

# NARRATING CIVIL CONFLICT IN POST-WAR SRI LANKA: COUNTER MEMORY, WORKING-THROUGH AND IMPLICATIONS FOR NORTH-SOUTH SOLIDARITY

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**Abstract:** This article examines survivor/witness narratives of the Sri Lankan civil conflict (1983–2009) and their potential as counter-memories that contest and challenge authorized history dictated by the state. In situating the significance of these narratives the article draws on the prevailing conditions in post-conflict Sri Lanka, especially the surveillance and intimidation against public memory in the former war regions and the dominance of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism within state power. In orientation, the study is future-oriented and is preoccupied with how survivor narratives can be utilized to strengthen reconciliation and solidarity among different victim groups. It advocates for survivor/witness narratives to be incorporated as classroom material and for frameworks that appreciate comparative readings of conflict to be developed and adopted.

**Keywords:** Sri Lankan conflict; witnessing; survivor narratives; memory studies; reconciliation; war crimes

## Introduction

Eleven years since the Sri Lankan civil conflict (1983–2009) ended in May 2009, the Tamil communities of the former war area continue life under what scholars construe as “banal militarization” (Sathkunanathan 2018: 5): a heavy military presence which has been normalized and institutionalized, and on which the society has been made dependent (Sathkunanathan 2016: 416–7). Despite the state’s post-conflict declaration of an inclusive status for all citizens—demonstrated in the President’s public claim in 2012 that the government has “removed the word minority from [its] vocabulary” (quoted in Wickramasinghe 2009: 1046)—an ongoing political crisis is indicated in the country’s north and east being forced to hold continuous vigils and demonstrations to demand a return of lands and persons disappeared during the “last war” and after (Beigh 2021; Saroor and Bala 2017). The state’s response to the post-conflict demands of the north and east has varied

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depending on the ideological moorings of individual governments. Of the three governments in office between 2009 and 2021, two—the Mahinda Rajapaksa United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government of 2010–2014 and the Gotabhaya Rajapaksa Sri Lanka People’s Front (SLPP) government since 2019—manifested a robust Sinhalese-nationalist outlook and was supported by groups which academics had identified as early as 2008 to promote a “political Buddhism” (De Votta and Stone 2008: 34–6). Under their watch, organized and institutionalized attempts at Sinhalese-Buddhist re-inscription of the north and east, which are historically Tamil homelands, have been identified (Dewasiri 2013: 5–6; Guruparan 2016: 25–28; Hensman 2015: 284)<sup>1</sup> with state control and policing extending over public memory and heritage (Wickramasinghe 2013: 97). Under the pretext of national security, the military has on occasion been deployed to prohibit memorial events, to demolish people’s memorials, and to intimidate community activism (Sathkunanathan 2016: 416; Seoighe, 2016b: 452). Such interventions have to be identified as post-war extensions of the “security state” scholars have associated with Sri Lanka since the 1980s (Uyangoda 2008: 8; Hashim 2013: 199–203). In doing so, the state has enforced a memorial culture which violently superimposed through sites and monuments the myth of a glorious war that echoed militarism (Dewasiri 2013: 7–9; Sathkunanathan 2016: 417) which—as public spectacles—were intimidating to minorities (Seoighe 2016b: 452).

The focus of this article is on narrative practice that counteracts the state’s bid to dominate public memory and narratives of the war in Sri Lanka’s post-conflict aftermath: stories, testimonies, and witnessing that have emerged from the former war zone during the final months of the war and the immediate post-conflict decade (2009–2020). These narratives belong to witnesses and survivors who experienced the trauma of a war in which they were displaced and lost as victims of the crossfire between the state military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that had styled itself as the “sole representative” of the Tamil community. The banal militarization and statecraft explained at the outset sum up the general social and political atmosphere of a decade in which survivor narratives of the war’s closing months gradually began to emerge. The purpose of this article is to examine the survivor/witness narratives in Sri Lanka’s North and East at two levels: primarily, as textual material that attempt to communicate a submerged/suppressed historical experience in which the state is implicated as a dominant and pervading force. But, more centrally, the article aims to frame the untapped potential in survivor narratives as public texts invested with energy for reconciliation and solidarity between victims of the North and East (predominantly Tamil-speaking) and the South (of predominantly Sinhalese membership)<sup>2</sup> who are survivors of three nationwide conflicts between 1971 and 2009 against the political and military strength of the Sri Lankan state. In the concluding movement of the

