

The Act of Memorialization and Survivor Guilt in Post-Genocide Society as Portrayed in Anuk Arudpragasam's *A Passage North*

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Abstract:

A Passage North (2021) is the crowning achievement of Sri Lankan writer Anuk Arudpragasam. He received a Doctorate in Philosophy at Columbia University in 2019. His debut novel *The Story of a Brief Marriage* (2016) won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2017, and was shortlisted for the 2021 Booker Prize. *A Passage North* is set in Sri Lanka in the wake of the civil war, and it deals with themes such as guilt and trauma following mass death. The protagonist's attempts to come to terms with life are shattered by the prevalence of his survivor guilt. In the post-genocide society, survivors have processed their traumatic memories of the genocide to explicate how the individual and society were traumatised. However, the survivor's memory is itself an obstacle to social healing, as it instigates guilt among the survivors. This article sheds light on the prevalence of survivor guilt and its strong association with memory in the post-genocide society.

Keywords: Survivor Guilt, Memory, Forgetting, Post-Genocide Society, Social Healing.

Introduction

Anuk Arudpragasam is a novelist and translator from Colombo, Sri Lanka. He graduated with a B.A. degree from Stanford University and received a Doctorate in Philosophy at Columbia University in 2019. His debut novel *The Story of a Brief Marriage* (2016) has been translated into seven languages. He won the prestigious DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2017 and Shakti Bhatt Prize for his debut novel. His second novel *A Passage North* (2021) is a critically acclaimed novel. Notably, it was shortlisted for 2021 Booker Prize, was a *New York Times* Editor's Choice, and was chosen as the Best Book of the Year by *Time*, *National Public Radio*, *The Financial Times*, and *The Times*. While congratulating Anuk Arudpragasam in the

announcement of the Booker Prize shortlisted novel, Judge Horatia Harrod says: “We had to find a place on the shortlist for *A Passage North*, in which Anuk Arudpragasam turns his poetic sensibility and profound, meticulous attentiveness to the business of living in the aftermath of trauma.”¹

The novel is set in Sri Lanka in the wake of the 1983-2009 civil war, which resulted in an unrelenting massacre of more than 100,000 innocent Tamil civilians.² It opens as the protagonist, Krishan, travels from the south to the north-east to attend the funeral of his grandmother’s caretaker, Rani. Krishan expresses his guilt constantly for surviving the genocide in which others were brutally killed; at the time of the killings, he was pursuing his PhD in Delhi. In contrast, Rani spent her entire life in the north-east and grew up in the middle of the war. She lost her two sons during the last two months of the war. The novel moves constantly between Krishan’s memories and his feeling of the survivor guilt. This article will analyse the association of survivor guilt with memory in the post-genocide society.

Survivor Guilt

The term ‘survivor guilt’ refers to survivors of a tragedy feeling unworthy to have survived while others perished; it is very common for such survivors. Akiyo M. Cantrell notes that: “Advocates of survivor guilt have characterized survivor guilt as a sense of self blame and remorse felt by a person who has witnessed or lived through a life-threatening event...”³. In *A Passage North*, there is a strong association of memory with survivor guilt through the protagonist’s narration. Notably, feelings of guilt are strongest in those who experienced the war second-hand, having escaped to less dangerous areas. On many occasions, the protagonist expresses his feeling of guilt. The author himself expresses his guilt of being powerless to act against the final war in an interview with the Booker Prize:

A Passage North is more about witnessing violence from afar than it is about experiencing it up close. What does it mean to witness such

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¹ ‘The 2021 Booker Prize’, *The Booker Prizes*. At: <https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/prize-years/2021>. Accessed 4/5/2022

² Anuk Arudpragasam, *A Passage North* (India: Penguin Random House, 2021).

³ Akiyo M. Cantrell, ‘The management of survivors’ guilt through the construction of a favorable self in Hiroshima survivor narratives’, *Discourse Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4 (2017), p. 378.

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violence virtually, after the fact, and be totally powerless to act?⁴

It is evident that the author feels guilt about having survived but also guilty of being unable to do anything in favour of his community during the war. For instance, the protagonist Krishan expresses his guilt for “the fortunate and privilege of his circumstances and the safe distance of his own life from the violence and poverty of the north-east.”⁵ He had never experienced the violence such as gunshots, shelling, and displacement directly. More importantly, he expressed his guilt for relative ease of life while his father become a casualty of one of the bombings by the LTTE in Colombo.

