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Sri Lanka: The Sadness of Geography: Book Review

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By Prof. Charles Sarvan.

Sri Lanka : The Sadness of Geography: My Life as a Tamil Exile, By Logathan Tharmadurai. *Dundurn Publishers, Toronto, 2019.*

By Prof. Charles Sarvan

Those who haven't experienced wounds can make light of the scars of others: freely adapted from 'Romeo and Juliet', Act 2, Scene 2.

Exile, whether temporary or permanent; voluntary or enforced, is as old as human history: one thinks of '*The Mahabharata*' and of the brothers sent into exile or, looking to the West, of Ovid and his five books of *Tristia* (Sorrows). Palestinian Edward Said, best known for his work, '*Orientalism*', has written on this theme with both perception and feeling: as W B Yeats wrote in a poem, God guard us from those thoughts we think in the mind alone. '*Sadness of Geography*' (more memoir than autobiography) begins with what may be seen as the end of a journey: the memoirist arriving in Montreal and declaring that he's a Tamil in need of refuge – refuge sadly from what once had been his home. Then in a 'flashback' (to use a term from **cinematology**) we are at the beginning of what led to his odyssey. The explication of certain Tamil customs and artefacts indicates the memoir was written also with a non-Tamil readership in mind. Words spoken in Tamil are transliterated and then translated into English. Page reference in what follows, unless otherwise made clear, is to the above edition, hereafter abbreviated as '*Sadness*'.

It's 1983, Northern Sri Lanka and the Sinhalese army is raiding Tamil homes. The terror of helpless civilians fallen upon by a marauding, a racist and ruthless, army is vividly re-created. The attack and the resulting cries of fear and distress spread from house to house, like "toppling dominoes" (p. 15).

The present writer, though now an octogenarian, going back in memory to what was then 'Ceylon' recalls similar experiences, though to a much lesser degree: such experiences are carved into the core of one's psyche. Tharmathurai is honest in his narration, including even "shameful" but honest detail such as the teenager involuntarily wetting himself through fear. There rise the terrified cries of women and girls (p. 16): fear has become almost tactile, palpable. To quote the words from 'Nightsong City', a poem by Dennis Brutus (South African; 1924-2009), violence "like a bug-infested rag" is tossed and fear, at once both unformulated and awful, spreads everywhere. The thumping sounds of the helicopter swooping low are like fists punching the body. In an effective use of compression, Tharmathurai writes of "the dread-filled silence" (p. 19) that follows, to be broken by lamentation: Oh my mother! Why did god allow my child to be taken? When will I see my child again? But the days of the epics when the gods dramatically intervened to save the innocent and punish the wicked, are long gone. Now the sky turns away indifferently, if not with distant distaste. The wailing changes to sobs, long and drawn out like a mournful wind. There's no justice – not in *this* world. These pages (11 – 23) represent writing of a high, creative order unmatched by the pages following.

Punning on the word "civil", Tharmathurai wryly notes there was nothing civil in that 'civil war' marked by rape and murder, pillage and destruction, bullying and humiliation. The teenager though terrified still notes and responds to nature: it's a beautiful morning, with the blue sky arcing above the green rice fields (p. 16). The sky was "serene" (p. 21). Perhaps, it's this contrast between the beauty and harmony of nature, and the violence and ugliness of human action that leads to the memoir's title. But more on the book's title later.

A current phenomenon is that of mass migration. President Donald Trump at the head of his "base" tries to close the gates of the USA, while boatloads land daily in Europe. (Angela Merkel allowed one million refugees into Germany.) Not coincidentally, liberal-democracy which had held sway from the end of the Second World War is now seemingly on the wane while the star of right-wing populism is in the ascendant in several, different parts of the world. The influx of thousands of refugees triggers deep-seated insecurity, fear and resentment. The refugees, driven by despair and desperation, do not see themselves as constituting a "problem". African American Maya Angelou in '*All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*' writes of the ache for home, a safe place where we can go as we are, but British-Somali Warsan Shire in a poem titled 'Home' writes that no one puts children in a boat unless the land has become even more dangerous than the ocean. With refugees, it's a case of others seeing only the wood and not the individual trees. We usually are shown refugees in a mass or group, but what '*Sadness*' does is to particularise by individuation. And it's not only Tamils but refugees all over the world who are faceless and voiceless, looked at askance, with rejection if not with hostility. The memoir helps to keep in mind that any heap of humanity consists of separate, unique individuals, each with her or his story to tell; with her or his hopes, wishes and longings for the future. Statistics can blur, even hide, the humanity which on which their cold numbers and factual figures; their percentages and graphs are based.

