On Responsible Distance: An Interview with R. Cheran by Aparna Halpé

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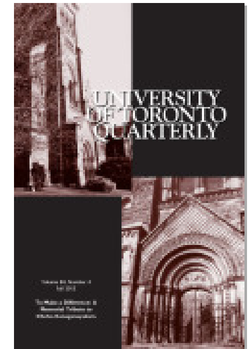

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R. CHERAN AND APARNA HALPÉ

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ABSTRACT

R. Cheran speaks on his trajectory as a Tamil poet, journalist, and intellectual, during the years of conflict in Sri Lanka and on his current work as a playwright, activist, and collaborator in the development of Tamil diaspora studies with Chelva Kanaganayakam in Toronto, Canada. This interview provides a glimpse of the histories of dislocation, censorship, and exile that framed Tamil political, cultural, and intellectual life throughout the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Precariously positioned as an artist and scholar who eschewed the non-democratic, militant positions of successive Sri Lankan governments and Tamil militant organizations, Cheran interrogates evolving notions of Tamil nationalism as articulated in the post-war context and looks to the future of the idea of the Tamil nation in Sri Lanka and around the world. This interview is a transcript of the public interview held at *Trans(sub)continental Imaginations: Three Centuries of South Asian Literary English*, a symposium in memory of Chelva Kanaganayakam, University of Toronto at Mississauga, 25 March 2015.

KEYWORDS: Tamil poetry, Tamil diaspora, Tamil liberation struggle, ethnic conflict, Tamil literary history, censorship, translation

AH:[1] Cheran, you were born and raised in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Can you capture a sense of Jaffna as it was when you were growing up? You are of the generation that witnessed the steady collapse of the North and East due to state-sponsored violence and discrimination against the Tamil people. Is this "always already" a part of your memory of that time and place?

CR: Let's start with landscape first: the green and lack of green. One of the things that really attracted me to the landscape of Jaffna was the red soil. We get greenery only for a few months in the year when there is rain. Beyond that, it was mostly very dry, but we had all sorts of different massive trees to which I was attached, in the backyard and beyond in the

1 AH and CR refer to Aparna Halpé and R. Cheran, respectively.

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paddy fields. My fascination with the flora and fauna in our area was endless. I wept for the giant *vaahai* trees when they were cut down by the Sri Lankan government's Electricity Board in the mid-seventies. I was so attached to the greenery but also very aware that we did not have adequate green in that landscape. I always felt that we should have "more green, more green, more green!" And I began to love the places that were lush and green. It became very clear to me, once I started traveling outside Jaffna, how very green the earth could be. This feeling has always been a part of the Jaffna I grew up in, and it has been a very strong element in my life and my work. I still remember how I tried to grow green grass in the front lawn of my household; it never materialized. Besides, we did not have drinking water. We had to walk to a nearby temple or neighbours' houses to fetch water.

On the other hand, Jaffna was surrounded by the majesty of the sea. We lived close to the sea, and our imaginations were largely shaped by the sea, all the attributes of the sea. So what you have here is a kind of love/hate relationship with the landscape of Jaffna.

The second aspect has a lot to do with the politics of Sri Lanka. I grew up in a time when ethnic identities grew sharper, and the ethnic differences began to emerge as destructive and powerful military conflicts. My father used to work for the Sri Lankan government. He was a very high officer in the civil service. First, he was a District Land Officer in Jaffna, and then the Assistant Government Agent in Batticaloa, then in Jaffna, and then he was in Colombo for a few years and was later transferred to Batticaloa as an officer in the Government Secretariat. In Batticaloa, there was a very interesting example of how the conflict and feeling of being a minority slowly crept into our lives and thinking. We were living in the government-provided bungalow, on the lake road; our house was called Neezhal, which means "shade," the shade of a great tree. One day, I wrote the name "Neezhal" in Tamil on the gate of our house. When my father returned from work that evening, he immediately went and erased what I had written and said, "No, these are government-provided quarters, and we cannot simply have a Tamil name for this place. Either it should be in the three official languages or it should be in the preferred official language: that is, Sinhala." When I offered to write the name in all three languages, my father was not willing. He was a very cautious officer, despite his love for Tamil. I didn't want to create any unnecessary trouble, so I was quiet, but this was very disappointing for me. We were living here, but we couldn't write our own language on the gate. This "erasure" loomed large in my life as a metaphor for our second-class status in Sri Lanka.

From then on, I became very sensitive to my Tamil identity. There were many issues where I started to see the dominance of the Sinhalese language and the Sinhalese-Buddhist state in our lives. Before the death

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of my father, in 1971, the government was already talking about implementing standardization,[2] and I remember my father talking to my mother. He said, "This is really going to affect the future of all my kids; this is not good. I don't know what we are going to do."

The next year, he passed away.

