

POET AS WITNESS: ETHNICITY AND THE DISCOURSE OF THE NATION

E.V. Ramakrishnan

South Asian countries have gone through similar phases of historical experiences such as those of colonialism, nationalist movements, state formation and efforts at decolonization. The politics of South Asia still bears the marks of colonial legacy. The boundaries which were politically drawn often contradicted the cultural boundaries that took shape over centuries. The nation building in these countries have been influenced by collective memories but the same logic did not inform the state formation. The minorities came into being through political processes of exclusion which were oftent he result of the policies prescribed by the state. Electoral politics made them increasingly self-conscious about their distance from centres of power. They were forced to defend their cultural identity against the aggressive assimilationist policies of the state. Their cultural identity took on aspects of political identity. They were caught in a conflict between atavistic sentiments and the compulsions of civil politics. The cultural givers that constitute the ethnic identities can mobilize people in times of crisis. Both Kashmiri Muslims and Sri Lankan Tamils can be described as ethnic communities since they are objectively different from other communities in customs, rituals and beliefs and they subjectively accept these differences as the basis of their distinctive identity. The prolonged civil strife in Sri Lanka and Kashmir has its roots in the conflict between ethnicity and nation state. Here we will study the poetry of Jean Arasanayagam, a Sri Lankan poet and that of Agha Shahid Ali, an Indian poet, both writing in English, to see how they respond to the crisis in their respective community.

Let us examine the case of Sri Lanka. When Sri Lanka secured independence in 1948, it was the Sinhalese Buddhist elite which constituted the ruling class. Here it is worth mentioning that of the 26 per cent of Sri Lankan population that belongs to minority communities, 18.5 per cent are Tamils and 7.4 are Muslims. The divisive politics followed by the Sri Lankan state in the 1950s progressively alienated the Tamil minorities who are largely concentrated in the North and North East parts of the country. The dialectic of the monolithic, unitary state and its deliberate suppression of differences, linguistic

and religious, led to the demand for a separate nation by the ethnic group. It should be remembered that the Buddhists have no special claim to Sri Lankan territory. There are strong cultural and racial similarities between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, the linguistic and religious differences notwithstanding. It is impossible to differentiate the Sinhalese and the Tamils from their physical appearance. Most of the Tamil speakers arrived in Sri Lanka centuries before and have contributed substantially towards the country's economic and cultural wealth.

After the formation of independent Sri Lankan state, the Tamils were systematically marginalized by the state apparatus. The Sri Lankan national flag shows a Sinhalese lion. The secular national discourse of the state became increasingly irrelevant as Buddhist culture and Sinhalese language became markers of Sri Lankan nation state. In 1956 Sinhalese was made the official language of the nation. The rhetoric of cultural nationalism ('Sinhala Only' was their slogan) was used by Bandaranaike's Sri Lanka Freedom Party to mobilize the majoritarian forces into a formidable political formation. Tamils who were a highly educated minority gradually lost their access to opportunities in higher education and representation in government jobs and the oppression of Tamils united them across religions. Gradually, as the relation between Tamil ethnicity and Hindu religion got severed and "Tamil ethnicity replaces Hinduism as the focal point of nationalist pride among Tamils. As a result, some of the most active participants in the Tamil Separatists movement have been Christians, even Christian clergy." (Juergensmeyer 1993: 102). It is to be noted that the resistance movement of the Tamils has primarily targeted the Sri Lankan state.

The poetry of Jean Arasanayagam gives us an inside view of the Sri Lankan ethnic strife. By birth she is a Dutch Burgher. The Dutch came to Sri Lanka in the 17th century and the Burghers constitute a microscopic minority of Sri Lanka. During the colonial period they were a privileged group and this had alienated them from the mainstream. Jean Arasanayagam's marriage to a Sri Lankan Tamil, despite the

disapproval of her family, meant embracing another minority identity. 1983 was a turning point in the history of Sri Lankan Tamils. In response to the killing of 13 Sri Lankan soldiers on 27 July that year, riots erupted all over the country in which more than 2000 Tamils were killed. President Jayawardene did not condemn the rioters. This was the beginning of the long drawn out civil war which is nowhere near a peaceful settlement. Arasanayagam's volume of poems, *Apocalypse 83* records her trauma as a refugee because, being married to a Tamil, she was also a victim of the political violence. In the poem titled "1958... '71... '77... '81... '83" she traces the recurring history of ethnic strife in the country and concludes:

It's all happened before and will happen again
and we the onlookers
but now I'm in it
it's happened to me
at last history has meaning
when you're the victim
when you're the defeated
the bridges bombed
and you can't cross over. (Arasanayagam 2003: 26)

Some of her major poems from this period deal with the trauma of dislocation and displacement of the Tamil community in the context of ethnic strife. Several poems such as "Innocent Victim – Trincomalee," and "Eye Witness – Nawalapitiya" give first person accounts of the inhuman violence perpetrated on innocent people who had no inkling of the magnitude of the tragedy that was to befall them. The poem "In the Month of July" describes the scene of a man being chased by a mob and brutally killed. "It's got to End" speaks of the need to speak out against violence. Several of the poems in the volume deal with the plight of refugees who are unable to come to terms with the sudden collapse of the familiar world they lived in. In the poem "I Watch My Own Death" – Refugee Camp 1983" she writes:

It is easier now to die than live,
One waits for the burning to be over
One waits for the final conflagration
To end, seeing death and murder face to face
In the eyes of enemies, stranger, predators,
The degradation of the fugitive, the hunted
Fleeing from the burning mazes, threats and death. (Ibid: 67)

In the poem "The Dalada Bombing" she shows how violence is routinized in the civil war-torn Sri Lanka. She says:

Who were the first to die?
A family come to give their early offering
Of milk, caught in the crossfire
A woman on fire runs demented along the street
The flames surging out of a sieged glass
Body-globe. (Arasanayagam 2003: 46)

The Nallur poems are a poignant record of the temple town's slide into violence and chaos. Nallur houses a famous Murugan temple around which a minority culture of devotion and worship had grown. In "Nallur," she says that the 'thirtham' which tasted like nectar is now bitter and at the entrance of the town "the silent gaus are trained upon a faceless terror" (p 3). Smoking ruins, blackened stones, empty roads and trails of blood mark the landscape outside. The pilgrim town now has turned into a ghost town:

The land is empty now
the pitted limestone
invaded by the sea
drowns, vanishes,
waves of rust swell and billow
beating into hollow caves and burial urns
filled with the ash of bodies
cremated by the fire of bullets. (Ibid: 107)

In "Remembering Nallur – 1984," she recalls the annual festival of Nallur temple which used to attract lakhs of people. Now "the punch blast echoes/over the veechi of Nallur/ summoning the penitents/to sacrifice, no one comes." (Ibid: 109). She also remembers the wandering singers who once traveled through the villages and hound them in their enchanting devotional music:

Where have they vanished,
The Bhakti singers in their trance,
Bodies bent backwards leaning against
Wind, borne by its surge
Across the empty plain singing thevachans,
Clashing cymbals, ringing their death knells
As they dance and sing traveling
From distant villages for miles and miles
Seeing only the gods behind the blind eyes
Of the world. (Ibid: 109)

The memories of devotion and communion which form a counter-narrative to the dominant one of arson, murder and dispossession constitute a site which assumes significance in her subsequent poetry. "Remembering Nallur 1984" ends with the lines:

This time the poojas are not made
 With laden trays of flowers, tulsi, camphor,
 Fruit, kumkum and thirtham
 The poojas are made with their bodies,
 As they come thousands and thousands
 Traveling from distant villages.
 Nallur is now a battlefield
 and the hands upraised
 storming heaven
 all bear arms,
 all bear weapons. (Ibid: 115)

The context of ethnic violence forces Jean Arasanayagam to review the content of her minority identities. She offers a critique of the nationalistic discourse by producing self-critical narratives of her Burgher and Tamil identities. In *A Colonial Inheritance and Other Poems* she recovers her past and in the process, takes stock of the colonial past. This, by no means, is an easy task because now she has to recognize that her ancestors have left her a dubious legacy of violence and shame:

In the garden of museum
 a cannon rests. Within glass cases
 artefacts of time. Minted coins abraded
 silver larins, golden guilders, stuivers,
 ancient swords stained with rust
 and blood. Firearms antique,
 and in my face --- a semblance. (Arasanayagam 1985: 5)

The minted coins are stained with blood. This is a moment of epiphany. The present violence was inherent in the colonial conquest of the natives and their brutal subjugation. To own up to this dubious legacy is to be self-critical about her community:

We were once invaders

 On our brows eating into skull
 We bear branded the mark of Cain. (Arasanayagam 1991: 85)

In a long poem called "Exiled Childhood" in the volume, *Shooting the Floricans* Arasanayagam confesses to her privileged status in the colony as a Burgher (Arasanayagam 1993: 9-10). To situate her own legacy is to accept that her relation with the mainstream is historically determined. The critical distancing she achieves in her narration of the past is a pointer to her awareness of the complications of history informing the present. In the middle of the poem she

compares herself to a migrant bird which has overstayed its summer and has chosen to stay behind to cohabit with the native kind and has now grown "into a rare genus" (Ibid., p.113) Here she achieves a status of sort without any final resolution of her problem of belonging. The nationalist discourse, by its very nature, demands assimilation and the critical distance she acquires through her examination of her own location within Sri Lankan history, enables her to realize the inherent vulnerability of minority identities. In an article, Elaine Ho and Harshana Rambukwella have argued that Arasanayagam's writing is heavily invested in the idea of 'national belonging'. They suggest:

It is from within the Sri Lankan nation and as an individual who desires to belong that Arasanayagam writes, but she is also acutely aware that in this national space, she is persistently marked as alien. The desire to belong co-exists with an equally urgent process of rewriting her own alien-ness, and to reinvent alienation as critical irony and poetic agency. (Ho and Rambukwella 2006: 66-67).

I would like to argue that this is not borne out by her poems. She questions narrow notions of belonging. She has come to recognize that each discourse of belonging creates its others. She understands that choices are made by one's birth and one's location in a community which are historically determined. Today it is recognized that a nation-state may contain more than one nation. Anthony D. Smith says in his study, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*: "Quite simply many individuals today belong simultaneously to two 'nations' --- Catalan and Spanish, Breton and French, Croat and Yugoslav, Scots and British, even Yoruba and Nigerian, perhaps." (Anthony D. Smith 1986: 167). The nationalistic discourse, as it has been defined by the Sri Lankan state, has no space to accommodate minority identities like hers. The nation-state bestows equality whereas it is the nation which endows one with identity. She is caught between the state-seeking Tamil nationalism and the state-sponsored Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. (See T.K. Oommen's article 'New Nationalisms and Collective Rights' in Stephen May et al 2004 : 132-140 for details regarding the post-colonial nationalisms of South Asia.) It is not easy for her to endorse either of the two as it involves making painful choices. The metaphor of the migratory bird overstaying its summer and choosing to cohabit with the native kind and eventually evolving into a 'rare genus' does underline the fact that she will remain alien and different. Can she find her own space within the nation without getting assimilated? She will remain a vulnerable member of a minority community ever marked

and singled out for differences. This burden of self-consciousness also will prevent her from being part of a dominant imagined community.

Arasanayagam is trying to find an alternative to the colonizing model of nation-building that characterizes the colonial and post-colonial nation states. This becomes apparent in the manner in which she negotiates differences with her Tamil identity. The insular nature of her mother-in-law's Tamil Hindu (Vellala) culture denies her entry into it. The culture and customs that constitute Tamil identity can also make it hegemonic in its own way when it excludes other identities from its day-to-day life. In the long narrative poem "The Woman Goddesses and Their Mythologies" the narrator describes how she is allowed to enter the pooja room of the matriarch only to be made aware of an intractable symbolic logic of the Tamil cosmology that excludes her and constructs her differently. Here we are made to feel the matriarch's centrality in Tamil culture. As a daughter-in-law from another minority culture she feels both unwanted and threatened. She has to subscribe to the codes of this new culture to gain entry here. As she says:

Yet I entered, treading uncertain and wavering with
Naked sole, my feet, now unpolluted, washed and bathed
In tumeric, first having shaken off the dust of many
Journeys on roads and streets I trod ... (Arasanayagam 1991: 30)

The dialectic of purity and pollution that is at the root of this narrative of the sacred clearly speaks of the essentializing tendency at work in the Tamil culture. The writer feels the need to resist this hegemonic element because it is the very same factor that is at work in the construction of the majoritarian discourse of the nation state. In her poem "Mother-in-law" she points to the hollowness of all claims to purity:

"Aachi you have Sinhala blood,
You drank milk of a Sinhala woman"
"who told you that? A Sinhala nona
gave me milk. They all were
respectable Sinhala nonas." (Wijesinha, Rajiva 1998:41)

Nona means 'an honourable woman'. She wants to preserve the purity of her 'blood'. But we are all 'polluted' in one way or other. The ironic comment in the above lines points to an inclusive vision of the idea of identity and the need to resist fictions of purity. In a plural society one has to be wary of essentialist claims to insular spaces of identities.