This same guilt can be seen in the survivors of the Holocaust. Michael Nutkiewicz in his article “Shame, Guilt, and Anguish in Holocaust Survivor Testimony” expounds the personal accounts of the Holocaust survivors and their feeling of overwhelming guilt in the post-Holocaust. In his own words, HR, a Holocaust survivor from Poland, described his iconic experience in different terms. He felt overwhelming guilt over his inability to act at certain key moments in the concentration camp. His guilt silenced him, which raises questions about the nature of choices made during the Holocaust.⁶

Further, he states that survivors live with countervailing pressures in the post-genocide society. Notably, the survivor’s struggles to forget traumatic events transformed their suffering into narratives of witnessing. It is evident that memory plays a vital role in the post-genocide community of survivors.

Association of Survivor Guilt with Memory

This article focuses on how memory and guilt are interlinked with each other in the post-genocide society. Dan Stone states, “Genocide and memory are inseparable.” The concept of genocide is intrinsically related to memory. The way the victims and the perpetrators of such an event construct the memory is remarkably different. While the perpetrators often construct their memory to justify their actions, the survivors construct their memory to narrate their tragic past and to seek justice for their suffering. The tragic past compels the victims to construct and maintain the memory throughout their life. In fact, their suffering becomes deeply embedded in their ethnic memory.

Guilt and memory are demonstrated in the novel in a number of ways. Firstly, the protagonist’s guilt paves way for the “memorial impulse.”

⁴ ‘The 2021 Booker Prize’, *The Booker Prizes*.

⁵ Arudpragasam, *A Passage North*. p. 190.

⁶ Michael Nutkiewicz, ‘Shame, Guilt, and Anguish in Holocaust Survivor Testimony’, *The Oral History Review*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2019).

Secondly, his act of memorialisation instigates the feeling of guilt further. Similarly, his guilt urges him to memorialise the traumatic events of the war and the memory of pre-genocide society. The author himself acknowledges that there is a “memorial impulse” or “impulse to memorialize” past. It is evident that a lot of his work is a kind of response to the events of the end of the war and the events of his community.

The memorial impulse can be understood from the efforts of Krishan in constructing the memories of the final war and recreating the sites of violence in his mind. He seeks to memorialise the Tamil lives that were needlessly destroyed at the end of the civil war. Notably, the author compares himself to the character Poosal, the poor man in the ancient Tamil literature *Periya Puranam*.⁷ As an intense devotee of Lord Shiva, Poosal wants to build a temple for Siva to honour his Lord. The impoverished man is in search of necessary land and materials for several months. After many failed attempts, he begins to build a temple in his mind instead of a physical temple. Surprisingly, the day of the consecration of Poosal’s temple coincides with the consecration of the king of the realm’s temple that has been built in honour of Siva. However, Lord Shiva chooses to attend the ceremony of Poosal’s temple instead of attending the ceremony of the unprecedented temple that was built by the King. Here, the author explicates the intensity of memory in creating or building something extraordinary. Poosal constructs a mind temple out of devotion, whereas Krishan creates the scenes of prior violence in his mind out of guilt.

To an extent, his impulse to memorialise also leads him to self-hatred and a desire to punish himself. Though the burden of the traumatic memory weighs him down, the same impulse also helped him to suffice his guilt. More importantly, he finds solace by dwelling in the painful memories of the traumatic events that he meticulously constructed in his mind. He is comfortable continuing his life in memories despite the “incongruity between his environment and what was going on inside him.”⁸ He feels that his “life was a kind of dream or hallucination”.⁹ Similarly, the author clearly explains the kind of obsession of impulse to memorialise as follows:

All I felt was my distance. It’s not just me, I think any family, people who grew up outside the war zone feel this very strong sense of guilt and this kind of obsession with violence and this desire to constantly

⁷ Sekkizhar. *Periya Puranam*.

⁸ Arudpragasam, *A Passage North*, p. 21.

⁹ Arudpragasam, *A Passage North*, p. 21.

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be in the presence of virtual representation of that violence as a form of self-punishment.¹⁰

For the same reason, Krishan spends a lot of time looking at pictures and videos of the violence. His obsession also compels him to verify the reports on the war published in the newspapers. He knows very well that the government's account of a humanitarian rescue mission in the northeast is a falsification. The tormenting images poring through the internet tells another different story. To verify the effectiveness of the fact of the final war and to know the complete story of the final war, he pores through the internet both in English and Tamil, going page by page through blogs, forums, news sites that shared images and videos taken during the final stage of the war. Importantly, most of these sites have been set up by diasporic Tamils to show the world the atrocities committed by the Sri Lankan government in the name of the "war against Crime." Each image and video explicates the endless suffering of the innocent victims in the so-called no-war zone. In this way, he is compelled to dwell more on the origins of the war to understand the longings of the people who had lived in the devastating conflict zone.