We were in Colombo at the time, and after he passed away, we went back to Jaffna. In a sense, I was really happy that we were moving back to Jaffna because I wasn't happy in Colombo. We had been there for a year, where I attended Isipathana Maha Vidyalaya. I hated the school assembly where the principals spoke only Sinhala and a few words in English, and all Tamil-medium students had to attend. I didn't like it. I was dying to go back to Jaffna. After my father's death, we were on the train, the Yarl Devi, and I still remember the mixed feelings of sadness that we were all going to Jaffna without my father. My mother was crying all the way. I was really happy that we were going back to Jaffna, but I didn't have a father.

From that point, the situation got rapidly worse – from 1972 onwards. There was the International Conference in Tamil Studies, which I attended as a volunteer just for one day. I was a small boy, not yet old enough to wear long pants. But then the deaths started to occur, and this was the point at which we became completely estranged from the Sri Lankan state. In 1970, when they implemented the Republican Constitution, we burned the national flag, and we prevented one of our teachers from raising the flag in the school yard in 1972. The constitution enshrined the Sinhala-Buddhist nature of the state and symbolized the total alienation of Tamils from "Sri Lanka." Though I was a small boy, I went with all the senior students, and we actively participated in the boycott. That was the last time the national flag was hoisted and the national anthem was sung. Because, until then, we used to sing the school's anthem, and the national anthem in Tamil; that was our routine. But this was when it stopped, and I never sang the song again. What followed afterwards is a life, creative work, and politics shaped by all kinds of violence. The Tamilness of our generation – and the generations that followed immediately after – cannot be fully understood or explained without discussing violence.

AH: You've spoken before of the burning of the Jaffna Library. In my imagination, I see this act as the defining act of cultural genocide against the Tamil people. Can you contextualize this for us, both in terms of your personal history and, as far as you feel able, in the context of Tamil cultural, political, and intellectual history?

2 In 1972, the Government of Sri Lanka introduced a standardization policy for university admission that implemented a quota system for each language and district.

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CR: The Jaffna Public Library has a very important and emotional connection to my upbringing as a reader and as a writer because I started reading and writing at a very early age. The kind of books I wanted to read were in short supply. I could read 3–4 books in one day, and there wasn't a steady supply of good books available. My father, who was working in the Jaffna Government Secretariat, decided that he would take me and drop me off every Saturday morning at the Jaffna Public Library. So every Saturday from around 8:30 A.M. onwards till about 1:30 P.M., I used to sit in the children's section of the library and read. And soon, I exhausted the books there and moved on to the adult section.

Eventually, I wanted to borrow lots of books and take them home to read until the next Saturday, but at that time, the Jaffna Public Library did not allow readers who lived outside the Jaffna municipal boundary to become members and borrow books. This was very disappointing, and even though my father was a senior government official, the librarian was adamant. So I started to fight and resist this rule. Then, they said, "Why don't you provide an address of someone who lives in the Jaffna municipality, and we'll make you a member." But I said, "This doesn't make sense. I come here every day!" Finally, they relented and let me become a member. I was probably the first and maybe even the last person to become a member of the Jaffna Public Library while not residing within the Jaffna municipal limits. So you can see that my attachment to the library goes back a long way. And this was also the time I started reading Tamil fiction and reading books in English, even though I read most of the Western classics in Tamil translation. My transition from fiction to non-fiction took place exactly at this time. I was fascinated by travel writings and biography.

Another important aspect is the history of the creation of the Jaffna Public Library as a Tamil cultural centre. A lot of important personalities, such as K.M. Chellappah and Fr. Long in Jaffna, worked very hard to build the library. It was started in a small room in 1934. (Fr. Long died of a heart attack on the night he heard that the library was set on fire.) The library was not funded by any state institution. Public donations were the key in building the library. That history itself is very important to us. We could not expect anything from the state of Sri Lanka and its institutions; we had to build everything ourselves.

When I started writing and publishing together with some of my friends, we started a literary magazine that was handwritten because we didn't have money to publish it. There would only be one copy that we would circulate. Some of the most famous Tamil writers of this period like Nuhman, Shanmugam Sivalingam, and Nilavalan wrote for this handwritten magazine.

AH: Do you have any of these copies?

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CR: You know, because of the war, we lost everything. We could not even keep a single issue.

But I still remember that we used to have launches of our handwritten magazine in the new auditorium of the Jaffna Public Library. Around sixty to seventy people would attend. I was still wearing shorts – I hadn't graduated into wearing long pants! That was the auditorium that saw the launch of the first Tamil book of free verse, or what we call the New Verse in Tamil, by my friend Dikwella Kamal, called *Elikkuudu* (*Mouse Trap*) in 1973; he was a teacher-student at the Palali Teachers' Training College. This was the beginning of the New Verse in Tamil, in Sri Lanka.

