



Bodies at the Edge of Law: Bare Life, Sovereign Abandonment, and Intimacy in Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage*

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Abstract:

This paper examines Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage* through Giorgio Agamben's concepts of bare life, sovereign power, and the state of exception. Set during the final stages of the Sri Lankan Civil War, the novel portrays the lives of Tamil civilians trapped within a so-called "No Fire Zone," a space that ostensibly promises protection while exposing its inhabitants to extreme sovereign violence and death. Through a close reading of the experiences of the protagonists, Dinesh and Ganga, this study argues that the novel represents civilians as figures of "homo sacer". Moreover, drawing upon Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern, the paper explores how war transforms human beings into vulnerable bodies governed by sovereign violence. Particular attention is given to the refugee camp as a space of exception, and to the symbolic significance of marriage as an attempt to reclaim humanity amidst political abandonment.

Keywords: Sri Lankan civil war, bare life, sovereign power and biopolitics, state of exception, subalternity, intimacy and resistance.

Introduction

Set during the final stages of the Sri Lankan civil war, Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage* (2016) is a harrowingly gruesome narrative that portrays one day and night in a Tamil makeshift refugee camp. The novel follows Dinesh, a young Tamil man, whose life is marked by displacement, loss, and the ever-present threat of death. Amidst this devastation, he is compelled into a brief marriage with a woman named Ganga, a union which is motivated not by love but by the desperate hope for continuity and survival. "In truth he didn't want to get her married, he only wanted to keep her safe and close beside him, for now that the rest of the family was gone he could hardly bear to lose her too" (Arudpragasam 7).

The novel follows Dinesh, a young man who has already survived unspeakable loss and now faces the imminent collapse of civilian safety. His environment, which is a makeshift camp, is erroneously declared a "No Fire Zone". This can be interpreted as a paradoxical "protective" zone where normal law is suspended and human life is reduced to the most vulnerable state. What makes the novel so painful is not only that it depicts suffering, trauma, and chaos, but that it depicts a form of suffering organized by structured political abandonment. Dinesh and Ganga live in a landscape shaped by shelling, displacement, scarcity, and fear, but also by a brutal contradiction: civilians are gathered into a supposed zone of safety while being left radically exposed to injury, hunger, and death. The novel's characters, both individual and collective, can thus be read as examples of Agamben's "homo sacer," lives that may be killed without sacrificial ritual, stripped of political protection. In Agamben's terms, what is captured in sovereignty is "bare life, that is, the life of homo sacer (sacred man), who may be killed and yet not sacrificed, and whose essential function in modern politics we intend to assert." (Agamben 12). The force of Arudpragasam's novel lies in how intimately the narrative renders vivid the biopolitical subjugation of Tamil civilians.

Dinesh's inner monologue and the novel's portrayal of bodies underscore how "bare life" is all that remains under heavy artillery and military decrees.

Ganga, as a young Tamil woman, occupies an even more precarious position. Her body is implicitly subjected to patriarchal and military violence. The novel's sparse language and often silent perspectives point to the difficulty of giving voice to such subordinated existence. From a Spivakian perspective, silence can be understood as the consequence of structural exclusion. Further, in line with Agamben's insight that bare life is included in law only via its exclusion, the novel not only exposes the political structures reducing people to bare life, but it also respects the opacity of suffering that escapes full representation.

Context of the Novel

The Sri Lankan civil war (1983–2009) pitted the Sinhalese-majority government against Tamil insurgents (the LTTE) and led to severe state-sponsored violence against civilians. In late 2008, the government designated large coastal enclaves as "No Fire Zones," purportedly safe havens for Tamil refugees. However, paradoxically, these zones were subject to relentless shelling and artillery, turning them effectively into death traps. "Ethnic conflicts between Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka are the outcome of the manner in which national leaders manipulated the political situation to their advantage...Ongoing ethnic conflicts between Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka have killed thousands of people, rendered hundreds of thousands homeless and destroyed billions of pounds' worth of property"(Perera 137). Within this setting, Arudpragasam's protagonists wander among scattered body parts and bomb craters, dwarfed by military power. The camp in the novel, like a concentration camp or massacred enclave, becomes a space included through exclusion or where law is suspended but still operative. As Achille Mbembe summarizes Agamben's view, "the camp is... 'the place in which the most absolute *conditio inhumana* ever to appear

on Earth was realized’” (Mbembe 12). In other words, the refugee camp is portrayed as a locus of pure biopolitical violence, where human lives are stripped of social and political value and exposed to arbitrary killing.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach, proceeding by close reading of the primary text, *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, to focus on moments where the narrative highlights bodies, pain, and power. These findings are interpreted through Giorgio Agamben’s theoretical framework from *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998). Key concepts include bare life, sovereign power, and the state of exception. Passages are examined for how they enact or illustrate these ideas. To further ground the analysis, this paper incorporates Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of the subaltern. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles are also consulted to support the analysis. The study emphasises the intersection of literary form and theoretical discourse, aiming to bridge textual analysis with broader socio-political concerns.

