



Memory as resistance: A study on the literary importance of new forms of representation in confronting and commemorating the experiences of genocide

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Abstract

In light of a new generation of individuals discounting the genocides—the Holocaust being one of many—the need to remember the atrocities, the need to hand over the responsibility of the memory of the atrocities, has become increasingly pressing. The transfer of memories to a generation which has not experienced the trauma of genocide is vital to prevent the watering down of experience to a myth, and most importantly, to work towards the prevention of a repeat of the genocide. The first part of the paper discusses the original ways of approaching the field of genocide studies, the genre of Historical Realism being predominant. The next part of the paper focuses on selected texts—Ezhatu Kavithaigal, Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* etc. to respond to the criticisms against postmodern approaches and the deviation in the way genocides have been recorded. The field of genocide studies has, in recent years, been on the receiving end of new approaches to further the understanding of the events that have transpired. Texts emerging in the postmodern era are a welcome difference from the monolithic approach to this field of studies. New forms of art and literature have taken on the responsibility to transfer the memory and experience of genocides, becoming the channels of resistance against misrepresentation of trauma. The third and final part focuses on the components from the above-mentioned selected texts that enable dialogue between the reader and the text, commemorating past trauma and paving the way to human rights discussions.



Introduction:

Art, in a sense, is a revolt against everything fleeting and unfinished in the world.

Consequently, its only aim is to give another form to a reality that it is nevertheless forced to preserve as the source of its emotion. In this regard we are all realistic, and no one is.

Albert Camus

Art and literature, imaginary discourses both of them, are highly appreciated in all cultures, except when the subject is the genocide, where instantly, these discourses are met with suspicion—creating an opposition to the memory of the genocide itself (Alphen 16). This means that imaginative discourses are opposed to historical discourses and the realities to which a discourse belongs to. This opposition has, in a fundamental way, directed the outcome of the discussions of such events, and also the kind of art, literature, and history it has produced. Apart from the practical idea of effectiveness, most critics oppose imaginary discourses on the basis of morality. Here, art is considered less effective, and therefore objectionable. To gain pleasure—the arts being considered as tools of deriving pleasure—from a barbarous past is a barbarous response (Alphen 17).

Art is studied as a form of entertainment, a medium for pleasure. For example, most critics believe that the idea of the Holocaust being expressed in any medium that is pleasurable is trivialising the atrocities, and they believe it to be inhumane to derive pleasure from inexpressible horrors. James Ladsun's review of a novel in *The Guardian* discusses the risks of deviating from the historical discourses of the Holocaust, and the idea of extracting pleasure from them (Ladsun). This leads to the solution that most people followed, to accept the memory of these events through hard facts and sober discourses.

It has become unavoidable, therefore, to start any discussion on the representation of the Holocaust without Adorno's famous dictum. If the sentiment expressed by Adorno—to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric—is to be considered, he appears to condemn artistic representations in general as barbaric. This statement sets the stage for overwhelming doubt of the literary or artistic representations of the Holocaust. Prior to World War II, art was given a sacred place in the sphere of discourses, but soon after Auschwitz, it gained a reputation for being frivolous (Ladsun 17). But Adorno's objection lies not with representation, but the "transfiguration" of the Holocaust into mediums pleasurable for the audience without the gravity of the event making an impression. But, art is indispensable, and according to Adorno, art forms are needed to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive.

As the last generation of Holocaust survivors pass, the need to remember the atrocity, the need to hand over the responsibility of the memory of the atrocity, has become increasingly pressing. Before we move ahead, we need to understand the importance of the memory of the Holocaust itself. In the introduction to her book *The Generation of Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch explains the issues at stake with this transfer of memories. It's not, she says, "a personal/ familial/ generational sense of ownership and protectiveness, but an evolving ethical and theoretical discussion about the working of trauma, memory, and inter-generational acts of transfer." (Hirsch 2-3). The fate of the collective memory of millions of people rests on the "hinge generation" (Hirsch 1)—the second generation that has not experienced the Holocaust, but has memories of the experience of the event passed on from the first generation of survivors— and their ability to either keep the history fresh in the memories of the people and to work towards the prevention of a repeat of the genocide, or let it water down to future generations as a myth. This thought gave to the rise of one specific genre used in the representation of the Holocaust: Historical Realism.

