



Minority as a Victim of Dissent

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Abstract: In this paper, the Sri Lankan context of Sinhalese - Tamil conflict has been used as a foreground to comment upon the idea of dissent, nature of dissent and its repercussions and collateral damage on any existent minority.

Discrimination and the creation of differentiation on the basis of that has been explored in this paper. Formation of identity and its crisis would also be analyzed. Migration and exile are other themes have also been investigated.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, Identity, Exile, Dissent, Sri Lanka Migration etc.

The dissent in various forms has been the inseparable part of South Asian identity which is still evolving. Sri Lanka too has emerged through dissent in many forms. Sri Lanka has been a site of communal conflicts between the Sinhalese and Tamils. This combat between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils is not a recent and sudden communal rage but its seeds are rooted in past. In the pre-independent Ceylon the dissent was against British by the both Tamils and Sinhalese Union laborers. After Independence the dissent was directed towards the expulsion of Tamils from Sri Lanka. The Sinhalese majority took over but was no better replacement of the British rule for Tamil minority specifically.

To resist the discrimination in 1980s, Tamil dissenters formed LTTE (Liberation Tamil Tiger Eelam) to make a separate nation state Eelam for Tamils. In the scuffle between the Sinhalese and Tamils, over sixty thousand Sri Lankans have died in the conflict in the past twenty years alone. Tamils, in particular, have suffered huge losses; in the past four decades, forty to fifty thousand Tamils have died in the civil war and another five to seven hundred thousand have fled Sri Lanka.

To trace this long sustaining truce between the majority and minority faction of Sri Lanka, one has to go the history of the pre and post independent Sri Lanka. From the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth century, Ceylon was colonized by a succession of European nations: first Portugal, then the Netherlands, and finally England. In 1802 it became the first British Crown colony. British created plantations and brought over Tamil

workers from South India to grow coffee, tea, and coconuts. The introduction of these workers substantially changed the ethnic make-up of the island.

In Sri Lanka major 74 percent is Sinhalese, who speak Sinhala and practice Buddhism and next are 18 percent Tamil who practice Hinduism or Christianity. The communal representation initiated by the British fostered the belief that Sinhalese and Tamils were racially distinct peoples with competing interests. The nation's history has been interpreted to support this claim. Over the next fifty years, this ethnic divide has only widened, erupting into a civil war. According to Sankaran Krishna in his book *Postcolonial Insecurities* the politics of identity is an important component of nation building especially in South Asian postcolonial nations. He states that the "politics of identity is in a dialectic with a politics of difference, one mutually constitute other."

Dissent in Sri Lanka has taken many forms and shaped the history of the country like freedom struggle from British, making Sinhala the national language and Buddhism the national religion, expulsions of Tamils from Sri Lanka by violent means and LTTE as a tool to fight back. How the dissent was molded from the freedom struggle to the demand of Eelam would be traced in the paper keeping plight and impact of dissent on minority as a focal point. For this purpose three Sri Lankan texts have been taken, Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994), Roma Tearne's *Bone China* (2008) and A. Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies* (1997).

A dissent plays a significant role in nation building but it can also be proven fatal and a failure. Dissent can be collective effort of different religions against the authority or can also work on religious fundamentalism. Whatever shape and form it takes consecutively it is not always positive for everyone specifically for the minorities. Dissent takes a different turn when it is directed towards the weaker minority by the collective majority forces.

These texts have encompassed and captured the dissent in Sri Lanka in best possible ways. Hence the texture of writing and the genre these texts fall into become significant as they are not simple novels but they deal with very sensitive political and personal issues. The act of writing is experimental and retrospective. They present the cultural and political commentary in the form of docufiction, epistolary, journals and diary entries. These kinds of writing where the facts are documented, offers credibility to the fiction. The reference of real historical incidents, date and time validates the incidents in the texts. The diary entries provide authenticity and give the live picture of communal riots of the dissenting past of Sri Lanka. In *Funny Boy* the last chapter as 'Riot Journal: An Epilogue' does not only give the vivid picture of violence and riots by Arjie' but also form an epilogue of the novel in the form of emigration from Sri Lanka. The sense of loss and alienation can be seen in *Bone China* by the exchange of letters between De Silva family across the borders of England and Sri Lanka. In *When Memory Dies*, the letters of Rajan for Vijay from England provides a sense of connection between the father and son. The letters a private form of expression provide emotional depth and try to relate to the readers. This shows how a political text is directly in conversation or trying to appeal at personal level with the readers. The journals and letters allow the personal commentary of the author or character to voice his views in the narrative for instance the diary entries of Mrytle in *Bone China*. Apart from the texture of writing these texts seem to follow the genre of Builingrosman, coming of age, coming out novel and exile narrative, riot journal. Along with coming of age novel, *Funny Boy* is an example of a gay fiction or coming out novel. It provides a combination of both a personal and political novel. It also showcased another king of protest of gay minority against the heterosexual majority. This situation also draws parallel between gay minority and Tamil minority. These are not only about the growth and identity of the characters but

