

## THE MUTED VOICE AND UNTOLD SUFFERINGS: A STUDY OF JEAN ARASANAYAGAM'S ALL IS BURNING

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### ABSTRACT

*All is Burning* is truth-telling. Jean Arasanayagam's writing contains some of the most powerful and truthful stories to come out of Sri Lanka. She is a wonderful writer and is one of the most significant voices writing in Sri Lanka today. It is the duty of literary writers to bring the truth of suffering to light to awaken the masses against the atrocities on refugees and to get a curb on human rights violations. *All is Burning* is a collection of short stories which describes the hardships of civilians within the island by ethnic strife. This article focuses on the short story "All is Burning" that depicts the muted voice and untold sufferings of the women in a war torn country where men are looted and women have to survive after all the disasters of life.

**Key Words** – Muted Voices, Untold Sufferings, Awaken, Atrocities, Refugees, Human Rights Violation, Ethnic Strife and Disasters of Life.

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Jean Arasanayagam (1931-2019) is one of the leading literary voices in contemporary Sri Lankan literature. She is a well-known poet and short story writer in Sri Lanka. She is the author of fifty books. Her writings are highly political and polemical. Many of her works have been translated into various languages such as Swedish, French, Japanese and Danish. She has received many awards from other countries. She has received the Sahityarata award from the Sri Lanka government in 2017, the Premchand fellowship from Sakathiya Academy, India in 2014 and received the Gratian prize which is prestigious literary award in Sri Lanka. Her notable works include: *Kindura* (1973) *Apocalypse 83* (1984), *The Cry of the Kite* (1984) *A Colonial Inheritance and Other Poems* (1985), *Out of our Prisons We Emerge* (1987), *Fragments of a Journey* (1992) *All is Burning* (1995) *Peacock and Dreams* (1996) and *Shooting the Florian* (1996).

*All is Burning* is truth-telling. This contains some of the most powerful and truthful stories to come out of Sri Lanka. In "All is Burning" Jean Arasanayagam brings us voices that are not normally heard: those of anonymous men and women searching for order and reason in the midst of a ruthless civil war. While many succumb to the horror of their times, there are others who discover in themselves unexpected reserves that will help them survive. Thus a young Sinhala man turns his back on an aimless upper-class existence and joins a group of Tamil refugees smuggling themselves into Germany; a woman goes out alone to see the scene of a carnage to try and find her daughter's lover among the dead and dying; a maid

returns from the rich desert city of Doha to the green half-jungle of her village in northern Sri Lanka and rediscovers happiness despite the uncertain future. In addition to stories about the effects of war and violence, this collection also explores aspects of ethnicity and individual choice in a multicultural society.

“*All is Burning*” is the sorrow of a lonely mother who has raised her daughter irrespective of all the hardships with a hope that at least her daughter would live a happy married life, but a heavy blow strikes them. Jean Arasanayagam portrays the suffering of Alice and her daughter Seela who seeks to find Sena. The whole village has lost their male counterparts down and out. The mother and daughter are in utter dismay and not only their huts, but also their lives are in utter darkness, worried about future. Seela, a young woman of 20s seemed older than her age. The pain she endures is expressed, when she calls out to her mother, “Mother, shall we go in search of Sena? He may still be alive if he has not been taken away. I’ll come with you. You can’t go alone. They may still be there who knows. We can guide each other. It’s still not light, we have to search for the path. It may be an unfamiliar one” (167). The persona wants to go out and search but she does not know how effective it would be. Alice, her mother was worried about Seela’s security, she was ready to accept any difficulty for her daughter’s sake, so she warned her daughter to be safe and gave her instructions “No. You wait. Don’t open the door to anyone. Remain in darkness. Don’t light the lamp” (167). The daughter too was worried of her mother going alone. The whole village was awe stricken. Alice stepped out of the house in search of Sena. She was alert as she had to guide herself by “odours – unusual odours of gunshot, of blood, borne by the slight, chill tremors of wind. There would be that human odour too, of fear, that rank smell of bodies through whose pores fear had breathed (167-168). Alice was confident in facing her trial all alone. If she finds Sena, she could drag him out of the dead and save him. She had to turn over each body and find out Sena. “She bent over, turned up face after face. All she recognised were the empty faces of men. Men who were all akin, all brothers, husbands, fathers. All gone. To leave life in so unfinished, so haphazard a manner” (173). It was a difficult task for Alice to move around amidst the dead bodies, she almost stumbled every now and then, some had last breath, “the soul that is reluctant to leave the body” (173). Funeral for each individual is impossible. Only reminders of each man is carried in the minds of the wife or mother. Many are anonymous and a few are claimed. Even the birds move out from this deadly habitat of gunshots to other places. Life becomes impossible in a treacherous land of slaughter. Her search for Sena continues in a mechanical way, a searcher continues until her mission is accomplished.

