

**War-torn Homeland and Diaspora: Examining the Multi-layered
Marginalization and Resistance of the Eelam Tamils in Select Short Stories
from the Anthology *The MGR Murder Trial* by Shobasakthi**

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Abstract:

The Sri Lankan civil wars have trounced the Eelam Tamils and turned them into a diasporic community. They are either Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) or immigrants with strong ties to their war-torn homeland who continue to seek refuge in countries around the globe. Shobasakthi, like many young revolutionaries, participated in the armed Movements against the Sri Lankan Government to defy the atrocities acquitted on the Tamils in Sri Lanka. In his short stories “Turncoat”, “Laila” and “Animal Farm” from the anthology *The MGR Murder Trial*; Shobasakthi explores the fissures that form when an identity undergoes multiple transformations. This research article critically examines the multi-layered marginalization of Eelam Tamils and illustrates how the Tamils resist through guerrilla warfare. It further explicates how Shobasakthi breaks the paradigm of a singular unified Tamil identity that was being marginalized by the Sinhala majority and traces the internecine wars between guerrilla groups.

Keywords: Marginalization, Resistance, Conflict, Violence, Eelam Tamils, Homeland, Diasporic community.

Sri Lanka is a country marked by diversity of religious, ethnic and linguistic identities. Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Tamils and Muslim Moors constitute the majority of the population of Sri Lanka along with minor groups of Sindhis, Malayalis, Malayas and Parsis. So, we see that there are two groups of Tamils located in Sri Lanka, they are the Sri Lankan Tamils or Eelam Tamils or Ceylon Tamils, who are mostly Shaivite Hindus and the Indian Tamils who are native speakers of Tamil language and are primarily of Islamic or Christian faith. The Tamils of the old Jaffna Kingdom and Vannimais chieftaincies of the East coast constitute the heritage

of the Sri Lankan Tamils. The Indian Tamils (or Hill Country Tamils), on the other hand, are progenies of bonded labourers who were transported to Sri Lanka from Tamil Nadu in the Nineteenth century to work on tea plantations. Both the groups initially saw themselves as separate communities, but a great sense of unity emerged since 1980s. The political turmoil between the Sinhalese and Tamils began in early Twentieth Century. After decades of increasing ethnic tension, the war began as a low-level insurgency after the pogroms in July of 1983. Ethnic riots broke out and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam declared the “First Eelam War” (1983-87). Their aim was to create a separate Tamil state in northern Sri Lanka called Eelam. The Civil War can be divided in three tiers, the first tier being the militant operation against Sinhalese army, the second against foreign forces for example, Indian peace keeping force (IPKF) sent during the governance of Rajiv Gandhi which did more damage than restoration of peace and lastly of the Indo-Lanka accord of 1987. This communal Sri Lankan civil wars have vanquished the Eelam Tamils and reduced them to a diasporic community not only in abroad, but also within their own country. They are either Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) or immigrants with strong ties to their war-torn homeland who continue to seek refuge in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Denmark, and the UK. (Szczepanski, *Thought.Co*)

Anthonythassan Jesuthasan is a former LTTE child soldier who writes under the pseudonym of Shobasakthi. He was born in Allaipiddy, a village in the Jaffna peninsula of Sri Lanka, in the year 1967. He is a Sri Lankan Tamil refugee now residing in France, in an exile, to escape imprisonment. Shobasakthi, like many young revolutionaries, participated in the armed Movements against the Sri Lankan Government to fight against the atrocities acquitted on the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Shobasakthi’s works are written in a dialect of Tamil spoken by island Tamils in Sri Lanka which again shows the assertion of his identity. Shobasakthi’s works not only talks about the Tamil Eelam liberation struggle, he also challenges the homogenous Tamil identity by portraying the in-fightings and fissures within the various Tamil groups which led to the failure of Eelam. In an interview with Bhakti Shringarpure from *Warscape*, Shobasakthi rightly said with regards to ethnic violence in Sri Lanka that: “In this social system, when one is a victim, isn’t he at the same time a victimizer? Let’s take the Tamil Eelam liberation struggle for instance. The Tamil Tigers, who fought against the Sinhala ethnic violence, at the same time, thrust Tamil ethnicity onto minority Muslims. When the Muslim communities resisted, they killed them. Our caste system too works on the same way...” (Shobasakthi, *Warscape*)

