



Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature as a Mode for Dialogue and Reconciliation in the Portrayal of War in Sri Lanka (1983-2009)

S. Bamunusinghe¹, C. D. Senaratne²

Abstract

From ancient times, war has played a main role in the lives of people and has been a major theme for literature, history, and as well as for political discourses. The period between 1983-2009 marks the war that took place in Sri Lankan history, which impacted the country politically, culturally, and economically. The realms of Sri Lankan English, Sinhala, and Tamil literature also went through change during this period, and many fiction, poems, dramas, and films were composed in response to the war both during and in its aftermath. The Sri Lankan Anglophone writers: residential authors as well as authors of the diaspora portray the war through their literary compositions. This critical literature review examines the role Anglophone literature plays as a mode for dialogue and reconciliation in the portrayal of war. Above ten studies conducted on Sri Lankan Anglophone literature and its role in portraying war published between 1992 and 2020 were reviewed. The findings of the review indicate that many scholars consider Sri Lankan Anglophone literature as a platform that plays a significant role as a mode for dialogue and reconciliation while some consider it as literature composed by the English-speaking class for its own class. This review concludes that the Sri Lankan Anglophone literature plays a substantial role as a medium for dialogue and reconciliation in the portrayal of war in Sri Lanka (1989-2003).

Keywords: Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature, dialogue and reconciliation, war in Sri Lanka (1983-2009)

¹Business
Communication Unit,
Faculty of Management
Studies and Commerce,
University of Sri
Jayewardenepura, Sri
Lanka
²Department of English
Language Teaching,
University of Kelaniya,
Sri Lanka

sepalibamunusinghe@sjp.ac.lk

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-2246-5154>



This article is published under the Creative Commons CC-BY-ND License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/>). This license permits to use, distribute, and reproduce the contents of the publication for commercial and non-commercial purposes, provided that the original work is properly cited and is not changed anyway.

**Original Article****INTRODUCTION**

War has been a major theme in the arts and also for history, political discourses, and media. Calloway (2018) indicates that war will exist as a major theme since it is universal perennial incorporating the themes of human nature, love, death, or time. The *war in Sri Lanka*¹ was a period which is marked as bleak and violent in the history of Sri Lanka that changed the whole social setup culturally, socially and economically. Along with the other social and cultural domains of Sri Lanka, the domain of literature changed drastically, and a number of poems, fiction, drama, and cinema productions were created during the period of the war as well as in its aftermath. The writers in English, Sinhala and Tamil responded to this war through their compositions and wanted to 'understand the roots of the conflict, foster dialogue and reconciliation, and bear witness to terrorism and repression by all sides' (Jayasuriya, 2016, p. 195). Sri Lankan Anglophone literature that erupted based on the 'ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka both reveals the impact of terrorism and ethnic violence on a particular society and seeks to understand how and why the conflict took root' (Jayasuriya, 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

As Brosman (1992) indicates, most of the literature pertinent to war can be identified as "not literary" or "marginally literary" which include military records or historical records. What makes the literary writings different from the above type is its "experiential dimension"; the subjective element in the imaginative medium of literary works which portrays how the war was felt and lived by people, surpassing a mere record of the war. As Jayasuriya (2016) denotes, English, Sinhala, and Tamil literature of Sri Lanka has been "shaped to a remarkable degree both by the brute fact of violence and by the varying ways in which Sri Lankans have responded to violence" (p. 195). Sri Lankan Anglophone writers were writing about the victims who lost hope in life and are overwhelmed by misery and were living "in a world marked by emotional and spiritual emptiness" (Denicius and Sivapalan, 2014, p. 149). In the year 2009 the war came to an end militarily, thus it is necessary to build ethnic harmony among people and establish reconciliation and it is visible that the Anglophone literary works attempt to fulfill this need which is "crucial for the future peace and well-being of Sri Lanka and vital as well for the pursuit of peace and reconciliation around the planet" (Jayasuriya, 2012).

¹war in Sri Lanka that took place from 1983 to 2009



Original Article

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is carried out as a critical literature review to explore how selected literary reviews evaluate Sri Lankan Anglophone literature in its portrayal of the war in Sri Lanka (1983-2009) as a mode for dialogue and reconciliation. About ten studies conducted on Sri Lankan Anglophone literature and its role in portraying War mostly published between 1992 and 2020 were reviewed to identify the part it plays in portraying war through literature.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

War is a perennial “cultural myth as well as a continuing human experience, and thus is still preeminently a topic for literature” (Brosman, 1992, p. 95). For thousands of years, wars have been taking place, as they are today as well as tomorrow. As a result of manmade wars, people live in fear and embrace death and this goes on as a cycle, making war an ever-present phenomenon in human societies. According to the reviewed articles, the literary writings composed on war carry an experiential dimension and are able to depict how the war was felt by people. As such, the readers prefer a subjective element in the imaginative medium of literary works which is the total opposite of journals, records, and histories. The use of literary language to express the deep emotions of the

characters impacts the imagination of the readers and brings them a fulfilling realistic experience. Poetry, fiction, or drama on the war do not appear to simply record the roots of conflicts and how the battles are conducted but explicate ‘the manner in which they are lived, felt, used, and transformed by participants’, which in turn can generate a fulfillment in the reader which is more than getting to know facts and “carry a mark of authenticity and truth that, paradoxically, more objective histories rarely attain” (Brosman, 1992, pp. 85-86).

