tamil. Rani's trauma is direct as she lost her sons in the conflict. Krishan's journey reflects his efforts to cope with the trauma caused by the conflict. The narrative is not linear; Krishan's thoughts constantly swing between the past and the present. His interior monologue mirrors the way in which trauma compresses time so that the past (wartime memories) invades the present. Krishan is not a direct victim of the ethnic violence that gripped the island nation but is a witness to the suffering of others (like Rani) and to national trauma. But Krishan suffers from "guilt for having been spared" (*PN*, 16) and "a desire to punish himself for what he'd escaped by exposing himself to it as violently as he could" (*PN*, 23). Krishan collects every bit of information about the war while living in Delhi far away from the epicentre of the conflict.

Unlike Dinesh, the war is not overtly experienced by Krishan. The novel shows how trauma is often felt rather than fully articulated. Krishan repeats thoughts and images, particularly those related to death, violence, and suffering throughout the novel. The violence penetrates so deep into Rani's psyche that she never fully recovers until death becomes the only release and traumatised people like her "themselves walked with open arms in the direction of these seemingly accidental deaths, as though they themselves welcomed them or even willed them to take place" (77).

LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" is vital as Krishan is stuck between the two, replaying memories without working towards a resolution. Krishan's thoughts are circular; the war's atrocities are felt in the long silences, the muted emotional responses and the pervasive sense of loss. His sense of "survivor's guilt" despite being away from the direct conflict underscores how trauma can go beyond those directly exposed to violence and affect others indirectly as well. We can see that the traumatic experiences of Krishan and Rani do not immediately manifest but emerge later in repetitive and disruptive forms: "Trauma for Rani was something that had to coexist with all the various exigencies of daily existence" (172). It is an inescapable part of her life and she constantly thinks about and reacts to it. In her sleep, it haunts her in the form of nightmares. She suffers due to these nightmares, withdraws into silence and feels a burden that she cannot ever lay down.

Individuals can be indirectly affected by trauma even if they are not directly involved in the conflict as perpetrators or as victims. Krishan lives in Colombo and is geographically removed from the epicentre of the war. But, he is caught up in its consequences and forced to struggle with its moral and psychological costs. He engages intellectually with the atrocities of war and eventually returns to work in an NGO in war-torn areas suggesting a later manifestation of trauma. Rani's accident/suicide embodies another traumatic legacy that resists explanation. She symbolizes the invisible cost of war echoing Shoshana Felman on the limits of witnessing and testimonies.

On the other hand, *The Story of a Brief Marriage* expresses trauma in the body and in the here and the now. Dinesh experiences trauma as extreme awareness of the body and the imminence of death. The novel is set over twenty-four hours in a refugee camp in the closing stages of the ethnic conflict. The novel delineates one day in the life of Dinesh, a young Tamil man. He is abruptly asked to marry a stranger, Ganga, amidst the bombings and imminent death. The novel is heavily immersed in physical vulnerability - bodily wounds, filth, hunger, and dismemberment. In *The Story of a Brief Marriage* trauma is not indirect as it is in *A Passage North*. Dinesh feels trauma viscerally as he becomes hyper-aware of his own body and that of others. At the beginning of the novel, Dinesh does not touch a child's recently amputated hand because "he didn't want to feel the softness of freshly amputated flesh between his fingers, the warmth of a limb just recently alive" (*SBM*, 5). Time and the narrative move forward extremely

slowly reflecting the numbness, deadness and lack of sensation that is induced by trauma. The day-long narrative reflects how time is stretched in extreme trauma. Dinesh has already lost his family but must now try to form a connection (through his marriage with Ganga) even as everything around him is disintegrating. He feels the trauma of attachment as well as loss, thus revealing the difficulty in processing one's emotions during conflict. The marriage proposal from Ganga's father surprises him and he remains sceptical about accepting the proposal as "he couldn't tell when the last time was that he'd really felt connected to someone else" (*SBM*, 11). The novel also features minimal dialogue; Dinesh retreats into his shell showing how trauma can lead to grave silences aligning with trauma theory's claim that language and communicative abilities can fail in the face of catastrophic violence.

Trauma theory helps us understand how both novels depict the enduring psychological effects of war from different vantage points. *A Passage North* explores the remnants of trauma in peacetime memory while *The Story of a Brief Marriage* reveals the immediacy of trauma in the lived, violent present. Arudpragasam uses silence, time ruptures and bodily details to show how trauma disrupts both the internal self and external relationships.