also of Sri Lanka as a nation from Ceylon. These document the history of Sri Lanka in the form of docufiction and diary entries. The characterization of identity is fractured and amalgamation of complexity as in *Bone China* the identity of Vijay. They do not follow the conventional pattern and seem to be crossing the boundaries of a specific genre as these are narratives of violence, complex disintegrated identity, alienation and marginalization. .

The first adverse effect of dissent as an independent struggle eventually freed the Ceylon from British but the newly created government of Sinhalese majority started discriminating the Tamil minority. British instigated the age long ethnic difference between the two and used it as a prop for religious fundamentalism. Para told Lali in *When Memory dies* that how the Tamil became educated “So they sent us teachers and missionaries to colonize our minds with the schools and their churches and prepare us for service in the British Raj.” Tamil were converted from Hindu to Christianity on the pretext of education by the British missionaries .This enabled the 18 percent Tamil minority to obtain education in convents and eventually have upper hand on the majority.

Their ethnic difference was more aggravated by the Sinhalese political parties by making false history and by provoking the insecurities of the majority by posing the minority as a threat to sustain. Therefore in order to grab more and more votes of the majority the political parties rejected and boycott Tamils. Lali told Rajan about the prediction of uncle Para about the future that that one Sinhalese means one vote “Communal war, between the Sinhalese and the Tamil that is what he said. He said it was already in there, written into the constitution.”

In *When Memory Dies*, Sivanandan has hailed the brotherhood between the Sinhalese and Tamil and tried to show that once there was unity between the two, in form of Sinhalese S.W and Prema as the foster parents of Tamil Sahadevan and Sinhalese Tissa as a brother. Sinhalese Lal and

his sister Lali are the symbols unity between Tamil and Sinhalese. But along with this he has also shown that how Sinhalese started hating the minority. Finally the death of Vijay a half Tamil at the end punctured all thoughts of Sinhalese-Tamil unity. This echoed the impossibility of any identity negotiation of the minority.

The second effect on Tamil as a minority came in the form of the second class citizen by the Sinhalese government to perpetuate communalism to grab majority votes. In *When Memory Dies* Lal wrote to Rajan in a letter that “Socialism is dead; the only decent thing in our lives is dead. We’ll no longer be fighting injustice but each other ... Language and religion: Banda has found the perfect formula for a ready-made majority.” Due to this Tamils were discriminated at administrative level. Tamils lost their jobs and were given pre-retirement. Sahadevan was given pre-retirement as he was a Tamil. The hatred and the rift between the Tamil and Sinhalese were growing rapidly as Viswappa a friend of Saha told him that how the discrimination was becoming popular and open “but now it has come into open, that’s the difference, they are no longer ashamed of being communalist. To insult the Tamils is a patriotic duty.”

Jegan in *Funny Boy* was left with no choice but to leave his job because of racial abuse.

At the educational level universities and schools reserved seats for the Sinhalese and exams for Sinhalese were easier than the Tamil students. That was not the only suffering of Tamil but their history was removed from the history books in the schools. Government propagated their agenda of expelling Tamils and by imprinting hatred on the psyche of young minds through education. They created new history which would only suffice their purpose. In schools the political pamphlets like ‘Buddhists Beware’ and ‘The Unseen Enemy of the Sinhalese’ used to be distributed by the teachers.

Vijay in *When Memory Dies* showed the flaws and prejudices in education system while arguing with Manel his wife that how the history has been manipulated by the educational department of Sinhalese government. He stated “but look at the muck you teach them.’ Vijay went up to Manel’s work table with its array of ‘recommended books’ and picked up a primer. ‘Look at these pictures of the ‘People of Lanka’ – all Sinhalese. Why? No one else lives in this country?’ ” and he substantiated his arguments further by reading from the history book which has removed everything related to the Tamil history, “‘The history of Lanka, ”he began aloud in slow amazement, ‘ “is the history of Sinhala race. The Land nourishes the race, the race civilizes the Land. Buddhism is the golden thread of the Race and Land.” He criticized the educational system which taught lies to the children to propagate communalism by teaching them to hate Tamils. Vijay showed how from the mainstream the minority is marginalized by deleting their history.

