
ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN THE SELECT POEMS OF JEAN ARASANAYAGAM'S *APOCALYPSE 83*

Ms.S.Balasundari,
Associate Professor of English,
Gandhigram Rural Institute, Deemed University,
Gandhigram.

Abstract

Jean Arasanayagam (1931-2019), one of the leading literary voices in contemporary Sri Lankan literature. Her poetry is unique for depiction of socio-cultural milieus, ambivalence spaces and crisis of identity. Arasanayagam's poetry directly addressed racial violence during the Black July, the anti-Tamil campaign in Sri Lanka in 1983. In addition, her poetry captures alienation, minorities' issues, identity crisis and quest for freedom. In this regard, the paper examines the ethnic violence in "Nallur 1982" and "In the Month of July" is extracted from Arasanayagam's *Apocalypse '83*. It also demonstrates how innocent Tamils are brutally assaulted and killed by the mob.

Keywords: Arasanayagam, Violence, Black July.

Introduction

Jean Arasanayagam, a well-known poet and short story writer in Sri Lanka. She is author of 50 books. Her writings are highly political and polemical. Arasanayagam deals with gender, personal relationships and post-colonialism in her literary works. Many of her poems have been translated into various languages such as Swedish, French, Japanese and Danish. She has received many awards from other countries, been received the Sahityarata award from the Sri Lanka government in 2017, the Premchand fellowship from Sakathiya Academy, India in 2014 and received the Gratian prize which is prestigious literary award in Sri Lanka.

The leading news magazine *The Wire* is identified that her poetry represents "quest for meaning belonging and identity in Post-colonial Sri Lanka" (1). Her notable works include: *Kindura* (1973) *Apocalypse 83* (1984), *The Cry of the Kite* (1984) *A Colonial Inheritance and Other Poems* (1985), *Out of our Prisons We Emerge* (1987), *Fragments of a Journey* (1992) *All is Burning* (1995) *Peacock and Dreams* (1996) and *Shooting the Florian* (1996).

The paper explores the ethnic violence in "Nallur 1982" and "In the Month of July" Jean Arasanayagam's *Apocalypse '83* (1984). *Apocalypse* is a collection of poems which deals with her experience of ethnic riots in July 1983 in Sri Lanka. It is widely known as Black July. It pictures personal narrative and insight and politics to the violence of the civil war. The essay is divided into two parts; first, it maps the "Black July" and ethnic horrors will be analyzed in the

second part by the select poems from *Apocalypse '83*.

Ethnic Violence

Ethnic violence described a type political violence that driven by ethnic hatred politics, ethnic conflict and counterfeit nationalist ideas. Sometimes it is also called as ethnic terrorism and ethnically motivated terrorism. According to Dr. May Lim, a researcher who is affiliated with New England Complex Systems Institute (NECSI)

Violence normally occurs when a group is large enough to impose cultural norms on public spaces, but not large enough to prevent those norms from being broken. Usually this occurs in places where boundaries between ethnic or cultural groups are unclear. (Wikipedia)

Ethnic violence leads to fear, rage, hate and resentment and triggers individuals and made them enemies to each other and makes emotional tensions. Sri Lankan riots and Nazi massacre is the biggest ethnic violent behavior of the globe. Based on which many literary narratives have been flourished. Arasanayagam imprints the ethnic terrorism as it is in her poetry.

Black July: Genocide

Black July is widely known as anti-Tamil campaign in Sri Lanka. This anti-tamil pogrom had occurred on 24th July 1983. The Sinhalese attacked brutally Tamil minority in Colombo. Sinhalese mobs burned tortured, looted and killed the innocent tamil citizens. As result, 3000 were killed, decimated more than 5000 shops and over 150,000 tamils lost their life. In the case of women over 500 were raped and several families were burned alive. Over 500,000 tamils were fled to other countries. The NGO, *International Commission of Jurists* referred the riots as genocide. This massacre is popularly called ethnic cleansing.

Nallur 1982

Arasanayagam, delineates the disastrous of racial and ethnical discrimination and political as well in her poem "Nallur 1982". The poem opens with alarm that disastrous going to be occurred. It reflects the contemporary state of Sri Lanka. The conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamil minority is prevalent. In "Nallur 1982", she uses the power image to illustrate the crisis of existence, the dry trees branches are fallen and no water in the well. It reflects the contemporary state of Nallur is a significant place in Northern Province, Sri Lanka. It is where the famous Hindu temple is located named 'Nallur Kandasamy Kovil' Lord Murugan, presiding deity.

