

Book Review

Divided by Marriage, United by War

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**Arudpragasam, Anuk. 2017 [2016]. *The Story of a Brief Marriage*.
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The Sri Lankan government's strict media blackout during the final stage of the three decades long civil war left the world largely unaware of those civilians caught in the crossfire between the army and the insurgents of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the northeast of the island. Anuk Arudpragasam's debut novel *The Story of a Brief Marriage* (2016), published seven years after the war's brutal ending, sheds light on this very chapter of Sri Lanka's recent history of violence, which resulted in the deaths of more than 100,000 people, with at least 40,000 civilians that may have been killed in its final months alone. Set against the cacophony of constant shelling, the narrative takes place in and around a refugee camp in Sri Lanka's isolated northeast where life and death are only held together by a string of luck. It covers a single day and night in the lives of twenty-year-old Dinesh and his wife Ganga whom he marries in a makeshift ceremony in front of her father's battered tent. Theirs is a story of survival, however brief this story – and their marriage – may be. Yet, neither time nor place are explicitly mentioned in the novel. Only the blurb informs us that the narrative is set in the final days of the war, with the army drawing ever closer. Throughout this short but intense read, none of the few characters comments on the political situation, nor do they complain about the situation they find themselves in – displaced, wounded, starved. Instead, it is the novel's meditation on the *present* moment that may be its most powerful critique of how Sri Lankan Tamil civilians had been literally left to their own devices – abandoned by both the state who has been accused of shelling hospitals or stopping aid, and by the Tamil Tigers who, among others, have been accused of using civilians as human shields in the final stage

of the fighting. Through the eyes and voice of protagonist Dinesh, we get to witness the very interiority of war that is narrated in almost minute-to-minute sequences, simply for survival's sake. As if intensified by yet another round of air raids, Dinesh indulges in dwelling on some of the most human of sensations: defecating, eating, swallowing morsels of food, showering or cutting his nails – all of which make him feel alive in an otherwise apocalyptic setting. And while some critics may have faulted Arudpragasam for his brooding descriptions of said sensations, they make you surrender to the simplest of pleasures of those whose lives (and deaths) have never been accounted for.

Although Dinesh's introspections remain at the heart of the novel, it is the opening scene that vaults the reader right into wartime Sri Lanka. There is no way to escape the graphic account of how a doctor – one of the very few who has stayed behind – amputates the right arm of a boy with a kitchen knife to substitute for the lack of surgical instruments, let alone anaesthetics or painkillers; not because of the brutality of it all, but rather because of the quiet narrative voice that contemplates whether it would have been better if the boy had lost his left arm (and not the right) to support his “already amputated thigh” (2) on the same side with a set of crutches. Given the book's backdrop of bombing raids and trapped Tamil refugees, it is not surprising to encounter such a scene. In fact, one might even expect it from a novel that explores the most violent episode of Sri Lanka's 26 years long war. What is surely at odds with the narrative setting – at least when judged solely by its title – is Ganga and Dinesh's marriage, hastily ‘arranged’ by her father who feels obliged to settle his daughter's future as the only remaining member of the family. Even Dinesh wonders how to live a married life when days are decidedly numbered: “But if they couldn't talk about their pasts, what could they say to each other at all, given that there was no future for them to speak of either?” (63). And yet, the way Dinesh observes his wife-for-two-days, Ganga, reveals that the mere idea of companionship might be somewhat comforting. After all, life as a refugee largely is a solitary affair where human(e) interactions are far and few between.

Arudpragasam's debut is perhaps the most intimate, if not intense, portrayal of Sri Lanka's civil war amidst a growing body of post-war Anglophone fiction from resident and diasporic writers. However different in form or content these novels may be, what they all have in common is their shared concern for the *inner* workings of war played out in the imagined/imaginary sphere of the private and the personal. Some of these books revisit the violent past through references or flashbacks to family life before and during the war, like Naomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2012), which alternates between the retrospections of its two female protagonists. Others narrate the history of the conflict through a chronology of events such as Shankari Chandran's family saga *Song of the Sun God* (2017) or Ru Freeman's *On Sal Mal Lane* (2013). Among these, *The Story of a Brief Marriage* is one of the few works of fiction that is set entirely in the past. Thus, what makes

Arudpragasam's novel stand out here is its protagonist's refusal to reminisce a lost past but to persevere the present moment. The prospect of a 'peaceful' future is only toyed with allegorically through Ganga and Dinesh's marriage. But given away as early as in the novel's title, the story of their marriage is brief, and so are Dinesh's daydreams of a shared future. As fighting intensifies in one of the final days of war, Ganga is killed by the end of the narrative. Driven by an innate human desire to not die alone, the power of the novel resides in the affective register of how Dinesh perceives the world (or warzone) around him. If you allow Arudpragasam's style of writing to sink in, *The Story of a Brief Marriage* will haunt you with its raw but tender prose that so eloquently examines the fault lines of human existence.

Works Cited

- Chandran, Shankari (2017) *Song of the Sun God*. Colombo: Perera-Hussein.
Freeman, Ru (2013 [2012]) *On Sal Mal Lane*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press.
Munaweera, Nayomi (2012) *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*. Gurgaon: Hachett India.