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A CRITICAL EXPLICATION OF THE POEM, *NALLUR 1982* BY JEAN ARASANAYAGAM

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ABSTRACT

Jean Arasanayagam is one of the most acclaimed writers of the post-colonial Sri Lanka. She has published several collections of poetry for which she has been endowed with wide international acclaim. Arasanayagam's poetry is essentially viewed as a political critique where she deliberates on the disastrous issues of racial discrimination and political violence which were rampant in the contemporary Sri Lanka in the context of the burning antagonism between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority. This paper intends to critically analyse the poem, *Nallur 1982* which appears in her collection, *Apocalypse '83*. The poem remains a sober poetic success that effectively portrays the mass destruction, property devastation and religious deterioration which are the immediate inevitable circumstances in a society crippled by ethnic violence. Therefore, it is expected that this paper will be resourceful for those who read the poem, *Nallur 1982* not just for academic intentions but for intellectual enjoyment as well.

**Keywords:** Jean Arasanayagam, poetry, ethnic violence, *Nallur 1982*, themes

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Born in 1931 to a Dutch Burgher family in Sri Lanka, Jean Arasanayagam has been playing an iconic role in the podium of Sri Lankan English Literature. The unique contribution rendered by her to fill the lacuna of Sri Lankan poetry in English has widely been recognized both locally and internationally. Though she was a Burgher by birth, as a result of her marriage with a Tamil she was destined to experience enormous torture during the period of Black July 1983 which was a grave consequence of the unforgiving racial violence prevalent in the then Sri Lanka. Just as the idiom, "every dark cloud has a silver lining" emphasizes, her poetry made its way on a new direction with the telling social experience she gained through this horrendous political turmoil. Anders Sjöbohm in his article, "'Someone Smashed in the Door and Gave Me My Freedom': The Writings of Jean Arasanayagam" consolidates this fact as he writes, "perhaps Jean Arasanayagam would have remained a strictly disciplined word painter and observer if external events had not interfered and disturbed the balance in her life and thus also her aesthetics." In the same article, he further goes onto argue that Arasanayagam's poetry shows a concentration on the "essence of carnage hatred" and also on the "impenetrability of pure evil to understanding".

To Arasanayagam, poetry seems to be an absolute religion and she turns this enthralling genre of literature into a means of raising a sound awareness in people regarding the heinous suffering that the

innocent has to undergo owing to ethnic violence. Written in a state of preoccupation with the ethnic riots in the contemporary Sri Lanka, *Apocalypse '83* is perhaps the most pulsating collection of poetry by Arasanayagam. In his essay, "Taken from Breaking Bounds: Essays on Sri Lankan Writing in English", Rajiva Wijesinha declares that in addition to the serious political upheaval in the riots of July 1983, Arasanayagam also catches the chaos that essentially followed the run-up to that uproar in the series under review, because the Black July 1983 was just an outburst of years of wrath and cold war between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. The poetess' self-cognizance of the impending transformation of the national scenario into a battlefield inspired her to contribute to an almost bold prediction of that approaching adversity in such poems as *Nallur 1982*. *Ruined Gopuram* is one of her sober poetic successes which brings to light very felicitously the havoc caused by the "bloody skirmishes" bringing death to mankind. It is with a dreadful picture of mayhem and carnage that *Ruined Gopuram* examines the devastation of Hinduism at the clutches of racial prejudice. As is clear from the poems mentioned above, when examining the writings of Arasanayagam one cannot help noticing that she shows an essential propensity to depict the suffering of mankind through a religious point of view.

Her celebrated collection of poetry *Apocalypse '83*, first published in 1984, opens with the much lionised poem, *Nallur 1982* with its prophetic vision of the terrible events to occur as a repercussion of the ethnic struggle between the Sinhalese and Tamils. *Nallur* is a highly famous temple located in the Jaffna peninsula and it is widely regarded as the heart of Hinduism in Sri Lanka. Through this poem, Arasanayagam invites our attention towards the *Nallur* festival which is consecrated to the god of war, Skanda who is the son of Shiva, one of the greatest divinities in Hinduism. The opening line of the poem, "it's there" shows that the poetess directly points at the current atmosphere surrounding *Nallur*, and thus she takes us to a dark world, ravaged and dying.

Beneath the fallen fronds dry crackling  
Pile of broken twigs, abandoned wells of brackish  
Water lonely dunes (2 – 4)

The utterly sterile atmosphere that currently haunts the temple premises is brought to focus through the images of "abandoned wells", "lonely dunes" and "fallen fronds". The desertion of the wells and the loneliness of the dunes emphasize the absence of human life in the area. *Nallur*, being the foremost Hindu temple in the island, has no deficiency of pilgrims throughout the year. So, the distinction is crystal clear. The darkness that broods over the area is further divulged through the following lines.