article I briefly flag the Sri Lankan classroom as a potential space to develop discussion centred on narrative (such as stories of witnesses and survivors) that may transcend narrow ethno-nationalist definitions within which the state continues its education programme. While I do not wish to elaborate on the education strategy and policy required to make such a programme bear fruit, the article nonetheless signals the need for an inclusive solidarity framework where southern and northern narratives meet and encourage comparative readings and reflexive and critical imaginaries for a reconciled future.

### **The Politics of Memory: Witnessing and Remembering Conflict in Post-War Sri Lanka**

Northern narratives born out of the Sri Lankan civil conflict are not widely circulated in Southern Sri Lanka. The notable exclusion in recent years is the autobiography of a former LTTE soldier, Subramaniam Sivakami (alias Thamalini Jeyakumarani), which was translated from the Tamil and was well received by the Sinhalese readership. Titled in Sinhalese as *Thiyunu Asipathaka Sevana Yata*, the book was written while Sivakami was a political prisoner in state custody and, later, a poster child for the state's rehabilitation programme of former rebels. A onetime elite activist of the LTTE's Political Division, Sivakami's book presents very little in terms of the contested last days of the war in a narrowing battlefield where thousands of civilians were trapped; and, since the end of war, has given birth to war crimes allegations against both contending factions. The Sri Lankan state, in particular, has been pressurized by these allegations in the post-conflict decade, under whose burden some of its elite military-men continue to walk; and are banned from entering certain international territories. Sivakami herself was one of the few LTTE leaders to surrender and be "rehabilitated". After a prolonged detention under close state watch, Sivakami was later released to the society in 2016. Her narrative silence over events during the closing stages of the war, therefore, has to be judged with caution. Is hers simply a silence of omission? Or, by presenting a glaring cavity in her story, is Sivakami drawing attention to a historical rupture which, as a prisoner or beneficiary of state-sponsored rehabilitation, she is unable to narrate? With such absences in the narrative of the "last war"<sup>23</sup>, where must one turn in search of a voice and a representation without which an understanding of the war event—particularly, mappings and conveyances that would potentially speak on behalf of a mass tragedy over which the state's authorized narrative presides—is incomplete?

In mapping the conflict experience of the "final war" through memories and witnessing, two types of narratives have emerged as public discourses in post-conflict Sri Lanka: firstly, survivor narratives where primary witnesses self-architect the narrative by working on personal recollections; and secondly,

literature by foreign/outside agents who investigate events during and after the war and act as mediums or as secondary witnesses to the trauma of victims. The latter includes journalists and activists from within Sri Lanka and from the international community. Together, these survivor/witness narratives foster a significant emergent body that maps northern memory against the state's gate-keeping role as a sovereign with the "right to dictate narrative". In facilitating the present discussion, I draw from witness/survivor narratives published and circulated in or translated into English that carry the potential to communicate to an international audience locally, and reach out to a global readership outside Sri Lanka. As records of lived experience, these narratives often contain a textual variant of violence, destruction, political arrogance, and morally and ethically debatable political practice that instruct post-conflict conversations of non-recurrence: a literary variant of what Holocaust writer Primo Levi—in relation to artefacts, spaces and sites that represented Nazi violence—has termed a "warning monument" (Levi 2019: 434).