Affect in the novels

Affect studies concentrates on the role of intensity and feeling in human experience. It highlights pre-conscious, bodily responses rather than rational, conscious thought. Prominence is accorded to the body with feeling located in the corporeal. Affect is often understood as raw feeling or intensity before being labelled as an emotion. Affect is non-conscious, unformed, unstructured and abstract (Shouse, np). Brian Massumi emphasizes affect as autonomous and pre-cognitive and describes affect as an intensity that is "irreducibly bodily and autonomic" (28). Sara Ahmed focuses on how emotions 'stick' to bodies and objects, and how emotions can have social and political ramifications (4). Lauren Berlant speaks of "cruel optimism" and "the condition of maintaining attachment to a significantly problematic object" (24). *A Passage North* and *The Story of a Brief Marriage* are rich with moments where the non-verbal, visceral, and imperceptible elements of experience are foregrounded in the narrative.

Affect studies helps us read bodily sensations, atmospheres, and micro-experiences in Arudpragasam's work as central to how war is lived and remembered. *The Story of a Brief Marriage* foregrounds the protagonist Dinesh's microscopic bodily experiences like breathing, bathing and defecating amidst the chaos of war. This connects with Massumi's notion of affect as pre-cognitive intensity. The claustrophobic atmosphere of the refugee camp, the sounds of shelling and the intimacy of a forced marriage in sudden circumstances are conveyed through sensations rather than explanation. When the bombing starts, Dinesh "felt at such times always strangely disembodied, as though observing himself from the outside, watching as his two hands clasped each other tightly and as his fingers intertwined of their own accord" (*SBM*, 15). Lauren Berlant's ideas about "slow death" and "cruel optimism" are seen in Dinesh's attempts to cling on to hope in a disintegrating world: "There was a chance, of course, that one or even both of them would be killed before the end of the war, but there was a chance too that they would both survive" (*SBM*, 154). This hope however, is short lived and the brief marriage ends as Ganga succumbs to another round of heavy bombing. Affect is also revealed in Dinesh's reaction to his mother's death in the conflict:

... at such times, a person's actions are determined solely by the unconscious movements of their arms and legs, by reactions that have never been reflected upon but which, unknown to the individual, have been preparing themselves quietly and meticulously in their muscles and nerves, ... (*SBM*, 81)

On the other hand, *A Passage North* is a more reflective novel where grief, memory, and meditation on violence take precedence over action. In this novel, affect circulates through memory, landscape and relationships. Throughout his journey to the north of the island to attend the funeral of Rani, Krishan is disturbed by thoughts of conflict and violence. Sara Ahmed's theory of "sticky emotions" is useful to note how loss during war "sticks" to Rani's and Krishan's identities and relationships even after the war has come to a close.

Affect in *A Passage North* becomes a contemplation on the affective consequences of conflict and casualty. The news of Rani's death does not provoke a dramatic outburst in Krishan; instead it triggers waves of feelings, memories and a journey. Even when he is distant and passive, Krishan is deeply attuned to Rani's suffering. As his train arrives at Kilinochchi, Krishan realises that "(h)e'd traversed not any physical distance that day but rather some vast

psychic distance inside him, that he'd been advancing not from the island's south to its north but from the south of his mind to its own distant northern reaches" (*PN*, 205). The novel also delves into the disconnections between body and feeling in post-war Colombo, a space in which violent memory clashes with superficial calm. This creates a tension as the trauma is not visible but is felt as an all-pervasive unease. The novel demonstrates the slow accumulation of affect without attempting to show its resolution.

Affect in *The Story of a Brief Marriage* focuses on visceral affect and survival. Affect studies shows that the body is the first space where war registers its presence - through tremors, wounds, exhaustion and broken bodies. Dinesh's experience is largely physical and shows his exposure to hunger, pain, filth, and mortality:

He'd been isolated from his home, family, friends, and possessions so long that such a separation could no longer feel painful or even unusual ... it was the disintegration of his body that came to mind at such times, the disintegration of his hair, his teeth, his skin. His nails no longer growing, his skin no longer sweating. (*SBM*, 19-20)

Washing himself becomes an act of regaining some control over affect, not just dirt removal but the attempt to re-regulate the overwhelmed and tired body. Dinesh becomes hypersensitive to breathing patterns, texture of leaves and the sounds of shelling. Dinesh's sudden marriage to Ganga is not about romance or legality; it is an affective gesture and a means of creating temporary intimacy and shared vulnerability in a brutal landscape. The moment, when Dinesh ties the thaali around Ganga's neck, seems like "two humans crossing paths in a lifeless and empty land will stop and with words and gestures attempt to build a narrow bridge between their worlds" (*SBM*, 52). Time slows down, and sensations are stretched out.