Going to these book launches and being in this literary climate was a big part of my youth. Eventually, I went to Jaffna University, and it was when I was there as a student that we heard about the burning of the library a few hours after it was set on fire. We saw that it was burning, and we tried to go there to help, but we couldn't because they started firing at us. It was the next day that was the most hurtful moment in my life. In the morning, we all went to see what had happened. It was totally gone. Right next to the library was the Duraiappah Stadium where the police and army were stationed. As people went to see what had happened to the library, the soldiers were standing there in the stadium mocking us. They would say, "*Anē*, it's gone. Now what are you going to do?" This was the moment when I felt that the only way forward was to wipe these soldiers out. We were angry, but we were helpless because we were just young students, and they were the armed forces.

So this is the beginning of my political writing and my anger. Although it had been building over time, it erupted with the burning of the library. And it wasn't just the library that they burnt; there were hundreds of other business establishments and the newspaper offices of *Eelanadu*. Immediately after this, on the second day, we started publishing a cyclostyled newspaper called *Jaffna on Fire* in Tamil and English. This was the beginning of my life as a journalist. We published until *Eelanadu* started publishing again. In that small bulletin, we reported the number of establishments burnt, the number of people killed. This was my first attempt at journalism in English, and whatever I wrote, A.J. Canagaratna went through and corrected it. The Catholic Church and the Jaffna Bishop's House helped us cyclostyle this bulletin for distribution. This was to show our resistance; we wouldn't give up. Some of the copies of *Jaffna on Fire* are available in an archive in Germany.

This is how it all began. My poem "The Second Sunrise," which is also the title of my first collection of poems, speaks to the burning of the Jaffna Library. I didn't specify the burning of the library because other things were burning as well. But I said, "My city was burnt, and my people lost faces." This describes the entire scenario of fire and death. Yes. First, they burnt the books, and later in May 2009, they burnt the people!

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The Second Sunrise

On that day,
there was no wind;
no rising tide,
even the waves had died.
Sea.

Walking across,
feet sinking in the sand,
again a sunrise.
This sunrise in the South.

What happened?
My town was burned;
my people became faceless;
in my land, my air,
in everything,
the stamp of outsiders.

Hands clasped behind you,
who do you wait for?
On the clouds
fire
has written its tale;
who waits even now?

From the ashen streets,
arise and march.

(R. Cheran; qtd. in Kanaganayakam, *Wilting Laughter* 11)

AH: You come from a literary family where your father, the great Tamil poet Mahakavi, casts a long shadow, but when did you first start writing poetry? Where did the drive to write come from?

CR: I wrote my first poem when I was in Grade 2. It wasn't really a poem. There was a series of poems with moral import by the famous Tamil poetess Avvai, called *Aathisoodi*, which means short moral guidelines for people to follow. The poems are arranged alphabetically, from the first letter "*ana*" onwards. These were popular verses that everyone was supposed to memorize. I did a version of this, called *Putham Puthiya Aathisoodi* – meaning "new, new *Aathisoodi*" – following her style, but writing on different things. It was a lot of work because Tamil has a lot of letters! I wrote it in a small booklet and showed it to my dad, who was very impressed. He took it to his office and asked one of his secretaries to type up the whole thing. He also corrected some of the verses. He was particularly happy with some of the verses I wrote. For example, with the Tamil letter "*ay*," I wrote "Ayyarukku Adi!" which

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means "Hit the priest." Even then, I was not into religion or priestly rituals. He laughed, and he didn't change anything in that verse.

Interestingly, some of these verses were subsequently published in my school magazine. But the editor of the magazine was not convinced that I was the one who wrote these pieces. Because of this, he refused to publish my grade next to my name (which was the standard practice). So if you look in this magazine (it's still there), you can see the name and the grade of the student for all the other entries, but mine only has my name.

After this, I wrote here and there, but obviously, it wasn't very good. But my father had this habit of writing a poem, and then reciting it out loud as he went for a walk, sometimes in the paddy fields. Sometimes he would ask me to recite it. So I became a performer of my father's poetry. I would commit it to memory and I would perform these poems for audiences; this also included the poetry of my father's friends. So I developed the art of reciting poetry and committing all kinds of poetry to my mind. I can still recite hundreds of these poems. This gave me a very early sense of tone and the sound of the Tamil language in poetry. There's no forced rhyme here; it must occur naturally. It has to emerge through the line; you can't search for a proper rhyme. So this was the kind of practice that I developed.

The major rupture occurred after my father's passing. You see, my father was a senior government official and he was not comfortable writing any political poems. He too had anger building up, and he sometimes wrote different poems under a pen name. But he was very careful. You can see the difference between his generation and mine. My poems were very open and full of controlled anger. You can say that controlled anger is part of my resistance, and it was what made my poetry different from the poetry of my father's generation. You can trace the divergence between us from my first collection of poems, even though you can see elements of my father's poetry in mine: for example, the way "black" humour comes in, the way certain words are chosen, the melody. These are very importance influences of my father's poetry that you can find in my poetry as well.