A warning monument often constitutes of a site of political trauma that has been preserved in its historical condition for post-conflict instruction. It often takes the shape of an object or a space—such as, for example, remains of torture equipment used by a regime or a torture camp such as Auschwitz-Birkenau—that conveys to later generations impressions of a dark past. In Sri Lanka, victim memory of the "final war" has in many ways been silenced or suppressed. At one level, the shock-wave of the violence continues to travel through the political and demographic bodies of Sri Lanka's Tamil-speaking world. Those who died in the concluding weeks of the war—either as civilians or as combatants—have not been fully declared or publicly acknowledged by the state. Nor has the state wholeheartedly accommodated an atmosphere that demands for disclosure beyond the point of lobbying and street activism. Victim casualty figures presented by independent and non-state bodies have often been contested or disputed by the state, while Sinhalese and Tamil-nationalist propaganda have relentlessly attempted to shape the debates surrounding the war to their political advantage. In contrast to state-sponsored victory monuments embedded with valorized militarist values, a "warning monument" has the power to reach over political disagreements, blame-shifting, and the desire for historical validation (for the conduct of war), and to elevate a conversation to a third space focused on the war's humanitarian implications. I contend that in the context of the North and East, the witness/survivor narrative is a storied preservation of scarcity and survival against extreme conditions in a violent transitional passage of the country's modern politics: one in which the "final war" was "mythologized for Sinhalese Buddhist consumption" (Seoighe 2016a: 365).

The witnessing and writing of a political event such as the concluding stages of an intense war is often underpinned by a process of working-through. Working-through procedures may depend and vary on individual circumstances and support

atmospheres, but the act of writing and narrating, as retrospective motions, fundamentally anchor on degrees of revision, reconsideration, and re-imagination. Post-trauma narrative, therefore, is in part a recovery and a reassertion that depends to a degree on the victim's regaining of a certain confidence and willpower to revive a shattered past. Reflecting on post-conflict working-through, memoirists have often laid emphasis on the writer's task—as Nazi prisoner Charlotte Delbo concedes—of collecting “the scattered pieces” of experience as they “reappeared all of a sudden”, or else “came back to light little by little” (Levi and Rothberg 2003: 48). Yet others, like Rohitha Munasinghe, who was incarcerated at a notorious torture camp in Brown's Hill, southern Sri Lanka, during the political emergency from 1987 to 1990, suggests bearing testimony to be an act of will: a social responsibility of the survivor for the dead and other survivors who are yet unable to narrate (Munasinghe 2000: Preface). The emergency resulted from a power struggle between the state and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a Marxist political movement which, at the point of the event, was operating underground. Events during this period brought on the death of a number estimated between 30,000 (Samaranayake 1999: 117), 40,000 (Watkins 2005: 220) and 40,000–60,000 (Senaratne 1997: 103; Wickremeretna 2016: 15) of which a majority were state-enforced and extra-judicial in nature. The vast majority of these killings were carried out in unmarked safe-houses, army camps, and special torture facilities which—in terms of the numbers of those killed—far exceed civilian deaths of a comparable nature in regimes such as Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile (1973–1990) and the extra-judicial violence in Argentina during the Dirty War (1976–1983). A survivor of the 1987–90 emergency, Victor Gunathilake, composed a notable community history of victimization and persecution (Gunathilake 2009) which, at the outset, began as a series of short notes he drafted as a self-administered remedy for post-trauma stress. The expression of the suppressed story of violence and of the violated carries a redemptive potential, especially as it addresses a post-conflict universe where justice and accountability are slowed or are denied outright. Such stepping up, as political activist Visakesa Chandrasekaram identifies, is a necessary forward step to break “the code of silence” that governs over political crimes in Sri Lanka (Sannasgala 2020). As Chandrasekaram observes, families of victims of the 1987–90 emergency are yet to be delivered justice even after 31 years since the end of that conflict. Their narrated and unnarrated stories have remained the only stamp of their collective grief and victimhood.

In a seminal study on memory narratives, Michael Rothberg has drawn on the significance of the play between different memories as they contribute to “possibilities for unexpected acts of solidarity” to include empathy and identification across different conflict events (Rothberg 2006: 180). In his contribution to the

