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INTERNATIONAL
CENTRE FOR
ETHNIC STUDIES



Research Paper No: 10
September 2013

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ISBN: 978-955-580-146-1

Printed By: Karunaratne & Sons (Pvt.) Ltd.

This research paper was commissioned as part of the Democracy and Equality Programme implemented by ICES with support from Diakonia, Sri Lanka.

Acknowledgements

The ideas for this paper originated a long time ago, in an environment that did not facilitate collective work. This is our first research publication, a collaborative endeavour by a Sinhala Buddhist (by birth) and a Tamil Christian (by birth). We wish to thank the ICES for making space for this research, especially Chulani Kodikara for her valuable feedback, the reviewers, and all our own beloved for their incomparable support. A portion of the title of this paper was inspired by a chapter title in Elizabeth Jelin's *State Repression and Labors of Memory*.

Dinidu Karunanayake and Thiyagaraja Waradas
August 2013

Acronyms and Abbreviations

All-Party Representative Committee	APRC
Government of Sri Lanka	GOSL
Internally Displaced Persons	IDPs
Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission	LLRC
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam	LTTE
Parliamentary Select Committee	PSC
Tamil National Alliance	TNA
Truth and Reconciliation Commission	TRC

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What Lessons are We Talking About? Reconciliation and Memory in Post-Civil War Sri Lankan Cinema

“Winning, one engenders enmity;
Miserably sleep the defeated.
The one at peace sleeps pleasantly,
Having abandoned victory and defeat”.

The Dhammapada (Stanza 201)

“Those who have been friends and have afterwards forsaken him will return
and join themselves to him when the cause of disagreement is taken away”.

Tirukkural (Chapter 53, line 9)

The current post-civil war era in Sri Lanka that begins with military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by the armed forces of the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) on 18 May 2009, poses challenges as well as possibilities in the political, economic and social domains. Amongst these, reconciliation has emerged a primary concern. The discourse on reconciliation is being informed by diverse discussions in political, social, cultural and literary spheres. This paper will concentrate on the implications for reconciliation of four mainstream cinematic texts released subsequent to the end of the civil war, namely *Maatha* (2012) by Boodee Keerthisena, *Gamani* (2011) by Sarath Weerasekera, *Selvam* (2011) by Sanjaya Leelarathna and *Ini Avan* (2012) by Asoka Handagama. The paper will argue that the films share a paradigm of segregating the two major ethnic communities represented, Sinhalese and Tamils. The films discussed also construct a hegemonic memory based on ‘lessons learnt’—a trope required by the discourse of militarism in post-civil war Sri Lanka—undermining the true essence of reconciliation.

Post-Civil War and Reconciliation

The GOSL’s initial emphasis after the war was on post-war reconstruction and bringing the Eastern and Northern provinces of Sri Lanka ‘back to normalcy’.¹ The GOSL initiated the *Negenabira Nawodaya* (‘Revival of the East’) and *Uthuru Vasanthaya* (‘Northern Spring’) development projects, targeting the Eastern and the Northern provinces of the island soon after they came under GOSL control in July 2007 and May 2009 respectively. The approach adopted by the GOSL with regard to economic development is a rapid, top-to-bottom one, implemented by the central government. Furthermore, the GOSL’s self-congratulatory reports on progress relating to resettling Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs),² re-building infrastructure, demining, rehabilitating ex-combatants, restoring state administrative

¹ This was planned to be achieved through massive and intensive development, as stated by President Mahinda Rajapaksa at the inauguration of the *Negenabira Nawodaya* (‘Revival of the North’) development project: “Economic freedom is as important as freeing territory. We expect to launch an all out development war, throughout the country, giving priority to agriculture. I expect this economic war to bring back economic prosperity denied to the country”. See the address by the President at the *Negenabira Nawodaya*.

² Statement made by Minister of Plantation Industries Mahinda Samarasinghe at the 17th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council on 30 May 2011.

mechanisms, and holding elections encounter much criticism. The protests relate mainly to the militarisation of the North and the East, human rights violations, forceful land acquisition, continued existence of high security zones, censorship of the media and exclusion of the Northern and Eastern people from decision-making processes relating to development.

Against this backdrop, in May 2010, President Mahinda Rajapaksa appointed the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) with a mandate to elicit ‘lessons learnt’ from the past (civil war period) and make recommendations for reconciliation between communities. *The Gazette Extraordinary of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka*, published on 16 June 2010, states, “[...] it has become necessary that while we as an independent and proud nation of multi-ethnic polity undertake a journey of common goals in a spirit of co-operation, partnership and friendship we also learn from this recent history lessons that would ensure that there will be no recurrence of any internecine conflict in the future”. This need was reiterated in the deliverables of the LLRC under number (v). In this manner, reconciliation—as well as the insistence that a similar conflict will not recur—looms large in the LLRC’s post-civil war mandate.