The author portrays Krishan's obsession as follows: "He'd become obsessed, in the years since the end of the fighting, with the massacres that had taken place in the north-east, become more and more possessed by guilt for having been spared."¹¹ Krishan's feelings of guilt are systematic and progressive at each stage. For instance, he is not ready to believe that the war is over and that genocide truly occurred. He even feels ashamed about his initial reluctance to acknowledge the level of intensity at the end of the war. The author clearly explains how the feeling of guilt is systematically evolved in Krishan's mind as follows: "His initial disbelief gave way first to shock, then to anger and then to shame at his own easy existence."¹² It is evident that Krishan is wrecked by the feeling of guilt. Moreover, it is not just guilt, but the sense of consciousness that is not matching his environment. In other words, it is a kind of desire for a world that reflects the situation he is dealing with in his mind. This returns us to Stone, who states, "Genocide has profound effects that are immediately felt, and that people are exhorted (and willingly choose) never to forget."¹³

¹⁰ Artforum, 'No Wrong Answers: Anuk Arudpragasam and Megha Majumdar', *YouTube*. At: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-t97tIDISNM>. Accessed 4/5/2022.

¹¹ Arudpragasam, *A Passage North*. p. 16.

¹² Arudpragasam, *A Passage North*. p. 21.

¹³ Dan Stone, 'Genocide and Memory', in *The Holocaust, Fascism and Memory*, ed. Dan Stone (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

In *A Passage North*, the feeling of guilt is parallel to the feeling of the impulse to memorialise. In post-genocide society, the victims construct their memory to express how the individual and Tamil society are traumatized by the heinous act of genocide. The images and videos of the victims that pooled through Facebook, Twitter, and news channels at the stage of the final war are not just social media footage, but a kind of memory that serves as a voice for voiceless people. At the same time, it is also important to note that victims' memories are an obstacle to the social healing of that particular community. Healing has not always been easy for the survivors, especially for the survivors of genocide. The horrors of mass destruction and a trail of grief continue to haunt the victim community and reopen their unhealed wounds. It is important to point out that the form of narratives such as oral telling, literature, movies, monuments, memorials, museums, and commemoration practices such as national holidays and anniversaries are representing the collective memory of the victim's community. At the same time, the Sri Lankan government took all efforts to erase the ethnic memories of the Tamil community by prohibiting the death anniversaries and by razing out the martyr's cemeteries.

Krishan is deeply distressed by the appalling scenes of the destruction of the Martyrs' Cemetery in the post-genocide society by the Sri Lankan government. The author depicts the destruction of the martyr's cemeteries, containing hundreds and thousands of dead fighters, which was razed to the ground by the army after the war. Gordon Weiss, the United Nations Spokesman in Sri Lanka, has also acknowledged that army methodically razed the Tiger cemeteries in Vanni (the north-east of Sri Lanka).¹⁴ Krishan rightly points out the notion of the Sri Lankan government destroying all these memories of the victim community as follows:

...memory requires cues from the environment to operate, can function only by means of associations between things in the present and things in the past, which mean that remembering became far harder when all the cues that an environment contained were systematically removed.¹⁵

This passage clearly expresses why the Sri Lankan government is motivated to erase the memories of the victim community and rewriting history. However, it is worth noting that many historians have observed that

¹⁴ Gordon Weiss, *The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka and the Last Days of the Tamil Tigers* (London: Vintage, 2011).

¹⁵ Arudpragasam, *A Passage North*, p. 226.

self-identity is anchored in these sites of memory.¹⁶ In fact, these sites serve as the collective memory of community. Stone rightly notes that the subject of genocide memory focuses on commemorative practices, monuments, and museums.¹⁷ For instance, an extensive body of research exists on Holocaust memorials and museums. Similarly, the images and videos of the Sri Lankan civil war on Facebook, Twitter and other social media serve as the cues from the environment even after the physical destruction of the martyrs. Notably, these cues help Krishan to construct the memories of the past. At the same time, he is also well aware of the fact that the average person in the north-east could not spend time cultivating the memories consciously and deliberately. They have many more urgent concerns such as how to make ends meet, how to rebuild their homes, and how to educate their children.