In *Funny Boy* too Tamil Arjie faced discrimination at School by his Sinhalese classmates as he was a minority. The battle between Black tie and Lokubandara also reflect the discrimination where Lokubandra wanted to make Queen Victoria Academy a traditional Sinhala School only for Sinhalese students. He also came to know of racism when he witnessed how Lokubandara had given license to Sinhalese students to beat and exploit the Tamils students. Shehan told Arjie “Since all Buddhists are Sinhalese that means the school would be a Sinhala school, and there would be place for Tamils in it.”

The other exploitation faced by the Tamil minority was by police and army who were the agents of the autocratic Sinhalese government to discriminate and torture Tamil further on the pretext of law.

In *Funny Boy* the probable murder of Daryl the Burgher Australian journalist by police in Jaffna was the proof of injustice by the law and snatching the freedom of the Press.

The journalists who used to write about the torture and killing of Tamils were often killed by the Sinhalese army. Daryl had gone to collect evidences against the Sinhala police who used to torture and kill innocent Tamil minority in Jaffna. According to Daryl the young Tamils were forced to wage a war against the Sinhalese police and army. Arjie recalled what Daryl earlier had told his mother about the suffering of Tamils that “they also disagreed about something called the Prevention of Terrorism Act. This, I gathered, was new law that allowed the police and the army to arrest anybody they thought might be a terrorist without something called a warrant. Amma thought it was a good thing, but Daryl Uncle called it “a tool for state terrorism.” ” Jegan in too was arrested under suspicion by the police who had once worked with Tigers. Vijay in *When Memory Dies* a half Tamil was also arrested and tortured by the Sinhalese police as he used to speak of Sinhalese-Tamil unity. His concern of minority was not entertained by the police rather to discourage him they tortured him badly in the prison.

The other discrimination and oppression of the minority by Sinhalese politician came into the form of popular demand of making the Sinhala as a national language and Buddhism as the national religion was fulfilled. The language and religion of Tamil were not recognized and given the equal status by Sinhalese government. With the boycott of Tamil language and Hinduism or Christianity, Tamils were partially thrown out of Sri Lanka. This kind of marginalization by the majority marred the Human rights of minority and pushed the Tamils away from the Sri Lanka. Due to Sinhalese language Tamils abandoned not only their language but also English the only medium of connection between the two. Even speaking Tamil was not safe as it instigated the wrath of the majority as language was the marker of one’s ethnic identity. Tamil minority was bound and compelled to forget their culture and ethnicity as comprise to live in Sri Lanka. In *Funny Boy*, the mother of Arjie told his father that “I know. I have stopped

talking to our Kolpetty market butcher in Tamil,” Amma said. Poor man is quite relieved. One doesn’t feel safe speaking Tamil these days.”

The father of Arjie put him into the Sinhala class though his grandmother chided his father of being a Tamil betrayer but he knew that Sinhala was “the real language of future.”

In *When Memory Dies* Vijay wanted Manel to introduce the bilingual text books in the school as she was in charge of selection of books but she denied as it was against the government policy to teach Tamil too in a Sinhalese school.

The discrimination was not the only trouble the Tamil minority faced in Sri Lanka. The hatred towards Tamils took severe turn in the form of riots. In the riots of 1958, 1971 and 1983 thousands of Tamils were killed and their women were raped by Sinhalese mobs. In *Funny Boy*, Ammachi and Appachi of Arjie were burnt alive in the car in 1983 riots and along with the electoral lists the mobs came to know which Tamils houses were and “Tamil shops had been set on fire and the mobs were looting everything. The police and the army just stood by, watching, and some of them even cheered the mobs and joined in the looting and burning.”

In the riots innocent Sinhalese were also killed by infuriated mobs in *Bone China* Vijay the lover of Grace was killed, Sinhalese Kamla, Sunil and Ranjith were killed.

In *When Memory Dies*, Sultan and Vijay half Tamil were killed. Along with killings Lali a Sinhalese was raped and killed brutally. Later Tamil Meena and her aunt Sellemma were raped by the Sinhalese.

The civil unrest and brutal butchering of Tamils imposed exile on them. Most of them fled to India, England, Australia and Canada. The Tamil minority was not left with any choice by the majority and most of them were forced out of the Sinhalese nation. Arjie echoed the feeling of a forlorn Tamil and sighed with relief when his father agreed to emigrate, “I

am glad he said that, because I long to be out of this country. I don't feel at home in Sri Lanka any longer, will never feel safe again." Except all De Silva left Sri Lanka because of civil unrest and discrimination. Rajan too did not come back to Sri Lanka from Britain. The exploitation and discrimination by the majority enforced them to flee from their birth place.

