

Survival media: the politics and poetics of mobility and the war in Sri Lanka

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BOOK REVIEW

Survival media: the politics and poetics of mobility and the war in Sri Lanka, by Suvendrini Perera, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 133 pp., US\$67.50 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-137-34594-3

Suvendrini Perera's *Survival Media: The Politics and Poetics of Mobility and the War in Sri Lanka* is an intellectually stimulating inter-disciplinary account on Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, the ghastly end of the civil war and how the survivors of the war, writers and artists residing in the country and among the diaspora represent in texts and audio-visual media the war and its legacies. Perera sees these representations as sites that expose the fraught relationship between the nation and its subjects and the messy alliances and disjunctures that emerge between the state and supranational institutions when violence leads to the destruction and displacement of marginalised populations in the global south. Looking at Sri Lanka, its people and their mobility from the vantage point of the aftermath of the war, *Survival Media* zooms in on the calamity that exclusivist nationalisms wreaked on human lives and how the fleeing refugee/immigrant populations re-narrate it in order to express their precarity and claim a safer future for themselves.

The rich historical analysis of state formation in Sri Lanka presented in the introductory chapter de-naturalises the (national) identities that occupy the heart of the Sri Lankan conflict and instead sees them as products of complex socio-economic and institutional processes that could be traced back to the colonial era. Perera holds the view that administrative processes like the census initiated by the colonial state laid the groundwork for the ethnic disharmony in post-colonial Sri Lanka. But her analysis does not let the political class of the post-independence era off the hook; she rightly notes that this class, while projecting themselves as champions of decolonisation, accentuated these differences for their own political gains. Though Perera draws our attention to the 'long histories of [ethnic] overlap' in the island, she does not overlook the dialectics of the postcolonial state and how its discriminatory policies pushed the minority communities towards its margins and how such marginalisation fuelled in the Tamil community separatist desires (7). Unmasking the ethnic majoritarianism underneath the LTTE's nationalist politics, she forcefully demonstrates the inadequacies of ethno-nationalism as a framing logic in processes of state (re)formation.


Perera's theorising of survival media as 'embodied and expressive movements of survivors and refugees of the war and the practices and narratives, artifacts and apparatuses that constitute their flights, forced and free' in the first chapter shows that this body of representations is arguably different from diasporic literary and artistic expressions about the cultural dislocation experienced by immigrants and their descendants post-naturalisation. Unlike the latter, the focus of survival media is centrally on the ambivalent moment of flight and the hopes and anxieties that mark that moment. Presenting the productions of Sri Lankan Tamil-origin artist M. I. A. (Maya Arulpragasam) as examples of survival media, Perera remarks in the second chapter that in some of M. I. A.'s works the Sri Lankan civil war and global struggles against racism animate each other. From Perera's astute analysis of the (self-)representations of the refugees in Australia in the third chapter emerges the idea that discourses around citizenship in the global north are terrains where the unifying racial ideologies propagated by hosting states clash with the heterogeneous self-articulations of the refugee subjects originating from their homelands. For instance, she sees in *Theatre of Migration*, a community production

by Sydney-based diasporic Sri Lankans, a performance that reveals the contradictions within the Sri Lankan diaspora in Australia along ethnic, religious, political and linguistic lines.

The last two chapters of the book concentrate on the violent happenings during the last phase of the war in Sri Lanka. Citing the UNOSAT's decision to keep the satellite images of the war zone from public view at the height of the war, Perera, in the fourth chapter, contends that the international community, alongside the state, silenced the people trapped inside the war theatre and expresses her scepticism over the accountability mechanisms designed by international organisations purportedly to deliver justice to the war survivors. In the textured analysis of the relationship between nation, sovereignty and the female subject in the fifth chapter, Perera observes that the sexual and other forms of violence exacted on the bodies of (deceased) female members of the LTTE signify the triumphant state's assertion of its supremacy. Commenting also on the construction of the female suicide bomber in the LTTE's narrative as a victim (of rape) turned avenger, the fifth chapter indicates that both the LTTE and the state took advantage of the sexual mores encoded on the female body in their nation-making processes.

Foregrounding the enduring residues of European colonialism, post-independence state formation, the rise of ethno-nationalisms, the civil war and the mobilities it produced, *Survival Media* frames (Sri) Lanka as a specific historical and experiential category without fixed geographic borders. But in so doing, Perera chooses to dispense with the 'Sri' in 'Sri Lanka' keeping in mind the term's chauvinistic underpinnings. At a time when refugee studies is pre-occupied with the refugee crisis in Europe precipitated by the developments in West Asia, Perera's book on mobility and its representations, by having Lanka as its central node, attempts to give prominence to a neglected location and history and an array of understudied experiences.

Both in its structure and style *Survival Media* is fluid. Reading this book, especially its conclusion, one hears an exhortation to the reader to be open and open-ended in his or her approaches to the past and its violations. As a way-out to the political impasse caused by the war in the relationship between the different communities inhabiting the island, Perera invites us to see the call for justice as emerging from the multiple, contradictory and non-linear ways in which the people (re)frame and (re)narrate their stories of risk, survival and mobility within and outside of Sri Lanka in their quest for a secure future.

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