Michel Foucault’s theorisation of biopolitics is a foundational lens for examining state power and its management of life. As Foucault notes, “For a long time, one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death”(135). Agamben subsequently elaborates Foucault’s biopolitics and shows how, from antiquity onward, sovereignty has been defined by the ability to pronounce exception—that is, to suspend the law for certain lives. His landmark claim is that “the protagonist” of his book “is bare life, that is, the life of homo sacer. Homo sacer in Roman law was a person excluded from both divine and human protection, anyone could kill him with impunity. Agamben argues that this figure remains the hidden paradigm of modern power. The sovereign’s first act, Agamben argues, is to “produce” a biopolitical body, while the state inseminates life into

the sphere of politics by including it via exclusion. In effect, modern states invite their citizens to live as bare life, to be protected only in theory, yet actually subject to the ban of sovereign violence. When the “state of exception” becomes permanent, life and law collapse into indistinction. In simpler terms, people are held in a limbo where they exist only to be exposed to death. The camp, concentration camps, war zones, or “No Fire Zones” becomes the ultimate expression of this collapse of law into raw life. By quoting Agamben and related thinkers, the analysis below reads the novel’s scenes as examples of these biopolitical categories in action. The characters are included in political order solely by being excluded from its protection.

Furthermore, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s formulation of the subaltern provides a critical apparatus for addressing epistemic violence and the politics of representation. Her central argument in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is that the subaltern is structurally excluded from dominant systems of knowledge and representation. Even when attempts are made to “give voice” to the subaltern, these efforts often result in appropriation or distortion. In *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, Ganga can be read as a subaltern figure whose existence is shaped by systemic violence and marginalisation. Ganga and Dinesh’s experiences are mediated through a narrative voice that is deeply introspective yet constrained. While the novel provides access to Dinesh’s thoughts, and Ganga’s through Dinesh’s speculations, it simultaneously underscores their inability to articulate their suffering within a broader socio-political framework.

Dinesh as Homo Sacer

Dinesh, the young protagonist of *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, lives the condition of bare life throughout the novel. He spends his days amidst destruction and shelling, evading both the government forces and his own recruiters of the Tamil “movement”. He is a “good boy,

that he'd some education"(Arudpragasam 7), as the old man Mr. Somasundaram, notes, but his goodness does not entitle him to any protection or special treatment. His survival often reduces to bodily instinct. Dinesh often monitors his hunger, exhaustion, and pain. For example, he notes his own trembling and constant weariness, eating only when he must:

The last proper meal he had had been two days earlier,... the rest of the week had rationed biscuit from a few packets he'd bought with some of his last money. He ate two in the morning, four in the late afternoon, and another four at night, breaking each biscuit into two or three smaller pieces (Arudpragasam 64).

Even his mundane tasks like digging a grave, hauling corpses, are performed under the constant risk of being blown apart by a random shell. The narrative repeatedly returns to Dinesh's body and its precariousness. For example, after a child is operated on, Dinesh must dispose of the amputated arm. He notes that "There were plenty of other naked body parts scattered around the camp of course, fingers and toes, elbows and thighs, so many that nobody would say a thing if he just left the arm under bush or beside a tree"(Arudpragasam 5). The camp has become a necropolis of body parts, and every inhabitant is at risk of losing theirs. The environment itself testifies to the biopolitical exposure of life. Dinesh felt, "more than just a sense of being isolated; above all, it was the disintegration of his body that came to his mind at such times, the disintegration of his hair, his teeth, his skin"(Arudpragasam 19). "All his life he had used his hands and feet, his fingers and toes, and knowing that soon he'd no longer be able to rely on them made him feel abandoned suddenly and alone"(Arudpragasam 20).

Dinesh rarely connects his suffering to a larger narrative of justice or politics. He does not articulate a political grievance against the Tamil Tigers or the government, nor can he protest and seek justice; instead, he focuses on immediate survival, simply enduring. This

parallels Agamben's argument that homo sacer occupies a position of political abandonment in which legal recognition and meaningful political agency are severely constrained. This is the stark condition of bare life; Dinesh is human, yet he exists almost entirely as a being to be counted among the dead or dying.