intersection between memory, history, and narrative—in particular, the interlock of narrative and post-trauma memory invested with political activism—Rothberg’s prescription for spheres that expand the boundaries of collective activism and take on the state and its “dirty secrets” signals at a solidary framework anchored on collaboration and corroborative connections. This, in other words, calls for a parameter within which “southern stories” emerging from the 1971 insurgency and the 1987–90 emergency foster networks with memories of the civil war and—more recently—right wing Sinhalese violence against Sri Lankan Muslims. Victim and witness narratives of these conflicts circulate in Sri Lankan society in mutual isolation and as non-mobilized counter-publics. The death toll during the closing months of the Sri Lankan civil conflict has not been publicized through a declassified official statement. Independent agents suggest a number between 70,000–140,000 to be “unaccounted for” between October 2008 and the war’s end in May 2009 (International Crisis Group 2012). The International Truth and Justice Project (ITJP) co-publicized a report claiming 500 persons were disappeared immediately after the war between 17–19 May 2009 (Ball and Harrison 2018: 7). From a position of activism, it is crucial to encourage the survivor narrative to expand and take root as a public and for it to be set in collaboration with “southern narratives” to empower and breed mutual confidence among different victim groups in three country-wide conflicts since 1971.

At the outset of this article, I identified two collaborative streams in which survivor/witness narratives of the “last war” and its immediate aftermath can be situated: those—like N. Malathy and Rathika Pathmanathan (the authors of *A Fleeting Moment in My Country* and *There’s a Darkness Called Light and I Grope for Myself in the Thick of It*) — who narrate as primary witnesses, or as those who story based on first-hand trauma experience; and secondly, secondary witness accounts (or narratives facilitated by a medium) such as stories recorded in Frances Harrison’s *Still Counting the Dead* and Beate Arnestad’s film *Silenced Voices*. Where the boundaries of categorizations thin—such as in *Vanni*, a graphic narrative produced by Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock—there are writers whose works combine or permeate textbook categorizations (such as “primary” and “secondary witnessing”) framed for the ease of discussion.<sup>4</sup> In October 2008, when the United Nations office in the Vanni was closed and staff was relocated to Colombo ahead of the “final war”, Dix was stationed in that office where he witnessed the approach of the military. The polyphony of these different yet mutually enforcing narratives give narrated memory the definitions of a cultural mnémo-technique which, as Ann Rigney argues, contributes to “active memory” (Rigney 2004: 366). Rigney (2004) advocates that the condition of “being remembered” transcends the fact of an event being archived as a record in a passive or latent form (368); where memory—like Sri Lanka’s post-conflict reception which draws

from films and books that continue to emerge—must constitute action that engages in on-going activism and social consciousness. The advocacy for “active memory” aligns with Saul Friedlander’s warning against presentations (such as abstract statistics and tables) in which conflict events, their participants, outcomes, and losses and damages are reduced to numbers and lists lacking individual or collective emotion. Friedlander encourages discussions that bring out “the starkest factual information” with the power to counteract the “loss of historical weight” (quoted in Rothberg 2009: 211). Both as self-started communications as well as conveyances through media, survivor/witness narratives carry the impetus to give voice, agency, and representation that redeems a community from silence and historical marginalization.

The next section of this article draws on representational literature that emerged in the immediate post-civil conflict phase and its contribution to the development of a comparative narration of conflict memory.

### **Storying the “Final War”: Survivor Narratives as Counter-History**

On the diplomatic front, allegations of war crimes during the final stages of the civil conflict have posed one of the most challenging international pressures Sri Lanka had had to face in the post-2009 period. Between 2010 and the present, successive governments have come under scrutiny for unfulfilled international commitments to bodies such as the United Nations Human Rights Council in setting up and following through an inclusive reconciliation programme acceptable to all parties. In spite of internal commissions set up to inquire into events during the war, truth establishment and distributive justice remain unsatisfactory for the war’s victims, while the commissions seemingly share a fate common to similar bodies set up in history which Amnesty International once identified as Sri Lanka’s culture of “commissions of make-belief”: commissions set up to stem public outcry rather than to speed up justice or establish truth (Amnesty International 2009: 10). In 2015, the Maithripala Sirisena United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG) government proposed a joint resolution at the UNHRC (Resolution 30/1) to revamp reconciliation efforts and set up a local mechanism which included an Office of Missing Persons to register grievances of victim families. The government followed through with a long overdue return of some civilian lands in the North that had been confiscated by the military during the war to their rightful owners. However, internal conflicts in the governing coalition stalled the progress of the programme.<sup>5</sup> The Gotabhaya Rajapaksa SLPP government elected in 2019 revoked the Resolution 30/1 and stepped down from the state’s international pledge at the UNHRC. The government’s immediate post-election conduct alarmed human rights groups as President Rajapaksa granted a special pardon to