The MGR Murder Trial is a collection of short stories which, like the translator quotes, attempts to give voice to a silenced, marginalized people. The stories are set against the context of the Sri Lankan civil war. The stories showcase how the Eelam Tamils were systematically marginalized by the Sinhala majority state. This marginalization led to resistance movements like guerrilla warfare. However, what began as resistance in fact led to further marginalization within the separatist groups based on the hegemonic ideology of the LTTE. The escalating civil war became the reason for diasporic communities both within and without Sri Lanka. In the stories the Tamil diasporic communities exist at many levels: as a group that desires the Tamil homeland “Eelam” and hence is marginalized by the Sinhala state, diasporic communities of Eelam Tamils who live as refugees in countries like France because they had the opportunity to leave the country. However, in the crossfire between the marginalizing state and the resisting guerrilla groups, the common people – the Eelam Tamils get further marginalized, thus forging a diasporic community called Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who are refugees within their own country. In the short stories Shobasakthi also shows marginalization due to class within the minority group. Interestingly one sees that this also leads to armed resistance, since the ongoing civil war left no other options for minority groups.

In the short story “Turncoat”, Shobasakthi shows how a community of Eelam Tamils belonging to a small island village, become a diasporic community because of the oppressive marginalization of the Sinhala army. At the outset, the village is seen as representing a rural community known to each other through nicknames, with its normal everyday routine. The fact that they are ethnic Tamils is established through cultural references like the films of the Tamil iconic hero M.G. Ramachandran. But they were not Tamil ideologues, demanding a separatist state. Stanley, the protagonist of the short story, did not stay confined to his community. He had lived in Makkona (a Sinhala town) for some time and learned Sinhala. This shows how he was not tainted by the politics of language even during Eelam struggle which is by and large a language-based conflict. But for the Tigers, the village becomes a diasporic community as the villagers were Eelam Tamils. The Tigers were anti-state; therefore, they marginalized themselves from the state. They saw the village as their territory though the villagers did not support them actively. This attitude of the Tigers became the reason why the villagers were caught in the crossfire between the State and the Movement.

Shobasakthi shows certain heterogeneity in the community by suggesting that this was a Tamil village where Hindus and Catholics lived in two different parts of the village. The normal everyday functioning of the village gets distorted when the Sinhala army arrives to raid the village to cleanse it of guerrillas. In spite of their religious differences, the crowding in the church, for shelter, out of fear for the marauding army, suggests the beginnings of a homogenous Tamil diasporic community. When the army obtruded into the Church in search of the leader of the church, Stanley stood up and spoke in pristine Sinhala and tried to negotiate with the army. This however helped him in no way. Stanley's actions are a case in point. One can interpret it as his attempt to assimilate and not differentiate himself from the state body, through the language he spoke. But this attempted assimilation becomes the starting point for marginalization as Stanley is used for victimizing the people instead. Stanley becomes the interpreter of maladies of sorts as he enables communication between the army and the people. The villagers are now systematically persecuted through the army's convoluted methods of subversive marginalization. Usually by marginalization one understands it to mean disallowing the participation of a marginal group in the activities of a mainstream group. But the soldiers forcefully make the village community participate in its activities through physical abuse and persecution. The body of the marginalized is the first to be targeted in this. This we see in the inhuman treatment of "Item" and the twenty captives who were stripped and tied to the ilandai tree and tortured so that they could investigate to find out their involvement in the Movement. After this the soldiers pushed the twenty men through the streets of the village to the beach where the Tigers had planted landmines which resulted to death of half of the captives. This enforced participation of the marginalized in the mainstream's search of the guerrillas, though seemingly reverses politics of marginalization, it in fact reasserts the dismissal of the ethnically marginalized as collateral damage, in the context of war. Their bodies are systematically objectified and written off as means to locate landmines planted by the Tamil guerrillas.

From abuse this marginalization moves to erasure when those alive, including Stanley, were locked in a nearby aluminium factory. The army left the village temporarily, but while leaving they threw a couple of grenades through the window into the aluminium factory and Stanley survived yet again. Here we can see marginalization of the Eelam Tamils by the Sinhala army through persecution, violence, oppression and genocide.