By accepting historical discourses over imaginative discourses as the only source of knowledge of the holocaust, we dismiss any further possible interpretations. Our exploration of these ideas, therefore, should take into consideration the form in which the actuality of the event is delivered. A process of construction and reconstruction, the memories—a medium of expression, here— of holocaust survivors become a part of the historical discourses, the one tried and tested approach widely used to depict the holocaust. However, with the generational gap between the survivors and the newer generations



increasing, it becomes harder and harder for the latter to access the memory of the Holocaust through the overly done historical discourses, reducing it to only a statistic. But for the memory to make people think, to make them understand, to make them question, there is no better way than art. The idea that truth is found primarily in historical accounts, especially when testimonies reflect the events through the perspective of the victims, chancing the displacement of the events in a historical context, and not in art, is therefore arguable.

Indeed, historical reality [of the survivor's memory] has to be reconstructed before any other work can start... [Once the memory is reconstructed] the therapeutic process of constructing a narrative...[and] the re-externalization of the event—has to be set in motion. (Laub and Auerhann 87)

By rhetorically using testimonies or other historical modes inside the realm of imaginary discourses can “imply an undermining or hollowing out of the opposition (Ladsun 31). This rhetoric of fact is again used, and challenged, in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. It is an autobiographical account of the Holocaust, a dual story of the son (Spiegelman) and his father, whose experiences have impacted the next generation. Yet, the cartoon medium it is represented in has connotations of the fictional and the imagination. The medium is, therefore, in tension with the genre of the work. Art Spiegelman himself acknowledges the existence of this conflict as he recently insisted that *Maus* be classified as “nonfiction” (Ladsun 22). Spiegelman's images and texts show that he has transcribed the testimony recorded on tape verbatim. He has used documentary realism, the recorder being a symbol of the style, though the visual approach to the genre counters it. Marianne Hirsch remarks that in the “aural realm Spiegelman seeks absolute unmediated authenticity, while in the visual he chooses multiple mediations” (Hirsch) (Ladsun 22).

Let us further analyse the art in *Maus* and its various themes in relation to memory, Holocaust, autobiography, reality, etc., The first volume of *Maus*, the work that gave a nudge to this activity, was published in 1986 (*Maus I*), the same year as two similar “convention-rupturing comics” (Wolk 8), *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen*. While those two works radicalised the adaptations the traditional superhero genre, *Maus*- Art Spiegelman's story of his parents' Holocaust experience and his own relationship with his father's memories and the man himself – “marked the coming of age of the contemporary graphic memoir” (Kyler 1). By combining the autobiographical genre and the comic medium— two of the oldest forms of storytelling, pictures and narration— *Maus* demands newer ways of reading and examining the text. The contemporary graphic memoirists use words and images as “purposes and maps, creating complex works that must be navigated as much as read” (Kyler 1). Graphic memoirs are unique genre-mediums that propose various explorations of real life narratives, and “Pointing to the uniqueness and complexity of the genre, several critics, beginning with Gillian Whitlock, have adopted the terms “autographic” or “autography”” (Kyler 3).

The memoir, or autography, *Maus*, is real, unbelievable, and represented in stark heavily filled pages, and “by situating a nonfictional story in a highly mediated, unreal, ‘comic’ space, Spiegelman captures the hyper intensity of Auschwitz” (Rothberg 206). This paper examines the themes that make representation of the genocide memory through the medium of art effective.

The Generation of Postmemory

Borrowing the title of Marianne Hirsh's book and chapter of the same name, this section identifies the part played by memory in the graphic novel. Art Spiegelman relied on familiar visual symbols and traditional narratives when he began writing his father's story and his shadowed childhood. In *First Maus*, published in 1972, Spiegelman begins the narrative as a bedtime story about “life in the old country during the war” (Spiegelman). As evident in the image below, the small house they live in opens up into a child's bedroom, a picture of safety, and then flows into a flashback of terror and fear.

