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### Sites of Torture: Reinterpreting *Traitor* a novel by ShobaSakthi

The history of Sri Lankan conflict is not a univocal history but a pulp discourse, owing to many sides of conflict. The civil war that broke out after the July pogrom of 1983 caused tremendous loss to people, property, economy and the environment. Growth of LTTE and the assassination of former Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi on May 1991 at Sriperumbudur created political crisis between nations.

This paper aims to reveal the pseudo fascist political ideologies of Sri Lankan Government towards the innocent people and their collective psyche owing to war, displacement, torture, persecution and oppression. ShobaSakthi left Sri Lanka in his late teens and became an international refugee in Thailand. In France he has chosen to find employment at minimum wage level, which gives him freedom to write. He was such a fearless writer with powerful political denunciation. *Traitor* depicts the narrative fragmentation to the unnarratability of the violence faced by Sri Lankan Tamil people, by wrestling with conflicts that are internal to the Tamil community alone. The paper aims to explore how the protagonist faced breakdowns in familial

and communal relationships, and reflects these dissolution in the fragmentation of the narrative. Shobhasathi traverses spaces that are not often covered in contemporary Srilankan fiction and Srilanka as merely a site on which to mourn the lack of an ethnic, Tamil solidarity.

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As texts that narrative armed conflict, they portray their dispossessed individual's personal and collective histories, their internalization of the effects of living under subjugation and offer us, what viceroy in *Representing Trauma*, identities as, alternatives to depersonalized and institutionalized histories. Whether it is an analyze- seeking Dasan, or a tortured Nesakumaran or the nightmares of Destaguir or Silenced, pain of sailor, Sirissa, Nirami, Lakma, Harsan or Maria they are lesion, that have an inherent political, historical and ethical dimension.

In Anthony Dasan's story, the act of witnessing the wounds on the tortured body of the ethnic Tamil turns against the traumatized body. For when witnessed by Sinhala forces- the army or the police, the physical trauma of torture becomes the reason to inflict further torture, as the marks act as what Jonathan H. Marks identifies in *The Logic and Language of Torture*, as terrorsopic signifiers(2). Together with his ethnic identity, they give a microscopic view to his political actors of his possible terrorist association thus implicating him further. At the Maradana Police Station, the Galkissa Army Camp and later at Pittakotta Police Station,

Dasan is betrayed not only by masked figures but his body as well, now covered with unhealed wounds. The wounds scrutinized by his tormentors cause torture, then becoming the reason for further torture. At the Galkissa Camp, Dasan narrates the physical mutilations done to him “ toes twisted with pliers, genitals scorched with melted polythene bags, skinned hands stuffed with crushed hot pepper”. Scarry states that, Torture consists of a primary physical act, the inflicting of pain and a primary verbal act, the interrogation(28).

Amongst the many violations Traitor, raises and voices, the legitimacy of torture as in Kalyvas' words , an ethical means of combating terrorism<sup>11</sup> is challenged(121).The novel portrays this transgression against the body, as becoming an instrument that aids oppressive and armed structures (whether of the majoritarian state or the later militant Tamil groups) to perpetrate acts that violate human rights, dignities and identities. In a gesture that destabilises even the centrality of the authorial voice, the narrative arms the unarmed tortured, mutilated subject Nesakumaran in these sections with the power and privilege to narrativise his tale. A privilege the novel will subvert when Nesakumaran confesses that he was the torturer in his daughter's bedroom. The ticking bomb and the missing cylinder that fuels the torture imperative in Gorilla (in the stories of Dasan and Rocky respectively) are missing as objects of fear invigorating the torture necessity in Traitor.

Before handing Nesakumaran over to the state authorities and the narrative over to Nesakumaran, Shobasakthi makes it explicit in his narrative that Nesakumaran is the most inept terrorist and is in no way a genuine threat. If in the text's counter discourse these presuppositions are established before the state guardians take over Nesakumaran's body, the state's stentorian discourse constructs Nesakumaran with the collective signifier of terrorist, with its accumulation of attributes. To achieve this construct Inspector Jayakumar's standard

