

# Crossing Borders: Sovereign Life and Sovereignty

*Sivamohan Sumathy\**

*I never did a nobler thing than bury  
My brother Polynices. And if these men  
Weren't so afraid to sound unpatriotic  
They'd say the same. But you are king  
And because you are king you would not be contradicted*

(Heaney 2004, p. 32).

**A**s we ease into an uneasy and uncertain phase of COVID-19, which by no means can be called post-COVID-19, it is time to have an appraisal of the last three months. Life was basic, or so it seemed. Locked down deep in the bellies of our homes, which we were newly discovering, we were forced to think anew about our relations with the world, but most of all with what has been configured as nature. While we were and are online and meeting across virtual space (rather uncommon and not what we did before) we have also had to forage for our food and discover edible plants. In my urban dwelling, I was astonished to see tens of birds nesting, while a monitor lizard made its way in, to forage in the garden for worms. With a vague sense of survival, we were making free with what the earth could offer in the bounded place called the backyard. I, who only nodded at my neighbours and greeted them with hulloos and good mornings, exchanged vegetables and other foods we could spare. We lived in the interstices.

It was heartening to see varied efforts to help people in need; genuine and persistent assistance in feeding the country's destitute, who had been rendered homeless and hungry with their informal labour patterns broken down. However, what is right and wrong, who belongs and who does not belong are being redrawn, but with the same familiar tropes we knew of earlier. Working people, migrant workers coming from West Asia are unwelcome, though they are key producers of our

foreign exchange. We hear reports of increased incidence of domestic violence in lockdown days. Whether this is true or not, women have had to look after large families, cooking and serving for increased numbers in locked down days. Questions about the environment are being renewed with a new fervour, but do we have new answers? While we know we have to share our land with birds and animals, we do not want to share it with other human beings. The pandemic must give us a new discourse, but will it?

Borders are closed, nationally and across communities. In Colombo, until recently, there was a complete lockdown, and some areas were in total lockdown and were called isolated areas. We no longer have curfew, but for long we could not cross districts. We live in isolation, creating borders. At the same time, we are also meeting virtually, crossing borders at will. I don't need a visa to address an audience across many seas. COVID-19 expresses a paradox that we need to address urgently.

We lived a bare life. The lines from Heaney's play uttered by Antigone and cited above, lays out the question of life, bare life, zero-sum life, for scrutiny, pitting it against the law of the land, questions of citizenry, the subject of the state, and her life on the borders of sovereign life—the integrity of self, us, me, and body. Antigone holds an especial salience for us in Sri Lanka, for we battled through a controversy

unleashed about the cremation of the first Muslim person to die of the virus, the third death in the 11 odd deaths from the virus at the time of writing.

## Sovereign Life and Sovereignty

The relations between these two terms, life as sovereign and the state as sovereign, need to be kept together, not necessarily in opposition but in adjacency and tension. I draw upon the ideas of Divya Dwivedi and Shaji Mohan (2020) who in contesting Agamben's ideas of bare life as a possible pre-state of nature situated as an outside to the social, stress the importance of our existence as a function of political and social imagination, bare life included.

This political and social imagination confronts the idea of the sovereign as that of the body politic and the body. This is the time of the King, the sovereign king, of the dictator, and centralised authority, who would not be contradicted. In early March, the President of Sri Lanka dissolved Parliament and called for General Elections. During lockdown (from mid-March to early June and continuing) the President of our country acted as a supreme leader, without parliament; today we are ruled by bureaucratic management, task forces, in themselves redolent of military command, but peopled with high level serving and retired military personnel. We have a Presidential Task Force for the pandemic, a task force for a disciplined and virtuous society (*Daily FT 2020*) (a paradox in terms) and a task force for archaeological excavations in the Muslim and Tamil dominated east, in which only one person is an archaeologist; the rest being Buddhist monks and military personnel (Kirinde 2020). The last has accentuated the fears of the minority no little about land grabbing and dispossession. Under cover of darkness, lockdown I mean, in which the larger community was somewhat immobilised, Ramzy Razeek, was arrested on charges of hate speech on Facebook, for no real offense. He is an activist and has been working on bringing communities together (Mohamed 2020). Hejaz Hizbullah, a prominent lawyer, was arrested on very dubious charges in a very similar way in April 2020 (Sooriyagoda 2020).

## Sovereign People

Yet, the sovereign state is held in tension with sovereign life, and they shape each other. People are sovereign, and life is sovereign. Appropriating the words of Dwivedi and Mohan, I call this 'the time of the human as the forsaken'. This body of sovereign life is not

the bio political of Foucault, bounded, disciplined and constitutive, but one that crosses borders, decomposing and recomposing. As Antigone challenges Creon in the quote above, it is the time of the body, the bare body, the unpatriotic act, the time for burial and to take care of the living. In talking about bare and naked life, we are pushing open the politics of borders, and tack our precarious, uneven and unequal lives on sovereignty, people's sovereignty. In doing so, we do not wish away states: we are asking for the protection of the state from rampant corporatisation, a caring for the living and the dead.