Though the images here haven't been simplified for visual economy as they have in the *Maus* volumes, the condensed version of the account of the Holocaust— ghettos, murders, hiding, betrayals, Auschwitz, etc.— already form a connection between “personal and public memory, present and past, in paradig-



matic ways” (Hirsch 29). Even postwar childhood is not left untouched by the horrors of war, as signified by the partially drawn window shade. It is, in fact, transferred through the safe and intimate act of bedtime stories. The blood dripping off the title MAUS has now become a base for most of Spiegelman’s works related to the Holocaust. It is a drawing, anthropomorphized version, of a 1945 photograph by Margaret Bourke-White of liberated male prisoners in Buchenwald (Hirsch 30). Spiegelman’s version, though, has gone through various changes in style, the photo corners of the image showing how a public image has been absorbed into the personal photo album. An arrow at the back pointing to “Poppa,” shows how the young boy is able to picture these stories transferred through intimate storytelling only through known public images. Marianne Hirsch suggests that the bedtime transference of the father’s violent experiences become a fairytale, nightmare, and myth of sorts, for the child “Mickey.” This transactive process occurs without fully being understood, but is internalized anyway. She uses Paul Conner-ton’s term “acts of transfer” to define how history is transformed into memory, and memory is enabled to be shared across individuals and generations. This, she says, is Postmemory, where the memories and the people living in it let continue, in some part, the experiences of war or any other event. This, then, becomes a living connection between generations, which is quite clearly expressed in the parallel storylines in Maus.

Familial Transmission of Memory

Children of the first- generation Holocaust survivors are deeply affected by the collective trauma and gain a horrific past that their parents were not meant to live through. Second generation survivors’ works of art are therefore an attempt to represent the long- term effects of living in close contact with the pain and suffering of their parents. They are shaped, Hirsch says, by the child’s responsibility to fix what is broken, and his/ her confusion when the trauma remains constant. Loss of family, safety, and belonging “bleeds” into the next familial generation.

Bleeding History to Rebuild History

Volume I of Maus is titled My Father Bleeds History, and true to it, Vladek Spiegelman’s narration of his experiences is a form of painful torture, a bloodletting according to Chute. The “concept of history has become excruciating for Vladek, the title also implies an aspect of the testimonial situation we observe over the course of Maus’s pages: the fact that, as Spiegelman reports, his father had “no desire to bear witness”” (Chute 203). And it is evident in the first volume of the text that Vladek would rather complain about his dissatisfaction with his second marriage instead of the war. Somewhere towards the end of the second volume, he protests that he’d tried to forget all of it until Artie brought it up. “All such things of the war, I tried to put out of my mind once and for all... Until you rebuild me all this from your questions” (Spiegelman, Complete Maus). His father’s blood makes Spiegelman’s text and images. ““I’m literally giving a form to my father’s words and narrative,” Spiegelman observes about Maus, “and that form for me has to do with panel size, panel rhythms, and visual structures of the page”” (Interview with Gary Groth 105, emphasis in original) (Chute 200). This process of bleeding is not an easy task at all. For Vladek, his wife Anja’s diaries were too filled with history to keep as well, the reason why he burns them (See image 3). His narration and Artie’s documentation of them to provide order to his own life is a constant theme. This becomes more precious as Vladek is not fond of this process, and he and Anja had never shared the details of their traumatic experience.

According to Chute, the most striking instance of representing past and present together in Maus I is the inclusion of the autobiographical comic strip Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History (1972) in the text of Maus. Its entrance into the pages of Maus are abrupt and jarring. It enters as an ‘other’ outside entity, creating a confrontation between the past and the present. During the time Artie demands Vladek’s experiences of the Holocaust, Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History comes as an issue that both of



them have to deal with. First published in an underground comic book, Short Order Comix 1, it narrates the immediate aftermath of the 1968 suicide of Spiegelman's mother, Auschwitz survivor Anja Spiegelman, at his family's home in Queens. Featuring human characters, it is completely different from the rest of Maus in methodology. In one panel, Spiegelman layers five different moments with text and images, merging the time and space thoroughly. There is "Mommy!" – the past but we also have "Bitch" - the present; we get "Hitler Did It!"- the past, but we also get "Menopausal Depression" - the present.

Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History can then mean that Artie has been burdened with the memories and pain the uniform represents, not willingly taken or rejected, but it just became a part of him.

Order Out of Chaos

In Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began, Spiegelman uses the method of self- reflection as a strategy. Throughout, he doubts himself and his adequacy, trying to find his place in the whole world of Holocaust, his parents' world, and his connection to the present and past. His therapy sessions being incorporated into the text makes him realize how less he can visualise what his parents and many others lived through. He insists that he would have liked to live through Auschwitz to know what it actually felt like instead of remaining confused and lost. The second volume focuses on him trying to make order of his life, trying to find himself, and of his father's experiences. The title of the second volume: Here My Troubles Began also points to the issues he had to face after the publication of Maus I.

Artie attempts to chronologically account for Vladek's time in Auschwitz while the latter insists on giving importance to the space occupied. Working with his father's strange and non-linear method of storytelling, Spiegelman is forced to put order to it. Artie wants to present a lucid and chronological narrative of his father's months in 1944, but Vladek resists Artie's accounting: "In Auschwitz we didn't wear watches." The diagram runs down the page, but ends with a speech bubble covering it. The timeline begins in March 1944 and continues down vertically, representing Vladek's Auschwitz activity: quarantine, tin shop, shoe shop, black work.

The diagram of the timeline cuts off Vladek's speech in the first tier and his shoulder in the second tier, in the third tier it is itself interrupted by Artie's wife Françoise's speech balloon, "YOOHOO! I was looking for you." Here, the present is superimposed by the past, which is again layered beneath the present. The timeline, however, remains on the uppermost surface, giving a histographic suggestion by shuttling between the two different spaces of the past and the present, which Vladek cannot do by narrating his experiences in a zig- zag manner.

Historical or documentary graphic novels today use the comic narrative that was once considered distracting to discuss serious political concerns. It offers a space for ethical representation without the problematic issue of closure. Maus itself is an intensely political and ethical text, but it is so without forcing morality on the reader like most other historical accounts. Art, the medium, is used to remember history and resist forgetting the past that once made us. This visual approach to Holocaust memory is unique and in depth, an autobiography that is made true through art. "It seems to me that comics have already shifted from being an icon of illiteracy to becoming one of the last bastions of literacy," Spiegelman has said (Interview with Gary Groth 61). "If comics have any problem now, it's that people don't even have the patience to decode comics at this point. I don't know if we're the vanguard of another culture or if we're the last blacksmiths."



The next part of this study will focus on the significance of the literatures that emerged out of the war torn nations in reviving the memory of the genocide and ethnic cleansing. The Sri Lankan Civil War fought between the state and the LTTE is one of the deadliest wars fought in the 21st century. The non-violent protests withered in 1980's following the deadly Black July Pogrom against the Tamils in Sri Lanka. History records the protests and militant organizations attacks against the state but wipes out the systematic targeting and scapegoating of the Tamil Speaking Minority till present. While the world seems to have almost forgotten the genocide that took place in Eelam, the literatures, personal narratives, eyewitness accounts from people who had lived in the war zone resurrects the truth once buried by the state with the help of other powers. Ravi Kumar, a Tamil poet says, "It is believed that 'truth' is the first victim of war. The corpse of truth lies in wait like a landmine. When it explodes, the citadels of falsehood build over it fall apart". The account on the brutal massacre of the Tamils and human right violations orchestrated during the crucial period in May 2009 is understood through the memory of the peoples through narratives. The war came to an end on 18th May 2009 but the genocide is still on in the guise of rehabilitation and investigation. There is a desperate attempt to erase the gruesome past and memory by silencing the voices of dissent, forced land acquisition, destruction of war memorials and mass graves of Tamils. These narratives paves way for a constructive discourse on the need to preserve the memory of genocide, voices out against the systematic aggression towards any particular race, religion, caste or ethnicity.