Sunil Rathnayake, a military-man serving death row, who, after a lengthy trial, was convicted as the only serving military-man in the history of the conflict to be successfully prosecuted for the murder of civilians (International Commission of Jurists 2020). Rathnayake was found guilty of killing eight civilians including children while on duty in Mirusuvil, Jaffna, in 2000. The Rathnayake case, in time, might become a textbook example for the extremity against which the voice of the civil conflict victim in Sri Lanka struggles for recognition and representation.

While the diplomatic response by the Sri Lankan state in establishing truth and accountability for its conduct during the war's closing stages has lacked purpose and intent, the voice of public interventions and witness/survivor narratives assume a significant responsibility in centring the discussion on victimhood. In this respect, a pioneering effort in confronting the state narrative was tabled by Channel 4 in the documentary film "No Fire Zone: In the Killing Fields of Sri Lanka" (2013) directed by Callum Macrae. The one-hour documentary publicized content incriminating the Sri Lankan military where soldiers were shown to engage in actions which, the authors argued, constituted war crimes. This included summary executions of men who seemed to be prisoners, degrading treatment of persons in custody, and violations and mutilations of dead persons. Witnesses alleged the military had carried out attacks on civilian targets. Bodily violations depicted in footage suggested the possibility of sexual assault and rape prior to the killing/execution of female prisoners. The dates assigned to the footage corresponded with the immediate aftermath of the conflict where ITJP reported the "largest single group of enforced disappearances in Sri Lanka" (Ball and Harrison 2018: 1) took place. In responding to allegations, the state maintained that the film footage was inauthentic (Forster 2011). However, nor has the Sri Lankan state taken satisfactory steps to counter the war crimes charges or present verifiable alternative facts. On the other hand, witness accounts which corroborate and support incriminating claims made by "No Fire Zone" are found in independent narratives such as the account of journalist A. Lokeesan who reported from the civilian zone till the end of the war. Lokeesan's memories revive the trauma of working amidst the escalating war, taking notes, visiting sites of attacks, and uploading reports. At one point, he counts up to 300 dead persons before giving up, too shaken by the children who called out for their parents who were dead (Harrison 2012: 37). A grieving mother clasping the blood-gushing body of her dead baby to her chest and sights of corpses tied on top of piles of possessions on bicycle-backs dripping blood leave harrowing impressions on Lokeesan (Harrison 2012: 37). He takes photos and videos of the shelling, reports on the use of chemical substances and of attacks on hospitals (Harrison 2012: 39; 41). After the war, Lokeesan bribes his way out of the Menik Farm refugee camp set up by the



military and leaves the country to India (Harrison 2012: 49–50). Lokeesan's regrets are often associated with what he couldn't achieve as a reporter in the war zone: "There were no witnesses. A lot of people were killed that we don't know about" (Harrison 2012: 39).