Speaking of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), presumably the most widely discussed reconciliation mechanism in recent history, Gibson refers to four sub-dimensions: interracial reconciliation (rejection of interracial stereotypes and prejudice), political tolerance (willingness to allow one’s political foes full rights of political contestation), support for human rights principles (and, in particular, the rule of law), and the extension of legitimacy to political institutions (Parliament and the Constitutional Courts) (2006: 413). While similar objectives are envisioned in the Sri Lankan situation, the realisation of those goals is seen to be suffering many setbacks. The report of the LLRC was published on 16 December 2011 (*The Sunday Leader* website), and to date very few of its recommendations have been implemented. On 13 June 2012, the GOSL said that 33 out of 135 main recommendations need to be implemented at national level (Ada Derana 13 June 2012). It also reinforced that necessary steps would be taken for reconciliation in line with its own time frame which hitherto remains undeclared. According to the Secretary to the President, Lalith Weeratunga, some of them were to be implemented within 2012 while the others may take time till 2013. A main reason given for the tardiness was that the 2012 budget allocations for ministries had been done prior to the release of the LLRC Report (Ada Derana 13 June 2012). The government initiated talks with the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) in January 2011—one and half years after the end of civil war (Radhakrishnan 2012)—with the purpose of articulating a political solution to the ethnic problem. Eighteen months after their initiation, the talks are at a stalemate due to the lack of a time-bound agenda from the government side. Instead of scheduling an agenda, the GOSL proposed a Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) to start fresh talks with all stakeholders. This has been criticised by many parties, including the TNA, as a delaying tactic, since Sri Lanka has had experiences with such commissions being used as politicised delay tactics (Ladduwahetty 2012).

While the reconciliatory approach adopted by the government through political channels has thus reached a deadlock, ‘other means’ of reconciliation also seem to suffer a similar plight. ‘Other means’ may be identified as measures in economic, social and cultural spheres of society which are not politically administered. Even before the civil war was over, the

government showed an interest in supporting Tamil-medium audio-visual work, films and tele-dramas, as a way of promoting intercultural cohesion. For instance, when a levy was imposed on all imported films, tele-dramas and commercials with effect from 1 July 2006, Tamil films were exempted from it (Liyanage 2010). In the post-civil war era, the significance of audio-visual media in cultivating unity is being further emphasised. Against this backdrop, cinema, with its capacity to become an “institution [which provides] not only an escape as entertainment, but...cultural nourishment for survival” (Maciel cited in Agrasánchez 2011: 14), can play an undoubtedly influential role in inculcating harmony and cohesion.

The official end of the war coincides with the beginning of a markedly changed Sri Lankan cinematic aesthetic. The post-2009 period has seen a boom in ‘patriotic’ film productions. Shedding light on Jean-Luc Godard’s argument in *Cinema* (2005) that after the main political events in the twentieth century, film and history are inextricably intertwined, post-civil war Sri Lankan films engage with history in many ways. They often depict the GOSL’s political mechanism which consists of the rehabilitation of the ex-LTTE cadre, development of former war-torn areas, establishment of a ‘terror-free’ nation state, and binding of ties between the two communities. In examining this post-civil war cinematic paradigm, we focused our attention on the films’ presentation of ‘lessons learnt’—the punch-line of the GOSL’s reconciliation process. In *Overcoming Apartheid: Can Truth Reconcile a Divided Nation?* Gibson hypothesises that truth contributes to reconciliation, in the experience of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. “‘Truth’ is conceptualized and operationalized as the degree of individual acceptance of the collective memory promulgated by the ‘TRC’” (2006: 413). In a similar vein, this essay will examine the process of ‘truth-telling’. It will also observe the films’ attempts at ‘memory-programming’ about the civil war.

The study looks at four films: *Gamani* (released on 19 August 2011), *Maatha* (released on 20 January 2012), *Selvan* (released on 25 November 2011) and *Ini Avan* (released on 21 December 2012).³ These films are treated not only as cinematic texts but also as cultural implements with a wide socio-political impact in post-civil war Sri Lanka. Cinematic-textual analyses and archival surveys are the primary methodologies used. The selection is based on several reasons. Primarily, these films embody ‘official’ versions of ‘truth-telling’, and almost all of them were obviously state-sponsored from their initial stages to post-production and screening. They were granted support in terms of props and access to locations (at the production stage), and publicity (after the release) by ministers and ‘official voices’, state-owned media, news bulletins, and the government press. It can be argued that government incentives were granted because the films presented state-sanctioned hegemonic views of history and memory. On the other hand, the films had wide circulation around the country—a privilege that every Sri Lankan film is not entitled to. In this manner, they had an opportunity to make a significant impact on the mindset of the general public. Hence, it is a worthy task to analyse the films’ stance on war as well as their success (or failure) to advocate reconciliation between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities.