It is important to understand the political climate of post-independent Sri Lanka and its response to the rise of ethnic conflicts. Perhaps, the popular narratives these days are subjective in its approach and are not equally critical of both the state and Tamils. English remained as the official language in Sri Lanka till the 1950s. The Sinhala Only Act passed in 1956 removed Tamil as an official language of the state. Unlike the Anti-Hindi agitations in India the protests were not successful. The policy of standardization in 1971 was against the Tamil minorities. In 1981, the Jaffna Public Library, one of the biggest in Asia which housed centuries old rare Tamil manuscripts and histories was burnt by Sinhala mobs. This is seen as an attempt to erase the memory and history of Tamils. Several peace protests, hunger strikes were held in order to claim their rights and equal citizenship. As a response to the deadly ambush by LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), the deadly Black July Anti-Tamil Pogrom occurred in Sri Lanka. Sinhalese mobs attacked and killed Tamils, burned shops and buildings. John Braithwaite in his book, "Cascades of Violence: War, Crime and Peace building Across South Asia" says, an estimated 3,000 Tamils were killed and more than 150,000 became homeless which forced many to ebb out of the country as refugees. Tamil Women were stripped naked, raped by the mobs. Tamil political prisoners were violently murdered by Sinhala prisoners under the supervision of Sinhala prison guards. In their torture, they were forced to kneel and their eyes gouged out with iron bars before they were killed. This marked the beginning of the Sri Lankan Civil War between the state and rebels.

Many nations turned blind eye and almost have forgotten the plights of the Tamils. Several countries betrayed Eelam Tamils and the state constantly denied genocide. Many foreign NGOs, witnesses were silenced and warned of the consequences. The writers have fallen silent as death has become the prize for speaking the truth. It's a universal truth known to every conscience that any work that critiques the state that dares to speak truth to power is not welcomed. Not many works speak of the bloodiest massacre that occurred in the state. Such prolonged silence offers a new presentable history for the generations to come. Rudhramoorthy Cheran, Professor at University of Windsor envisioned the silence of Tamils and the erasure of memory in his poem "Apocalypse".

The apocalypse happened In our own time.

Earth Shaking in smokescreens Body splitting in satanic rain

Fire raging within and without. (Stanza 1) In those days we ate death

Throwing a lifeless sidelong glance At the helplessness of spectators Fuming, fuming like a cloud

We began to rise up.



All of us have gone away There is no one to tell stories Now there is
A wounded landmass

No bird is able to fly over it

Until we return. (Apocalypse by Cheran)

He speaks about the intellectual circle and far sightedness of poets who were vocal about the violence inflicted upon them. Such works remain as testimonies and evidence of genocide of the Tamils in Eelam. The poets of Tamil Eelam expressed their sorrow and unimaginable violence in their writing following the ethnic riots that broke out in 1983. Some of the notable works that informed the world about their trauma include, Yesurasa's Ariyapadathavargal Ninaivaga, Cheran's Maranthul Vaazhvom, Eelam women poets' Solladha Sedhigal, Sivasekhar's Nadhikarai Moongil. Unlike then there is grave silence in Eelam post war. Cheran's "Apocalypse" explains that poetry doesn't emerge when voices are silenced and suppressed by power. He says, 'All of us have gone away'; 'There is no one to tell stories'. He reminds about the collective responsibility of the creative poets of Eelam to speak truth to power. Literatures emerging out of this space would instill faith in people who aspire to freedom. Most importantly, it remains as an archive that recounts the bitter past. In his poem,

Of those who were buried Of those who were burned

And of those who were washed away by the sea The exact and precise details

Have reached the subterranean archives Of the International workshop.

Over our single mass grave

They are hoisting the General's loin cloth As the national flag.

In the memorial built by tears

Someone writes empty words. Many people weave dreams.

Unruffled, never breaking his silence He writes a poem.

