

COUNTERING “TRAUMA” AND CRITIQUING “INTER COLONIALISM” THROUGH “DEMONS IN PARADISE”:

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ABSTRACT

After independence, Srilanka did not get over colonialism and became a prey to the nationalist movements and ideologies of Sinhalese and Tamils. The imposition of Sinhalese language, culture and power over Tamils led to Tamil separatist movements and civil wars. During the civil war, minority Tamil groups were tortured and killed by the Srilankan army powered by the majority Sinhalese groups which led to the escape and migration of Tamils from Srilanka. This inflicted eternal horror and trauma in Tamil people. The traumatic experience of the Tamils and the effect of internal colonization is looked into through the theory of “Cultural trauma” in this paper through Jeffrey Alexander in the book *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*.

Keywords: - Trauma, Traumatic theory, Cultural Trauma, Internal colonialism, Demons in Paradise, Nationalism.

INTRODUCTION

Tamil nationalism, an ideology that has been in movement for many years have served grounds to several wars and deaths. Tamil nationalism is the ideology of Tamil speaking people that led to the demand for a separate sovereign Tamil nation. After independence from British, Srilankan nation was still not over the divide and rule sequel that the British had left behind in their country. The Sinhalese and Tamil's conflict over sovereignty of Srilanka had major consequences on the minority Tamil population which led to the demand for a separate nation for Tamils. The majority Sinhalese turned their hands into imposing Sinhalese language, culture and practices into minority Tamils and their culture. The conflict has its roots from the imposed Sinhala only law of 1956 that subjugated Tamils. *Demons in paradise* is a trilingual Srilankan documentary directed by Jude Ratnam which displays his emotions and psyche who as a five year old boy fled Srilanka in the train with fear and anxiety during the massacre and returns back to his homeland in the same train which reminds him of the violence, terrorism and suffering of the 26 years long civil war. This paper looks into the collective brutal trauma that happened during the times of civil war in the process of state formation and the trauma inflicted upon the minority Tamils by the nationalistic groups through the theory of “Cultural trauma” by Jeffrey Alexander in the book *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. How the diffusion of Sinhalese language and culture through internal colonialism inflicted trauma to the indigenous minority group during the civil war and how nationalism turned against its own cause affecting the mental health of the people is looked into in this paper through the documentary called *Demons in paradise*. The paper analyses the cultural trauma undergone by people during the internal colonialism and liberation movement. Using narrative analysis methods, this paper will go on to analyse all the narrative elements which give meaning to the text including the script, narrative and representation in the documentary thereby obtaining the context of the trauma imposed by the internal colonialism on minority Tamil people.

CRITIQUING “INTER COLONIALISM” THROUGH “DEMONS IN PARADISE”

Demons in paradise begins with the image of a broken train and ends with Ratnam travelling in the train with words of hope. Train journey has been an integral part of the memory that Ratnam looks back to. The whole documentary projects Ratnam along with his uncle who has fought alongside the Tamil nationalist groups, travelling to meet their kiths and kins in Srilanka after about thirty five years. All they have to speak about is the horrors of war that are pinned in their memory. Ratnam approaches an old Hindu couple who gets back home with a Christian attire. The woman says

”I thought I would never be able to wear it (bindi) again. I thought I’ll be easily identified as Tamils if I wear bindi” and her husband goes on to say “We were so afraid, we ran with whatever we were wearing. Thinking about it, we felt we were being hunted down like animals. Now we know we are only acting. But, it was real then.”(Ratnam)

In the first chapter of the book co-authored by Ron Eyeraman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, Piotr Sztompka, Jeffrey C. Alexander defines the concept of cultural trauma as an event that occurs “when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves inedible marks upon their group consciousness, making their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (1). Ratnam and his uncle meet some native Sinhalese. The woman who saves Ratnam’s uncle from the army says “They harassed us since we supported Tamils. We protected them anyways. We’re still alive. Aren’t we, my boy?” (Ratnam). By assuming the power of autonomy, imposing dominant Sinhalese language education, adopting settlement and immigrant policies favouring the Sinhalese and by seizure of forest, land and home from the Tamils, the majoritarian Sinhala government pitted the minority Tamil community. Alexander brings in a theory called Lay trauma theory in which he says human beings are traumatized when they do not get the security, order, love and connection. “In 1983, they looted everything and put a petrol bomb on our house,” says an old man in the documentary. When neither consociation nor federation became possible is when the Tamil minorities took up the concept of separatism and demanded a separate nation called Tamileezham.

Tamil people including children who lived in Srilanka during the war did not get love, order, security or connection. Before even the British gave them independence, they were colonised by the majority Sinhalese. Internal colonialism is the subjugation and discrimination of the minority ethnic group by the majoritarian who wants to take control of the state.

Liberation tigers of Tamil eezham (LTTE) is a vigorous Tamil nationalistic group among many other nationalistic groups. Ratnam, as an insider and as a Tamil, has deconstructed the insider’s look on the Tamil nationalistic movements’ through this documentary. He interviews guerrilla fighters who confesses to have killed numerous of their own Tamil community members because they have been part of other Tamil nationalistic groups. LTTE played an important role in this kind of attacks. In this regard, Alexander mentions two kinds of Lay Trauma Theory which is “enlightenment” and “psychoanalytic”. Enlightenment theory is a “rational response to the abrupt change”. The Tamil nationalist groups did not have the patience to create unity among Tamil people and sought abrupt change. In the documentary, a Tamil guerrilla fighter puts across how he killed 800-900 Tamil people just because they belonged to another group. People became so familiar with colonisation that, even after the British left behind independence, they “project the responsibility for their own sufferings on this others”(1). In case of Sinhalese, they projected their sufferings on Tamil and the Tamil nationalists directed it to innocent people.