As outlined earlier, the expression of personal and collective emotion is crucial for a conflict experience to be transformed into a discussion that engages the hearts and minds of an international space in a multi-ethnic country such as Sri Lanka. Being more than an emotional expression of acting out a sentiment, it is significant for a narrative borne out of conflict to be an expression of working-through trauma: one that bears energy to communicate to a public and inspire reflective and reformative engagement. In characterizing working-through as a process, a line of scholarship has identified a simultaneous "protective numbing" and a "disruptive emotion" (Friedlander 1992: 51) which potentially governs post-trauma narrative: an internal dialectical play that brings on an interlock between an "objective distancing" and "subjective urgency" in representation. For Saul Friedlander, a proponent of this notion, working-through primarily indicates being aware of the above-defined dialectical tendency and making allowance for "a measure of balance between the two wherever possible" (Friedlander 1992: 51). Such balance and composure benefit from the expansion of the range of narratives within a widening network of corroboration, collaboration, and verification. In Sri Lanka's post-conflict context, narratives such as N. Malathy's *A Fleeting Moment in My Country*, which reads as a social commentary of life in the Vanni from 2002 to 2009 during the time New Zealand-resident Malathy volunteered in the Peace Secretariat of the LTTE's de facto state, read as accounts disciplined by and anchored on working-through. Scholars responding to *A Fleeting Moment in My Country* have identified Malathy to demonstrate the approach of "an insider-outsider" (Bakmeedeniya 2019: 25) and to narrate with a composure that was not mystified by her allegiance to the rebel movement. Malathy's balance of perspective can be located in the detached tone with which she comments on events that led to the exodus from Kilinochchi in 2008 as well as events such as devastating air raids on orphanages in Senchoolai and Aruvichchoolai in the Vanni resulting in the deaths of 53 children and 3 teachers (Malathy 2012: 40). Many friends and acquaintances Malathy had in the Vanni were disappeared or killed (Malathy 2012: 112–4). Her last memory of some of them was limited to an accidental meeting on the road, or of receiving news of their passing (Malathy 2012: 49). Observations and impressions that compare with Malathy's experiences are found in sections of books such as Samanth Subramanian's *This Divided Island* (Subramanian 2014: 244–57) and Rajan Hoole's *Palmyrah Fallen* (Hoole 2015: 209–50), which carry a biographical interest in the concluding affairs of the civil conflict and of the immediate post-war period up to 2014.

At one level, enforced disappearances that took place outside the immediate war zone which terrorized both northern and southern societies can be located within an extension of the extra-judicial atmosphere of the time. The techniques and modes of operation often seen in these disappearances can be traced as an immediate legacy of the violence in southern Sri Lanka in the mid-to-late 1980s carried out by specially designated teams of military cadre and paramilitaries. In the common idiom, abductions carried out by these teams are referred to as “white van kidnappings” which became a focal point in political debates during the last stages of the war and afterwards. At the time, the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances noted that Sri Lanka, after Iraq, recorded the second highest number of enforced disappearances (de Mel and Kodikara 2018: 51).

Narratives of such extra-judicial practice have rarely—if at all—been rendered voice in official state bulletins. Such events, at best, received mention in a news edition or were passed down word of mouth in the bazaars and thoroughfares. In the immediate post-conflict period, Rohini Mohan’s biography centred on three Tamil families in *The Seasons of Trouble*, Para Paheer’s *The Power of Good People*, and Shankari Chandran’s historically-informed creative work, *Song of the Sun God* represent proactive literature that attempts to address this narrative vacuum. The absence of narratives by locally resident writers confronting the state’s extra-judicial programme is justified in the vulnerability and lack of safety for such whistle-blowers (the disappearance of journalist Prageeth Ekneligoda is a textbook example of the vulnerability experienced by outspoken critics at the time). It took more than a decade, post-conflict, for narratives of a comparative nature to emerge locally from the political violence of 1987–90. Two early critiques of the prevailing impunity in Sri Lanka during the late 1980s and early 1990s were written in exile in London and Paris by Prins Gunasekara and Rohitha Munasinghe, the authors of *A Lost Generation* (1998) and *Eliyakandha Wadha Kandhawura* (2000). Locally resident survivors of the conflict such as Victor Gunathilake (2009) and Ajith Perakum Jayasinghe (2018) delayed the publication of their memoirs of torture camps which, in part, implies the continuing hostility and second-guessing against probing literature in an unstable democracy.<sup>6</sup> Against this atmosphere, the sharpness of Shankari Chandran’s commentary of the conflict aftermath and the state’s extra-judicial programme stands out. While Chandran is an Australian-resident writer of Sri Lankan Tamil heritage, her publisher, Perera-Hussein Publishers, is a Colombo-based commercial business. Perera-Hussein’s undertaking of the publication without vetting some compelling sections—such as where Chandran hails the head of state and his brother (by name) as responsible for the prevailing violent political culture in Sri Lanka—is a daring act.