The genocide of people does not end with their physical extermination: it continues when they are not allowed who they were and what they fought for. Once a terrorist is revered a freedom fighter after the victory and vice versa. It all depends on the victory or triumph. Being critical of both the parties it is indeed a shameful act to destroy or vandalize to show supremacy over the other. Burning of Jaffna library is a reprehensible act aimed at destroying the roots or memory of an ethnic community. The Tamils celebrated the martyrs who laid down their lives for freedom every year on Maveerar Naal. People come in large numbers to commemorate and remember their martyrs: their brothers and sisters, their lovers and comrades, their heroes. Recently, the Tamil war memorial at Jaffna University was destroyed in Sri Lanka. The monument was established in 2019 in the University of Jaffna in memory of the civilian Tamils killed in Mullivaikkal in one of the bloody episodes of the island nation's last leg of the three-decade old conflict in 2009. War memorial at Mullaitheevu was vandalized by unidentified group clearly shows the hatred towards the Eelam Tamils. These acts are nothing but a desperate attempt to erase the memory of genocide from the history.

It is important to note the thirst for freedom that forced people to lay down their lives for the people. Cheran writes,

A body by the Sea Head split open



In the straight glance of the eyes

That refuse to close even in death There float: resistance, surprise, Distress, struggle, agony, despair And an endless great dream.

These lines highlight the dream of a Tamil homeland free from discrimination and violence. In another poem he tries to recapture his days in the wetlands and explains about the systematic aggression and violence against the Tamils. He writes,

My story began in these wetlands Soil that once clung

To the roots of huge trees Saying by the seaside,

Is now seen on the surface. This lush land, where people Roamed about even in summer,

Is transformed into a land of another language In matter of days.

Another notable poet of Tamil Eelam VIS Jeyapalam recounts the genocide in his words. He says, Angel of Justice

I sing odes to you and bow before you Though I have never bowed

Before the enemy or the fighter. Give punishment for the genocide Upon those who killed

Upon those who supplied weapons Upon those who did not prevent harm Let justice descend

Like the fire of apocalypse.

Jeyapalan's poetry highlights the betrayal of world nations during the crucial period in 2009. Desmond Tutu, South African anti-apartheid says, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor". Thousands went missing; many were shot down and remain missing till present. Even after the massacre the Eelam Tamils were denied Justice. One of the notable Tamil poets Kanagalatha recounts the days after the war in her poem. It is ironic to see the dominant Buddhist state sanctioning such violations against the innocent civilians. She expresses her anger through her words,

The fair Buddha

Who has sprouted in the wilderness Adorns his hair

With the karthikai flower My unrelenting vengeance Buried in his silence

Rages on in the flowers's flame.

According to Kanagalatha, Tamil Eelam witnesses a new religion, language and is forced to accept an identity which it fought against for decades. She also highlights the destruction caused due to the civil war. She says, "Houses blown to bits in weird shapes like an art fair". Most of the war torn Tamil settlements were left as it is wilfully in order to instill or remind them of the Civil war and the destruction. The psychological war isn't over yet in Eelam. War museums, army camps were set up in the areas to monitor the settlements. She tries to portray the helplessness of the victims who are tired and exhausted with a dream of a Tamil homeland. She speaks of a new flag, new language, new religion and new identity which is alien to people. She says, "The people have learnt to pose for hours clutching with ease the barbed wire without getting pricked". She satirized the dominant attitude of the oppressor and the constant fear of the re-emergence of the Eelam freedom movement in her words.

In the land lost beyond dreams Food, repose and work

And all back to normal they say. Yet,



When I say

That Eelam is where I was born, They growl more than ever.

Kanakalatha is critical of both the state and the militants. In it she comments on the day on which slain martyrs are revered by the Tamils. Thousands visit to pay homage to dead cadres who laid down their lives for the freedom of Tamil homeland. She becomes the voice of the innocent civilians who only want a nation with peace. Most often they are caught amidst the chaos, used as human shields, discriminated as second-class citizens in the nation they belonged, unable to move

freely, hide in bunkers for days and weeks fearing the kfrs, shelling and hoots of chemical bombs that scattered human bodies across the island. She says that the only bit of worry that people had is whether the barbed wire fence will get drenched out. It is very easy to brand anyone as a Tamil / LTTE sympathizer but this literature documents the physical and psychological trauma that innocent civilians underwent and the loss cannot be forgotten.

