From Gurunagar to Panagoda and Welikada: The "Multidirectional" View of Legal and Extra-legal Prison Camps in Shobasakthi's Fiction

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Introduction: The Premise and Scope of the Study

Prisons, safe-houses, and other incarceration spaces managed by the state and non-state organizations (such as militant political organizations) are central to Tamil novelist Shobasakthi's work. The novels *Gorilla* and *Traitor*, in particular, significantly draw on such sites where the indignant treatment of men and women, rampant physical and psychological trauma, unchecked violence, intimidation and coercion, and violent death are routine. The camp-violence Shobasakithi brings on, at a level, complements the tradition of narratives reflecting on the incarceration that followed the April 1971 political uprising and the emergency of 1987-1990 (Munasinghe 2000; Gunaratne 2008; Gunathilake 2009; Jayasinghe 2018): two country-level conflicts based in the Sri Lankan south. In these narratives, the "camp" is often presented as a conduit between captivity and disappearance/death; and, thereby, is framed as a compelling space in Sri Lanka's political imaginary. However, persuaded by ideological and political reasons, writers have often narrated the camp with bias such as, for instance, in the works of C.A. Chandraprema (1991) and Rohan Gunarathne (1990) – both purporting to write "inside stories" of the 1987-90 emergency – that were published immediately after the 1987-90 emergency. Writing with a palpable bias towards the state, these writers refrain from commentary or critique of the extra-judicial culture of impunity that was normalized in state-sponsored camps during the time that led to thousands of men and women being killed or disappeared (Perera, 2021, p. 25-26).

Shobasakthi's *Gorilla* and *Traitor* represent a wide range of prisons and incarceration centres in the north and the south of Sri Lanka; as well as in Europe. This includes "camps" that were operated by the military – such as the Gurunagar and Panagoda camps that were unmarked and outside the law. They differed from prisons in Welikada, Kandy, and Batticaloa (prominently featured in *Traitor*) which were legal entities managed by the Prisons Department of the country. Safe-houses operated by organizations associated with the Tamil liberation movement – that, in structure and operations, closely echo the facilities run by the military – is a third type of incarceration facility Shobasakthi frames in his fictional work. Together, despite being operated by

organizations with conflicting interests, Shobasakthi's fiction brings on a map of legal and extra-legal prisons with points of comparison and overlap. These sites, at best, are ambivalent and perverse, and support regimes and counter-regimes that are intolerant of each other; where soldiers and security operated with arbitrariness and impunity that mirror what Giorgio Agamben terms a "state of exception" (Agamben 1998, 136-138; Agamben 2005, p. 1-31): where social safeguards and rights of individuals are suspended and power is unchecked. Shobasakthi often blurs the boundaries between state and non-state organizations (such as contending militant groups) in order to challenge the myth of "good" and "bad" power. His map of prison spaces – irrespective of political creed and conviction - is an invitation for readers to review the "camp" for comparable patterns of violence, depravity, and indignation executed through a hegemonic dictation of authority.

Framework and Method

The present study engages in a close textual analysis of Shobasakthi's *Gorilla* and *Traitor*, focusing on representations of prison/incarceration spaces to consist of considerable overlap, mutual patterns, and schemes. In theoretical terms, Shobasakthi's understanding of state and non-state prison/incarceration facilities aligns with the idea of "multidirectional memory" - originally presented by Michael Rothberg - that encourages the arrangement of memories and residues of events in ways that transcend binaries and other limiting definitions; where, in search of complex patterns, memories are allowed to feed off each other (Rothberg, 2009). As a framework, "multidirectional memory" offers potential for a Sri Lankan readership where assessments of conflict are traditionally event-centric and event-specific: where conflict is often gauged within its own compartments, with scant regard for avenues of comparison. Such watertight imagination, while preventing them from marking echos and overlaps, discourages interplay between the memories of conflict events that carry the potential to complicate our conflict-imagination. In presenting "multidirectional memory" (which he established through the work of writers like Charlotte Delbo, the Algerian journalist, whose post-second world war books juxtapose war memory, along with those of French colonialism in Algeria, and Nazi incarceration camps) Rothberg calls for comparison and corroboration over the insularity of memory. In the Sri Lankan context, the work of at least two authors – that of Ben Bavinck and the photographer Stephen Champion: both, incidentally, published decades before Rothberg's theorizations – bring on comparative memory in a way that complements Rothberg's assertion. Bavinck's diary entries in the late-1980s and early-to-mid-1990s, later published as *Of Tamils and Tigers* (2011), and (British-born, Lanka-resident) Champion's compendium of photographs in *Lanka: War Stories* (2008), are remarkable for their play on the multidirectional energy of trauma and conflict memory.