I move to a novel I read in lockdown. Téa Obreht's Orange Prize-winning novel *Tiger's Wife* (2011), seems written for the lockdown; capturing in a sweep what our norms are about and how war-ravaged communities conduct their lives, when what we considered civilisation shuts down. It is a life in which animals become one's lovers, and where mythology makes more sense than the bombs that rip your heads off, for these stories sustain life while war takes life away from you. Set in Serbia in the chaos and splintering of the former Yugoslavia into many regions, communities and states (like Saadat Hasan Manto's 'Toba Tek Singh' and the partition of the subcontinent), the novel is a criss-crossing of borders and boundaries at multiple levels.

The novel is about people and their relationship with other people caught across borders. But there are other kinds of crossing, human to animal and back; the dead and the living traverse each other's paths seamlessly and live on the borders of each other's territory, not in harmony, but in a reduced and bare existence. Fact, science and medicine exist side by side with myth, stories and superstition in an astonishing weave of what humanity could be about, in its sordidness, but also in its state of forsakenness.

We are also grappling with the significance of the breaking up of Black Lives Matter protests in Colombo by the police on the 9<sup>th</sup> of June (*Daily FT 2020*); and the outright murder — not by the state or paramilitary — but the goons of finance capital on 10<sup>th</sup> June of the Chairman of the Lanka Self-Employed Professionals Three-Wheeler Association during a verbal altercation. He had been advocating that the government's promised deferment on the payments by three-wheel drivers to leasing & finance companies be kept (Wijedasa 2020).

In the month of May, after we lost May Day, Ramazan and Vesak to COVID-19, we were also locked down in the grief of another death in 2009. On

May 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> we commemorated once again the anniversary of the conclusion to the war, where roughly 40, 000 lost their lives and hundreds of thousands were rendered destitute. Grieving and remembering the dead was disallowed for hundreds of Tamil families in the aftermath of the war. 11 years later, Tamil families are still denied the right to remember.

In *Tiger's Wife*, there is a burial, the poignancy of which has to be kept together with Antigone's defiance, in our time of COVID-19, yesterday, today and tomorrow, to query the raising of the dead. Death is not to be understood as a natural event we all anticipate for ourselves, but as a politics; we are responsible for our community, for our relatives, our families, for our dead and our living. We stand up for the dead, and in doing so, we stand by the living, those who live on the margins of an economic setback in lockdown, among other things, the Muslim body.

In *Tiger's Wife*, Dure, one of the novel's many minor characters, comes back to the land of the other, the enemy, after 12 years, to give a decent burial to a cousin, whom he had hastily shut up in a suitcase when he was killed and abandoned in a shallow grave. His family is falling sick and there is a curse on him, he thinks.

Dure was wiping the sides [of the suitcase] down slowly, with great care, enormous relief at having recovered the case, evident in his face. Twelve years of accounting for his inability to return the body, his negligence in leaving a family member behind, loyalty suspect, always defending himself from the conclusions they must have been drawing – had he abandoned a dying man? Killed him and disposed of the body? And the illness itself, how his thoughts must have turned straight to the body, when his wife and children began falling ill. (Obrecht 2011, p. 230)

I read these words on the burial and the lapsed ritual re-enacted 12 years later along with some parodic gestures, in the story of Dure, with a shiver, contemplating the precariousness of life in the proximity of death of our own selves, our families and that of the community, both political and social.

Audre Lorde says, 'So, it is better to speak/remembering/we were never meant to survive' in her poem, 'A Litany for Survival' (1978, p. 256). We need to speak in our attempt to survive. We shall cross borders, both social and political, and speak up. The lines of solidarity cross in the barest of lives.

As a part of my own litany for survival, I offer a poem written as a celebration of May Day in 2020, reflecting on what its muted tones may mean to us.

*on may day today,  
i hear the vendors cry  
their wares on delivery,  
breaking the silence  
of the streets,  
as i greet the lone grey cat  
outside on my doorstep,  
waiting for its feed.*

*on may day today.  
on may day today,  
i see no workers in streets of protest.*

*the earth will not work today,  
it has taken a few days off,  
on this holy day,  
so they say.  
i remember waving flags and  
singing the internationale,  
on long marches spread out against centuries.  
the international is broke now,  
in a long unending stop over,  
its people on a lonely trail  
of a single song  
about singular days.*

*yet i hear the twitter of the birds, and the dogs barking,  
the tuk-tuk stuttering and my neighbour's switch,  
sweep the stone floor next door,  
a little boy on a bicycle circles the lane outside my yard.  
the long trace of women locked out of work and place,  
wending their way back home, wearing care  
on the unwaged bags in their hands,  
i hear not.*

*we know today,  
more than ever before  
in our own life-days,  
how tomorrows are not to be foretold,  
and yesterdays are the same as today,  
we must learn to sing old songs, again and again,  
but with a new refrain.  
we must learn anew,  
to wake, to make sounds, speech,  
to wait and see,  
to work,  
and to make war  
against unjust wages, and unjust toil  
and the injustices of nations.*

*We must learn to join marches,  
of women, children and men,  
“forge in the smithy of my soul  
the uncreated conscience of my race,”  
we must learn anew,  
broken down on the lonely trail  
of a single song in these singular days,  
to walk ahead,  
in a cacophony of the birds  
arising,  
to survive the next death,  
survive again, the next birth.*

## Notes

\* Sivamohan Sumathy is an academic attached to the Department of English, University of Peradeniya and is also a filmmaker, dramatist, performer and poet.

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