After the suppression and exploitation of minority by majority a question arises whether the identity of the minority can be negotiated or not? And what the options and ways minority have to survive in these kinds of situation.

One immediate option is exile or emigration to leave the majority dominated country and try to make other the host country ones homeland. But the reconstruction of their identity as third class citizen in host country will ever give them the sense of identification and acceptance? The acculturation and dislocation of emigrants how far allow them to accept the foreign culture and forget their own. Here the question arises even will they be ever assimilated in mainstream of first class citizen and would not be seen as an outsider and marginalized. In *Bone China* Savitha raised these questions. "In that moment, all her ideals, all her hopes for their life on foreign soil, seemed as nothing. We are nobody, she thought with silent pain. It was so simple. We are displaced people. *They* had no history left, for carelessly they had lost it along the way. Escaping with their passionate ideals, they had arrived here. Hoping. Hoping for what? Acknowledgement perhaps? Understanding, may be? But she saw it was for *them* to understand. We belong nowhere, thought Savitha in despair."

The sense of loss and alienation always used to haunt the De Sivas. They were nostalgic and their identity was fractured. It raises a significant question that what will happen to the history, culture and ethnicity of the minority. Their anchoring power was uprooted and they had nothing to identify with. They were suspended in the mid of two poles. The sense of

belongingness was lost forever. Back in Sri Lanka Sinhalese uprooted them from their homes without thinking for once that their heritage and history would be lost ever and one day they will be no one. They were alien to both Sri Lanka and England. The sense of identity was lost and they were on the verge where their identity can hardly be negotiated. Neither they would be able accept the new culture and forget the old one. In her letter Savitha wrote to Frieda “I have discovered that being a part of an empire means you lose your individual and collective identity.”

The other way out to escape the wrath of majority is accept to subjugation and domination of the Sinhalese. Tamil minority has to adjust and compromise with their culture, ethnicity, language and religion.

The father of Arjie told his wife when she wanted to take him Jegan’s side, “As a Tamils we must tread carefully, my father replied. Jegan has to learn that. Even I have circumspect when I’m talking to the staff. If I was Sinhalese, like Sena, I could say and do whatever I liked.”

The discrimination of Tamil and favoritism to Sinhalese has to be accepted at the administrative level by minority. The new educational pattern has to be welcomed and calmly accepted by Tamil.

In funny boy, father of Arjie told Jegan that “But we are minority, and that’s a fact of life, my father said placatingly. “As a Tamil you have to learn how to play the game.” ”

The jungle law of Sinhalese Government was accepted by the minority In Funny Boy Arjie stated Tamils helplessness “My parents went to the polling booth near us, but they never got the chance to vote. A member of parliament arrived with his thugs, held the voting official at gun- point, and then proceeded to stuff the ballot boxes with false ballots. ”

Q.C uncle a lawyer told Amma of Arjie to leave the hope of finding justice when she wanted to fight the case of Daryl’s

murder “these days one must be like the three wise monkeys. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.” The cartoon by Awantha too echoes the same point of Q.C.

The other option is conversion into Buddhism and mixed marriages.

Can mixed marriage would eradicated the differences between minority and majority. Can the offspring of mixed marriage be the new hope of unity between Tamils and Sinhalese or whether the mixed marriages would further aggravate the wrath of the majority on the charge of miscegenation?

The Sinhalese- Tamil conflict did not let the any relationship develop between the two. The mixed marriages were not only prohibited but the prevailing situation of riots rendered bitterness to the idea itself. The love affair between the two was seen with disgust to discourage the intermixing of Sinhalese and Tamils. Rajan thought after marrying Sinhalese Lali after the ethnic riots that “I was an outsider, an alien, and being married to a Sinhalese made me more alien still.” In *Funny Boy* Radha aunty was not allowed to develop friendship with Sinhalese Anil. After the Jaffna accident Radha to left the idea of marrying Anil. The emerging love relationship between Shehan and Arjie was also shattered to pieces because of racism.

The last option is another form of dissent and a violent way to resist the Sinhalese exploitation and fight for their rights like LTTE. Would the partition of the country into Sinhalese Sri Lanka and Tamil Eelam solve the problem? In *Funny Boy* Amma put her changed sympathetic opinion towards the Tamil tigers after so much exploitation that “May be these tigers and their separate state are not such a stupid idea, after all.”

