IN SEARCH OF THE NATION: *WHEN MEMORY DIES* AND THE [IM]POSSIBILITY OF A NATIONAL IMAGINARY IN POSTCOLONIAL SRI LANKA

"[W]hen memory dies, a people die" (Sivanandan 1997: 335). These prophetic words echo throughout Ambalavaner Sivanandan's ambitious historical saga *When Memory Dies*, as testimony to the centrality of memory in defining and sustaining the nation. Ernest Renan in "What is a Nation?" (1990 [1882]), considered an inaugural attempt at a theoretical definition of the nation in modern times, identifies the critical role shared memories play in forging a national consciousness. This is a theme that has a long critical genealogy and is perhaps most famously theorised in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991), where Anderson identifies the key role a shared national consciousness plays in the emergence of the modern nation state through what he terms "print capitalism". If such is the power of national memory, Sivanandan's text can be seen as a narrative that attempts the politically and socially committed task of resurrecting inclusive national memories that seek to counter the seemingly intractable polarization of the two numerically dominant Sinhala and Tamil communities in Sri Lanka today. Yet even as it reaches backwards for this gargantuan task of historical re-visioning the text seems unable to fulfil itself because the very spaces in which it seeks to locate an inclusive national imaginary (the labour movement and the family) appear divisive and unable to yield the unity sought for. Quasi-epical in ambition, *When Memory Dies*, foregrounds the multiple problems encountered in the translation of a Eurocentric nationalist model in a non-Western society and also points towards another fundamental question—the [im]possibility of locating an inclusive national imaginary in Sri Lanka.

The nation-state in South Asia, as Partha Chatterjee (1993) has convincingly argued, is not a simple derivative copy of a European[1] original but a complex adaptation which reveals the very processes of transformation Eurocentric modernity underwent as it came in contact with different cultures and contexts. Whilst actively and aggressively seeking modernity in the public realm in the form of modern institutions of governance, technology and educational systems, many nationalist movements in South Asia defined their unique anti-colonial character within what could be loosely defined as the

[1] My use of the term European here shares the kind of generalised scope of reference in which Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) uses it. Chakrabarty calls this the "hyperreal Europe" a sort of quasi-transcendental idea of western modernity and intellectual tradition that pervades academic scholarship and becomes a standard against which the rest of the world (especially the third world) is evaluated.

private sphere. The private sphere and the "indigenous" culture it represented was considered to be relatively uncontaminated by Western influence and was therefore co-opted as a powerful site from which national sovereignty could be articulated. The success and strength of this strategy in terms of decolonisation is evident in the history of Indian nationalism but it has also meant that the newly emerging post-colonial nation often assumed a particularistic religio-ethnic character. This paradoxical legacy from the anti-colonial struggle remains at the heart of many postcolonial nationalisms in South Asia—a powerful mobilizing force that enabled cultural and social resurgence to defeat imperial domination, but emerging as a repressive and particularistic dogma in the post independence period. In the Sri Lankan context both Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms arose as anti-colonial movements within the last decades of colonial rule and were in an uneasy alliance for a short period leading to formal independence. Following independence, however, Sinhala nationalism increasingly sought to legitimise its position and establish cultural, political and economic dominance, under the seemingly justifiable rubric of a disenfranchised majority asserting its "rightful" status whilst shaking off past colonial fetters. This nationalistic drive has led to the alienation of many other ethno-religious communities in the country, resulting in a situation of armed conflict where sections of the Tamil community are seeking self-governance through an armed rebellion. Sivanandan's text moves through almost eight decades of Sri Lankan history and interweaves a family saga with the history of these two competing nationalisms—searching for, but never quite finding that space of unity.