AH: Given the rising trend towards militarism in your youth, how did you resist this urge to take up the gun? Was it an issue that created conflict for you? Writing at this time was dangerous.

CR: In the early eighties, especially after the pogroms of July 1983, all of my friends and university batchmates joined some form of militarized resistance movement, and they became fighters in a very literal sense. But I was not ready to join any military movement at that time, even though, in 1983, I was actively involved in student politics at the Jaffna University. And when the Indian government offered training to various groups, some of us from the University of Jaffna Student Assembly, too, went to India in 1983, to an initial strategy session at the Tamil information centre

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there. We knew that young Tamils had already started their military training, joined by some of the militant leaders. I was witness to a couple of meetings where these military leaders held talks with the Indian authorities and among themselves on the future course of militant strategy. As members informally representing Jaffna University Student Assembly, we were very radical, but we were also extremely politicized, and we felt that we shouldn't blindly follow the influence of India. We were very cautious. We all supported military training, but we wanted either a memorandum of understanding between all parties or some form of united front that could represent the diverse militant groups. But this didn't work out.

Every organization began recruiting left, right, and center. All the young people joined up: some to EROS,[3] some to the LTTE,[4] EPRLF.[5] I was not convinced. At that time, I wanted to be part of the militant movement on one condition – not that I had any power to impose a condition! I hoped that if all these people could form a united front, as in Nicaragua, then there would be a united resistance, and I could play a role, not as someone carrying a gun, but in terms of politics. But it didn't materialize. I wrote about this a long time ago in an article that appeared in the journal *Thalir* in 1985, published by a group of Jaffna University students, about the need for a united front. I was very disillusioned when this didn't happen due to the lack of discipline, foresight – the lack of unity among the different groups and the lack of political vision and coordination. I saw a united front as the key to advance the liberation struggle.

Instead, I saw youngsters in large numbers going to get trained and returning as militants bubbling with energy and anger with which they had to do something. There had always been a gradual development of a politics of liberation, but all of a sudden it ballooned into a militarized body. This was one of the more negative things that happened to the Tamil liberation movement.

I was critical about this, but I didn't want to leave Jaffna. Then, the attacks and the bombings started, and the most distressing part of this was the internecine warfare. The LTTE against the PLOTE,[6] and all the others. I have a diary of all the internecine killings. You can read about these issues in "A Poem That Should Not Have Been Written." I was hoping that the ideal of liberation would be different. We couldn't simply mirror the image of the oppressing Sri Lankan state. The way they conducted the killing of innocent civilians, the massacres, the torture, we could not do the same thing. If we did, what would be the difference?

3 Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students, formed in 1975.
4 Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam, formed in 1976.
5 Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front, formed in 1980.
6 People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam, formed in 1980.

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I became very critical of these issues. Then, the Anuradhapura massacre took place.[7] I was working at the *Saturday Review* at the time, and I was one of the first people to say that this was a massacre by the LTTE. Immediately after the massacre, I had a chat with Thileepan, one of the senior LTTE leaders. He claimed that the "Anuradhapura Operation" was necessary and inevitable. My article on the recollection of the meeting with Thileepan was published in my book of political columns in 2002.[8]

Gamini Navaratne, my editor and a Sinhalese man – perhaps the one and only Sinhala civilian living in Jaffna at the time – didn't believe me and refused to publish the piece, saying it can't be the LTTE. He believed the Tamil militants wouldn't do this and accused the Indian external intelligence service, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). That was a moment of deep shame for me.

At this time, I wanted to be in Jaffna, and I wanted to be a part of all these things, but I didn't want to be part of a military group. I had two options: one was to work in a cultural field, as a playwright, or performer, or poet; or to work as a journalist, exposing the atrocities by all parties. I had always done both these things, but it became increasingly difficult in terms of freedom of expression. Various militant groups became mad because I was writing and criticizing their work, and some of my plays really angered them. Writing for the *Saturday Review*, and writing in English, which was one way we got around the militant groups because we were not writing in Tamil, was a very difficult balancing act. Looking back, I am glad that I chose not to become part of any militant group, even though I shared some of their ideals at the time.

AH: Given that Sri Lanka has an abysmal track record with state sponsored censorship, including the unlawful incarceration and murder of journalists, what options do journalists today have to really engage in investigative journalism?

CR: I think that freedom of expression and the right to information has become an increasingly difficult proposition, not only in Sri Lanka, but all around the world. If we look at the recent developments in surveillance, the increase in controlling and monitoring, and the increased corporate monopoly of media ownership, together, all these things are contributing to the progressive destruction of the freedom of expression and the right to information. This is a challenge for writers, journalists, and everyone. There is a critical need right now for all of us to be aware of this shift and to resist and challenge these forces.