The shadows of long bodies shrunk in death  
The leeching sun has drunk their blood and  
Bloated swells among the piling clouds (6 – 8)

The poetess' powers of imagination seem to have blended together with her remarkable intellectualism and keen observation in the above lines where she effectively portrays the bloodshed and massacre that haunt the area. It is possible to "smell it in the air" that the dead bodies have got shrunk and the blood that stained from those bodies has evaporated in the blinding rays of the scorching sun, which is distinctively caught by her poetic eye as she illustrates "the leeching sun who has drunk their blood".

The direct reference to death that she makes in the line, "It is there, death, smell it in the air" substantiates the tremendous magnitude of the loss of human lives caused by the political mayhem. Also, the idea is further supported by the description of the foul smell of the death that mingles with the air. "The clangour of the temple bells", "the clapping hands" and "the brassy clash of cymbals" indicate the enormous religious services performed by the innocent civilians in the hope of obtaining the god's assistance to protect themselves from the ruthless torture. "The zing of bullets" and "the cries of death" encompass the monstrous and excruciating nature of the chaos. In addition, "the clangour of the temple bells" and "the zing of bullets" represent a conflict or clash between spirituality and barbarity. "The roar of voices calling Skanda by his thousand names" and the phrase, "we pray, we cry, we clamour" intensify the magnitude of their attempts in seeking for the god's protection in times of adversity. Unfortunately, their attempts never came to fruition. The truth is unveiled in the harsh statement made in the following lines.

We pray, we cry, we clamour.  
 Oh Sri Kumaran, be not like the god  
 Who does not hear deaf Sandesveran.  
 Thirtham now no longer nectar of the gods  
 Brims over but is bitter, bitter, (27 – 31)

The absence of a reaction from the god to their ceaseless prayers seems to have instilled in the poetess a feeling of anger and hatred. Paradoxically, the god seekers no longer perform the rituals in a state of religious ecstasy as usual, but yell in heinous suffering. The repetition of the term, "bitter" emphasizes the resentment of the narrator who now seems to be harbouring a grudge against the religion, seeing no way out of the existing commotion. Here, it becomes clear that in the writings of Arasanayagam, religious symbolism gathers prominence as a central theme.

And at the entrance to Nallur  
 The silent guns are trained  
 Upon a faceless terror. (32 – 34)

The lines given above reveal the gun training that the soldiers undergo "at the entrance to Nallur" and the "terror" that haunts the whole environment. The temple is the most important icon of a religion. It is the place where religious ceremonies are conducted and the lay followers worship and perform various services to the god. So, *Nallur* with guns at its entrance gives rise to a sense of contradiction thus manifesting the deterioration that the religion has faced with at the clutches of the chaos concerned.

Then, the poetess describes how the "landscape changes, outside". "The temples by the shore are smoking" and their ruins are burnt. "The debris of warfare" can be observed everywhere on empty roads in the form of "stained discarded dressings" and "burnt out abandoned vehicles". "A trail of blood that soon mopped up the thirsty sun" further consolidates the enormity of the human lives lost on the blood staining battlefield of *Nallur* and in its vicinity. July 1983 saw the blowout of violence on a massive scale between the Sinhalese and Tamils, which ended in so much bloodletting and devastation of property. The above lines in an exquisitely efficacious manner bring to notice the extreme destruction that racial violence brings to the human society taking a very heavy toll of lives and property.

Turned away from bloody skirmishes  
 Of humankind, the gods are blinded  
 By the rain of bullets,  
 Six faced Arumugan  
 All twelve eyes  
 Closed in darkness. (45 – 50)

The writer signifies that the "bloody skirmishes of humankind" and "the rain of bullets" have blinded the god and so his eyes are closed in the darkness. Arasanayagam here comes to one of the most pivotal points of her poem. It is important to note that religion is not a set of precepts only to be preached about, but to be followed too. While resorting to various acts which are completely opposed to the doctrine of their religion, people go on praying to the god to save them from the suffering inflicted on them by war. No religion condones cruelty to living beings and instead teaches how the "bloody skirmishes" lead to death and destruction. So, now they are suffering the overwhelming torment as a consequence of their neglect of the virtuous and truthful words uttered by the gods. The barrenness of the land disclosed in the line, "the land is empty now" unravels the fact that war serves no purpose except culminating in death and destruction.