A Space of Unity? The Early Labour Movement

When Memory Dies is presented in three books [sections called books] and Book One deals with the life of Sahadevan (Saha for short). It traces the life of Saha in the mainly Sinhala-dominated south of the country as he witnesses history being made. Saha is both an observer of and reluctant participant in the country's early labour movement. This grassroots workers' movement is portrayed in the text as a radical and at times militant struggle which has the makings of an inclusive nationalism but is unable to fulfil its potential because its trajectory is altered by the intervention of bourgeoisie politics. The sincerity and inclusivity of the politics represented by S.W. —a Gramscian organic intellectual-type working class leader—is swept aside by the opportunistic and non-inclusive politics of the real-life labour politician A.E. Goonesinha. The text suggests that the bourgeoisie politics of Goonesinha orients people towards a non-inclusive trajectory that betrays both the Marxist ideals and the broad inclusivity represented by S.W. But a close reading problematises a binary interpretation of S.W.'s "good" politics being defeated by Goonesinha's "bad" politics and points towards historical conditions that enable Goonesinha's success—conditions that reveal the problems encountered in translating a multi-cultural social and

geographic space into the linear logic of a modern nation state. Qadri Ismail (2005: 169-223) reads this as a form of historical determinism. *When Memory Dies* revises the historical record to posit moments of inter-communal co-existence that both Sinhalese and Tamil nationalist histories do not attest to. However, Ismail argues that the book is unable to sustain this radical re-visioning of history due to its "historicism". One dimension of Ismail's definition of historicism here, expressed simply, is the idea that the past determines the present. Hence Sivanandan's text must conclude the passage of the inclusive labour movement represented by S.W. in failure. To quote Ismail: "There isn't multiethnic community in the present. Was it possible in the past? Could it be imagined? Not really" (2005: 209). Ismail's critique of *When Memory Dies* forms part of a larger epistemological critique of the practice of historiography and historical consciousness in Sri Lanka.[2] But why is history debilitating for the imagination of a multiethnic community in Sri Lanka? How does historical consciousness intervene in this novel to disrupt the inclusivity it wishes to narrate? Tentative answers emerge in the depiction of the labour movement in Book One.

Saha, the educated son of a poor Tamil farmer, arrives in Colombo, the capital city of the country, as a politically and socially naïve "country boy". But he is soon placed amidst complex political currents through his close relationship with Tissa, a Sinhala colleague and Tissa's uncle S.W. As the narrative unfolds Tissa becomes closely involved in Goonesinha's politics, estranging him from his uncle while Saha is divided in his loyalties to the two men, but recognises that S.W.'s politics represent a subaltern counterpoint (Perera 1997: 14) to Goonesinha's organised bourgeoisie politics.[3] The period Saha bears witness to is one of tremendous social upheaval as a nascent anti-colonial struggle expresses itself through trade union activity. Kumari Jayawardena (2003: 17-26) observes that the 1890s to 1930s period saw significant worker mobilization against colonial capitalism and notes the radical militancy and broadly inclusive nature of the workers' movement of this period. In the late 19th century a common sense of victimisation due to long working

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[2] Ismail's (2005) problematisation of history follows David Scott's (1999) pioneering intervention in the problem of historical discourse in Sri Lanka. Scott argues that history understood as a definitive account of the past and the influence that the past holds over the present has reached a conceptual impasse for the imagining of peace in Sri Lanka.

[3] Sivanandan's depiction of Goonesinha departs significantly from how social historians like Kumari Jayawardena assess him. For Jayawardena Goonesinha represents an important political activist in the early labour movement in Sri Lanka. And indeed most historical sources document Goonesinha as being despised by his conservative political colleagues in the Ceylon National Congress (CNC). Mainstream CNC members viewed him as a rabble-rouser who threatened their political stability by bringing 'undesirables' like working class people into the political system. However, Sivanandan, in a deliberate piece of historical revision casts Goonesinha as a Janus-faced bourgeoisie politician.

hours, poor wages and unjust labour management practices united the working class of the island which was drawn from diverse communities like Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Tamils, Moors, Burghers and Malays. The workers movement did not conceive of itself as a nationalist struggle but its radicalism, militancy and inclusive character had the makings of a substantial anti-colonial movement that the elite-led bourgeoisie nationalism that followed it did not possess (Jayawardena 2003: 17).