When reflecting on the Sri Lankan Anglophone literature, it can be identified that there are several moments or incidents of the War to which the writers go back in their plots, signifying them as turning points in the growth of the conflict and significant to be recreated through literature (Jayasuriya, 2016). The *burning of the Jaffna Public Library in 1981*² is one such incident that is portrayed and discussed in literary creations. This bibliotheca was a space that contained texts containing knowledge about the Tamil community and their culture and the burning of it may have “represented to Sri Lankan Tamils an attack on their very culture and identity” (Jayasuriya, 2016, p. 196) along with their values and beliefs. Cheran (2011, p. 7, as cited in Jayasuriya, 2016, p. 196) in his poem, “*The Second Rise*”³ writes; “What

² The attack took place on 1st June, 1981 which destroyed more than 97000 books and manuscripts

³ “*Irundavadu Suuriyaudayam*” translated from the Tamil language by Chelva Kanaganayakam



Original Article

happened?/ My town was burned;/ my people became faceless;/ in my land, my air,/ in everything,/ the stamp of outsiders". Another pogrom revisited moment of the war in literature is the 1983 *Black July*⁴ riots which is portrayed in many literary works. For instance, Jean Arasanayagam (2003) in her poetry collection "Apocalypse'83", Karen Roberts (2001) in her novel "July", V.V. Ganeshanathan (2008) in her novel "Love Marriage", Nayomi Munaweera (2012) in her novel "Island of a Thousand Mirrors", and Shyam Selvadurai (1994) in his novel "Funny Boy" sketch the disastrous effects of Black July.

In a novel like Nihal de Silva's (2003) "The Road from Elephant Pass", another aspect is presented of the Sri Lankan war as it unfolds strife through the perspectives of *both sides*⁵, which grants the reader to understand the complicated nature of the conflict and to assess both parties' rationale behind the war. Presenting the image of the female suicide bomber is another feature that is evident in the literature depicting the War in order to learn the reasons which had led the people to choose violence and execute such extremist deeds. In Nayomi Munaweera's (2012) novel "Island of a Thousand Mirrors", Lal Medawattegedera's (2008) short story

"The Last War"⁶, and Amila Weerasinghe's (2001) poem "Suicide Bomber"⁷, the figure of the suicide bomber is well employed for their theme.

Presenting the traumatic everyday life in a war zone is yet another prevalent aspect identified in most of the writings and one such significant presentation is in Jean Arasanayagam's (2002) short story "Exodus"⁸ in which she writes of a young girl who was only two years old, but 'already knows what to do when there is an air raid: aerial attacks have become part of her normal diurnal routine and she has learned the art of self-preservation' (Jayasuriya, 2016, pp. 201-202).

Another feature that can be identified in the literature on the War is the inclusion of incidents of destruction; the *terrorist attacks*⁹ which killed people have been remembered and recreated through these writings. One such intense presentation is visible in Punyakante Wijenaike's (1998) novella "An Enemy Within" which recreates the bombing of the Central Bank in 1996, displaying how civilians from different ethnic groups got killed, and the pain and loss shared similarly by all.

⁴ anti-Tamil riots that took place in 1983 July

⁵ The LTTE vs the GOSL

⁶ In the book, "Can You Hear Me Running" (2008, pp.78-83)

⁷ In the book, "A Compendium of Creative Writing 1989-2001" (2001, p. 6)

⁸ In the book, "The Dividing Line" (2002, pp. 123-140)

⁹ Massacre in Anuradhapura in 1985, Central Bank of Sri Lanka bombing in 1996, Temple of the Tooth in Kandy in 1998 etc.



Original Article

Paralleling the Sri Lankan war to violence that occurred in different parts of the world in the past is another important feature that can be identified in writings on the Sri Lankan War. In Anne Ranasinghe's (1991) poem "*July 1983*"¹⁰, the connection between the *Holocaust*¹¹ and the Sri Lankan War is discussed. Aparna Halpé (2013) in her poem, "*Of this November, Mumbai*"¹² depicts a parallel between the many bombings that happened in Colombo, Sri Lanka to the terrorist attack that occurred in Mumbai, India in the year 2008. As Jayasuriya (2016) describes, many of the writings on the War in Sri Lanka, "seek to witness, acknowledge, and mourn the effects of violence, and many also seek to imagine a way beyond the impasses that the authors see at the time of writing" (p. 206). Altogether, these writings are a voice against violence, conflict, trauma, and killing and a plea for peace, reconciliation, and resolution.

When examining the Anglophone literature created on the Sri Lankan War and its aftermath, Jayasuriya (2012) indicates that it "reflects the centrality of war, terrorism, and attempts at reconciliation to the Sri Lankan experience of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries".