The author also stresses the importance of social healing and of making peace with our past. Krishan also mentions that forgetting is not so different from remembering but it is an important and necessary part of our life. It must be noted that Krishan's act of remembering orients himself more to the past and compels him to live in the memories and imagination just like the temple constructed by Poosal. On the contrary, the act of forgetting orients himself more toward the present and future. He knew that forgetting takes place only with the consent of the concerned person to reconcile past and present. At times, the act of forgetting is imposed on the people against their own will and forces them to accept the present. In this regard, it is important to recall the act of "willed amnesia." Stone points out that the concept of willed amnesia is largely inaccurate, as individuals require passage of time especially immediate aftermath of genocide.

In *A Passage North*, the protagonist also noted that, whenever forgetting is imposed on the people, they will be stubborn in remembering. He also highlights that "the past would continue to exist somewhere, somehow" for survivors.¹⁸ In this regard, Dan Stone, a historian rightly pointed out in his *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies* as follows:

Remembering genocide, however, is only one side of the coin of responding to such traumatic events. The other is willed amnesia. The conscious turn to memory tends – though this is not always true – require the passage of time, for in the immediate aftermath of

¹⁶ Stone, 'Genocide and Memory', p.103.

¹⁷ Stone, 'Genocide and Memory', p.112.

¹⁸ Arudpragasam, *A Passage North*, p. 238.

genocide the scars still too deep.¹⁹

While analysing the survivor guilt, it is also important to suggest the ways to overcome the negative aspects of the survivors' mentality. It must be noted that the survivors should possess "tragic optimism" in spite of their tragic past. On the contrary to the character Krishan, some real-life characters fought well against their survivor guilt and the tormenting memories of genocide. One among them was Viktor E. Frankl, an Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, and Holocaust survivor. He was one among the miraculously survived people in the concentration and extermination camps where others tortured to die. He narrates his experiences as a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps in *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946).²⁰ In his account, he describes the horrors of the concentration camp Auschwitz and the unrelenting struggles of the prisoners in the camp. Despite his terrible suffering in the concentration camp, his hope kept him alive. He has stated that one should remain optimistic in spite of the "tragic triad". The tragic triad consists of the aspects of human life circumstances such as pain, guilt, and death. According to the theory of logotherapy, one could retain the potential meaning of life in all aspects including at the time tragic aspects. He did not dwell on the suffering and guilt like Krishan in *A Passage North*, but rather suggests logotherapy to find meaning in the survivors' life despite his suffering. While explaining about the second tragic triad, guilt, he states, "It is totally unjustified to hold one person responsible for the behavior of another person or collective person."²¹ It is clear the survivor guilt manifests differently for those who were physically present during the violence and those who watched it from afar. In the case of Krishan, survivor guilt manifests as his inability to take part in the collective suffering of his people during genocide.

It is important to note that the theory of "the existential vacuum"²² in logotherapy provides another fresh insight to the survivors' mentality in the post-genocide society. According to Frankl, "the existential vacuum" is a feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness. He argues that this is the proof of one's humanity. Similarly, survivor guilt also explicates one's human nature. Krishan's survivor guilt clearly explicates not only his humanness but also

¹⁹ Donald Bloxhem and A. Dirk Moses (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 113.

²⁰ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: The Classic Tribute to Hope from the Holocaust* (London: Rider, 2008).

²¹ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, p. 150.

²² Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, p. 143.

his social responsibility of taking part in the collective struggle against discrimination. However, he also suggests that the individual can overcome the existential vacuum, and survivor guilt by understanding the very purpose of life. For instance, Krishan can very well orient himself to the present and future by serving the victims of genocide. On the contrary, he wishes to suffer the fate of victims of the Sri Lankan genocide. Krishan willingly submits himself to dwell on the feeling of guilt.

Conclusion

The act of remembering and forgetting is a common phenomenon in human life and are two sides of the same coin. At the same time, these common phenomenon act differently in post-genocide society. Survivor guilt rekindles the traumatic memories of the war and genocide and acts as an obstacle to social healing. More importantly, social healing and pacification of survivor guilt in the post-genocide society is only possible when justice is ensured for the victims' community. More importantly, the facts of genocide and the sufferings it caused to the victims' community, and the need of social rights should be educated in schools, through media to create awareness to deter forthcoming genocide at its early stage. Thus, the international community should take effective measures to punish the perpetrators of the genocide. It helps to promote social healing among the survivors of the victim community in the post-genocide society. It restores not only justice to the victims' community but also helps in curbing future genocide. At the same time, the survivors should make peace with their traumatic past and try to overcome their guilt of surviving genocide. It depends largely on the impulse of individuals and their willingness to make some meaning and purpose worth living for in their rest of the life.