

The Author



Geetha Sukumaran is a Graduate Associate of the York Centre for Asian Research and a masters candidate in the Graduate Programme in Humanities, York University.

Contact

For further information on this research, please contact: Geetha Sukumaran (geetsuku@yorku.ca)

Contemporary Tamil Poems from Sri Lanka: Regional Sensibility and Mainstream Trauma Theory

Trauma, a mental or physical injury, has become a common 20/21st century human experience and a component of contemporary culture. Holocaust scholars made substantial contributions to the field, bringing trauma studies forward as a multi-disciplinary area of investigation in the 1990s. While trauma studies remains centered on the Holocaust, it has recently begun to move beyond Europe and post 9/11 America. And yet, despite the broadening spectrum of trauma studies, representations of trauma in the non-Western world, where most war crimes are still taking place, have largely been ignored.

Western theorizing tends to characterize trauma in specific ways. In particular, the notion that trauma impedes normal emotions, resulting in a psychological disconnection, constructs it as outside of human experience. Consequently trauma is connected to an unspeakable emotion that is in a way 'other' to language, which negates the representation of trauma. The unspeakability of trauma, therefore, is a theory that generalizes trauma experience, ignoring its diverse cultural representations.

War crimes against the Sri Lankan Tamils, in the final conflict of 2009, which went largely unreported by the international community, killed over 70,000 people and displaced another 300,000.* My work explores Tamil poetry from Sri Lanka, on war and mourning, written in 2009 to:

- Investigate the regional and cultural specificities in the narration of trauma.
- Look beyond the widely accepted representation of trauma as a modernist, splintered aesthetic.
- Create space for pluralist representations of trauma via the inclusion of trauma from non-Western cultures.

Much of the poetry from Sri Lanka of the past four decades has been centered on the trauma of loss, displacement, torture and pain. My research begins by contextualizing the poetry of the 1990s, viewing this period as the foundation for a focus on the language and representations of the trauma literature of 2009. The 1990s marked the emergence of the images of the tortured body from marginalized groups such as women and Muslim writers in Sri Lankan Tamil literature; the tortured body epitomized the personal experience and the collective memory of violence in the poems of the catastrophic events of 2009.

Ahilan's collection of poems in Tamil, *Saramakavikal* (Elegies) & *Pathunkukuzhi Naatkal* (Days in the Bunker) and other poems of this period (in my English

Asia Research Briefs

Asia Research Briefs provide short summaries or perspectives based on research by YCAR Associates. Their purpose is to share insights from academic research with journalists, policy analysts, community leaders and interested members of the public. For further information, or to subscribe to the series, contact: ycar@yorku.ca.

About YCAR

The York Centre for Asian Research (YCAR) is one of Canada's largest and most active communities of scholars working on East, South and Southeast Asia as well as Asian migrant communities around the world.

The Centre includes faculty, graduate students and research associates from the social sciences, humanities, fine arts, law and business.

YCAR facilitates and supports research projects, knowledge exchange and graduate student training, as well as engagement with wider communities in the conduct or dissemination of research. YCAR is located on York University's Keele campus.

For more information:

www.yorku.ca/ycar

Eighth Floor, Kaneff Tower
4700 Keele St., Toronto
Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3



translation) are the primary source of my research. The collection, *Elegies*, represents trauma literature that is a paradigmatic shift from Western concept of literary trauma as fragmented narration. Ahilan's poems about the war of the final conflict engage with individual and collective mourning, via the non-Western framework of Tamil culture and literature. The body, which is his to express trauma also becomes the mode of healing. For instance, the poem titled 'The Gospel' use the Christian notion of gospel, while incorporating the Siddhar tradition of addressing the body:

*The masturbator,
the feces eater,
the sleeper in the urine tank,
and that flesh fly
known as that man
this man known as this
this man and that man
known as this and that,*

A gospel for all those:

*O worm, o insect
O polluted garment,
one who is sleepless
is fortunate.
He is the listener
the beholder
the wanderer;
wandering the path,
he becomes the path.*

The Siddhar poems in Tamil literature belong to the medieval period and are written by Hindu saints known as Siddhar. These poems form a separate genre in Tamil Literature, which engage with the dichotomy of describing the body as waste and also as an instrument for salvation. P. Ahilan borrows this Tamil tradition to find a possible way of articulating trauma. It is these specificities of region and of cultural sensibilities that need to be incorporated in trauma studies.

An interrogation of Tamil texts allows for a critical intervention into the global context of trauma literature. Like postcolonial studies of English literature, which calls for the inclusion of works in the vernacular and in translation, I argue that trauma studies can benefit from the inclusion of the literary explorations of trauma from other parts of the world and from contemporary and postcolonial conflicts. My aim is to connect the regional with the global and to bring attention to the regional/cultural discourses of trauma and its implication in the understanding of trauma representation in its multiplicity.

Source

* Report of the Secretary-General's Internal Review Panel on United Nations Action in Sri Lanka. November 2012. Available at: http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Sri_Lanka/The_Internal_Review_Panel_report_on_Sri_Lanka.pdf