Through S.W. Saha learns about the labour movement which lies outside of institutionalised structures like party politics. It is a struggle that requires no external agency but depends on leaders drawn from within itself and has no rigid communal, or religious demarcations. The text privileges the workers' struggle over the institutionalised labour politics represented by A.E. Goonesinha. Goonesinha's movement is seen as communally divisive and fundamentally flawed in its top-down approach. S.W. in contrast is portrayed as a born leader with an astute intelligence and incisive knowledge of the ideological forces that shape his existence. The narrative positions S.W. alongside such historical figures as "Hamban" William, a union activist who played a central role in the 1923 general strike. William regularly visits S.W. at his home to discuss trade union activity and Saha's ignorance of politics in general is exposed when Prema mentions William's name and it fails to register on Saha (*When Memory Dies*: 22-23). Following this incident Saha, shamed of his ignorance, begins to take a more active interest in local politics initiating a process where S.W. attempts to interpellate Saha into his ideology. The political and social philosophy that S.W. expresses here encapsulates a vision that the text authorises and upholds as a radically uncompromising alternative to the politics that ultimately triumph—Goonesinha's bourgeoisie-led alternative that is willing to compromise its ideals and collaborate with the colonial administration. The following passage is representative of the alterity of this vision:

> They [the British] say they are bringing civilization to us, with railways and roads, when what they are really doing is transporting the wealth out of the country. I am not saying [...] the railways are a bad thing; after all I am a railway man myself, but we should have come to it in our own time, at our own speed.... It wasn't the right time. Like a *namban* mango, they had got ripe before time. The rhythm was all wrong, they were no longer in tune with themselves. (*When Memory Dies*: 38)

This critique of colonialism and the fundamental changes it has wrought in the collective psyche of the community represented by "rhythm"—a musical metaphor that evokes a harmonious functioning of the whole—rhymes with the opening paragraphs of the novel where the advent of colonialism is signified as a decisive rupture of indigenous history: "in 1505... Don Laurenco de

Almeida...landed on our shores and broke us from our history." (Sivanandan 1997: 5) This iconic moment in the colonial history of the country, when the first Portuguese landed on the island, is seen as precipitating a crisis that goes beyond mere political or economic domination. It is seen as the breaking of an organic harmony between people and their history and begins a process of self-alienation. This type of incisive vision characterises S.W.'s position on the labour movement as well. He is wary of Goonesinha's politics from the outset and mistrusts Goonesinha's ability as a bourgeoisie leader to fully represent the workers. The idea of an external agent animating the workers struggle is problematic for S.W. and he warns "...he [Goonesinha] is trying to organize the workers. From the outside in" (*When Memory Dies* 56).

Another characteristic of S.W.'s politics is his firm and genuine commitment to inclusivity. While Goonesinha in his public performance as a politician professes a broad inter-communal approach, the text exposes him as an expedient politician willing to sacrifice his principles to gain popular support. When it comes to defending the Indian-Tamil[4] labourer Ramasamy unjustly interdicted by the colonial railway administration, Goonesinha uses the opportunity for maximum media exposure but conveniently avoids the issue later because the majority of the workers are unwilling to recognise the Indian-Tamil labourer as a legitimate partner in their struggle. In contrast S.W. tries his best to defend Ramasamy but fails. This practical failure of S.W.'s efforts, though his philosophy is privileged by the text for its inclusivity, typifies the overall failure of the politics he represents—a failure that anticipates and metonymically prefigures the exclusionary nature of the emerging nation. The ending of Book One suggests that S.W. and the politics he represents belong to a bygone era —symbolised in S.W.'s death and the success of Goonesinha's highly organised populist campaign. Yet while a massive island-wide general strike organised by Goonesinha's labour party is successful and even threatens the authority of the colonial government, the closing passages of Book One suggest unresolved tensions and uncertainty about this apparent victory and what it holds for the future of the nation. Goonesinha has reached a deal with the colonial administration to call off the strike, and the tableau of him standing alongside the liveried Colonial Secretary, above the workers graphically illustrates the betrayal of their struggle. Thus while the crowd around them rejoices Saha, Para and Tissa cradling the body of the young Sultan (Tissa's sidekick) killed earlier by police gunfire are full of uncertainty and cannot share in the crowd's enthusiasm for the future.