How far the demands of the imagined separate nation state Eelam and violence included is justified? Sarath echoed the plight of Tamil young men like Ravi and Yogi in front of

Dhana and Vijay that “they go college to find their language taken away from them, they sit in exams to find the pass mark’s higher for them, they go for the jobs and finally get the message: sorry no Tamils. That is when they pick up the gun.” Neither taking arms in hands and use of violence nor discrimination by both Sinhalese and Tamil would solve the problem. Ethnic peace and unity in healthy coexistence are the only solution to avoid bloodshed otherwise the hatred insecurity of both majority and minority would never let the negotiation take place between the two.

Cartoon I



This cartoon is by Awantha Artigala a cartoonist of Daily Mirror. This appeared in 2009.

This pictorial satire echoes the statement of three monkeys of Gandhi by Q.C uncle in *Funny Boy* which goes like ‘See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil’. Ironically this was said to propagate peace and equality but here it has reversed the statement in which the insecure position of Tamil minority in Sri Lanka has enforced them to turn blind eye to the discrimination, killings and riots around them. This caricature of a man here also portrays the subjugation and acceptance of Sinhalese majority domination over Tamil minority whose all senses are blocked and they seem like the puppet in the hands of the majority.

Cartoon II

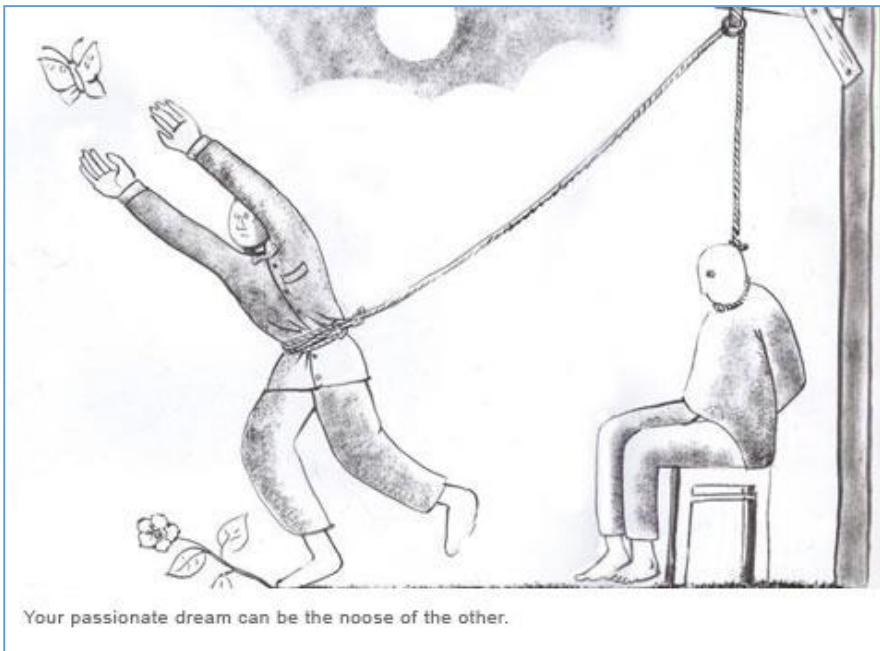
All these three cartoons are by Prageeth Eknelygoda a journalist, columnist and cartoonist who was gone missing in 2010. His cartoons were displayed at show by his wife at colombo’s Lionel wendt gallery in May 2010.



If the will of majority identifies as democracy

This pictorial satire echoes how the democracy has been stripped naked by the autocratic political parties to favor their own interest. Democracy has been portrayed in the form of a naked woman who is gazed at by the majority of man. Within the majority a man is half Tamil whose lower body, is of a Tiger symbolizes Tamils is also laughing at the helplessness of the single woman perhaps representing the Tamil minority which is also helpless like this naked woman. It is also hinting at the rape of both Tamil women while riots.

Cartoon III



This pictorial satire points at the aspirations of both Sinhalese and Tamil. Sinhalese wanted to get all Tamil to make a pure Sinhala state and Tamil want to form a new Tamil nation state. But ironically cartoonist is explicitly hinting at the connection between the two. Only the togetherness can keep the one sitting on the chair alive. Perhaps he is an innocent Tamil or Sinhalese common man on the chair helpless in front

of violent dream of the Sinhala government and LTTE. If one would pursue the dream it will bring death to the other. The violent scuffle between LTTE and Sinhalese army would only inbreed hatred and bloodshed of both Sinhalese and Tamils.

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