Ganga's inaccessible interiority

While Dinesh's consciousness anchors the narrative, Ganga remains partially obscured, her silence becoming one of the novel's most powerful representations of gendered vulnerability and subaltern existence. The narrative gives minimal access to her thoughts and feelings, as she speaks only a few lines throughout the text. She is doubly marginalized by war and patriarchy and; her relative silence recalls Spivak's argument that the subaltern woman is especially difficult to recover within dominant representation. Nevertheless, Agamben's framework allows us to see that Ganga's silence is not only discursive; it is politically produced through exposure. The very fact that the father cites the word "defiled" suggests that Ganga's worth, in political terms, is measured by her sexuality, as if her body were another battlefield. This chilling calculus embodies the sovereign ban; Ganga is effectively placed at the mercy of whoever captures her, rendering her legal status void. As a woman in the camp, she faces specific threats that Dinesh does not. Ganga's silence and compliance highlight that, in her position, resistance is nearly impossible. Her vulnerability is produced at the intersection of war, military force, patriarchal gaze, and sovereign abandonment.

A reductive reading of her quietness would suggest that she is overly silent, inaccessible, too close to passivity. However, when Dinesh asks whether she is happy that they are married, "Ganga remained silent for a while, then suddenly stood up." She asks Dinesh, "Are you hungry?" and turns almost immediately to the work of cooking and care

(Arudpragasam 63). This is not the speech of sentimental disclosure, but neither is it nothing. Within the logic of bare life, such gestures are profoundly meaningful because they attempt to restore relation where politics has produced exposure. Ganga does not need to become a transparently expressive liberal subject in order to possess interiority. The novel's ethical strength lies in allowing that interiority to remain partially inaccessible. Yet the novel also gestures toward her agency in small ways. For instance, Dinesh remarks, "no matter what she had to see or do she never seemed to feel faint. When there wasn't any urgent work to be done, she would wander around the clinic in search of ways to help the injured, she would clean their wounds and change their bandages... together with the task of taking care of her father"(Arudpragasam 31). Ganga's actions are heavily constrained by the sovereign ban; for instance, her choices are strictly dictated by her marriage, her father's orders, and the camp's rules. Her brief gestures of care, though, quietly resist complete objectification.

Although Ganga remains largely silent throughout the narrative, the novel repeatedly suggests a quiet strength beneath that silence. Rather than presenting her as merely passive, Arudpragasam depicts her as someone who continues to care for others despite living under constant threat. She tends to wounded bodies in the clinic, assists her ageing father, and performs everyday acts of care in a world where ordinary life has nearly disappeared. These actions reveal a form of agency that does not depend on speech or overt resistance. Even after her marriage to Dinesh, Ganga expresses herself not through lengthy conversations but through gestures of concern, responsibility, and companionship. Significantly, her death occurs while she is searching for her father during the shelling, a moment that highlights both her devotion and the tragic realities of war. She is not killed in a heroic battle or political act, but while trying to protect and remain connected to the last member of her family. Her character embodies both the vulnerability of those abandoned by political power and the quiet strength of individuals who continue to care for others even when their own lives are at risk.

Bare Life and the Camp

The refugee camp in *The Story of a Brief Marriage* functions not merely as a setting but as a biopolitical space where human life is reduced to its most fragile and exposed condition. The opening scene describes Dinesh carrying a shrapnel-lacerated child, noting how the boy's arm has been "dissolved...into a soft, formless mass"(Arudpragasam 1). Elsewhere, the painful nursing of wounds by both characters and by nature is detailed with an almost clinical precision: "There were no surgical instruments in the clinic, no anaesthetics, neither general nor local, no painkillers or antibiotics", The doctor "raised up the kitchen knife they'd been using for amputations"(Arudpragasam 2). These passages graphically present the bare life, raw physicality of pain endured by survivors whose silence is heavily laden with grief.

The phrase "No Fire Zone" is precisely the kind of Agamben's "threshold", where law appears to protect life even while suspending the conditions under which life can meaningfully count. The No Fire Zone, in this context, can be read as a lived state of exception, where the result is not chaos but managed exposure. Dinesh, Ganga, and the other refugees of the camp are not expelled from the political order in any clean way. They remain under its force, subject to shelling, displacement, camp organisation, and war's bureaucratic calculations. Importantly, these bodily descriptions highlight the material reality of bare life beyond ideology.

Tens of thousands of people... had abandoned their homes long before and been on the move for many months, some, like Dinesh, for almost a year. Each time they set up camp somewhere they had hoped it would be the last time before the movement pushed back the government, and each time they were forced again by the advancing shelling to pack up and move further east.(Arudpragasam 9)

“Dinesh had once seen a man wandering around after the shelling as if in search of his missing body part; he picked up the different forearms he found on the ground and tried each one on like he was shopping for new clothes”(Arudpragasam 18). Arudpragasam does not organise the narrative around campaigns, ideology, or military spectacle unlike conventional war fiction. Instead, he narrows attention to the body: to flies landing on skin, to sleep deprived by shelling, to hunger, excretion, bathing, touch, and exhaustion. Neera Majumdar is right to note that the novel depicts the Sri Lankan civil war “through the lens of the mortal human body,” and that excreting, touching, eating, and sleeping form its backbone (Majumdar).