Chandran’s critique of the “white van culture” is characterized through the disappearance of Dhara, a doctor who had earlier served in the war (Chandran 2016: 335–7). In *Song of the Sun God* descriptions of the battlefield and of civilians caught in the firing share resonances and corroboration with narratives by witnesses-narrators such as Lokeesan, Malathy and Rathika Pathmanathan. Produced under exceptional circumstances, Pathmanathan’s *There’s a Darkness Called Light and I Grope for Myself in the Thick of It* is a text that requires special attention. Pathmanathan published this autobiographical account in 2016 in Tamil, Sinhalese, and English: a rare instance in the subgenre where a trilingual publication strategy was adopted. Pushed back by its depleting resources and cadre, the LTTE forces young Pathmanathan, barely out of her teens, into the battle during the closing weeks of the war. In 2009, when she was transferred to Colombo Hospital with a shrapnel injury, Pathmanathan neither spoke nor understood the Sinhalese language. *There’s a Darkness Called Light and I Grope for Myself in the Thick of It* is narrated with composure and revisionist retrospection that intelligently comments on the anger and indignation Pathmanathan felt as a patient in a ward full of Sinhalese who cast her as an enemy/other all her life. Pathmanathan’s anxieties and uncertainties gradually recede as she begins to work through her trauma and feel comfortable in Sinhalese society. Pathmanathan has since found a welcoming place in Colombo where she is now employed in the state sector, while restoring ties with her family and friends in the North.

### **Concluding Notes: North–South Solidarity and a Future-Oriented Imagination**

In order to strengthen discussions of post-conflict restoration beyond narrow ethno-nationalist delimitations, it is imperative that southern survivor stories (and their narrators) foster empathy and solidarity with their northern counterparts. Despite their potential to contribute to and build an overarching discussion on human rights, northern and southern experiences of conflict rarely connect over the divisions created by nationalist political currents in both Sinhalese and Tamil communities. While literary practitioners periodically engage with the need to bridge this gulf, the absence of translation and lack of state initiative remain a major stumbling block. At the institutional level, Sri Lanka’s education establishment, too, has failed to develop curricula that encourage imaginations alternative to the nationalist interests of successive governments (Karunaratne 2021: 48). The teaching of subjects such as history has been noted to be selective and exclusive of “recent history or contemporary events,” including the civil conflict (Cunningham and Ladd 2018: 578–9). The study of history encouraged by the state is non-inclusive of national minorities and is designed to enforce a continuous

Sinhala-Buddhist lineage (Wickramasinghe 2013: 94–5). This non-comparative framing lens and resultant single-tracked readings have undermined and proved counter-productive to multi-cultural and multi-ethnic assessments necessary for a post-conflict imagination.<sup>7</sup> While southern and northern grievances and community trauma share in common the loss of thousands and persecutions under extraordinary laws and extra-judicial manoeuvres, in practical terms, collaborative links appear wishful rather than being an achievable reality. In the increasingly polarized post-war realpolitik prevalent in Sri Lanka, to unknot the political crisis surrounding Sri Lanka's conflict legacy without investing in a new imagination in reassessing forces that shattered every aspect of the country's social, economic, and cultural life is both difficult and futile. Institutionally, education and classroom engagement needs to be reconsidered to proactively advocate readings that become a post-conflict world including the comparative assessment of historical events. Independent groups of scholars and activists—such as, for instance, Project 72, a “Netflix-style” documentary on Sri Lanka's post-independence past led by Sarah Kabir and Roar Media set to be launched in 2023—have initiated groundwork that addresses the gaps in teaching history in mainstream curricula (Sunday Island 2021). However, it requires a committed state initiative and participation for such projects to influence policy and national educational practice. As of the present, the state has shown little inclination of facilitating inclusive narratives that politically empower Sri Lankan Tamils who continue to be displaced within the mainstream frame of history.