operating procedure<sup>ll</sup> begins with the denuding of Nesakumaran. As the translator observes his state ordained power allows him to —make visible what are for others furtive acts (Traitor 220). This sexual violence first against Nesakumaran and later against other Tamils is an assertion of masculinity and its corresponding ability to exert power over others, particularly by means of the use of force. Julie Gerk Hernandez in *The tortured body*, the Photograph and the U.S. War on Terror ,comments that the body with its cultural encoding such as clothing or ornamentation becomes a product of civilization (6). If denuding strips Nesakumaran of cultural meaning or value relegating his body to the realm of the inhuman, thus dehumanizing him, this sexual violence against male members of another ethnicity suggests not only the disempowerment of the individual victim but the disempowerment of the community itself. Thus Jayakumar, and later Sinhala authoritarian figures, as representatives of the state achieve two things, they make Nesakumaran in Hernandez’s words , an unlawful combatant in designating him as a terrorist and further reducing him to the quintessential other- distorted, uncivilized and animalistic(3). As an unlawful combatant, he is relegated to a non-status, therefore torture is permissible as a part of legitimate police action, especially on the body of one who had contempt for laws of the state .The other enables the torturer’s discourse to emerge as the rational and coherent one, with the erasure of the discourse of the tortured subject, with the prisoner’s ground becoming increasingly physical and the torturer’s increasingly verbal. As Scarry observes, the tortured becomes a colossal body with no voice; and the torturer, a colossal voice...with no body (29).

In this final section of the novel the disproportion of power, knowledge and prerogative is absolute; as Sussman says ... the victim is in a position of complete vulnerability and exposure, the torturer one of perfect control and inscrutability (4-5). Nesakumaran has no idea where they are, who might be making the ultimate decisions and how long they might be

confined. An asymmetry and unawareness that culminates in the incomprehensible brutal massacre paralleling the Welikada massacre in the floor below the rooms where Nesakumaran and others are locked. Pakkiri who refuses to acknowledge this ultimate act of —debodying, is himself incredibly beaten to death.

As Vickroy further points out as a victim of trauma the most difficult aspect of Nesakumaran's situation is the feeling that he is powerless to affect his situation. As a defense mechanism against a loss of agency, Nesakumaran the victim turns victimizer by becoming his daughter's rapist. Nesakumaran re-externalizes his trauma on to the powerless body of his daughter to restore his sense of power. Nesakumaran passes through the new ethical zone that Primo Levi identified at Auschwitz as the —Grey Zone where the victim becomes the perpetrator. In this Zone as the paedophile rapist father, Nesakumaran appropriates the torturer's narrative. In the process, Nesakumaran's reproduces the supremacist discourse of the torturer, privileging the torturer's narrative and silencing the victim's. Nesakumaran thus silences his daughter's trauma by stating that he saw only purest love in Nirami's eyes (185). Nesakumaran rapes his daughter to recover power dynamics that assert his masculinity.

In *Traitor*, while the state witnesses this trauma and punishes the traumatizer father, like girls and women most damaged by incest and rape Nirami is prevented by the narrative to voice her anger or pain. Though Premini rejects and refuses to shelter her sexually abusive husband, Nirami's testimony as a female sexual abuse survivor is missing in this novel of oral testimonies. *Traitor* on the other hand will not allow us to witness or hear the entire story of Srikanthamalar, the Kadayar woman. The kind of closure *Traitor* effects on the story of the subaltern male Rajendran is denied for Srikanthamalar. While the reader knows the singular closed story of Sirissa, Srikanthamalar's story acquires multiple narrations with different

closures. Like Ananda's ignorance about Sirissa, we never know what her traumatic history was within the Sri Lankan prisons. Though the third person narrator speaks about her life in exile in London, a bawdy coarse prison song that Nesakumaran hears narrates Srikanthamalar's sexual torture within the prison. Though the song like the torture it describes makes public what should remain private, the gruesome tale only draws an —Mmml from Nesakumaran who has already denied Srikanthamalar's story as a part of his story.

Woman's trauma is a result of being the pretext for war, booty, rewards for allies, objects to be protected or attacked. Within the context of armed conflict, these texts show war as man's affairs and woman as a passive victim protagonist sometimes narrating her silences, sometimes silencing her trauma narrative. As fragmented subjects, whether a Nirami or a Sirissa, they and their traumas are pushed to the periphery. Like the Earth and Ashes and The Kite Runner demonstrate, dominant cultural narratives cannot absorb these stories where women and ethnic minorities are brutalised and cultural masculinities are thwarted.