Discussion: Shobasakthi's Critique of the Prison/Incarceration Camp

Gorilla (originally published in Tamil in 2001) and Traitor (published in Tamil in 2008 as Mm) triangulate Tamil conflict experience in the Sri Lankan north, south, and the European diaspora. They were set in the early-to-mid-1980s, Gorilla follows in part the story of Rocky Raj, a young Tamil liberation activist who, with increasing disillusionment of the organization belonged to (referred to as "the movement"), leaves its corps. Later, Rocky is incarcerated by "the movement" for some weeks under suspicion of stealing ammunition, where he is beaten, starved, and intimidated (Shobasakthi, 2008, p. 110-114). The extremity of this treatment runs parallel to alleged Police violence recorded elsewhere in the novel where, in Colombo, police beatings result in physical and mental trauma (Shobasakthi, 2008, p. 9-11) for captive suspects. Reference to Police brutality is also reported in the opening installments of Traitor (Shobasakthi, 2010, p. 23-26; 43-46; 50-57) that anchors on the story of Nesakumaran Ernest, a radicalized political activist who is interned in Police and army camps (from Urathurai and Gurunagar in Jaffna to Panagoda in the south) and state-run prisons in Welikada, Batticaloa, and Kandy. Nesakumaran witnesses disturbing torture of captives by camp superiors, and the massacre of July 1983 at the Welikada Prison where a group of (Sinhala) jailers and prisoners formed a mob to murder fifty three Tamil political prisoners (Shobasakthi, 2010, p. 82-100; 105-115). Elsewhere in the novel, being held as a captive by a Tamil political group which the writer insinuates to be the Liberation Tigers (LTTE), Nesakumaran witnesses a summary execution of prisoners of a rival group (Shobasakthi, 2010, p. 175-181) in a scene that closely mirrors the Welikada massacre.

Shobasakthi's representation of the prison space and sites of incarceration advances several key ends: foremost, it confirms and corroborates harsh realities framed in literature that testify to military and police violence on persons taken into custody as suspects. For instance, the detailed descriptions of depraved treatment of prisoners at the Panagoda camp - where suspects are beaten, bodies are mutilated, and torture that proves to be fatal to the person is executed at will (Shobasakthi, 2010, p. 68-69; 72-75) – complements textual sources that testify to military violence of a comparable kind in the Sri Lankan south (Munasinghe 2000; Jayasinghe 2018). Furthermore, Shobasakthi's framing of violence in prisons operated by militant organizations within the Tamil liberation movement (such as, as the writer insinuates, the LTTE) brings on descriptions of the interior functions of such incarceration facilities that are scarce and under-represented in the literature available in the English language. Notable literature in the English mainstream that comes close to describing the interiors of such camps - such as Ajith Boyagoda's *A Long Watch* (2018) – are selective in their depiction of "favourable treatment" of the inmate by the jailer, whereas in conflict-narratives by writers such as Niromi De Soyza and Malaravan – respectively, the authors of *Tamil*

Tigress (2011) and *War Journey* (2015), which are also set in the mid-to-late-1980s – such spaces have been completely deselected from narrative.