The poetry of Jean Arasanayagam compels us to reconsider the 'modernity' of modern nations. In his study, *The Ethnic Origins of Modern Nations*, mentioned earlier, Anthony D. Smith argues that the core of ethnicity resides in the quartet of "myths, memories, values and symbols and in "the characteristic forms or styles or genres of certain historical configurations of populations" (Smith A.D. 1986: 15). Ethnic communities carry the potential to emerge into nations as shown by the struggles of several such communities during the twentieth century. Citing the example of East European nations, A.D. Smith says that such transformations meant a triple movement: "from isolation to activism, from quietism to mobilization and from culture to politics" (Ibid:154). We have seen above how Sri Lankan situation forced the Tamil community to stake claim for a separate nationhood. The Kashmir context is equally complex. During its history, confluence of cultures. The political crisis of Modern Kashmir is, however, traceable to confluence of cultures. The political crisis of modern Kashmir is, however, traceable to the partition of the sub-continent and the emergence of two nation-states namely, Pakistan and India. It is also linked to the strong sense of *kashmiriyat*, the Kashmir identity deeply implicated in the history and culture of Kashmir. This cultural ethos got politicized during the 80s due to the interference of the Indian nation-state in the affairs of the state. The government in Delhi was deeply suspicious of Kashmir people's loyalty which created mutual antagonism (Ajil Bhattacharya 1994; Madhumita Srivastava 2001).

Agha Shahid Ali spent his childhood in Srinagar but moved Delhi and then settled in the United States. He became more acutely aware of his ethnic roots once he became an exile. His poetry is not concerned as much with the routinised violence of Kashmir as its politico-cultural identity which he invokes through myths, metaphors and memories. While Arasanayagam documents the trauma of ethnic violence, Agha Shahid Ali embodies the trauma of Kashmir in the embittered elegiac poetic discourse he went on to perfect with chiseled precision.

Both Arasanayagam and Agha Shahid Ali know that there are larger ethical questions behind ethnic conflicts. Their poetry is an attempt to negotiate the homelessness inherent in their contexts. While Arasanayagam distances the tragedy with ironic examination of the very processes of exclusion in the construction of alidentities, Agha Shahid is more concerned with memories as a source of cultural identity. I.K. Gommen's formulation of 'ethnic' may be applied to both of them. He observes:

In order to get rid of the prevailing confusion, we need to conceptualize ethnicity as an interactional, as against, an attributional notion. We must view ethnicity as a product of conquest, colonization and immigration and the consequent disengagement between culture and territory. It is the transformation of the "outs" into "ins" that leads to the process of ethnies becoming nations. (Stephen May et al: 131).

In the case of Sri Lankan Tamils and Kashmiris the question of internal colonization is relevant. Both Arasanayagam and Agha Shahid have experienced the disjunction between 'culture and territory' Oommen speaks of. As an exile, Agha Shahid's alienation from land is more acute and this is reflected in his recollections full of anguish.

In his Half-inch Himalayas (1987) Agha Shahid shows how the Kashmir of his childhood is now untraceable. As a homeless exile, he is condemned to his memories which unspool from the hallucinatory images of violence in the valley: "This is home. And this is the closest/ I will ever come to home. When I return,/ the colours will not be so brilliant/the Jhelum's waters so clean,/ so ultramarine. My love/ so overexposed" (Agha Shahid Ali 1987: 1). The Kashmir of his childhood has shrunk to the size of a postage-stamp. The over-exposed memory turns his memory into 'a giant negative, black and white, still underdeveloped' (Ibid). He turns to the mythical images of the snowman to capture that elusive identity which is a haunting absence. In the poem "Snowmen" he says how his ancestors came from Samarkhand with a bag of whale bones. He still travels with generations of snow men on his back: "They tap every year on my window./ Their voices hushed to ice" (Ibid. p.8) In this surreal vision Agha Shahid recognizes his own otherness and homelessness. To recover his voice he has to speak from within the marginal space of an exile. It is by going back to the cadences of Urdu that he retraces the collective memories of his community. "In memory of Begum Akhtar" uses memory as a source and resource to map a layered view of Kashmir:

Ghazal, the death-sustaining widow,
sobs in dingy archives, hooked to you.
she wears her grief, a moon-soaked white,
corners the sky into disbelief.

