

EXPLORING PSYCHIC SUFFERING AND HEALING

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Masking Terror: How Women Contain Violence in Southern Sri Lanka. Alex Argenti-Pillen. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. xv + 235pp.

Scarred Minds: The Psychological Impact of War on Sri Lankan Tamils. Daya Somasunderam. New Delhi: Sage, 1998. 353pp.

The Ocean of Stories: Children's Imagination, Creativity, and Reconciliation in Eastern Sri Lanka. Patricia Lawrence. Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2003. 94pp.

The resilience of individuals and communities, in the face of extraordinary violence, be it rape, torture or ethnocide, is a phenomenon that has continued to perplex as well as give us hope. The three texts I briefly discuss here seek in different ways to explore the fraught processes of such psychic suffering and healing.

Masking Terror

In *Masking Terror*, Alex Argenti-Pillen argues that Sinhala women in a “rural slum” (an ambiguous term left unexplained) in southern Sri Lanka who have experienced extraordinary violence, during a Sinhala youth uprising in 1988-1990, seek to “reconstruct their communicative worlds and interrupt the cycle of violence” through a variety of “traditional” and “culture-specific” narrative styles (p.xii) embedded in the belief of the wild (yakku).

Argenti-Pillen provides a sensitive analysis of a variety of Sinhala expressions used in everyday discourse that seek through euphemisms and other forms of veiled speech to converse about terror and violence in a non-provocative way. Drawing a parallel between women’s responses to perpetrators of domestic violence, who continue to live in their households, and perpetrators of non-domestic violence (those who accused, betrayed, threatened or killed family members during the uprising) who continue to live in their communities, she also suggests that verbal strategies of

dissociation (differentiating between ordinary and yaka-like people) averted a more widespread outbreak of violence, as it was only the punishment and indictment of the perpetrator that was sought, not of his entire family.

These strategies of “acoustic cleansing” (p.197) are used to substantiate Argenti-Pillen’s broader and supposedly anti-Foucauldian position that there are local discourses on violence which reference local social realities rather than the “institutionalized discourses of the national elite” (pp.13-14). The conceptual purchase of such a rigid dichotomization and the valorization of the local as “small scale, well-isolated social contexts” (p.197) is unclear to me. Previous anthropological research has demonstrated that local social realities play a crucial role in how national events are played out within local communities and how inextricably linked are the two (Pradeep Jeganathan, “All the Lord’s Men? Ethnicity and Inequality in the Space of a Riot,” in Michael Roberts (ed.) *Sri Lanka. Collective Identities Revisited*, Vol. 2. Colombo: Marga Institute, 1998). Indeed, can even a cursory understanding of nationalism ignore the complex articulation of ideological state apparatuses such as the school, media and family? What fuels statements (however satirical) such as the one made by Argenti-Pillen’s informant that “[t]o end the war we must reduce the production of Tamil people” (p.66)? Similarly, could verbal dissociations operate as seamlessly within a non-homogenous neighbourhood where the perpetrator could be of a different ethnicity from the victim?

Argenti-Pillen’s most noteworthy contribution lies in her efforts to provide a located and contingent reading of ‘fearfulness’ among Sinhala women. While this has enabled her to de-link the Sinhala belief in yakku from its more commonly relegated role as an exotic cultural manifestation of ecstatic religion (the discipline of anthropology being particularly culpable here), her unquestioning faith in ‘tradition’ has blinkered her ability to see how women can be constrained and disciplined through a system of beliefs and rituals that seeks to constitute them as perennially vulnerable to contamination. The containment of violence

seems to be produced at a great cost — to women. Additionally, the perpetrator seems to be left out of this analytical equation.

Even more surprising is Argenti-Pillen's censure of women who refuse to be interpellated as 'fearful' and express their scepticism regarding the efficacy of cleansing rituals. She not only faults trauma counselling NGOs for encouraging such "Western" and "modernizing" paradigms of thought and behaviour but "estimates" these 'fearless' women's contribution to the cycle of violence "to be substantial in the long term"(p.194). This is a troubling argument circumscribed by Argenti-Pillen's inability to provide a genealogy of 'fearfulness' and 'fearlessness'. An engagement with the extensive literature and vibrant debates on notions of femininity and masculinity in Sri Lanka would have made clear that not only are there normative and anti-normative discourses and practices of gendered embodiment—for example, the interpellatory categories of chandiya (thug) or lajja-bhaya (respectability)—that are not embedded in a belief in yakku, but that the category of the 'fearless' woman is not a new phenomenon arisen out of women's recent responses to violence, as Argenti-Pillen seeks to suggest and even make predictions based on such a false assumption.

