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Tigers, Terrorism, And the Teeming Multitude: Reading S Shakthidharan's Counting and Cracking

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Abstract

Violence inflicted on the masses ultimately results in displacement. As communities are displaced in the aftermath, they aim to conceive a home in an alien land and embrace a refuge in the outside. South Asia has historically been prone to forced mobilisation and the displaced multitude have been compelled to flee to safer havens abroad. In *Counting and Cracking*, the play by the Australian playwright S. Shakthidharan, the violent past seeps into the present, and the vestiges of memory lead to a broader commentary of how the fringes of democracy operate to militarise masses to quench hunger for power, and how these militarization processes disseminate ideological apparatuses to uphold the same colonial and phallogocentric formations of power.

Keywords: Necropolitics, Feminist, Post-Colonial, Sri Lanka, 1983 riots

INTRODUCTION

Counting and Cracking, written by the Australian playwright S. Shakthidharan, premiered in January 2019 at the Sydney Festival and in March 2019 at the Adelaide Festival, Australia. The story keeps the erased and compromised Tamil identity of the fleeing asylum seekers at its roots. The story of the play unfolds in three acts and is based on the communal violence in Sri Lanka in 1983.

According to the May 2024 report by the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Sri Lankan Civil War of 1983, also known as 'Black July', killed more than 100,000 people and over 900,000 were forced to leave their homeland. In the interviews with ABC News, Creative Australia, Belvoir, and Public TheatreNY, S.Shakthidharan repeatedly used the term *epic* to describe the narrative in the play. According to John Willet in 'Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic', the fourth wall is incongruent with the storytelling on the stage, The modern theatre is the epic theatre...The stage began to tell a story. The narra-

tor was no longer missing, along with the fourth wall. Not only did the background adopt an attitude to the events on stage - by big screens recalling other simultaneous events elsewhere, by projecting documents which confirmed or contradicted what the characters said, by concrete and intelligible figures. ("Brecht" 37-76) The missing fourth wall helps alienate the spectator from the events on the stage. The aim is to be less moralising and more on observing.

The play's 'Introduction', written by Radhika Coomaraswamy, describes the tone of the structure of the play as an unsettling silence, "*Counting and Cracking* also gives us a glimpse into that subterranean world where migrants, undocumented workers, people smugglers, asylum seekers and trafficked victims traverse the world of desperation and pain" (Coomaraswamy 19).

METHODOLOGY

The paper aims to undertake a qualitative study rooted in feminist and postcolonial theories, employing a structural analytical framework. The methodology entails a combination of structural and narrative analysis, employed alongside a bio-necropolitical strategy to look at how the insurgency operations subjugate the female body to serve its means. The study will focus on the minor character of Swathi in the play and analyse her marginalisation within the play as a narrative strategy in light of the theoretical framework, which includes critical insights from *Geographies of Violence: Killing Space* (2017) by Marcus Doel *Necropolitics* (2019) by Achille Mbembe, and Sarah Shoker's 39 interviews of ex-female militants published in *Males and Females in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam: Why They Joined* (2012).

In cross-cultural research on female militancy, researchers Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry found similarities in how violent women were analysed. They maintain that women, like men, can use violence out of desperation or

because they find violence useful to fulfil "some other socio-economic motivation." Scholars such as Miranda Alison, Margaret Trawick, and Peter Schalk have extensively interviewed LTTE females and have spent time in LTTE-dominated areas and have found that often female militants' decisions are influenced by geographical and socio-economic contexts. These reasons, in the cases of voluntary recruitment, do not show militant females to be confused victims; the majority of interviewees explained their violent involvement by giving articulate explanations. Cross-regional trends confirm that militants are likely to join organizations due to peer influence. Individual identity becomes fused with group identity. ("Males and Females" 13-14)

DISCUSSION

The play begins in Australia, near the bank of the Georges River, with a reverence ceremony of Apah, Radha's grandfather, being performed by Siddhartha, her son. Siddhartha has not met his father - Thirru, as he is presumed to be dead in the 1983 riots. After the riots, a pregnant Radha was forced to flee to Australia. Although Radha's grandparents, Apah and Aacha, arranged for her to be married to Thirru, unbeknownst to them, Thiru's sister Swathi (a teenager and Radha's sister-in-law) had joined the Tigers. The story culminates with Radha discovering that Thiru is alive and her family reunites in Australia.