At the same time, small acts of human dignity stand out as resistance to mere bare life. For instance, the amputated boy’s older sister quietly wraps her brother’s severed hand and forearm in a piece of sari, “veiling it reverently... as though it was a piece of supple gold jewellery”(Arudpragasam 5). Her care converts a mutilated limb into a precious object to be preserved, momentarily giving it value beyond anonymous flesh. This act of care, which is silent, intimate, and non-heroic, underscores the distance between sovereign indifference and human empathy. It aligns with Agamben’s idea that even bare life, though stripped of rights, maintains an irreducible dignity in the face of death. The young woman's action is not sanctioned by any power; rather, it is a purely human response, rendered visible precisely because the narrative refuses to ignore it.

Marriage as Legal Inclusion

It is tempting to read the novel through patriarchy or custom, and those dimensions are certainly present. Yet marriage becomes one of the novel’s most important political forms; it is also an improvised act of re-humanization. We see this binding in the novel’s pivotal marriage scene. The state of war and societal order demands that Ganga be “included”,

through marriage, in order to exclude her from some threats. The marriage is an ironic legal ritual that is performed hastily in the clinic, whose purpose is to manipulate the sovereign ban. Ganga's father, Mr Somasundaram, essentially explains that by marrying his daughter. He hopes to keep her out of wartime rape, one form of death, even though both life and death remain possible. The sovereign ban here works twice; her unmarried status would place her entirely in a zone of pure exclusion, in contrast, a married status makes her technically included in a social order. The marriage does not save Ganga, nor does it deliver Dinesh into a future. It cannot, because the political world surrounding them remains intact in its violence. Ganga's forced integration into kinship networks is therefore a tactic within sovereign biopolitical control, an inclusion meant to protect her bare life by granting it minimal legal form.

Dinesh found his initial lack of comprehension replaced by a quiet, sweeping astonishment when he learns of the marriage proposition. Ganga and Dinesh, newly married in the camp, lie together at night in an act that affirms life amid displacement:

Dinesh's arms were still around her body and he wanted to draw her more tightly so he could feel her breasts push against him through her frock but their heads were facing each other almost, were far enough part for eye contact to be made, and though they'd both taken care that their gazes didn't meet, he looking only into her neck and she only into his shoulder.(Arudpragasam 145)

It was as though in a brief period of time, Dinesh and Ganga "had actually grown closer to each other, more understanding or aware of each other"(135). Within hours, however, this fragile domesticity is ruptured. Ganga is killed during a shelling. Dinesh sank to his knees when he saw her lying, with blood pooled thickly under her waist, when he turned to her stomach, "glossy along a thin strip where it had apparently been ribbed open, from one end of

which what looked like the edge of a piece of shrapnel gave off a mute glimmer”(Arudpragasam 189). This abrupt shift forces the reader to confront war’s disruption of time and intimacy, and underscores the impossibility of sustaining ordinary life in a war zone where bodily autonomy is constantly negated by state inflicted violence. Thus, the novel ends without traditional closure, leaving the reader confronting the open question of what human connection or justice can exist when life has become bare.

Conclusion

The Story of a Brief Marriage presents a deeply moving account of human life stripped bare by war, lived under the constant shadow of death. Through the experiences of Dinesh and Ganga, Arudpragasam illustrates how war strips off security, dignity, and political protection from individuals, reducing them to what Giorgio Agamben describes as “bare life”, a condition in which existence is exposed to violence without guarantee of protection. The novel's "No Fire Zone" becomes a tragic space where the promise of safety collapses, leaving civilians trapped between survival and destruction. Through Dinesh's acute awareness of his own bodily vulnerability, Ganga's precarious position as a woman in wartime, and the recurring images of wounded and mutilated bodies, the novel reveals the devastating human consequences of biopolitical power.

However, Arudpragasam does not portray his characters merely as victims of war. Amid fear, loss, and uncertainty, moments of care, tenderness, and companionship continue to emerge. The brief marriage between Dinesh and Ganga, though unable to protect them from the violence surrounding them, becomes a powerful affirmation of shared humanity in a world increasingly defined by sovereignty and death. Read through the theoretical perspectives of Agamben, and Spivak, the novel exposes how vulnerability is politically produced while also demonstrating the resilience of human connection. Ultimately, *The Story*

of a Brief Marriage reminds readers that even in circumstances where life has been reduced to its most fragile state, acts of intimacy, compassion, and care remain meaningful ways of asserting human dignity against forces that seek to erase it.

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