Scarred Minds

Similarly, why introduce the tired oppositions of Western vs. non-Western, modernity vs. tradition to understand a society that has been colonized for over four centuries? While it is irrefutable that there has been a recent boom in mental-health NGOs, psychiatry has been practised on the island for at least half a century. Its importance in Sri Lankan life is particularly exemplified through an incident described in *Scarred Minds*: In 1988, a group of 487 Tamils who had been tortured while in Sri Lankan army custody took out a newspaper advertisement requesting medical help (p.264).

Scarred Minds by Daya Somasunderam is a psychiatric analysis of responses to chronic violence among Tamil civilians in northern Sri Lanka "written from the inside of the violence, as it were" (Veena Das, in Foreword, p.15). Both a witness to and survivor of violence, Somasunderam not only taught psychiatry and treated patients throughout the twenty-year civil war in the north but also co-founded a human rights documentation group that has worked under threat of death (another co-founder was murdered by Tamil

militants, in 1989). His comprehensive theoretical and clinical discussion of the psychological causes and effects of continuous violence is thus framed by a powerful critique of violence and an impassioned advocacy of non-violence as the most effective way of securing political justice. Working with mental illness in conditions of chronic violence, Somasunderam notes, makes us question our own notions of 'normality': It is the "so-called 'normal' individuals [those who incite others to violence by mobilizing notions of patriotism and nationalism] who may be more in need of treatment than those who come to be labelled as 'insane'" (p.20, emphasis author's).

It is unfortunate that Argenti-Pillen's critique of mental health discourses does not engage Somasunderam's work. While Somasunderam would be in agreement with Argenti-Pillen that narrow medical models are inadequate to express the full extent of people's mental agony, he believes in mobilizing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder diagnoses as "an internationally recognised means to draw attention to the plight of civilians and in the long term to create social awareness and mobilise support for affected populations" (p.169). His "descriptive narratives of psychological reactions... transcribed in the language of the mind and body," argues Somasunderam, provide what conventional accounts of war fail to do—a testimony to suffering (ibid).

However, Somasunderam's deep and politically located commitment to his community extends beyond merely documenting suffering, to trying to explain how a community's very scarring by violence perpetuates this vicious cycle: Peace can only be brought about through developing an awareness of the "unconscious psychic forces within us" and changing their direction by "an act of will" (p.331). His call for a "descent into the ordinary" (Veena Das in Foreword, p.17) and the recreation of a non-violent sociality is particularly poignant: "Too much importance has been given to politics" Let us turn our minds to other things in our lives—work, family, art, drama...let us laugh and cry over life's small problems and go to sleep without any fear" (p.311-2). This is the message from the local to the global, observes Veena Das, in a context where a Tamil diaspora sends money for "women and children to be recruited to the Tamil cause in Jaffna while their own children are happily going to school" (p.17).

The Ocean of Stories

It is children and their storytelling, in a region that has witnessed the massacre of entire villages, where

“political silencing had become endemic” (p.3), which is foregrounded in *The Ocean of Stories* by Patricia Lawrence. This slim volume is an ethnographic reflection on the Butterfly Peace Garden in Batticaloa, in eastern Sri Lanka, which was founded seven years ago to provide a space where Tamil and Muslim children who have endured devastating loss and psychic injury can learn to play and heal together. Lawrence, a cultural anthropologist who did her dissertation research in this region and has had a long relationship with the Garden, skilfully evokes the whimsical energy as well as transformative power of this exceptional space “where the effects of war made by adults are unmade” with gentleness, patience, imagination and laughter (p.14). Simultaneous with such healing is the slow and painful narrowing of a chasm of ethnic hatred and suspicion between Tamil and Muslim children and the similarly ethnically/religiously differentiated animators who work with them.

What makes the Butterfly Garden both so extraordinary and unique seems to be its constant interweaving of a variety of methodologies and rituals of healing. Within a framework indebted to Chong philosophy [an underground movement

popular in Canada in the sixties] based on the Taoist maxim —“doing the ordinary in a marvelous way, doing the marvelous in an ordinary way” (p.23), the Garden’s founder, Paul Hogan, and his co-director, Father Paul Satkunanayagam, have incorporated Tamil folk drama, medicine circles from First Nation’s peoples in Canada, Buddhist walking meditation, Jungian psychoanalysis, etc., to create “a transforming space that is always in transition...not really anywhere at all” (p.30). It is the very cultural non-recognisability of this space which is enabling, observes Lawrence, because “the usual rules do not apply there...it is a place so free and open even a grown up might be able to relax” (pp.30-1).

This statement is an interesting counterpoint to Argenti-Pillen’s assertion that ‘traditional’, culturally recognizable systems of healing are the most effective. What I have sought to suggest here is that we should not underestimate the resilience and resolve of wounded individuals and societies to seek solace in whatever rituals or systems of healing they may encounter—be they familiar or unfamiliar—and transform them in the process. ■

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