On the contrary, Goonetilleke (1992) views Anglophone writers of Sri Lanka as individuals "on the sidelines" and considers them as individuals

"responding to a situation engendered by politicians, who are not likely to consider their viewpoints, and by militants and soldiers who do not read the language in which they write ...", (p. 451) which is English. As a result, the Anglophone writers would not be able to impact the ones who really go through the hardships and struggle of war, being the "comfortable and cushioned class who share neither their privations nor their perceptions" (Goonetilleke, 1992, p. 451). In that context, it seemed as if the Anglophone writers were creating literature "for one another, for the local critics, for a few readers of their own class, and for a corresponding class in the developed world" (Goonetilleke, 1992, p. 451), and not for the people who were caught in the midst of the struggle. On the contrary, Jayasuriya (2012) views the role of Anglophone literature as a messenger that presented the Sri Lankan War and their collective tragedy to the outer world through poetry, fiction, and cinema and not as censored war records.

The writers who paint the Sri Lankan War in literature are those who wish to portray the brutality and cruelty of a civil war that its victims faced for more than three decades. Although the military war has ended, "what the war brought with it—loss of self-dignity, abasement, indignity, psychological disorder, and ignominy—remain

¹⁰ In the book, "At What Dark Point" (p. 171)

¹¹ Genocide of Jews during the 2nd World War (1941-1945) by Nazi Germany

¹² In the book, "Precarious: Poems" (2013, pp. 20-24)

**Original Article**

irreparable” (Denicius and Sivapalan, 2014, p. 149). Anglophone writers who produce literature in response to the War in Sri Lanka constitute of writers who are residents of the country as well as those who are spread around the world. In the study of their contribution to literary scholarship, Jayasuriya (2012) looks into the patterns in the Anglophone literature related to the Sri Lankan War and identifies three strands as follows:

- Sri Lankan English language literature is crucial as a medium for dialogue and reconciliation.
- Because of the importance of the diaspora within the Sri Lankan nation, it is essential to consider both works by diasporic writers and works by local writers in order to have a full picture of the literature that surrounds the ethnic conflict.
- The importance of considering these groups together must not obscure the fact that location and material conditions matter deeply, and an attempt to deal with Sri Lankan literature that does not make considerable room for writers who are resident in Sri Lanka and thus often excluded from wider publishing networks is fundamentally flawed (Jayasuriya, 2012).

The aspects identified above shed light on the significant role played by writing in English on the Sri Lankan War is visible; mainly its role as a medium for dialogue and the option to look at both local as well as diasporic

writers’ creations to get a comprehensive idea of the conflict. There is a group of Anglophone writers from Sri Lanka who have “either chosen to or been forced to go into exile in the West as a result of the violence and political instability” (Jayasuriya, 2012) of the country and the others who have chosen to live in Sri Lanka. As Jayasuriya (2012) denotes, while these writers are attempting to react to the havoc in Sri Lanka due to the war, there are also ones who “wrestle with the claims of their multiple identities [and] are engaged in delineating the contours of their own subjectivity”.

CONCLUSION

War has been a major theme in literature since ancient times. The War that took place in Sri Lanka between 1983-2009 is a period during which the domains of Sri Lankan English, Sinhala, and Tamil literature also changed, and numerous fiction, poems, dramas, and movies were composed in response to the war. The Sri Lankan Anglophone writers portray the War through their literary compositions and although some scholars view it as literature composed by the English-speaking class for its own class, it is evident that many scholars view the role of Anglophone literature as a mode for dialogue and reconciliation as a medium that paints war and the people’s collective tragedy to the outer world, surpassing amended war records.



Original Article

References

- Brosman, C. S. (1992). The Functions of War Literature, *South Central Review*, 9(1), 85-98.
- Calloway, C. (2018). War in Literature and Drama. Retrieved 24th May 2021 from <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com>
- Denicius, C. A. and Sivapalan, C. C. A. (2014). Relocating Literature: Rereading "The Waste Land" from a Sri-Lankan Post-war Perspective. Jaffna University International Research Conference (JUICE-2012), 148-154.
- Devotta, N. (2005). From ethnic outbidding to ethnic conflict: The institutional bases for Sri Lanka's separatist war. *Nations and Nationalism*, 11(1), 141-159.
- DeVotta, N. (2000). Control democracy, institutional decay, and the quest for Eelam: Explaining Ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, *Pacific Affairs*, 73(1), 55-76.
- Dutta, K. (2020). Writing the Home Writing the Nation: A Reading of Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*. *International Journal of Innovative Research in Science, Engineering and Technology (IJIRSET)*, 9(11), 10681-10685.
- Goonetilleke, D. C. R. A. (1992). Sri Lanka's "Ethnic" Conflict in Its Literature in English. *World Literature Today*, 66(3), 450-453.
- Jayasuriya, M. (2012). *Terror and Reconciliation - Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature 1983-2009*. Lexington Books.
- Jayasuriya, M. (2016). Terror, Trauma, Transitions: Representing Violence in Sri Lankan Literature. *India@ogs*, 3, 195-209.