The most immediately apparent reading of Goonesinha's triumph here is the success of opportunistic, non-inclusive politics that characterises the rest of the novel and shown as playing a major role in the exclusionary nationalism that

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[4] Indian-Tamil labour was imported in large numbers by the British colonial government mainly for work in the plantation sector but a few of the workers also migrated to other industries and services.

emerges in postcolonial Sri Lanka. However, a close reading of the text also suggests that consciousness of ethnic difference is a pre-existent condition and that Goonesinha simply assumes what can be termed an "enunciative" position within a discourse. In a Foucaldian sense the power of a leader is less attributable to the agency of the individual than to his or her perceived position within a discursive structure and Goonesinha can be seen as an individual who assumes such a position of authority. The period in which Goonesinha's politics emerges is a time when a nascent nationalism is struggling to evolve and find form and content for itself. This is not pre-determined as the inclusivity that S.W tries to bring to it suggests. This is one of the strengths of how *When Memory Dies* depicts history—not as an inevitable given but as something contingent on historically specific socio-political conditions. Yet at the same time the text suggests that nationalist consciousness does not emerge from a *tabula rasa* but alters and reconfigures structures of pre-existent community and historical consciousness.

The origins of the nation has long posed a theoretical dilemma. Theorists like Anthony D. Smith (1986) forward a primordialist understanding of nation—the idea that primordial structures of community like ethnicity are the basis of modern nation states. Modernist interpretations, on the other hand, assert the "modernity" of the nation and suggest national consciousness is more or less an "invention" or "construction" that bears little or no resemblance to forms of community that predate it (Ellie Kedourie 1966 and Eric Hobsbawm 1983). But a postcolonial perspective finds both explanations politically and conceptually problematic. A primordialist approach easily positions third world nationalisms as primitive and the modernist thesis evacuates their radical political potential by dismissing them as mere fictions. Hence, as discussed earlier, critics like Partha Chatterjee (1993) propose an alternative third model that negotiates between the primordialist and modernist positions. While acknowledging the nation's modernity Chatterjee argues that anti-colonial South Asian nationalism constructed a unique space for itself in the private/cultural sphere. If, under colonialism, the public domain signified the dominance of the West (economic, governmental and military superiority), the private or the familial became identified as the site of "authentic" national culture—a source of pride and inspiration for a dominated people.

However, this cultural sphere is both the enabling and disabling condition of nationalism—it enables a powerful site to resist colonial domination but also has the potential of aligning the emerging nationalism within a particularistic ideology. In other words the idea of an "authentic" culture presupposes or contains within it the idea of "inauthenticity". Thus a culturally grounded nationalism draws boundaries on what it includes and excludes and it is in the demarcation of such boundaries that nationalism can become exclusionary. It is this problematic of national historical consciousness that becomes visible during a cardinal moment in the text. As S.W. narrates a history