A Spanish expression well-known in English is, "Hope dies last". The present memoirist, losing hope both in Sinhalese justice and in the Tamil armed struggle, decides to seek refuge abroad. "This country belongs to the Sinhalese" (p. 59) says a leading Buddhist monk. (And even some Sinhalese settled abroad who ask for inclusion and equality of their hosts, reject them for Tamils back on the Island.) In an act of vandalism comparable with the Nazis burning books, the Jaffna Library housing thousands of irreplaceable books and manuscripts on *ola* leaf, is burnt down. Whether one interprets it as irony or as defiance, only the statue of Saraswathi, goddess of learning and knowledge, is left standing (p. 77). It was an act of cultural genocide. And if culture, the way of life of a people, is destroyed, then their distinctive identity is made parlous. "Hatred is a hard enemy to defeat" (p. 81) and the memoirist asks himself a question which other Tamils too have pondered: What did we do to excite *such* intense and vicious hatred? (The Jews of Continental Europe under Nazi rule also asked similar, perplexed and soul-searching questions.) I have attempted a partial answer in the essay 'Reign of Anomy', included in my '*Public Writings on Sri Lanka*' , Volume 2.

Perhaps, the subtitle, 'My Life as a Tamil Exile' is not quite accurate because this memoir is more an account of the causes that impelled departure, and the journey to or into exile, rather than of existence in exile. It's a hazardous and uncertain journey; a desperate leap into the unknown where fate (or chance, to those who reject divine ordering) plays a significant part. The start is not propitious as teenage Tharmathurai comes from Jaffna to Colombo only to realize he's been financially cheated by his Tamil contact. But he's helped by another Tamil, a young woman whose name he doesn't know. He hopes she'll happen to read the book and see that he remains grateful. He's also grateful to his "German hosts" at the detention camp who "gave us food and shelter and treated us with respect" (p. 153). From Germany, he's smuggled to Paris; lives with his elder brother for a while but then, attempting to fly out to Canada on a false passport, is arrested and imprisoned. Eventually reaching Canada; working hard and saving money, he's able to bring his mother and siblings to join him.

The "happy ending" of this particular odyssey should not mislead us. I borrow words from an essay of mine on exile: The German word *elend* which translates as "misery" has the same root as "alien", thus associating exile, foreignness and deep unhappiness. It suggests that to be an alien is to be in misery, as in the poem by Ovid (born BCE 43) titled *Sorrows of an Exile*. Icebergs vary but, as a generalisation, it is said that only about 1/8th of an iceberg is above the water-line, shining clear and beautiful. In the same way, there is a tendency to associate exile with the visible few above the surface, particularly with writers and artists; to a lesser degree, with intellectuals and academics, and with those who are "doing well". (Unfortunately, given worldly values the statement that someone is "doing well" usually means that she or he enjoys a good financial income. As Oscar Wilde commented, we tend to know price but not value. Indeed, we equate price and value.) The duty and the difficulty is to see those who are unseen, to hear the unheard and to be aware of those who, having lost their home haven't found another, and now are lost. Using language both literally and figuratively, one can say that many a refugee has walked and walked and walked, but never arrived.

To conclude, the epigraph of '*Sadness*', "Do you understand the sadness of geography", is from Sri Lankan-born Michael Ondaatje's novel, '*The English Patient*'. It also functions as the title of this book. Yes, undoubtedly Planet Earth is beautiful. Time (though we use expressions

like “those were cruel times”) is neutral - and so too is landscape. The phrase, ‘*The Sadness of Geography*’ is an instance of the use of what in literary studies is known as the ‘pathetic fallacy’, that is, the attribution of human emotions to things in nature; even to nature itself. (The word “pathetic” is not derogatory but stands for “emotion”.) For example, striking a romantic pose Scottish Robert Burns (1759-1796) in a poem, ‘The Banks O’Doon’ (using what’s termed apostrophe in literary criticism) addresses nature and asks: How can you be so beautiful and lively when I am full of sorrow? But as Tharmathurai shows, it’s neither landscape nor time but we who create happiness or horror. As in Existential philosophy, the responsibility is with us, human beings. Sri Lanka has its share of beauty (not that of human endeavour and achievement but of nature) but is aptly seen as a “tear drop” in the ocean.

It’s hoped that other Tamils too will write, however long or fragmentary, their recollections of what they experienced and endured. It’s a duty owed to succeeding generations; to posterity and to History. I thank Suseenthiran Nadarajah (Neduntheevu; Berlin) for securing a copy of this book for me, and Yogan Joseph (Jaffna; Toronto) for his support.

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Among his Sri Lanka-related books are: Public Writings on Sri Lanka, Volumes 1, 2 and 3

Sri Lanka: Literary Essays & Sketches, Sri Lanka: Paradise Lost?

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