'Swathi' is a minor character who only appears in Act 2 and is fleetingly mentioned in Act 3 of the play. She is the sister of Thiru Radha's husband and Siddhartha's father. The play's narrative positions 'Swathi' as a significant development in its structure with a dialogue by Apah (Mannikvaasar):

It was in Urumpirai that I first learnt the rudiments of democracy. Democracy means the *counting* of heads, within certain limits, and the *cracking* of heads beyond those limits (3.2 230).

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He reveals the play's sanctum. Mannikvaasar is the Tamil face of the United National Party and gives Swathi a pivotal place within the narrative structure of the play;

Swathi enters and hurries to Young Radha.

YOUNG RADHA: ஸ்வாதி ...ஹல்லோ. திருசொன்னவர்... (Swathi, hello. Thirru told me about you-)

She gives Young radha a note.

SWATHI: ராதா...இதுஎன்ற அண்ணாவுக்கு. (Please. Radha. For my brother.) Tell him ... tell him that I will do what he cannot.

Swathi quickly exits through the audience.

YOUNG RADHA: Swathi! (*Counting and Cracking* 2.3 169-170)

Swathi - without a moustache, is confronted with the great art of theatre. Swathi does not get to step outside Act 2 as she is balanced to provide narratorial structure to Sakthidharan's play. According to Achille Mbembe in *Necropolitics*(2019), terrorist insurgence becomes only a re-colonization of the community where subjects like Swathi become assets to churn a profit, pawns in a lucrative business, used as cavalries, sex slaves and labourers, and readily discarded when they are of no use. The new formation of necro-power, then, is a re-articulation of the colonial slave state where the hierarchies of genders, races and castes are reimposed, tightened, and mobilized.

Jayadeva Yangoda, in *The Failure of Accommodation: Ethnic Politics in Sri Lanka*, recollects the necro-power formations in the turbulent Sri Lankan political backdrop:

The failure of the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam agreement of 1957 and the Senanayake-Chelvanayakam agreement of

1965 were crucial landmarks in the ethnic politics of accommodation failure...It was against such a backdrop of increasing tension in state-Tamil relations that the anti-Tamil violence occurred in July 1983. This ethnic violence appeared to have been sponsored by sections linked to the UNP regime and even tolerated by the government and its leaders. (Uyangoda 574)

The Sri Lankan Civil War, with violent civil disruptions since 1956 extended beyond the horizons of the nation. The eruption of violence in the powder keg of Sri Lankan civil society and the displacement in its aftermath which initiated a hesitant diasporic movement is also observable in the described experience of the characters of the play:

FUNDRAISER அம்மா. ... நாப்பது வருஷமா இந்த உலகமே எங்கள் ஏறெடுத்தும் பாக்கேல்ல. இப்ப, விடுதலைப் புலிகளால நாங்கள் யார், எங்களுக்கு என்ன நடக்குதெண்டு உலகத்துக்குத் தெரியுது. இந்த சந்தர்ப்பத்த நாங்கள் விடக்கூடாது. தமிழீழம் எங்களுக்கு இப்ப கிடைக்க வேண்டுமெண்டா நாங்கள் ஒற்றுமையா நடக்க வேண்டிய அலுவலபாக்க வேணும். உங்கட தாத்தா ஒரு பெரியா ஆள் ... எங்களுக்கெல்லாம் அப்பா மாதிரி. (Madam, for forty years the world ignored us. Now, because of the "Tigers, we are front page news. We are Prime Time! We have to seize this opportunity. We must unite and do whatever is necessary to create a homeland of Tamil Eelam. Your grandfather is a hero of our cause. Your Apah is like a father to all of us.)