Alice ransacked the place, but could not find Sena. She had hope that Sena would return someday and with that hope Seela too will continue to live the rest of her life. Until there is the last breath, everyone has hope. She understands the reality of life and tries to cope up with life whatever may be the circumstances. The whole village was left without men, two hundred and fifty, all were taken and the women were left alone to cater to needs of their children. In this stage of their life women are given more strength to endure the pain and live the rest of their life. As death is unpredictable, yet happens at one point of time, hope continues and gives courage to face life as it comes. Each human being gathers courage and tries to go ahead with life irrespective of the ordeals they face. Life is a strange irony.

Jean discusses the loss of identity in depth as it is only one’s identity that is the basis of his existence, that adds a value to his life and that makes him a ‘human’ being. Refugees have no personal identities – they are just ‘refugees’: “Identity is still the burning question of the day in our part of the world; identity that separates and divides.” (3) A refugee loses his aim or purpose of life, his life is limited from hand to mouth – that too on the mercy of someone else as the protagonist who joins a band of refugees abode expresses his feelings: “That journey of his, that Road to Perfection.....And ours? We are traveling on many

unknown roads. Taking unfamiliar routes through alien terrain, crossing frontiers and borders. On and on we travel. To reach what destination and why?" (2)

Families are separated, children are left orphan, and nobody knows where the other members of the family are. There is endless mental and physical suffering for refugees: "A baby, four days old, slept beside its mother. The father? Lost somewhere, perhaps dead or perhaps he had deserted mother and child. No one questioned. No one knew or cared. The young mother still groaned, she hadn't got over the rigours of labour and child birth. She asked for rags, old clothes to cover herself and child with." (397)

There is no privacy even for women so that they may change or attend to their natural calls: "We were beginning to learn what sweat and grime were as our clothes clung to our bodies. There was no necessity to change our skins. Others too had grown accustomed to the sight. We lived in full public view of everybody, sleeping, eating, talking, moving around, visiting each other's newly established territory. Queues were necessary. They formed everywhere, for food, for toilets. I was living in one set of clothes. There were no screens behind which one could change. (396-397)

Insecurity is so deep-rooted that the refugees don't feel safe even in a camp where security is provided. Moreover, whenever any ethnic conflict begins, people are displaced in such great numbers that it becomes very difficult for authorities to provide basic amenities and enough security to them. This they understand well and this feeling makes them more unsafe: "No one pleaded for pity. Safety for our lives, especially for our children, was the main concern. Yet I myself could not fall asleep. I was alert for sounds, for every movement, every footstep. Anyone could walk in and do his will with us. There were only two men to provide security for the thousands of us who were in here. This was a prison although we could have, if we disregarded our safety, walked out. But walk out where? Into danger. The outside world was not the same world we were accustomed to. Even a look, a word, could stab us. But our wounds went deeper. We bore with us for life a bruised and tattered psyche." (400)

In refugee camps, there is equality of a peculiar kind – everybody is equal, no one has any separate identity, everybody is on the undesirable mercy of an authority and everybody has an uncertain future: "What mattered most here was life, even it was to be lived in all this squalor where you would creep like an animal into a lair and feel your pelt prickling with instinctive fear. Civilization meant nothing here. Philosophers were absent. So was political theorizing. You delved deep into the hitherto undiscovered springs of your primeval psyche to find the source of pure and absolute energy. Or else there was a new defeatism you had to accept. You had to succumb to the strength of brute force; allow your flesh to cringe. At all costs, this must never happen." (393)

To conclude, Jean, as a writer, has been doing this literary service for mankind for decades. She describes the suffering of the displaced, of the minorities and leaves it for the readers to draw conclusions or to make corrective steps themselves.

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