7 The Anuradhapura massacre happened in 1985. LTTE cadres hijacked a bus and drove into the town of Anuradhapura, attacking several public spaces, including the bus depot and the famed Buddhist shrine, the Sri Maha Bodhi; 146 civilians were killed.

8 Cheran, R. *Uyir Kollum Varthaikal* (2002).

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We must also be very careful about the classical, liberal ways of looking at freedom of expression, and the danger of selectively and hypocritically applying these fundamental rights and freedoms. There's this idea, "If we do it, it's ok, but if the others do it, it's not ok." We see this kind of problem in the Charlie Hebdo issue. I support the freedom of expression in every context, even at "supreme emergency situations" or the most critical junctures, but I also cautiously argue that freedom of expression must come with a tremendous amount of responsibility. This balance needs to come from writers and journalists, not from the state. We should never allow states, or groups, or political parties, or institutions to control or dictate the terms of free speech. Freedom of expression must be the responsibility of all of us; that is the only way we can maintain the moral responsibility of a writer.

AH: Shortly after this period, you left Sri Lanka, living in exile in the Netherlands, and eventually migrating to Canada. The issues of exile and dislocation feature prominently in your poetry, and you have devoted your academic and intellectual endeavours to furthering the rights of refugees. Can you speak to us of this experience?

CR: I need to give you some context. I was forced into exile in 1986, partly by the government and partly by the Tigers. There were others – such as the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) – who were unhappy with my writing and activism as well. It's an interesting thing because everybody knew that I wasn't affiliated with any militant group; I was just a writer and a poet with a big mouth. But the Tamil term *Kullappalvaade*, which means "someone who makes trouble," was given to me and to some of my friends who had similar sympathies. This was more dangerous in the Tamil militants' view. Here was someone who wasn't against them, but not for them either; instead, I disturbed everything. In their perspectives, "troublemakers" are worse than traitors and enemies. This was a very serious issue for them, and I was asked to leave Jaffna by one of the leaders of the Tigers. He said to me, "I don't want to kill you. I know you're valuable, but it would make my life easier for me and for you if you leave Jaffna. I can't guarantee your safety."

I still stayed in Jaffna for some time with his permission, while not being too active, but then things became really difficult in 1987, when the IPKF[9] came and the peace accord was put in place. I was very critical of the role India played, and my editor, Gamini Navaratne, finally said, "*Putha* [son], this is not going to be good for you. You better leave." I

9 Under the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord (1987), the Indian Peace Keeping Force was brought into the North and East of Sri Lanka, ostensibly to disarm the various active militant groups, including the LTTE. The lack of a shared language or cultural idiom between the IPKF soldiers and the peoples of these areas eventually led to increased violence and bloodshed for the Tamil people. See Hoole, Sritharan, and Thiranagama.

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then left for the Netherlands. I returned to Jaffna after two years. The IPKF was still there, and I was conscripted by the EPRL/ENDLF[10] combo on my way from Jaffna to Batticaloa to make wedding arrangements for my sister. I escaped the conscription thanks to one of my university friends who was in the EPRLF at that time. He saw me in the conscription camp, and he let me go. Then, close to Jaffna University, I was almost killed by the Gurka regiment of the Indian Army.

I couldn't publish my poetry collection that dealt with life under the IPKF in 1989. The person who wanted to publish my book had his printing presses destroyed. The collection called *Procession of Skeletons*, which dealt with the Indian occupation in Jaffna couldn't be published in Sri Lanka or in India. It was finally published in Toronto by the Tamil Resource Centre in 1990.

Living in exile gave me lots of insight into politics, pain, dislocation and the importance, or the lack of importance, of location. It also changed the structures of my language; it changed the metaphors. How was I to express solidarity while being part of a struggle from a distance? We have heard of the irresponsibility of distance. This is a major issue in diasporic studies. But I've also learned that there is an idea of responsibility of distance, and I think that these are two sides of the same coin. I belong to the school that thinks that for the Tamil diaspora, or for any diaspora, the responsibility of distance will be the key to any sense of solidarity in the future.

AH: In Canada, you developed a long and fruitful relationship with the late Chelva Kanaganayakam. Together with Kanaganayakam and Darshan Ambalavanar, you have played a key role in founding the Tamil Studies Conference. You've collaborated on a number of projects together, and he is the primary translator of your poems. Together, you both made Toronto into a place where Tamil literature flourishes. Can you give us a sense of your relationship?

CR: Actually, Chelva was formally introduced to me by Prof. Ashley Halpé. Although Chelva was familiar with some of my work, he was actually more familiar with my father's work. Chelva was one of the early translators of my father's work, and he was deeply influenced by my father's poetry. He didn't have much context in which to place my poetry or my politics until Prof. Halpé introduced me to Chelva in Toronto. But since that moment, we had a wonderful relationship. He began to read and translate my work, and we started collaborating on many significant projects.