During Stanley's stay in the hospital, the Movement men came to interrogate him. One of them was his distant cousin who repeatedly called him a "traitor", reasserting the title of the story. A turncoat is someone who abandons one group or cause in order to join hands with the rival party. During the Eelam war, any Tamil who did not support the LTTE ideology was constructed as a "traitor". Stanley's loyalty is further debatable because he knows the language of the mainstream – Sinhala. Stanley who had never seen himself as a Tamil separatist, owing to the systematic persecution of the army resists by helping the Movement with information regarding the army. He had an upper hand over all the other captives as he knew Sinhala, and therefore he could also give information of the conversation among the soldiers and the government officials. Thus, Stanley in a way became part of the rebellion and resisted against the atrocities done to him and the villagers. Thus, in the story we see how contexts of ethnic war create centres and margins leading those marginalized to resistance through armed violence.

The short story "Laila" opens with the narrator, Antonyhasan addressing his readers. This short story gives a glimpse into the lives of the Tamil diaspora residing in France. The reason behind the migration of the narrator and the mysterious Tamil lady Ilankainayaki is left ambiguous. But the autobiographical strain in the narrative hints that perhaps the narrator was also a child soldier like the author, and Ilankainayaki's involvement in the Movement suggests that perhaps she was also an erstwhile guerrilla, forced to migrate like the narrator. The narrative also explores the fissures within the different guerrilla groups through this diasporic community.

The narrator was the only Tamil living in the multicultural apartment until Ilankainayaki came to live there. Ilankainayaki's arrival made the narrator very curious about her life. He continuously made efforts to establish a conversation with her. But Ilankainayaki marginalized herself from everyone else. The narrator later comes to know that she was a part of the PLOTE Movement under the nickname of "Yellow Bird".

C.C.Fair comments that Uma Maheswaran, a former member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), formed People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) in 1979. The departure of Maheswaran from the group marked the advent of conflict between the LTTE and the PLOTE. The LTTE began fighting and engrossing rival Tamil militant groups. However, the LTTE and the PLOTE combined forces against the government a number of times. Thought 1985 marked the pinnacle of military strength for the PLOTE, but since 1986 the

group was largely controlled by the LTTE. Consequently, the LTTE turned against the PLOTE and began storming them. As a result, the PLOTE was compelled to accept the 1987 agreement between India and Sri Lanka. Since then, PLOTE has combated against the LTTE in conjunction with Sri Lankan forces. These internecine conflicts because the LTTE wanted to resist any other emerging organization leads to its erasure of all other groups. One sees this level of marginalization and resistance in the diasporic community living in Paris. Eelam Tamils residing abroad have established numerous organizations like Tamil Relief Organization (USA), Ilankai Tamil Sangam (USA), etc. to support Tamil equities in Sri Lanka. Many of these Tamil diasporic organization like The French Federation of Tamil Association, The Swiss Federation of Tamil Association, The Federation of Associations of Canadian Tamils, etc. have been clearly set up to cater to LTTE activities, which shows how the Tamil diasporic communities held on to the Eelam ideology abroad.

According to theorist William Safran, the diasporic communities, homeland is always a mythical place and they should be committed to the restoration of their homeland. Therefore, they build a communal consciousness and solidarity to continue their ideology. We see this sense of community where the diasporic individuals came together by a common vision, memory and myth about their homeland, during the time of civil war. In the story we see how Eelam Tamils in Paris started a protest under the Eiffel Tower and Ilankainyaki took part in it. However, Ilankainyaki was soon found mysteriously dead in her apartment. The narrator recounts how she had a dog called Laila. But when the French police cordoned off the apartment, there was no trace of her dog. This dog which is also the titular protagonist is central to the story. We are told how Ilankainyaki was very attached to this dog. The name Ilankainyaki is also very significant. One can roughly translate it to mean “nayaki of Lanka”. The dog could symbolize her party ideology and her death can be seen as an outcome of the in-fightings among the different guerrilla groups. These ideological fissures create margins and centres within a diasporic community. Till the end of story, one is not told who killed her. Though the narrator suggests that she was probably killed by some other separatist group who saw her as a threat, there are also undercurrents suggesting that it could have been the narrator who is an LTTE ideologue.