of anti-colonialist activism to Saha he refers to the "Panadura Debate". S.W. invokes this incident as part of a collective memory of anti-colonial resistance that he wishes to hand down to the next generation, represented by the naive Saha. He is worried that "no one will know the true story of our country" and is anxious to ensure its continuity. The "Panadura Debate" was a public confrontation between Christian missionaries and Buddhist priests in 1873. The two sides met to battle out the philosophical superiority of the two religions and the debate took place against an increasingly confrontational Buddhist response to aggressive evangelical missionary activity in the country. The Buddhist side was led by Migetuwatte Gunananda, while the missionaries were led by the Sinhalese Wesleyan minister David de Silva (Malalgoda 1978). In S.W.'s rendering of the event, Gunananda stands unequivocally for a nascent anti-colonial nationalism while de Silva, as a representative of Christianity, is identified with colonialism. Both in popular lore and historical sources Gunananda is depicted as having scored a "victory" through his populist oratory and S.W., who witnessed this incident as a boy recalls: "I could tell we were winning from the excitement all around me" (Sivanandan 1997: 40) But this moment of anti-colonial triumph is marked by an inner tension. The Wesleyan minister, David de Silva, is a Sinhalese Christian and is part of a larger community of Sinhalese and people from other communities who converted to Christianity under colonialism. This incident then, understood and presented as anti-colonial, has another dimension which is very important to the problem posed by the idea of an "authentic" national culture. The presence of de Silva problematises the nationalistic construction of an organic bond between Sinhalese ethnicity and the Buddhist religion, and its projection of an ideal Sinhalese Buddhist subject. de Silva, the Sinhalese Christian, is not just some deculturated colonial subject assimilated into an alien religion, but a historical subject formation who emerged in the rupture of the "natural" and organic bond between Sinhalese ethnicity and Buddhism, and who, in his historical emergence, signals the nation's ethno-cultural configuration as unfixed and moveable.

The history that S.W. invokes here is thus a Sinhala or more properly Sinhala Buddhist history. Though S.W. himself is committed to plurality the history he can narrate already anticipates the multiple exclusions through which the postcolonial Sri Lankan state would define itself. Early Sinhala Buddhist revivalists like Anagarika Dharmapala had begun to promote this ethno-religious consciousness as part of an anti-colonial strategy, in the early twentieth century and the time frame that S.W.'s character is placed in by the author coincides with this rising awareness. S.W. in fact names three such ethno-cultural revivalists: Siddhi Lebbe, Navalar and Dharmapala (Sivanandan 1997: 39). But none of these figures articulated a broadly inclusive pan-Sri Lankan identity—their focus remained essentially mono-cultural. It is within such a historical context that one can understand the triumph of Goonesinha's divisive politics.

The Family as Nation

As a family saga that spans three generations the familial space is another location in which *When Memory Dies* seeks to locate an inclusive national imaginary. The novel in its entirety can be read in terms of two symbolic journeys. One is Saha's relatively easy passage from the north of the country to the south and into the familial space of S.W.'s family where S.W. becomes a surrogate father to him. The other is Saha's grandson, Vijay's, unsuccessful attempt two generations later to repeat the same journey from the south to the north as an emissary of peace and reconciliation—with the intervening space charting the gradual polarisation of the Tamil and Sinhalese communities to the point of militant combat. In Book One, as in the case of the labour movement, there is potential for co-existence within the familial sphere but while the familial might provide a micro structure of inclusivity, the translation of this into anything larger such as a community consciousness or a national imaginary fails. The organic harmony of the family is unable to extend itself to a public sphere riven by ethno-religious divisions.

The text has several instances of familial bonding which allows people from diverse communities to unite within the private sphere of the family. Yet such familial harmony is also shown to be fragile—open to the violent intrusion of the public into the private. In Book One Saha develops a strong affinity to the predominantly Sinhala south through two familial spaces. With S.W. and Aunty Prema, Saha has a relatively easy relationship which is founded on a strong emotional bond with Saha beginning to view S.W. as a sort of a surrogate father figure. A common sense of victimisation as exploited "workers" within the colonial economy also informs this relationship. The level of intimacy between Saha and S.W. is apparent at S.W.'s death when Saha exclaims "Gone....My father gone" (*When Memory Dies*: 87). Saha's naming of S.W. as "father" here displaces the notion of biological "patria" into a sociological domain, opening up the possibility of claiming identity on the basis of affinity rather than biological origin. Such a problematisation of "natural" or given identity facilitates a space where Tamil and Sinhala identities do not denote an absolute "natural" difference, or an unchallengeable ontological reality, but more a learned way of life. If as Renan (1990 [1882]) suggests the nation is "patria" or the fatherland, Saha's naming of S.W. as father allows him a symbolic bonding with the "Sinhala" nation. However this does not denote an assimilation of Saha's Tamilness into Sinhala culture. Unlike the logic of hegemonic nationalism S.W. and Saha's relationship does not follow a hierarchical schema where Saha is either placed as an unequal partner in the family or is expected to "perform" a Sinhala identity. The familial space here allows him to truly belong whilst retaining his distinctive identity as a Tamil. Similarly Saha is able to blend in with the lifestyle and culture of the south through another familial space–Tissa's family in the coastal village of Kalutara:

> Within hours of meeting Tissa's family, Sahadevan felt more at ease with himself than he had for a long time, whether at the chummery or at his uncle Segaram's house. Tissa's coastal village, with its tiled roofs, cemented verandahs, was nothing like his own. And yet there was a familiar warmth and hospitality and an easy-going acceptance of him that he had not known since he had left Sandilipay. Quite easily and simply Sahadevan had slipped into Tissa's way of life, got to wearing a *sarong* which he found less inhibiting than the *verti*, developed a taste for the milder Sinhalese curry... (*When Memory Dies*: 20, italics original)

The geographical difference, as manifested in architectural difference, is superseded by the familiarity of the familial space. The change in clothes and food, both important markers of culture, also suggest a movement between the Tamil and Sinhala cultural domains enabled within the familiarity and warmth of the homely. Yet the familial, while enabling a micro-structure of inclusivity is unable to translate itself into the larger context of the integrative nation. This failure manifests itself when Saha and Para visit the estate town of Hatton[5] in search of a prospective groom for one of Saha's sisters. In Hatton Saha and Para encounter internal differences within the Tamil community, intimately linked to the Tamils' conception of their past in the country–differences that are unable to resolve themselves within the familial sphere. The groom, Jeya, and his family are Sri Lankan or "Jaffna" Tamils while a majority of the Tamil community in Hatton are "Indian" or Estate Tamils. Saha and Para, though Jaffna Tamils themselves, are shocked by the derogatory attitude Jeya displays towards the estate Tamil community. However, Para refuses to acknowledge this cultural logic and breaches a taboo when he drinks water from a faucet reserved for them–an act of ritual pollution in an extreme sense but more of a loss of face for Jeya who jealously guards his public profile as a Jaffna Tamil within the community. Subsequently Jeya and Para have an argument over the rights of the Estate Tamils and Jeya insinuates that Para's comments can be disregarded because his illegitimacy denies him true membership in the family. Saha is furious at this slur on his brother and both brothers abruptly abandon the marriage plans and leave Hatton (*When Memory Dies*: 101-102).

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[5] Hatton is described in Book Three as a town that has seen little or no economic development. The overall feeling is that development had passed it by (suggested by the road, an important vector of capital, that is seen as rushing and leaping through the town with very little connection to it—Sivanandan 1997: 256). This stagnant quality is evident in descriptions of Sandilipay as well. In Book One Saha compares the railway lines passing through the villages in the South and the North and feels that in the North they only serve to bring landless farmers to the South (p. 19). These descriptions capture the extreme disparity in resource distribution in the country.