This was the beginning of a long and very fruitful collaboration. He ended up translating an entire book of my poems *You Cannot Turn Away* (2011), and he also worked on many articles on my work and we edited –

10 Eelam National Democratic Liberation Front, formed in 1987.

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together with other scholars – three volumes on Tamil studies. Our meeting was a turning point for both of us. It was a turning point for Chelva because, until this point, his focus had been on Southeast Asian literature, ideas of diaspora, and aesthetics. He was not really into contemporary Tamil poetry and poetry that came out of genocide and war – the poetry of distress and trauma. I was able to bring him all the latest work, and we used to chat endlessly on the latest materials emerging in this area. He was gradually dragged into the vortex of contemporary Tamil poetry, and he was surprised by the power of the literature written after the eighties. He was convinced that the only way to bring this out was to engage in translation. He could have done other things, but he devoted his time and energy to translating this work from Tamil to English. This was a huge, huge contribution. Without Chelva, I don't think most people would have read my poetry or several other great works in Tamil because it would have been in Tamil.

Secondly, we decided to launch a forum along the lines of the original international conference on Tamil studies.[11] People asked us, "Why Tamil studies? Why not South Asian studies, or India studies?" In fact, a battery of academics and bureaucrats kept telling us that if we named it to reflect that latter, we would get more money and support. It was a time when being Tamil was being criminalized. But the reason we wanted to foreground Tamil studies was because the history of the Tamil language and culture was extremely important. Tamil is one of the very few languages that is not affiliated with any particular religion. There is a very strong tradition of secularism that is associated with the Tamil language, culture, and literature. We have literature from Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, all rolled into one language. And it is impossible to say that Tamil is associated with only one of these religions, unlike English or Arabic, for example. This strong tradition of secularism exists from the classical *Sangam* literature onwards. It's unique. The dominance of Sanskritic languages in the South Asian studies overshadows this progressive, secular linguistic and literary tradition. We felt this was important, and we also felt that we needed to articulate this in such a way that even the very radical Tamil nationalists would understand that this was not an exclusive project. In a way, this is a civilizational issue; it is not an ethnic or national issue. The question is, "How can Tamil and Tamil studies contribute to human civilization?" "And how has it contributed?"

11 The International Conference Seminar in Tamil Studies, held in 1974, which was in the tradition of the International Association of Tamil Research (IATR), which was formed by Fr. Thaninayagam from Jaffna. This organization was responsible for arranging conferences on research in Tamil Studies in Jaffna, Malaysia, Tamil Nadu, Mauritius, and the United Kingdom.

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AH: Chelva Kanaganayakam, quoting Sherry Simon, reminds us that translation is a site of exchange within the context of global power relations ("Rethinking Translations" 350). You too seem to be acutely aware of this when you suggest that English is your academic language, and Tamil is your poetic language.

CR: It's true. I grew up in a Tamil context, and I didn't study in the English language. I started using English when I went to study chemistry and biology at the university level. Although I was always comfortable with English, Tamil was my language: idioms, metaphors, images, and cadence – these all came to us through a Tamil context. I only developed a deep relationship to English when I started my graduate work, and I can now say that I have two languages – English and Tamil. But my poetry is deeply rooted in the cultural and linguistic context of the Tamil language. This is why I never tried to write poems in English. So in a sense, English became my academic language.

Secondly, and more importantly, writing in Tamil opens up different ideas, spaces, and images to me from my current location. I am an outsider within the larger Tamil context in Sri Lanka, but I am an insider in terms of what is taking place. In this sense, it is very important to me to be articulate in both languages. Writing poetry in Tamil gives me that powerful sense of location. This is why my poems "Apocalypse," "Healing the Forest," and the series of poems I wrote in May 2009 from *In a Time of Burning* (2013) are considered some of the most influential works on the genocide, even though I was not living in the North, or the Vanni, at that time.

Healing the Forest

To heal a still
smoldering land,
we went;
no bird in sight.

An empty sky
above the sparrow-flying
earth.

An ash-covered landless earth
to the edge of that wide expanse;
here, no one knows
how to gather bones.

Yet,

Our libation of milk
the relentless
welling of tears
now mocked with glee

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with dance and song
by an estranged foe;
what then is the
way ahead?

To cool the burning heart
there is nothing today.

No witness
for the drop of blood
still not dry.

To claim closure
to dissolve ashes in the sea
to scatter in the air
to close one's eyes,
there is no air
there is no sea
there is no way
to heal the forest.

(R. Cheran, *In a Time of Burning* 139)

AH: You have now begun to write plays in English. Why the shift? Is there something about the play that embodies a sense of performed activism?