In the immediate eras after decolonization, Sinhalese found to their shock that all the white-collar jobs were held by the Tamils. This was partially because of the divide and rule

policy of the British; but Tamil's, during the colonial period, also had the economic feasibility to send their children to convent schools in Sri Lanka and send them abroad for educational and economic advancement. In the post-independence period this became an important domain for the Sinhalese to seize control and thus marginalize the Tamils. A number of government policies like the Sinhala Only Act economically marginalized a number of Tamils. In the 1980s because of these policies a number of Tamils – young boys were left poor and jobless. To such youth, anti-state guerrilla organizations became a way of resisting this marginalization of the state. Sirimal Abeyratne in his essay “Economic Roots of Political Conflict: The Case of Sri Lanka” comments that the twin political conflict (Tamil Separatist War in the North and Sinhala Youth Uprising in the South) is an advent of radical youth from both Sinhala and Tamil Communities against the established traditional political system of the country.

The short story titled “Animal Farm” narrates these complex levels of marginalization. Instead of showing a poor, hungry homogenous diasporic community of Eelam Tamils, Shobasakthi shows us class divides within the community. This class division is also along the lines of religion. Both the central characters of this short story, J. Anthony and M. Anthony, get marginalized because of their religion and social class. Studying in a Hindu school, they are the only two who have nothing to eat during lunch breaks. They are also beaten for not bringing their lunch, by their Hindu teachers. The short story is very ironically titled because the narrator, J. Anthony refers to hunger as “an animal that lives in my stomach” (139). The narrator describes his hunger as a furry white animal, something between a coyote and a fox, which runs up and down the interiors of his body. When the biology teacher explains the digestive system, the narrator is unable to find this creature which seems to have a complex existence like a farm animal inside his body.

J. Anthony comes from an impoverished background and is ashamed of admitting it in his school. He was the only Catholic in his school that privileged the Hindus, until M. Anthony, who came from an equally poor background, joined him. While J. Anthony lied about his financial status and his starvation, M. Anthony was open about it and did not take on any charade. As they moved to the ninth grade, M. Anthony moved to Jaffna and worked there at a Bar, in exchange of food. Then later when they met again, the protagonist got to know from their conversation that M. Anthony had joined the Movement as he referred to his friend as

“comrade”. The story ends with J. Anthony reading the news of his comrade’s death. The story suggests that M. Anthony’s poverty compelled him to join the Movement and get involved in the violence. While J. Anthony tried to assimilate by putting on a façade of being rich, M. Anthony tried to break the class structure and resist the oppression by joining the Movement, but in the end, he was killed. Ironically, he was shot dead while eating which shows the tragic failure of the resistance. With dark satire the author comments, how there was a deep hole in M. Anthony’s chest but no animal came out of it.

The short stories show the multiple facets of marginalization. Violence became the major tool by which the Tamils were oppressed. Shobasakthi looks at the marginalization of Eelam Tamils in Sri Lanka and shows how the Tamils resist through guerrilla warfare. He breaks the paradigm of a singular unified Tamil identity that was being marginalized by the Sinhala majority. Instead, he locates internecine wars between guerrilla groups. The so called “resistance” by the LTTE becomes in fact a marginalization of other groups through strategies of terrorism and violence.

Shobasakthi represents the Tamil youth of Sri Lanka whose innocence was lost in the power politics. His experiences as a former LTTE child soldier, which led to his marginalization, also made him aware of the fissures within the different guerrilla groups and their hunger for power. Though initially he resisted through armed struggle, but his awareness disengaged him from it. He is in an involuntary exile in France to escape imprisonment. His geographical dislocation and diasporic status aid him to be critical of both— the Sri Lankan state and the guerrilla groups. His first novel *Gorilla* is an auto-fiction narrating his refugee status in France, and his novel *Traitor* is a fictional account of ethnic violence and torture in Sri Lankan prison. Both these trajectories of marginalization are brought together in the short stories “Turncoat”, “Laila” and “Animal Farm”, from his anthology *The MGR Murder Trial*.

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