³ The Post-war era has witnessed the emergence of a plethora of movies which reflect on civil and military experiences. Some of the notable examples are *Ira Handa Yata* by Benet Rathnayake (released on 2 November 2010), *Sthuthi Newatha Enna* by Sumith Rohana Thiththawalgala (released on 24 June 2010) and *Alimankada* by Chandran Rutnam (released on 30 October 2009).

War, Militarisation and Cinema

Since its advent in the early twentieth century, cinema has been used as a powerful medium of propaganda in political and militarised contexts, particularly during times of war. While a war is going on, hegemonic agencies in control of the mass media—television, press, radio and the internet—find the influential audio-visual aesthetic potential of cinema an effective means to endorse ideologies. Cinema feeds into militarisation, a process that begins before a war and lasts long after the guns have fallen silent (de Mel, 2007: 11). De Mel states that as an ideology, militarism has seeped into our institutions and ways of thought (2007: 11). Cinema is a socio-cultural institution that purveys ways of thought. In a post-war context, cinema makes strenuous attempts at constructing a particular version of memory based on ‘truth-telling’, by glorifying victory in the battlefield, legitimising military tactics, lionising certain masculine types, and reconfiguring notions of patriotism, heroism and nationalism. The use of cinema during and after the Second World War (1939-1945), Cold War (1945-1989), Vietnam War (1956-1975), Gulf War (1989-1991), Afghan War (2001 to present), and Iraq War (March 2003–December 2011) provides notable examples. A Films like *The Sum of All Fears*⁴ echo the tensions of the long-gone Cold War while *1968 Tunnel Rats*⁵ still narrate experiences of the Vietnam War, three decades since its official conclusion.

With the closure of any war or military conflict, a shift in focus is obvious in literary work based on the event. A post-war scenario dwells much on history and memory which are highly arbitrary and nebulous artefacts. Michel Foucault elaborates on the tensions between official histories and their contestation in ‘popular’ or unofficial memory in an analysis of the bearing of historical and memorial knowledge on formations of identity and operations of power (Cited in Grainge 2003: 2). He says, memory is “a very important factor in struggle... if one controls people’s memory, one controls their dynamism”. Thus, the process of remembering and forgetting is determined by hegemonic powers as Jelin puts in *State Repression and the Labour of Memory* (2003: 11). In these terms, memory becomes a political force that is subjected to containment and ‘reprogramming’ (Grainge 2003: 2). As Sturken similarly notes, “memory is socially produced and is bound in the struggles and investments of cultural and national identity formation” (Cited in Grainge 2003: 2). The role played by cinema is therefore crucial, as one of the most powerful audio-visual media that has far reaching access to society at large.

The ‘application’ of memory to a post-war scenario is best elucidated through Hollywood Cinema. A study of Hollywood renders that its recreation of memory is often closely linked to American nationalism and cultural imperialism.⁶ Against this backdrop, heroic masculine figures of the calibre of Indiana Jones, John Rambo (*First Blood Part I & II*), Jack Bauer (24), and Captain America play roles beyond mere entertainment, as they become icons playing to patriotic imagination. As Robert Burgoyne points out, Hollywood reasserts traditional narratives of nation and addresses the ‘recovered memory’ of the American nation-state to

⁴ A Hollywood thriller directed by Phil Alden Robinson in 2002, *The Sum of All Fears* is woven around a terrorist plot to lead the USA and Soviet Russia to war through a nuclear explosion on US soil.

⁵ *1968 Tunnel Rats*, directed by Uwe Boll in 2008 tells the story of a group of US soldiers deployed in underground warfare in Vietnam.

⁶ The extension of the influence or dominance of one nation’s culture over others, now usually through the exportation of cultural commodities such as film, music, etc. (The OED).

express a reconfigured sense of American identity (Grainge 2003: 3). Indiana Jones, Rambo, Bauer, and Captain America construct a supra-human identity that encapsulates all the ‘masculine’ attributes that a nation can take pride in, such as patriotism, allegiance, wisdom, far-sightedness, valour, and bravery. Accordingly, a “regime of truth” (Storey 2010: 99) is articulated in relation to the existent body of ‘knowledge’, which is part of the “central role that cinema plays in the imaging of the nation” as noted by Robert Burgoyne (cited in Storey 2010: 101). This situation is not limited to Hollywood, but is evident in other contexts marked by experiences of war. Notable examples are seen in European cinema, Chinese cinema, Russian cinema, and of course, Asian cinema. John Storey documents a statement made by Foucault in a discussion of French cinema in the 1970s. French films featuring the French Resistance were engaged in “a battle” to “re-programme...the “popular memory” and to “impose on people a framework in which to interpret the present.... So people are shown not what they were, but what they must remember having been” (Storey 2010: 101). Post-war Sri Lankan cinema provides a timely landscape to further study the Foucauldian idea of ‘mind-programming’.