The cultural logic of the Estate Tamil/Jaffna Tamil dichotomy emerges from the particular histories of the two groups in the country and the valuation of tradition and cultural genealogy that accompanies essentialised understandings of culture and identity. The Jaffna Tamils[6] define themselves as a group that has long antiquity in the island and a culture and tradition which the more recent immigrant community of Indian Tamils are thought to lack. Brought to Sri Lanka by the British in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as plantation workers, the Estate Tamil community has suffered severe socio-economic deprivation. This community's access to education, healthcare and economic resources is severely curtailed despite their major contribution to the country's plantation economy. In the 1960's, under the Sirima-Sastri pact, they were deported in large numbers to India (De Silva 1981: 529) symbolising an official refusal to recognise them as Sri Lankan citizens. Jaffna Tamils often exclude the estate Tamils and use the derogatory terms *Kallatoni* (illicit boat-person) or *tottakkattan* (plantation jungle-man) to describe them.[7] While the Tamils as a whole are a marginalized community in relation to Sinhala nationalism, the novel rehearses the cultural logic of victimization, all too visible in history and the contemporary world, that to every marginal there is an even more marginalized other.

One of the most violent intrusions of the public into the private occurs in Book Two when Rajan, Saha's son marries the Sinhalese Lali and she is mistaken for a Tamil and is raped and killed by a Sinhalese gang. Rajan meets Lali through her brother Lal, a radical student activist Rajan befriends in university–somewhat schematically echoing Saha's and Tissa's friendship in Book One. Rajan harbours a secret love for Lali but before he can express himself he finds out that Lali is betrothed to Sena, another friend of Lal's involved in student politics and working-class activism. During a demonstration Sena is killed by police gunfire and later on Rajan discovers that Lali was carrying Sena's child. Rajan both out of sympathy and love decides to express his suppressed feelings and marries Lali and adopts the son, Vijay, as his own. This symbolic Tamil-Sinhala union is placed in the narrative at a time when Sinhala nationalism is becoming increasingly belligerent and post-independence Sri Lanka is moving towards that watershed year–1956.[8] The following passage

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[6] An account of Tamil identity in the country and the idea of Jaffna (or northern) Tamil identity (which is often equated with Sri Lankan Tamil identity) can be found in the chapter "The Politics of the Tamil Past" by Dagmar Hellman-Rajanayagam (Hellman Rajanayagam 1990).

[7] A detailed description of the Estate Tamil identity can be found in Daniel 1996.

[8] In 1956, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, elected to power on a massive wave of Sinhala nationalistic support, declared Sinhala the sole official language of the country. The year also marks the institutionalisation of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and an active state-sponsored movement towards establishing the Sinhalese as 'the' privileged community in the country. The linguistic policies of '56 resulted in race riots when violent clashes

captures the multiple ways in which the Rajan-Lali relationship relates to the symbolic structure of the novel:

> When the time came for my [Rajan's] parent's departure everybody was heavy-hearted. Auntie Soma literally hung on to my mother as though she had found again a long-lost friend from her schooldays. (They reminded me of the photograph that hung proudly in my mother's room at home: of herself in a Kandyan sari and her great friend Sumana in Tamil attire. They had gone to the studio to be photographed and on a sudden girlish whim swapped clothes.) Vijay was trying desperately to hold on to all his grandparents all at once with his two little hands. (*When Memory Dies*: 212)

The little Vijay stands here as a mediating presence between the two communities his grandparents represent. The desperation with which he holds their hands, while being a small child's playfulness at one level, also anticipates the rapidly widening rift between the Sinhala and Tamil communities–a rift that Vijay attempts to bridge in Book Three when he becomes a lone figure searching for dialogue between the southern Sinhalese and the northern Tamils. Vijay also stands for the possibility of learning one's identity. As with Saha's socialisation in the south, Vijay though "biologically" Sinhala (born to Sena and Lali) is both Tamil and Sinhala through his father's and mother's influence. This problematisation of received and supposedly natural ethnic identities is further evident in Rajan's recollection of how his mother swaps clothes with a Sinhala friend. This act of playful cross-dressing suggests the thin layer of external signification separating the two communities. Despite differences in language and religion the two communities are indistinguishable in external appearance. Arjuna Guneratne, an anthropologist analysing the kinship patterns of the two ethnic groups, concludes that in terms of kinship, Sinhala and Tamil communities share significant commonalities and that the linguistic Sinhala-Aryan versus Tamil-Dravidian dichotomy is of recent origin—partly inspired by European linguistic and racial classifications which influenced the country's identity formation during the latter decades of British colonial rule. Guneratne further argues that kinship patterns are better markers of identity because they change relatively little overtime as opposed to linguistic characteristics (Guneratne 2002).