Ravi Kumar, a notable Tamil poet attacks the silent spectators around the globe who partnered the systematic genocide orchestrated by Sri Lanka against ethnic minorities. It is true what Desmond TuTu said, "We learn from history that we don't learn from history" While discussing the Holocaust and bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki the world turned a blind eye to a brutal massacre that took away lives of innocent Tamils in our times. Ravi Kumar in his poem tries to imagine the trauma that Tamils would have undergone when the war reached its peak in May 2009 and the silence of the world. He writes,

Was it a day, or was it endless night?

Were their hands wrapped around Shivering bodies on that windy night? Might they have strangled a crying child?

Because it would draw dangerous attention? (Waking is Another Dream 60) We know nothing of artillery strike..

We know nothing of the odour of burnt bodies under sulphurous flames.

Our ears cannot hear the weeping of a toddler crawling over severed corpses. We have no idea what a site of war is like. Did the people sleep all night?

Would they have had the time to weep for their slain relatives? We do not know anything at all.

We do not know anything about living or dying in bunkers. What kept us busy on that day of their mass burial?

We were in theatres. We dined in restaurants. We were buried in TV shows. We travelled. We smoked. We got drunk. We fucked. In the safety of our homes.

Why then do we talk? About an unknown day? About corpses and bunkers we have never seen?

About blood we never touched? Why do we speak of valour, of sacrifice, of betrayal?

We should speak of our selfishness. We should speak of our helplessness. We should speak of our treachery.

We should speak the truth: that we are not human beings. (Waking is another dream 62)

Ravi Kumar questions the silent spectators for being indifferent to the catastrophe that resulted in the mass destruction. He attacks the apathy and betrayal of the nations that turned a blind eye to the gross



human rights violations and cries of the innocent Tamils. His poetry questions the conscience of every individual who remained as a Nero's guest watching the innocent people burnt alive in the killing fields. The state denied/denies the war crimes committed against civilians. The eyewitnesses, testimonies and the haunting pictures and videos released by few channels tell a different tale. Erasing the memory of genocide is an attempt to Truth is what presented to us. The poet in one of his poem shares,

I asked the man without legs; he did not answer.

I also asked a woman with cotton wool instead of eyes, she did not answer either.

And the old man, whose teeth gaped through his ripped cheek, was silent. Do none of you write diaries?
Do none of you have cameras?

Are there no poets among you? Is there not a single artist?

Whatever happened on that last day? Nobody answered our questions. To ask one of the dead, at least, I went to the mortuary.

My corpse lay there, the ribcage ripped apart and in place of the heart There was a grinding stone. (Waking is Another Dream 65)

Meena Kandaswamy, notable Tamil poet in her "The Orders were to rape you-tigresses in the Tamil Eelam Struggle" speaks about the violence inflicted on the LTTE tigresses in the aftermath of the brutal war. She also shares the story of a female Tiger in her own words. She speaks about the unnamed Tamil Tigress who shared her experience as LTTE cadre and the trauma that has become part of her everyday life in camps after her surrender post war. She says,

I surrendered in April 2009. I told the army that I was in Vanni on work. I was asked to go to the -----camp in Vavuniya. We were in a girls-only camp. The rapes started before the war even formally ended. The first rape happened on 5th May 2009. That was two weeks before the final days of war. The rapists. Everyone from a top army official to the low-level soldiers wanted a piece of my flesh. The camp is where it all begins. My people were braving bombs, and here I was being raped. (Meena Kandaswamy 50)

Women, especially the female cadres were seen as sexual objects even after the end of Civil war. Rape is seen as a threat, revenge, a mechanism to exercising the power over the other. She also shares,

Yes, I was conscious when I was raped. At least the first time I was. The first time there were four men. Later, the numbers would increase. In the worst episode, seven men were involved. I was released from the camp with the warning: 'You must come whenever we call you'. I did not keep count of the number of times this happened. But let me tell you this: the days on which I was raped exceeded the days on which I was not. (Meena Kandasamy 51)