You've finally polished catastrophe,
The note you seasoned with decades
Of Ghalib, Mir, Faiz:

I innovate on a noteless raga. (Agha Shahid Ali 1987: 28)

It is significant that his memory is mediated by the aesthetic form of ghazal and its classical heritage. In "Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz", he again invokes the ghazal as the form that speaks the language of exile:

Your lines were measured
So carefully to become in our veins

The blood of prisoners. In the free verse
Of another language I imprisoned

Each line --- but I touched my own exile. (Ibid. p.32)

In poem after poem, the figure of the stranger appears in various forms: the previous occupant of the apartment, the riverside jogger, the 'someone' who lives in the house. The interiors of the poems become haunted as the poet feels unable to relate to a living community.

The crisis in Kashmir was precipitated by the insensitivity of the nation-state which abdicated its responsibility of ensuring the people's right to dignity and identity. When the nation-state delegitimizes the demand for identity, the collective identity takes on an aggressive political role. T.K. Oommen in his article mentioned earlier on new nationalisms and collective rights, observes:

But in the case of the new multicultural polities of Africa and Asia, there is a shift of emphasis from sequentiality to simultaneity. That is, the nations, ethnicities and minorities in the federal polities of these continents are increasingly insisting on equality and identity simultaneously (Stephen May et al 2004: 131).

For 'ethnies,' region and nation are contiguous. The 'disengagement between culture and territory' (Ibid: 13) Oommen talks about render both Jean Arasanayagam and Agha Shahid Ali as 'public poets' speaking as members of ethnic communities who voice concerns of a larger collectivity. It will not make sense to read their poetry in a strictly personal, individual context. The displacement they have suffered cannot be accounted for in individual terms. Agha Shahid reclaims a fragment of the inward-looking Kashmiri society through his scattered memories which range from those of Begum Aktar to saffron farmers.

The poems in Agha Shahid's *The Country Without a Post-Office* employ the metaphors of mourning to come to terms

with the trauma of displacement and loss in the wake of Kashmir violence. The post-colonial state in India has become highly unitary and in the process, the marginal cultures have become increasingly invisible. Ali documents Kashmir, its geography, myths and rituals from the fragments of his memories. This 'region' he constructs is a site of resistance to the monolithic, unitary nation-state. The nation-state as a centre of power operates through codes that strictly define the boundaries of allegiance politically. Words like 'domicile', 'citizen', 'immigrant' or 'foreigner' are creations of these codes. Our liberal nationalistic discourse failed to recognize the ethnic, linguistic and regional identities as legitimate categories in themselves as it has become highly exclusivist and essentialist.

Ali constitutes his ethnic identity as a site of loss, hurt, injury and denial. It feeds on memories of embittered exiles and apocalyptic epiphanies. The discourse of mourning becomes the dominant way of dealing with life and its experiences. We have seen how poems about the snowman and the gypsy invoke the other. Here we may also recall that one of his early poems, "Eurydice" from *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991) which retells the myth of Orpheus from the perspective of Eurydice. It is set in a concentration camp in Nazi Germany where a crippled Eurydice limps past 'howl-choked dogs' to disappear 'in a sudden tunnel of mustard (twilight)'. There is a suggestion of homelessness in these portraits. In his epigraph to the poem "A footnote to History" he writes: "Gypsies ... coming originally from India to Europe a thousand years ago ..." (Agha Shahid Ali 2000: 43). In his references to Begum Akhtar and the classical tradition she stood for, we have another clue to the separate cultural identity of Kashmir. In the concluding lines of the poem, "I Dream I Am the Only Passenger on Flight 493 to Srinagar," we can see a deep sense of hurt that is at the core of the Kashmir crisis:

He holds my hand speechless to tell me if

Those smashed golds flying past those petrified
reds are autumn's last crimsoned spillage

rushing with wings down the mountainside
or flames clinging to a torched village. (Ibid: 20)