Ratnam speaks to both Srilankan and Tamil people to expose an unbiased narrative on the sufferings of the war. He meets a Srilankan journalist who shows a picture of a naked Tamil man who was beaten ruthlessly and goes on to say that there was no practicality of saving him from the Sinhalese because of which he attempted to capture the scene through the photograph. Ratnam travels in the train in which he travelled when he was five years old recalling the horrible memories that will be etched in his memories till his last sight. He shows the broken railway tracks and the path he travelled to reach the place where Tamil people lived to the viewers. They travelled to Jaffna, the Tamil kingdom, and began to interact with people there. As Alexander says, “Social groups restrict solidarity, leaving others to suffer alone” (1), this is evident when Ratnam asks a guerrilla fighter why the Tamils have lost the war, he says” Because of the traitors those who betrayed us” (Ratnam). This shows humanity does not come as a package as said by

Johan Galtung in *Power sharing as peace structure: case study of Srilanka*.

As Neil J.Smelser advances in the second chapter “Psychological trauma and cultural trauma” of the book *Cultural trauma and collective identity*, Trauma is not natural, whereas trauma is “historically created” through the process of Internal colonization that happens in most of the third world nations after independence. The inability to share power and space has led to the creation of Trauma for one group of people in Srilanka. Ratnam’s uncle recalls how his mother was not able to cope up to the constant migration and was not able to accept the loss of her home, which made her mentally sick. All she did was to keep cursing the oppressors. Ratnam’s uncle While “experiencing

trauma” or while narrating a trauma narrative, the oppressor should be named clearly which Ratnam did not fail to do. He named both the Tamil and the Sinhalese nationalists and the traitors who did not belong to any category as the oppressors who killed innocent people.

Ratnam’s uncle exhibits his pain, horror and trauma in all his episodes on screen. Ratnam mentions that his uncle was the only person who went to join the guerilla and all the others in the family were resistant. Alexander says that Trauma always becomes attached to the psyche and the memories become etched in thoughts. So, the defensive activity is not getting touch with anything that will revoke the past horrors. Ratnam mentions that, even now after thirty five years of Tamils losing their war, his uncle was resistant to come back to native for the past thirty five years. This clearly, as Alexander puts it, that trauma comes with an anger and anxiety of loss.

Ratnam's uncle, as soon as he steps in his homeland, meets his kiths and kins. He couldn’t control his emotions when he recollects his past horrors. Ratnam, on the other hand, suffers as a child. He is the representation of all the children, who were forced to migrate fearing for life in the midst of all the horrors. Ratnam confesses that it still shocks him when some Tamils are still ready to wage war for Tamil eezham. In a state where the majoritarian government opts for mononational government instead of multiculturalism what can they ask for?

As Ernest Ranan in *what is a nation* says “Nor should languages shackle human liberty when it comes to determining the family with which one unites one’s self in life and in death”. Imposition of Sinhala language is one main reason for the quest for a separate nation. Ratnam confesses that even now he is comfortable when his son starts a conversation in Tamil in public. The language and linguistic trauma still remains irrecoverable. As Juliet Michelle says, “Traumatic languages become symbols of feeling rather than meaning”. Alexander says that when the collective identity has been reconstructed and re-remembered again and again, the discourse becomes a monument in museums or history in literature.

Loss of identity, loss of identity and loss of home has inflicted the never ending Trauma in the minds of Srilankan Tamils. “Tamil eezham, how did our hopes get into such cruelty? Today, in this country, we are asked to move forward, forgetting the past. Almost all traces of war have been wiped out. We are asked to deny our identities and move forward. But the fear inside our head and heart is just ready to come back to the surface and it could happen anytime” (Ratnam) says Ratnam. “Routinization” process of Trauma as proposed by Alexander should be analysed in order to understand the closing statement of Ratnam. Alexander says that “the spiral of significance flattens out, charisma becomes routinized, effervescence evaporates and liminality gives rise to reaggregation” (22). Leading to the deletion of Trauma with the memories monumented in the museum. But Ratnam goes against it and says that the fear inside them cannot and will not disappear and it will come out some day.

CONCLUSIONS

Ratnam uses Traumatic narrative methodology successfully to convey the psyche of people living amidst cultural, linguistic and geographical Tension. Alexander puts forth four criteria that the text should fulfil to be a Trauma narrative. The nature of the pain in the documentary is announced through the interview that was so natural to allow people to let out their tears and emotions. The nature of their pain is the wound that the civil war left on them. Victims here are the Tamil people and they have been killed and tortured to prove their inferior state. The whole world and especially Indians are empathetic towards the Tamil group because they have been treated inhumanely. The identity of the perpetrator is clearly defined- all the nationalists using the weapon of nationalism for wrong purposes. Ratnam satisfies all four criteria and makes *Demons in Paradise* convey the message in a clear and natural way.

Tamil nationalism and Srilankan nationalism have been researched under various contexts. But research papers on the civil war and the everlasting trauma it has inflicted upon people have not been researched on. The research gap is that there are not many direct articles on trauma theory and its impact on people with regards to Srilankan civil war. Through this documentary, Ratnam gives an alternative narrative of nationalism and the trauma inflicted by the ideology of nationalism.

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