Through Nesakumaran's, dissonant psycho-narration Shobasakthi is critical of Nesakumaran and his infantile ideologies. By the time the heterodiegetic narrator begins the narrative, Nesakumaran's story as a guerrilla-terrorist has almost neared its completion. By declining the handing over of the narrative this early on to his homodiegetic Nesakumaran Shobaskthi makes us see much more than Nesakumaran, perceive his foolishness and anticipate his assured denouement.

Unlike the impersonal and reliable third person account, Nesakumaran's is intensely personal and unreliable. By making this homodiegetic narrator a paedophile rapist of his daughter, who also seems to be mentally unstable, Nesakumaran's reliability as a narrator is

challenged. However he is also an extremely self-conscious narrator who is acutely conscious of the goriness of his tale on the one hand and believes his is the most legitimate version of many alternate histories he narrates (Traitor, 99). Before narrating the massacre at Welikada, he warns the reader about the grimness of his tale yet like the Ancient Mariner forces us to listen (Traitor 108). Shobaskthi does not create a gap between the focalizer and the narrator, but the man who suffers narrates his story as how he saw it then beginning with the extreme close-up of his tortured body.

The first person narrative of Traitor narrated in the present in the context of exile commences in ambiguity and indistinctness. The unnamed I is only classification of himself, at this point seems to be the official expression refugee. The I whom we later associate, through the third person narrative as Nesakumaran, however gives no particulars about his causes for exile, neither his place of origin nor can we ascertain his host land. The host land is merely a small and silent town in the middle of the cherry tree forest, 126 kilometers north-east of the capital somewhere in Europe (Traitor 3). The only detail he offers is the year he reached Europe, 1987 and the names of his wife and daughter- Premini and Nirami. Though a refugee, by the time the I launches on the story of his beloved child, Nirami he has been cast out as the text suggests of even that status, locked up in the prisons of some foreign, frozen country (Traitor 6).

Thus though Dasan's exilic condition is in a flux, his identity has a solidity, Nesakumaran's exilic condition while it coagulates in the word refugee, his fuzzy narration dissipates all coagulations gradually. Anthony Dasan is a linguistic exile, not only in Sri Lanka but in Paris as well, and is unable to tell his story except in his mother tongue. It is only when a white lady who speaks fluent Tamil arrives to interview him, that he is able to narrate his problems and his

multipart victimization by various forces in Sri Lanka (Gorilla 3). Not so Nesakumaran who during his incarceration quotes lines from the Bible in French. This suggests his assimilation into the host culture and the resultant refuge that he is offered (Traitor101).

But for Anthony Dasan extradition is a sentence worse than death, deportation would mean arrest, torture and extermination. That there might be deliberate gaps and erasures in his story becomes evident when he declares that he had falsified his identity when he had first arrived. His identifying himself as Radha Sethupathy was done, he claims as an attempt to stave off a highly possible deportation. While Nesakumaran neither desires nor fears repatriation into Sri Lanka, he hopes for other kinds of homecoming once his prison tenure is temporarily terminated in France. Without trepidation he prospects that his wife Premini will receive the patriarch home.

If one can measure varied scales of expatriation, Nesakumaran's rejection of his home is relatively more voluntary, in comparison with Rocky. Unlike Rocky's domicile, Nesakumaran's home's forte lies in its identity as a structure that gives those affiliated with it, authenticity and supremacy. Belonging to the upper caste majoritarian group of the Vellalars of Palmyra islands, Nesakumaran's family connotes respectability, uprightness and propriety, represented by his father, Earnest, the principal of the Government School of Palmyra Island, the patriarch of Nesakumaran's home is the polar opposite of Gorilla. Absolutely unthug like, Earnest, Shobasakthi asserts, was the pure catholic son of the church of St. Thomas, with not even a hint of drunkenness, womanizing, lying or cheating in his history (Traitor25). Such is his repute, that people called him master or principal. Within this space Earnest wishes to voluntarily exile his son from worldly ties by making him a catholic priest to ensure his later departure to



Rome. It is from this other worldly demands of his home, that Nesakumaran intentionally exiles himself to the world of politics and political ideology.

Nesakumaran's spatial shift, like Dasan's, is never complete. Once out of home, Nesakumaran wanders between Jaffna town and Urathurai, sleeping in homes of secret friends, abandoned buildings and church porches. Shobha Sakth's texts are born from trauma, text are a retrieval of the trauma through re- presenting it in the literary space. Thus he attempts empathetic unsettlement by making others witness what he has undergone, a conflict through literary text, a mirror reflection, towards Sri Lankan contemporary scenario.

## **Work Cited**

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