She hangs up the phone.

RADHA: This morning my priest told me about a fruit seller in Jaffna. He'd just been married, and not long after the wedding, completely by mistake, he delivered some mangoes to one of the Sri Lankan army houses. He was accused by the Tigers of being an informant. He was shot on his bicycle, dragged

along Point Pedro Rd, and strung up on the tree near Lingan Ice Cream House. Was that 'necessary'? His new wife was ordered to wear the white saree of a widow. அது (தேவதானா) தேவதானா? (Was that 'necessary'?)

FUNDRAISER: Madam—

RADHA points to the Tupperware container on the chair.

RADHA: இது என்ர அப்பா. ... விடுதலை புலிகளைப் பற்றி சொல்ற அதே வாயால, அவரைப் பத்தி கதைக்க வேண்டாம். உங்கட ஆக்களுக்குப் போய்ச் சொல்லும், இனி நான் தான் அவருக்கா வண்டி கதைப்பன் எண்டு. கேட்டுதே. நீங்கள் செய்யிற வேலைக்கு, கடவுளே மன்னிக்க மாட்டார். (That is my grandfather. You do not mention him ever again in in the same breath as the Tigers. Tell that to your organisation. Tell them I speak for him now. Do you hear?) (*Counting and Cracking* 1.2 64-67)

The fundraiser from the Tigers is a minor character in the play, who is not given much voice – his dialogue in the play is as frugal as that of Swathi, who later joins the Tigers. Yet, the repetition of the play's rejection of Tamil Eelam or Tigers infuses the narrative of the play with a broader feminist outlook overwhelmed by post-colonial violence. As the paper attempts to posit, the post-colonial violence in question was a re-articulation of the sanctioned struggle of the anticolonial movements, and it is one which reimposed the same phallocratic structures of power formation. Achille Mbembe illustrates the concept of necropolitics not against but as an appendage to Foucauldian biopolitics, as a political agenda at the heart of the thriving state that the state itself attempts to hide. In the biopolitical order, the state ideally pacifies its subjects, through deterrence, disciplinary techniques, policing, and other regulatory principles. It does so by envisioning, at least in theory, a

boundary between the state and the enemy, the inside and the outside, where the state must be empowered to reduce the enemy to bare life, to oust the enemy and the terrorist to prisons, camps and other disciplinary institutions. Mbembe attempts to delineate the praxis of such a biopolitical framework, which is realized within a broader call for decolonization.

According to the seminal decolonization project undertaken by Mbembe, there has been no universal ambit to theorize democracy - the framework has rather been applied to societies across the world, and the result has been differing and deferring forms of democracy, localized and decentred, and all of these forms find their origin in the colonial power that appropriated territorial resources and inflicted epistemic violence. The covenant between colonialism, plantation economy, and democracy suggests that rather than fostering freedom, the anxiety of the postcolonial state attempts to decompose the institutional frameworks that guard it. The proximity between these paradigms is adequately repressed in the ideological formulation of the state-centered mythologies that base themselves on the erections, of institutions, museums, and statues of martyrs.

The play's structure falls back on Swathi - the non-monetary ambit on stage. According to World Report 2024:

The government's plan of targeted social protection benefits led to the exclusion of many who do not have an adequate standard of living. Amid widespread protests, the government agreed to review almost one million applications for Aswesuma, the new social protection program. Social protection programs such as Aswesuma that target people based on economic status have been criticized for being prone to errors, arbitrary cut offs, corruption, and social mistrust.