In giving representation to events unfolding in the Welikada Prison between the 25 and 28 July 1983, where a massacre of Tamil prisoners took place in two separate incidents, *Traitor* makes an important contribution as perhaps the first dedicated account of this violent event to be tabled in creative literature. While supporting reflections on this gruesome political event by commentators and activists (Thambiah, 1992, p. 72-73), Shobasakthi's effort also contributes to the wider memory of violence within state-run prisons where violent riots break out periodically under one pretext or another. A resonant case is found in a "special operation" by a deployment of the military in 2012 that resulted in the murder of twenty seven prisoners at the same prison facility (Pussawela, 2017). Repeated massacres happening on the same site, albeit carried out with different motivations, piques the reader to look further afield at the arrogance of power outside narrow ethno-nationalist formulas – at a view that has the potential to bring on north-south solidarity in the matter of political incarceration – to which discussions of violence are often limited.

Within the weave of Shobasakthi's "multidirectional map" – particularly, in *Gorilla*, where an illegal immigrant and an immigrant suspected of murder is treated by the French Police with humiliation and contempt (Shobasakthi, 2008, p. 156-157; 161-162) – representations of incarceration in European police / law-enforcement institutions are a significant undertaking. These sequences echo treatment of men and women humiliated and maltreated by the local police (Shobasakthi, 2010, p. 28-29; 52). For instance, the Police, in *Gorilla*, strips to his briefs the local thug Gorilla, who is then kept on public display in the town square, encouraging bypassers to take a look (Shobasakthi, 2008, p. 21) (incidentally, in the later sections of the novel, a similar punishment is administered to Gorilla by the "Movement" as well).

The hounding of politicized men by the legal and extra-legal machineries highlighted in this discussion comes to a high in Pakkiri, in *Traitor*, who is Nesakumaran's prison-companion. Pakkiri is both ideologically-grounded and educated. He is an atypical revolutionary, almost comical in description and manner. His fate is that of someone cast in an ironical farce. The very day his political party was formed Pakkiri falls into the hands of the military (Shobasakthi, 2010, p. 171) where it begins a long spell of suffering and indignation in several prison camps. He narrowly escapes death at Welikada and joins a daring prison-break in Batticaloa (Shobasakthi, 2010, p. 130-132) to be recaptured, and for his arms and legs to be broken (Shobasakthi, 2010, p. 132). Later, Pakkiri secures a release after bribing a Colombo court and returns to the north on the day his political organization gets proscribed by the LTTE. Pakkiri

is subsequently captured, incarcerated, and killed in the most brutal and gruesome manner (Shobasakthi, 2010, p. 181).

Supplement: The "Grey Zone" of the Prison

Shobasakthi's "prison map" is also notable for its portrayal of unlikely solidarities and companionships - those resonant of Primo Levi's idea of the "grey zone" in his writings of the Second World War Nazi concentration camp (Levi, 2019). While attention has been drawn to unlikely and seemingly incongruous relationships between opposing factions - such as inmates and guards - in the southern camps (Munasinghe, 2000, p. 21; 63-67; Jayasinghe, 2018, p. 123-124; 135-136), the "grey zone" implicating Tamil political prisoners in the custody of Sinhalese soldiers is highly under-represented. In this regard, reference to a compassionate soldier and a kindly interrogator at the Gurunagar camp is memorable to Nesakumaran's captivity (Shobasakthi, 2010, p. 62). Later, at Panagoda, a kind soldier provides the Tamil prisoners much needed news from the outside world (Shobasakthi, 2010, p. 74) while, at Welikada, several Sinhalese jailers protect the Tamil prisoners at great risk to their lives (Shobasakthi, 2010, p. 94). This "grey zone" is significant to narratives of Tamil political prisoners in the south of Sri Lanka, as it furnishes interplay with narratives of similar solidarities emerging from the southern camps of the 1971 emergency and the emergency of 1987-90 (Perera, 2026, 34-35).

Conclusion

Shobasakthi's assessment of spaces of incarceration and imprisonment in *Gorilla* and *Traitor* are framed as an extensive multidirectional map of violence by state and extra-state actors. This map allows for comparable forms of violence to be appreciated and understood, and for insightful echoes that motivate a worldview past political bias to be framed. Collectively, they allow for a complication of the prison space as a site of exception where - transcending the subjective "good vs. evil" debate - our understanding is directed to understand incarceration as a political fact that reaches over ethno-nationalist divisions that often undermine the arrogance of power.

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