She also adds that it's a common practice in camps. She hides her identity as a female tigress to avoid going to the rehabilitation camps. She also informs that many who went to the camps never came back alive. Similarly, Ravi Kumar, a notable Tamil poet in his introductory essay "Apocalypse in our time" recounts the bitter experiences faced by the Tamils. He adds that in the name of investigation, extreme human rights violations have been and are orchestrated. Anyone could be accused of being an ex-LTTE cadre. Young Men and women from the camps were taken away in vans randomly. The Tigress further adds,



Why these rapes? I asked them too, just as you ask me now. They wanted the wombs of our women to bear their children. That's what they said during the rapes. I did everything I could have done in the circumstances in which this was all going on. I threatened to complain.' I shall tell your superiors' and the men said, 'These are their orders. The orders were to rape you'. (Meena Kandasamy 52)

Why me? Because I am a Tamil woman. But also, I was a fighter. My elder brother was a martyr. They saw the rapes as a revenge for my brothers who were martyred as Tigers. (Meena Kandasamy 53)

Adhilatchmi was a writer, producer of Voice of Tigers, a Tamil radio program in 1990's. It's unfair to avoid the poetry of LTTE cadres just because they spoke truth to power. Most of their writings were about their lives within the militant organization, participation of women in the liberation

struggle. While the world spoke about the equality of women, this cyanide carrying female tigers braved deaths, leading the organizations towards freedom. Most of the writings are liberatory and emancipatory. Meena Kandasamy recounts her experience of reading about the female tigers and their participation in the war. They became an icon of empowerment amongst Tamil women. Adhilatchmi writes, "Everything is now a dream, many of my friends are now on the battleground. A few of them, in graveyards. Me alone, with a pen in hand, a poet". Meena Kandasamy shares the opinion of Captain Vaanathi, another female tiger who believed that the national liberation was linked to liberation and emancipation of women. She writes,

"We will build the tomb for women's exploitation

We will dig the graves for the society's backward ideas" (The orders were to rape you 77)

Meena Kandasamy adds that the war poetry across the world especially the Sangam Tamil Poetry has exalted and praised the victors of war who were men. These female tigers created history and dismantled the patriarchal belief that gallantry and valour are masculine traits, and this breakaway is a radical departure from the convention. She further attacks the systems within which we operate, and censors authors and works which are progressive in nature. While literature is eager to celebrate the author as activist, its rarefied realm is never opened to the activist/fighter as author (Meena Kandasamy 86). It is important to consider these rare literatures of resistance which preserves the memory of the genocide. Captain Vaanathi writes,

Not the red dot of Kunkuman but blood decorates her forehead.

You do not see the sweetness of youth in her eyes, only the gravestones of the dead. Her lips don't utter useless babble, but the vows of martyrs.

On her neck she wears not the thaali, that marker of marriage, but a cyanide capsule.

She embraces not men but her weapon.

Her legs do not wander in search of her relatives, but towards the liberation of Tamil Eelam.

The bullets from her gun will destroy the enemy. It will break the shackles.

And then our people will sing our national anthem. (Orders were to rape you 89)



These powerful lines stand testimony to the valour and courage of the female cadres who fought the oppressor. Such writings carry the stories of resistance and history to the future generations. Captain Kasturi, another female tiger, attacks the superpowers and their role in the play of injustice. She accused them of being international terrorists with vested interest who are solely responsible for the artificial hurricanes in the island that resulted in the deadly war. Meena Kandasamy requests the readers to look at these writings as a critique of colonialism, occupation, and the imperialist world order. These poets use poetry as op-ed, poetry as resistance, poetry as a call to arms, and poetry as a call to poetry.

Conclusion:

The field of genocide studies has, in recent years, been on the receiving end of new approaches to further the understanding of the events that have transpired. Texts emerging in the postmodern era are a welcome difference from the monolithic approach to this field of studies. New forms of art and literature have taken on the responsibility to transfer the memory and experience of genocides, becoming the channels of resistance against misrepresentation of trauma, enabling dialogue between the reader and the text, commemorating past trauma and paving the way to human rights discussions.

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