In June, in an attempt to reduce its domestic debts, the government announced a policy that would reduce the value of state-run pension

funds in which ordinary people hold their savings. (Human Rights Watch)

Modern warfare, in forms of proxy insurgencies and civil disobedience, takes a graver form than the feudal power of the sword - the power to oppress, dominate, weaponize, mobilize, and discipline bodies. The tangibility of the emergent as well as dominant forms of power entails that it anonymizes and catalyses the subject to gain control of not only the psyche but the somatic functions of the victim. Much of the bio-necro power, in the hands of the insurgent collective, then, is used to inflict horror not only on its mythical enemies but on the actual members of the collective, especially the weaker ones such as the feminine, the marginal, and the vulnerable:

DHAMAYANTHI: There are four thousand people who want these visas, Radha. The Australian Government has set a limit of just over a hundred. If you don't take it, someone else- Young Radha hangs up.

HASA: Swathi is dead. The police called Bala and he identified her body in Vavuniya. I've called or visited every jail cell and camp in Colombo, Radha. [Pause.] I will keep looking for Thirru. [Beat.] But Radha ... I will be looking for a body. Beat. (*Counting and Cracking* 3.3 248)

The insurgence, which is the guided manifestation of violence on legal and safeguarding foundations of democracies, has in its kernel a libidinal economy, which sexualizes violence to imbue it again with the same vulgar desire that it aims to overcome, the libidinal desire, which in its final stage takes the form of a phallographic desire for power. As Doel (50-51) notes, the ebb and flow of warfare leaves in its wake sexual horror, much of which is orchestrated... Sexual horror is also at work in the libidinal economy that saturates and invests warfare from beginning to end:

HASA: 'No other profession calls on its practitioners to lay down their lives save the armed forces and, in Sri Lanka, journalism.

Our stories serve as a mirror in which the public can see itself without make-up or styling gel. From us you learn the state of your nation.'

Siddhartha stops and looks up at radha.

RADHA: Go on.

HASA: 'In the course of the past few years, countless journalists have been harassed, threatened and killed. It has been my honour to belong to all those categories and now especially the last.'

SIDDHARTHA: Is he saying-

RADHA: Two nights ago Hasa was hit many times in a drive-by shooting. I've called his family and sent our condolences. (*Counting and Cracking* 3.3 256)

Therefore, these apartheid structures re-saturate as much as subvert the legal-nominal colonial foundations to make them consumable by their subjects. In the new bottle, the toxic sediments of the old wine are stirred up, so that they are not visible to the consumers: it's an ontological de-structuring as much as epistemic, where brutality is cloaked in a palatable righteous spectacle, *Out* with the general strike. *In* with brutality and sex. In this era, which is so dominated by a passion for profit, this mix of lubricity, brutality, and sexuality fosters the society of the spectacle, assimilating racism and its molecularising through structures of contemporary consumption. ("Necropolitics" 62).

CONCLUSION

Increasingly alienating itself from the dominant formations of power, the insurgent ideology develops envy, pathological in nature, which aims to demonize and stigmatize the colonial hierarchical, legal and apartheid institutions, but at the same time, by aiming to banish the atrocities outside the community, it attempts to conceal the atrocities at home – the weaponization, pulverization, and maternalization of female bodies: "The manipulation of questions of gender for racist ends, by

way of illustrating the Other's masculine domination, is almost always aimed at concealing the reality of phallocracy at home" (Mbembe 60). Conceived in such a way, the insurgency cannot be translated to a radical annihilation of structural hierarchies, but when in power, it replicates the same colonial and libidinal foundations of the state:

Terror and counterterror are two faces of the same reality, *a relation without desire*. Terrorist activism and antiterrorist mobilization have more than one thing in common. Both strike the law and rights at their very roots (Mbembe 33)

The so-called revolution does not follow the logic of law because it deems the very state-centric legality which has failed to guard the marginalized masses from suffering - in its reenactment of the Darwinian motif of survival, the revolution from within becomes another ethically sanctioned act of violence against an oppressive and neo-colonial regime. These revolutionary paradigms have already pervaded the state, where these are known as acts of terrorism. These terrorist machineries form their institutions, propelled by a reactionary stance, that mimics the organization of the state in its institutionalization of violence, and gender atrocities, and uses the symbolic body of the feminine simultaneously as a site of progeny and massacre.

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