Affect theory helps us see that every emotion is not named or processed in Arudpragasam's novels. His characters do not always express themselves and their feelings; they live with them by tuning their bodies to the environment around them. In *A Passage North* we see a steady build-up of affect while in *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, affect is instantaneous and unprocessed. Both show us how trauma and violence are felt, lived, and passed on through affective registers.

Tenacity in the novels

The internal disturbances in Sri Lanka spawned a wide variety of literary responses with focus on political violence or militant resistance. Arudpragasam however engages with issues of war, violence and trauma by focusing on reflective interiority and little acts of defiance. Despite the pervasive presence of trauma, Arudpragasam's novels are not without a powerful undercurrent of tenacity. This tenacity is not a heroic, triumphant overcoming of adversity; it is a quieter, more profound form of endurance. Using the interior monologue, Arudpragasam keeps the narrative non-sensational, deeply reflective and mirrors the struggles with internalisation and adaptation.

In *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, the hastily organised wedding of Dinesh and Ganga in the middle of the conflict is a brave and defiant assertion of life. The young couple's attempts to navigate their new marriage in the midst of constant shelling and military offensives and counter-offensives reflects the fundamental human drive to find normalcy and connection even in the most extenuating circumstances. As Ganga tells Dinesh poignantly: "Happiness and sadness are for people who can control what happens to them" (*SBM*, 148). Their brief moments of intimacy and their efforts to undertake and maintain domestic routines show a remarkable resilience that is undeterred by the devastating dehumanization. Dinesh's attentiveness to humane actions like cleaning wounds, helping a young child hurt by shrapnel, observing physical sensations all challenge the brutality and inhumanity of war. His constant engagement with fundamental human needs is an act of tenacity against annihilation in a war. Thought, memory and reflection are also claimed as a type of resistance to external chaos. Dinesh's philosophical ruminations amid desperate situations can be interpreted as a way to maintain compassion in extremely excruciating exigencies. His physical endurance and resilience of the body reflects a deeper tenacity and a way to ground oneself:

It was as though he'd been moving around, all this time, in a heavy fog, doing whatever he needed to do mindlessly, refusing to register the world outside him, and refusing to let it have any effect on him, ... (*SBM*, 9)

War impacts the body before it impacts the mind and hence, we see in both novels how adaptation occurs through bodily routines and survival instincts. Ordinary and routine body

functions like eating, defecating, breathing, sleeping become tenacious acts of affirmation of life. Both Dinesh and Krishan have to adapt emotionally to the circumstances. Dinesh responds to situations with partial numbness using detachment as a means of adaptation: "... dying meant being separated from oneself above all, being separated from all the intimate personal details that had come to constitute one's life" (*SBM*, 12).

On the other hand, Krishan's guilt seeks a new emotional equilibrium. His journey north and his attempts to understand Rani and the war's impact are acts of intellectual and emotional tenacity. Despite his initial detachment, Krishan embarks on a journey that forces him to confront the legacy of the war and his own connection to it. His engagement with the story of Rani - the trauma of losing her sons, the nightmares that haunt her - represents a quiet but persistent search for meaning in a fractured world. Rani, on the other hand, is unable to accept a world without the people she has lost and hence, rejects the present in favour of memories and the past. The novel itself is an act of remembrance and an attempt to grapple with difficult truths. Krishan's journey also becomes a journey through memory, remembering and mourning. Recollecting the violence is a way of keeping the past alive. While memory can be a source of pain and fragmentation of the self, in Arudpragasam's work, it serves as a link to the past, preserving stories and experiences that might otherwise be lost. The act of remembering, even when painful, can be seen as a form of tenacity, a refusal to let the past be erased.

Conclusion

Anuk Arudpragasam's novels thus persuasively and effectively explore trauma and tenacity as the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka comes to an end. By poignantly portraying the psychological impact of violence, his works highlight the terrible nature of traumatic experiences, and their lasting impact on individual and collective memory. Simultaneously, the novels reveal how these painful experiences manifest as pre-cognitive intensities and shape human interaction. Within this landscape of profound suffering, Arudpragasam also reveals a quiet but powerful tenacity in the fortitude displayed by Dinesh and Krishan. It is not heroic but a tenacious will to stay alive, to go through ordinary, everyday life and to search for meaning.

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