In driving this discussion to a fruitful conclusion, I wish to mark the post-conflict literature classroom as an untapped space for the meaningful appreciation and sharing of life writing and memoirs of multidirectional victimhood and survival. However, as the study of literature in Sri Lanka continues to be acted out within a narrow classical frame of poetry, fiction, and theatre, this avenue remains a path hitherto unconsidered. An examination of classroom texts used for English Literature in Sri Lanka's General Certificate Examination (Advanced Level) between 1986 and the present indicates that the only study text in which the Sri Lankan civil conflict was featured is Nihal de Silva's *The Road from Elephant Pass* (2003) which was a prescribed text from 2011 to 2018. For a country that periodically experienced nationwide upheavals every decade since 1970, the classroom's being maintained as a space sanitized of imaginative engagement with social and political crisis is disheartening. As an initial step in addressing this textual vacuum I propose the adoption of a comparative reference frame in the appreciation of storied memories of conflict as literary texts. The organizational framework which photographer Stephen Champion uses in the layout of *Sri Lanka: War Stories* (2008) provides a prototype which can assist this re-imagination. In his display Champion showcases photographs from two different

conflict sites in Sri Lanka: the 1987–90 emergency and the North and East from 2002–2008. In display, the photos from the two sites are often in conferential juxtaposition and are freed from the burden of chronology where the photos feed off one another for meaning and effect. The layout simultaneously encourages the spectator to defuse him/herself from political and ideological prejudices and to seek nuances and refined readings anchored on the human condition. As an alternative paradigm, this arrangement de-frames the ethno-political and geographical frictions which the state manipulates in constructing political binaries and oppositions while birthing a potential to liberate Sri Lanka's future citizen from the chains of divisive national interest: to make her/him international and tempered with a pluralist imagination in reading and understanding the past and the legacies of conflict. However, a follow through of this line of inquiry is denoted by a broader discussion which I do not wish to broach at the present.

In his analysis of memory and history, Pierre Nora observes that memory constitutes of “life born by living societies founded in its name” which, as he claims, remained “in permanent evolution open to the dialectics of remembering and forgetting” (Nora 1989: 8). Nora's oppositional placement of history and memory as well as his characterization of history as being geared towards the “annihilation” of what has “in reality taken place” (Nora 1989: 9) has to be contextualized in the heritage and memory-policing roles of states preoccupied with national history projects. These constructions, in turn, enforce and perpetuate regimented and neatly blocked out events which often cast minorities and marginal groups out. Efforts to dilute the power of an ethnic minority that constitutes a country's territorial majority—as demonstrated in the Sinhalization of northern and eastern Sri Lanka—play a key role in enforcing the colonialist notion of a monolithic and continuous past. Situating post-conflict politics through a lens of transitional justice, commentators have called for “a balance between pragmatic, political and idealist standpoints” in working towards “post-war democracy” (de Mel and Kodikara 2018: 42–3). The role of narrative in drawing attention to that balance by relentlessly challenging partial conclusions, arrogant renditions and elitist positions, while expanding the space for negotiation by introducing stories and events easily forgettable to privileged players, cannot be disregarded in a process aimed at empowerment and the re-centring of submerged identities.

## Notes

1. For a detailed overview of the rise of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism in the 1980s and 1990s, see De Votta (2007) and Bastian (2009). For its place in the state's post-war political programme, see Dewasiri (2013: 1–22).

2. To maintain simplicity, the article uses the term “North and East” in a geographic and political sense to indicate the Northern and Eastern Provinces where the civil war was located. The term “South” is used in a political and idiomatic sense to indicate the non-Tamil territories in Sri Lanka (and not exclusively the Southern Province). In the Sri Lankan idiom it is common to refer to the non-Tamil territories as the “South” and Tamil areas as the “North”.
3. The article uses the term “the last war” (or the “final war”) to refer to events in the concluding months of Eelam War IV, between October 2008 and May 2009.
4. Also see Felman and Laub (1992: 73–83; 85).
5. For a detailed examination of the dynamics of Sri Lanka’s post-conflict reconciliation programme as it evolved under successive governments, see Cronin-Furman and Krystalli (2021), Fernando (2019), and Silva (2018).
6. In the dedication of Gunathilake’s memoir he makes reference to the cautioning words of his spouse against publishing his book which might cast the family in danger.
7. For a detailed discussion that identifies notions of nation/nationality, ethnicity and culture as “faulty premises” and encourages new imaginations that transcend modern categories that has ruptured and polarized countries like Sri Lanka, see Hensman (2015: 285–91).

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