CR: I began by writing creative non-fiction in English. Then May 2009 happened, and I lost hundreds of my friends and relatives. That apocalypse affected me deeply, and it's still very difficult for me to come out of this trauma. It was very distressing to see that while I felt that the first genocide of the twenty-first century had taken place, there was no reportage, no witnessing. The Armenians had to wait for a hundred years; now, everyone speaks of the Armenian genocide. And we don't even talk about the genocide of the Herero people by the German colonialists in 1904. That is gone. There's a hierarchy of pain. So, I thought that writing plays in English to be performed here in Toronto and the US would bring awareness to this issue. It was mainly a political project, and it was my artistic, and you might say aesthetic, response to this genocide. *What If the Rain Fails* (2008), *Not by Our Tears* (2009), and *Canto of War* (2010) were received very well wherever they were performed. I am sure that I will write more plays and non-fiction in English. I think the time has come.

AH: Can you tell us about any current initiatives to document the stories of refugees fleeing the atrocities that "officially" culminated in 2009, but in actual fact continued?

CR: There have been hundreds of narratives and testimonies in Tamil from witnesses and victims. Some of them have been published in Tamil,

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but not in English. In English, on the other hand, we have the books written by Western journalists, humanitarian workers, and Indian writers and journalists. They interview the victims, but the accounts are written in their words and language. The real voices of the victims have come out in Tamil, but they have not been adequately translated. I'm not saying that the accounts in English are lacking – we need all these accounts to give testament to what happened to my community. Most of these writers have an immense sense of solidarity and responsibility. But what I am trying to say is that it is equally important to give the voices of the victims and witnesses an audience outside the Tamil world. This brings up a political issue – how do location and language matter in this equation? Is it that if a victim cries in English, it makes more sense than in a vernacular language?

AH: It appears to me that there is a strong surge in writing by diasporic Tamil women poets. Do you find that these voices also trouble the more traditional waters of Tamil poetics?

CR: Yes and no. There has been a very strong feminist tradition in Tamil poetry written by women, especially from the eighties onwards, when we saw a rise in women's poetry in Tamil. This happened largely in Sri Lanka, not in Tamil Nadu or parts of the world where Tamils had a significant presence. A strong and critical feminist poetry emerged from the Tamil and Muslim women writers in Sri Lanka.

But there are difficulties; there are different kinds of patriarchies and structures of dominance at work. It is not just about the freedom to write what you want. There are also structures of family, which affect your interior landscape, your workspace, the absence of time and space necessary to contemplate and create. This problem is much more acute for women than for men. If I look at most of my friends who are women poets, they feel completely free to write, but there are the structures of patriarchal family that in a very subtle way affect their space and their time.

There are also several powerful Muslim women poets from Sri Lanka writing in Tamil. What happens to them when, for example, they challenge the orthodox ways of Islam or issues in womens' rights? A good case in point is Sharmila Syed who is a gifted writer. She was kicked out of her village and now lives in exile.

AH: In the context of postcolonial studies, particularly area studies, Sri Lanka often remains under erasure or subsumed within the larger "sign" of the subcontinent. In this context, the Tamil nation appears under double erasure. How does one speak against such internal hegemonies?

CR: This is one of the greatest difficulties with area studies. I feel that the conceptualization of area studies needs to be reworked. We all know that the beginning of area studies was aligned with imperial and colonial interests, and that this discipline came about as part of the larger project

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of colonialism and imperialism. Later, this morphs into the notion of development studies, where "development" simply means the development of capitalism. With this comes the idea that development can only be associated with various experts in area studies. We must understand that the person located in the Global North becomes the expert; the others are simply native informants. I used to appear in courts as an expert in refugee appeal hearings in Canada, U.S.A., and the U.K. Often, the counsel for the government would object to my status as an expert, saying I cannot be an expert on Sri Lanka simply because I was born there! This is, more or less, the model that area studies tends to follow.

I would propose a counter-model. Whether it is Tamil studies or South Asian studies, we must ask ourselves, what is the role that these studies play in the growth and enhancement of human civilization, social justice, and equality? Every language is an insight. How can we enhance these insights, these dimensions? And how will these dimensions and insights contribute to the widening and growth of human civilization for the benefit of humanity? For this to happen, we need to pay attention to the languages, to the different humanities. We cannot simply use English and French to comprehend the vast nuances and intricacies of these cultures.

AH: In a recent lecture, Steven Salaita mentioned the fact that he no longer thinks of Palestine as a nation, and that even as its geographical boundaries have shrunk, the idea of Palestine has become seminal. He says, "In my mind, Palestine is not a nation; it exists in music and poetry and dance." Can you give us a sense of how you define the idea of Tamil Eelam, and can you see a similar shift in the articulation of the idea of Eelam. What might some of the problematics of this idea be in the future?