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erupted between Tamil protestors and the Sinhalese. Bandaranaike later attempted to make amends by proposing a limited federalist solution to the Tamil community's demand for self-governance. But the so-called Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam pact was defeated by hard-line nationalist factions in the opposition. It is amidst these growing ethnic tensions in the country and the shrinking space for Tamil-Sinhala co-existence, that Rajan's and Lali's family life represents a niche of co-existence.

Yet, in a darkly ironic turn of events it is the physical similarity between the two ethnic groups that leads to Lali's death. When Rajan is confronted by a drunken Sinhalese gang who suspect him to be Tamil and is forced to recite Buddhist verses to establish his identity, Lali rushes to his defence and inadvertently cries out his name–an immediate linguistic marker of his Tamil identity. Rajan's Tamil identity established to their satisfaction, the gang who had been eyeing the attractive Lali earlier, rape and kill her–assuming she is also Tamil. The novel locates this macabre incident in the vicinity of Pollonnaruwa–a significant geographic location in the country and the Sinhalese imagination. Pollonnaruwa, occupies a central position in the imaginative geography of the Sinhala psyche. As part of the Sinhala Buddhist grand narrative Pollonnaruwa is a source of historical pride for Sinhalese Buddhists–a history physically manifest in its many architectural ruins. As a Buddhist site it is also a sacred space, but the novel conflates this sanctity with a potential for violence when such a historical consciousness is co-opted by ethno-nationalism. Lali's rape can thus be seen as a violent intrusion of the nation into the private or the familial. If the private here is configured as an inclusive alternative to the ethnically polarised public sphere, it is also shown to be highly vulnerable and fragile.

Conclusion: Remembering and Forgetting

Para's words—"When memory dies a people die"—from which the novel draws it title are reiterated here because memory and history are central to this text. Collective memory here is understood as the very possibility of community. From past to present continuity is ensured through the act of remembrance. But remembering can also be a dangerous endeavour. The novel warns us that false memories are more dangerous than forgetting. False memories or histories are "murder" as Para says (Sivanandan 1997: 335)—they create chaos, divide people and tear nations apart. One cannot invent history, one cannot substitute fiction for history—one must tell the past as it was. Yet paradoxically this is the very task that the novel undertakes. As Qadri Ismail (2005) suggests it performs fiction as history—refusing to concede the past to the exclusive authority of disciplinary history. *When Memory Dies* delves into the nooks and crannies of Sri Lanka's past unvisited by the disciplinary historian and brings to light stories of coexistence—pitting them against the divisive narratives of nationalist historiography. But the text does not completely let go of the idea of a verifiable history—truth and falsehood remain important. In concert with positivist historiography it holds that there is a truth out there—a truth about inter-communal harmony that nationalist discourse might have forgotten or suppressed, but a truth nevertheless— and it is this truth that it seeks to make visible.

The spaces in which *When Memory Dies* seeks to locate its inclusive imaginary—the labour movement and the family—are spaces rarely documented

in traditional historiography. The subaltern history of the worker's movement and the individuals involved in it, as Walter Perera (1997: 14-15) points out, do not form part of the historical archive. The familial is also an area excluded by disciplinary history. Thus, these two spaces enables the text to present an alternative account of the past—one of coexistence and inclusivity. But these spaces are also overdetermined by the spectral presence of the larger and more dominant historical consciousness generated by nationalism. For Ismail (2005) this is a failure of the imagination—or the failure of the novel to follow through on its own trajectory of revising history. But one could suggest that what the novel chronicles is also the power of such a historical discourse. History can be fictionalised but displacing its "ontological" authority is not so easy.

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HARSHANA RAMBUKWELLA