Rooms Are Never Finished (2004) uses Hussain's sacrifice at Karbala and its commemoration in Muharram as a central metaphor. Memorializing is the poetic mode which Agha Shahid perfects in his final collections. Memory and mourning become inseparable here. In working martyrdom

and memory into the musical structure of English ghazal he explores the possibility of community as an exile who cannot return to his homeland. Karbala becomes Kashmir and Palestine. Mother becomes both Zainah and Kashmir. The pain becomes physical and its overwhelming burden can be captured only in gestures. He uses translation as a verbal gesture of containing and communicating pain. One of the poems here is a translation from Ghalib who says: "Grief crushed me so / again and again it became the pain that pain erases." (Ibid:46). Translation is a mode that his poetry internalizes right from the beginning. We have seen his references to Begum Akhtar, Ghalib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz in his earlier poems. It is important to know that his use of ghazal form also involves translation. Rajeev Patke has argued that there is a homology between translation and migration in his poetry. He says:

The unavailability of communion (with God) or connection (with parent, community, friend, home or country) is like the impossibility of full translation. Reversed, it becomes a denial of univocity, and thus a sanction for plurality of speech as dialects, of poetry as translation, of exile as migration, and guilt as restitution. (Patke 2006: 234).

The need to translate and the impossibility to achieve it go together. While translating Faiz Ahmed Faiz he touches 'his own exile' as the free verse of English turns his hand 'to stone' (Ali 1987: 32). His efforts to transplant ghazal into English has to be seen in this context. The free verse of English was not free enough to embody the larger pain of his private context. Ali says that 'suffering is seldom, perhaps, never, private.' (Ali 1987: 32). It is this aspect of suffering which is public and private at the same time that he is able to articulate through his English ghazals.

Agha Shahid moved closer to the metropolitan poetic discourse in the later part of his career. But this is also the time he experiments with the ghazal form in English. Here I would like to emphasize the fact this use of ghazal form creates a dialogic space in his quest for identity as a displaced exile. Traditionally ghazal has spoken about love and desire. In their essay on the English ghazal, Chandrani Chatterjee and Milind Malshe show how the traditional male gaze inherent in the traditional ghazalis redefined in the ghazals of the American poetess, Phyllis Webb. (Ramakrishnan L.V. and Subha Dasgupta 2006: 197). In English ghazals of Agha Shahid Ali, he subverts the form from within by investing the tone with a collective voice. His use of ghazal in the context of the metropolitan tradition of American poetry is both an act of resistance and affirmation. It involves a border-

crossing that questions the assumptions behind such boundaries. He was opting out of the normative strategies adopted by hegemonic discourses and majoritarian languages. The ghazal as he reinvents it in English comes closer to the idea of 'minor' literature as defined by Deleuze and Guattari in their book *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1986). Minor literature contests the norms that constitute the normative codes of the literary. It renders the world and the word provisional.

What mattered in ghazal for Agha Shahid Ali was its paradoxical nature as reflected in its restraint and freedom, rigor and release and reticence and eloquence. It could be both personal and political at the same time. It could talk of the divine and the earthly love simultaneously. As he says in a small note on the ghazal form, the second line of each couplet 'delivers on the suspense by amplifying, dramatizing, imploding, exploding.' (Agha Shahid Ali 2004: 19). Ghazal gets deterritorialized as it moves out of its context. In its English version, it embodies the voice of an exile who cannot identify with any of the given identities constructed by hegemonic structures of power. Writing of Kafka's use of Prague German, Deleuze and Guattari comments:

He will tear out of Prague German all the qualities of underdevelopment that it has tried to hide ... He will turn syntax into a cry that will embrace the rigid syntax of this dried up German. He will push it toward a deterritorialization that will no longer be saved by culture or myth, that will be an absolute deterritorialization, even if it is slow, sticky coagulated. To bring language slowly and progressively to the desert. To use syntax in order to cry, to give a syntax to the cry. (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 26).