CR: This is a necessary question at this moment. It is also pertinent here to remind ourselves that way back in the eighties, the veteran journalist and writer S. Sivanayakam wrote, in the editorials of the *Saturday Review*, that Tamil Eelam is a state of mind. In fact, he had stickers and posters with those words. The whole notion of the Tamil liberation struggle in the eighties was centred on the idea of a separate territory called "Tamil Eelam" for the Tamils, and this was a response to the systematic oppression and marginalization of the Tamils by the Sri Lankan State. This is what we call the national oppression. I think that the conditions that gave rise to the need for a separate state still exist. The condition was the inability and the unwillingness of the Sri Lankan State to reform – transform – itself to accommodate Tamils and Muslims. The demand for the recognition of Tamil as a nation is present in current articulations by the Tamil National Alliance and other Tamil parties, even though they are willing to live under a united Sri Lanka. This has become their discourse. But the contradiction is that the Tamil nation has become a "transnation" because, while they have been fighting for territory, almost a million and a half Tamils have left the country, and

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the exodus continues. They are in the diaspora; they are dreaming about setting up a separate state. They are transnationals simultaneously belonging to more than one place, nation, and history, but there is this monolithic sense of nationhood which refuses to fade. I am not denying the need for the Tamils to aspire to the dignity of a separate identity, or state, or any other alternative form of governance other than the current unitary and mono-ethnic Sinhalese-Buddhist model, but this should be decided by the people who live there. On the other hand, things have drastically changed due to the outmigration of the diaspora, and the loss of territory since the end of the war. The Sri Lankan state has successfully taken away masses of territory in the North and the East. This was a project initiated in the 1940s and went on unabated under all Sri Lankan governments, but the control of these territories by Tamil militants in the nineties prevented the Sri Lankan state from successfully going forward in strategic areas. But since 2009, the Sri Lankan state has been very successful in creating, in Israel's terms, "facts on the ground" that the entire country is Sinhala-Buddhist. This will go on under any government, whether they are "liberal" governments or the racist Mahinda Rajapaksa–style governments.[12] The Sinhala-Buddhist hegemonic project initiated in the forties will go on regardless of any change in the governments of Sri Lanka. As long as this continues, the desire to have a separate and distinct Tamil identity will thrive as well. That is a fact. But from a Tamil point of view, some of the biggest challenges result from outmigration and the loss of a large number of people in the past several decades in the war and in the pogroms. Almost 200,000 Tamils – including militants belonging to all groups – have perished since 1956 in Sri Lanka. This is huge for a demographically small community such as the Tamils. While survival as a distinct community has become a fundamental issue for Tamils, another critical issue that the Tamils need to consider is that all the nation-states in the world are currently controlled or dominated by corporate interests. Would it be in the interests of Tamils, and humanity, to be part of a corporate-controlled state system? Can we think of alternatives?

Currently, the Tamil nationalist project has become transnational, and we cannot talk about any project in Sri Lanka without talking about the powerful role of the Tamil diaspora. This is where the tension lies: within the responsibility of distance and the irresponsibility of distance. Right now, it seems to me that the fight at the literal, theoretical, and conceptual level is a fight between the irresponsibility of distance and the responsibility of distance. This is going to determine what sort of trajectory the demand for a separate state called Tamil Eelam will take in the future.

12 Mahinda Rajapaksa was the sixth president of Sri Lanka, under whose governance the genocide of May 2009 took place.

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Forgetting

We can forget all;
spurning the loss
of this miserable life,
with the confidence
sparked in a moment;
along Galle road,
we race
with pounding hearts;

jutting from the burning car,
a thigh bone;
fixed on a spot
between the earth and sky
a staring eye;
no eye, but the socket
filled with blood,
on Dickman's road;
instead of black heads
bloodied remnants
of six men;
a piece of cloth
escaping the fire,
severed,
without a watch
a lonely left arm;
from the burning house
carrying the weight
of a cradle
a pregnant Sinhalese woman,

all these,
all these can be forgotten.
But,
that late evening
when the clouds
descended to conceal
the tea bushes
where you hid your children,
when, after so long
with the little rice
in the pot
you waited, hiding
for the rice to cook
you were shattered.
How can I forget,
the broken pot,
the scattered rice?

(R. Cheran; qtd. in Kanaganayakam, *Wilting Laughter* 17)

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In a Time of Burning (2013)

You Cannot Turn Away (2011)

Yaman (1984)

The Second Sunrise (1982)

Aparna Halpé
Professor, Department of English and ESL, Centennial College

"The Problem of Postcolonial Archetype: A Reading of Wilson Harris's *Jonestown* (1996)," *Interferances* (2015)

Precarious (2013)

"Fielding Ondaatje: A Brief Look at the 'Canadian' Response," *Moving Worlds* (2011)

"Balancing in Silence," *Nethra* (2011)

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