The poet shows that a dark, gloomy and dying Sri Lanka by the ethnic violence. The poem opens with a sentence "It's there" which postulates that horror of human violence among two groups.

It's there
Beneath the fallen fronds dry crackling pile of broken twigs,
abandoned wells of brackish water lonely dunes. (1-3).

The images "fallen bonds", 'broken twigs' and 'abandoned wells' symbolize the absurdity and absence of human life in Nallur at Murugan Temple Premises. Arasanayagam depicts the bloodshed that broke during violence in Nallur. These bloodsheds reveal that the war and violence is anti democratic. The Sinhalese brutally assaulted the Tamil minorities. This poem

posts a heap of dead bodies while riots take place. The violence lost the innocent civilians life.

The shadows of long bodies shrunk in death
 The leaching sun has drunk their blood and
 Bloated swells among the poling clouds. . . .
 Death smell it in the air
 Its odor rack with sun and thickening blood. (6-10)

The poet brilliantly juxtaposes spirituality and barbarity and presents the clangor of temple bells that show religious services have done by innocent citizens in order to save them from bullets and cried of death by merciless soldiers. The citizens called lord's name to save them but efforts are failed and ended in chaos and bloodshed. These incidents represented conflicts between spiritualism and barbarism. And also the poet unveils the gun training by military forces at the entrance of temple premises.

Amid the clangour of
 The temple bells, the clapping hands. . .
 The zing of bullets
 Cries of death
 Drowned in the roar
 Of voices calling skanda
 By his thousand names
 Muruga, kartikkeya
 Arumuga.....
 We pray, we cry, we clamour . (15-22)

The poet criticizes innocent citizens' blind belief on spiritualism which would not save their life and stress that God is not heard of his devotees' weeping. It is evident that all their ended in vain however, brutality and violence is continued at Nallur and her writings crammed with religious symbolism and violence which are central subjects.

Be not like the god
 Who does not hear deaf Sandeversan (24-25).

The poet slams that war does not help people to live with harmony. However, war culminating in death, destruction and divides the masses. Arasanayangam also emphasis that religion is not solution to control the war rather one should follow what religion has preached to people. She used metaphors bloody skirmishes of humankind and the rain of bullets have blinded the eyes of gods and closed in darkness.

Turned away from bloody skirmished
 Of humankind, the gods are blinded
 By the rain of bullets
 Six faced Arumugan
 All twelve eyes
 Closed in darkness. (48-54)

The poem highlights the miserable and brutality of Sinhalese and failure of humanity, bullets fired towards Tamils. The depiction of the cremation of bodies showed the nauseating of war and ethnic violence.

Waves of rust swell and billow
 Beating into hollow caves and burial urns
 Filled with the ash of bodies
 Cremated by the fire of bullets. (59-62)

In the Month of July

In her, "In the Month of July", is written during the rites occurred. The poem focuses on carnage, about the incomprehensibility of pure evil to understand, hate like that in the the mob knows neither mercy nor solidarity. Hatred politics is explored here and the difference is wild and absolute. With a hard rhythm and rush invocation and some rhetoric a poem can have. Jean Arasanayagam is riveting in its portrayal of pure hell. The fate of man, the suffering of anonymous and innocent people honed. It also depicts the ethnic violence between two groups that results in human nature is failed, childhood games with pebbles converted into mob riots. The Sinhalese brutally hit Tamils with stones and burned house of them. Tamils are tried to escape but they are squashed violence by the mob and beaten to death.

In the month of July
 A man fled from his pursuers
 He climbed a tree
 The mob aimed stones at him
 Until they got him down
 He probably fell off, his grasp loosen.
 Slippery with blood, his body already battered
 And then they trampled him to death. (16-24)

Arasanayagam's poems have been expressed vigorously without self-consciousness and contrast clearly with the formalities of an earlier period. "Nallur 1982" is known for the power of imagination and the bold prophetic vision of Arasanayagam. The poem seems to refer to the violence that pervaded the country in July 1983 and her poems have been illustrated the loss of humanity through war and violence.

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