This corresponds to what Agha Shahid Ali does in his English ghazals. He is able to find the syntax of a cry. His ghazals are 'in-formed' by his lamentations for the loss of his mother, his home, community and Kashmir. Ghazal allows him to find a midway home, an in-between space between the shadowlines created by nation-states and his own present location. It renders the borders porous making it easy for the exile to be in and out, to be at home in his homelessness. He creates a 'minor' language within the majoritarian language of English by eschewing its affiliations and normalative cosmologies. This also enables him to release the bodies that are mapped into objects by the nation-state. We may remember here that English is the associate national language of India. It is the nation-state's privilege to interpellate an

individual as citizen, refugee or outsider. The 'minor' language neutralizes this power by transforming itself through the deterritorialized collective voice which is detached from a unified subject or body. Thus, the English ghazal becomes the speech of a person who has lost his speech. In "Arabic" Agha Shahid Ali says: "The only language of loss left in the world is Arabic." (Ibid.24). In another couplet in the same poem he addresses Amichai and says: "I too Amichai saw the dresses of beautiful women./ And everything else, just like you, in Death, Hebrew and Arabic." (Ibid. 25). The poem ends with the lines: "They ask me to tell them what Shahid means---/ Listen: it means "The Beloved" in Persian, "witness" in Arabic." (Ibid 25). This is the paradox of which the ghazal becomes emblematic of: of belonging and not belonging, of defying prescribed affiliations and loyalties. He says this with clarity in the ghazal, "Land": "If home is found on both sides of the globe,/ home is of course here --- and of course a missed land." (Ibid. 50). It is the geography of this missed land that his ghazals map with great verbal precision.

To conclude, both Jean Arasanayagam and Agha Shahid Ali refuse to endorse the terms and conditions set out by the nation-state to secure a sense of belonging. Arasanayagam has lived in Sri Lanka, but as a witness to the tragic divisions that has extracted a heavy human cost, she documents the violence inherent in all discourses of identity. Both remain exiles, acutely aware of the traumatic consequences of essentializing one's sense of identity. They take their ethnicity as a matter of fact and refuse to celebrate it. As they stand witness to the tragic divisions in their societies in their separate ways, their poetry questions and affirms, even as it contests and consoles.

Notes

- Agha Shahid Ali, 1991, *A Nostalgist's Map of America*. New York:Norton.
 -----1993, *The Half Inch Himalayas*. Delhi:Oxford University Press.
 -----2001, *The Country Without a Post Office*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal.
 ----- 2002, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, New Delhi:Ravi Dayal.
 ----- 2004, *The Final Selections : Call Me Ishmael Tonight; Rooms are Never Finished*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
 Arasanayagam, Jean, First published in 1984; Reprinted 2003, *Apocalypse 1983*. Colombo:International Centre for Ethnic Studies.

- 1985, *A Colonial Inheritance and Other Poems*, Kandy, Sri Lanka. Privately Published.
- 1987, *Trial by Terror*, Rintu Books, Hamilton, O
- 1991, *Reddressed Water Flows Clear*, Forest Books, London and Boston.
- 1993, *Shooting the Floricans*, Samjna, Kandy, Sri Lanka.
- 2003, *Pavillade*, New Delhi: Indialog Publications.
- Bhattacharjya, Ajit, 1994, *Kashmir: The Wounded Valley*, New Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors.
- Bose, Sumantra, 1994, *States, Nations, Sovereignty: Sri Lanka, India and the Tamil Eelam Movement*, Sage.
- Colobryok, Claire, 2007, *Giles Deleuze*, (Routledge Critical Thinkers Indian Reprint), Oxon.
- Ilu, Y.L. Elaine and Harshana Rambukwella, 2006, "A Question of Belonging: Reading Jean Arusanayagam through Nationalist Discourse" *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Volume 1 (no.2), 2006: 61-81.
- Jurgensmeyer, Mark 1993, *Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Patke, Rajeev S. (2006). *Postcolonial Poetry in English*, Oxford: OUP.
- Ramakrishnan H. V. and Susha Chakravarty Dasgupta. Guest Editors. *Translation Today* (Special Issue on Indian Translation Traditions). Vol.3, Nos.1 and 2, 2006.
- Rothschild, Joseph, 1981, *Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Framework*, Columbia University Press.
- Smith, Anthony, D. 1986. *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Srivastava, Madhumita (2001). *International Dimensions of Ethnic conflict: A Case Study of Kashmir and Northern Island*. New Delhi: Bhavana Books and Prints.
- Wijesinha, Rajiva, ed. 1998, *An Anthology of Sri Lankan Poetry in English*, Published by English Association of Sri Lanka, Colombo.

Professor E.V. Ramakrishnan is in the Department of English, Veeva Nandan Math, Gujarat University, Surat.

Available again at the SSA

Philip Gunawardena

Making of a Revolutionary

by

Charles Wesley Ervin

Price Rs. 300/-

Suriya Bookshop