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. (54 – 57)

The penultimate lines of the poem further enlarge the theme of decadence caused by war. It highlights the miserable fate of the human beings at the grip of brutality. Countless numbers of bullets appear to have been fired, and here the writer uses the technique of hyperbole very skilfully through the portrayal of the cremation

of bodies by the fire of bullets. At this stage of the poem, cross lights are thrown on the death toll which spirals sky high owing to the repulsive process of war and violence.

Thus, it is apparent that the grotesqueness of the appalling political turmoil is skillfully painted out in the poem under discussion. The employment of such epithets as “abandoned”, “shrunk”, “blackened”, “brackish”, “bloody”, “discarded”, “empty”, “charred”, “bitter”, “lonely”, “fallen”, and “blinded” is highly effective in illustrating the degeneration and annihilation that war brings on the society. Throughout the poem, the death and blood are shown to be a very common sight that can be observed in the particular area and hence it is clear that the tone of the poem is surrounded with negative vibes. The powerful wording and the occasional use of Tamil terminology in such instances as “Skanda”, “Murugan”, “Kartikkeya”, “Arumugan”, “Sri Kumaran”, “Sandesveran”, and “Thirtham” sound really effective thereby lending a local flavour to the scene under scrutiny. In addition, the use of visual imagery in phrases such as “leeching”, “bloated swells”, “frothy toddy pots” and “six faced Arumugan all twelve eyes closed in darkness” fits very well into the particular context and possesses the necessary power to take the reader on an imaginary tour to *Nallur*. Through the portrayal of the abandonment of the area, the hollowness of the land and the loss of human lives, the poetess reflects the emergence of a sterile environment where the process of life has stopped. So, the entire poem resonates with a death dealing mood thus prophesying the horrors and terrors of a looming ethnic violence of which the portents are quite explicit.

*Nallur 1982* is noted for Arasanayagam’s powers of imagination and bold prophetic vision. Even though the poem seems to deal with the violence that permeated the country during the Black July 1983, it has been written before the actual havoc. Thus, it can be interpreted as a prophecy or a premonition that was created in her intellectual mind with regard to the impending mayhem as an inhabitant of the Jaffna peninsula. In fact, the very idea can further be supplemented through the line, “the silent guns are trained upon a faceless terror”. The guns are “silent” and the terror is “faceless”. Hence, it can be surmised that during the period when the poetess composed this poem the actual turmoil had not broken out, though its striking signs had warned her about the looming calamity. Thus, with her strong powers of imagination, Arasanayagam seems to have foreseen the miserable future of “Nallur”, and has put it in a really credible poetic framework which has become a tremendous success. The prophecy made in the poem seems to have been fulfilled, given the constant scenes of massacre and destruction that later followed the very place and its environs. It is mainly due to these factors that the poem is much celebrated and is often quoted to explain the “prophetic power of good poetry” as stated by Rajiva Wijesinha in his Notes to the anthology, *A Selection of English Poetry*.

As a whole, the poem remains a horrifying and terrifying picture of the repugnance brought about by ethnic segregation and the resultant bloodshed. This is indeed what Arasanayagam has endeavoured to achieve. From this sorrowful painting of death and destruction, emerges the innocent appeal of a thousand victims who had to encounter the extreme obliteration caused by war. What seems significant here is the fact that this is the voice of not a distant observer of the scene, but of one who has had first-hand experience of the situation concerned. The reason is that she herself was subject to the ethnic antagonism that exploded on the island in the early 1980’s being married to a Tamil at a time when the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority were becoming more and more aggressive. It is also important to note that she was among the ninety thousand Tamils in Sri Lanka who had to flee from the country during the particular period. So, the poem remains a credible illustration of Arasanayagam’s genuine sorrow and hate towards ethnic commotions.

Thus, the harsh and repulsive vocabulary used can rightly be hailed as a sense of sincere protest that springs out from the bottom of her heart. It is hence clear that through this poem remonstrating about the ethnic clashes of the early 1980’s in Sri Lanka, she contributes to a forceful renunciation against the universal menace of war which has been holding mankind in thrall for centuries. The octopus of war and violence has spread its tentacles to nearly every organ of society thus exposing it to get “shattered and sundered”. If this brutal process is not going to be erased from our soil, it will end in humans resorting to cannibalism, and the ultimate result will be the extinction of the human race from the face of the earth. As a final conclusion, there

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may be no wrong in asserting that *Nallur 1982* remains another feather in the cap of Jean Arasanayagam's prolific literary career.

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