Collective Memory and Cinema

Cinema addresses local communities before reaching global audiences. The memory that is reproduced, reinterpreted and redefined in cinema is supposed to be collective. In tandem with this, ‘truths’ constructed are also shared collectively. Halbwachs makes four overlapping claims about ‘collective memory’ (Storey 2010: 101). In line with Freudian thinking, he is of the view that memories are often fragmented and incomplete. He maintains that remembering is not a process in which we resurrect a ‘pure’ past:

[M]emories are not veridical reports of past events; remembering is always an act of reconstruction and representation. What we remember does not stay the same; memories are forgotten, revised, reorganized, updated, as they undergo rehearsal, interpretation and retelling. Moreover, the more important the event remembered, the more it is vulnerable to reconstruction, as it will be more frequently rehearsed, interpreted and retold. (Storey 2010: 103-4)

Remembering is always present-situated, as memories bring ‘the past’ into the present, and thus, it is a meaning-making process that occurs in the present in response to the past. Collective memory is “embodied in mnemonic artefacts, forms of commemoration such as shrines, statues, war memorials and so on”—what French historian Pierre Nora calls ‘sites of memory’ (Cited in Storey 2010: 104). In this context, “memory industries” function with the purpose of articulating the past (2010: 104), as exemplified by ‘heritage sites’ and museums. In the post-civil war Sri Lankan milieu, there are many such sites: the Nandikadal Lagoon,⁷ Iranamadu Tank⁸ and Kilinochchi where the LTTE suffered major losses during war, major battlefields such as Elephant Pass,⁹ the Muhamalai frontline and Mullaitivu where the government forces gained major victories, and the residential sites of the late LTTE leaders. Against this backdrop, cinema functions as an effective ‘mnemonic artefact’, that commemorates and enshrines ‘memories’.

⁷ The place where LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran was supposedly killed by the Sri Lankan Army.

⁸ The LTTE had an airstrip by the Iranamadu Tank. The Tank was also the site of a hydro-power project of the LTTE.

⁹ An iconic battlefield that witnessed a number of major confrontations between the GOSL forces and the LTTE.

Collective memory is always selective, and forgetting is an inextricable part of it: “[...] we can remember only on condition of retrieving the position of past events that interest us from the framework of collective memory.... Forgetting is explained by the disappearance of these frameworks, or of part of them” (Halbwachsm cited in Jelin 2003: 11). Hollywood’s representations of the Vietnam War in 1980s provide good examples in this regard. Storey discusses how Hollywood ‘forgets’ the extent of US firepower deployed in Vietnam, while lionising the ‘human’ emotions of US soldiers who were on ‘a mission with a cause’ (2003: 106). Storey further points out that such creative work is often made in close collaboration with military professionals (2003: 236). The post-war Sri Lankan films discussed here, in particular *Maatha*, *Gamani*, and *Selvan*, are notable such examples. Their production involves consultation with military personnel, use of weaponry, armoury and locations provided by the military, and more importantly, cast appearances by military personnel. *Gamani* is in fact directed by a former Rear Admiral of the Sri Lankan Navy. The post-war re-staging of war colludes with a militarisation that continues in heightened and clandestine forms.

Cinematic representations of the Sri Lankan post-civil war scenario can be best understood through Storey’s discussion of the 1980s Hollywood representations of America’s war in Vietnam, which he calls ‘Hollywood’s Vietnam’. Hollywood produced a particular ‘regime of truth’ about America’s war in Vietnam and this body of ‘knowledge’ was ‘articulated’ by George Bush as an enabling ‘memory’ in the build-up to the Gulf War (Storey 2010: 99). Storey further argues that the political and historical revisionism of the 1980s produced a ‘mythology’ as to why the US was defeated in Vietnam (2010: 101). As he discusses, this mythology is aimed at preparing the US state for future military endeavours than explaining the past. As discussed in this paper, the Sri Lankan films made in the post-civil war often ransack events in the civil war, yet their mission is more about reconditioning the mindset of the viewer than explaining the past.

***Maatha*—Martial Virtue, Thrilling Heartbeat of Motherland, and Visual ‘Atrocity Tourism’**

Promoted as a film based on “nothing fictitious” (*Maatha* Trailer), “true events shot on real locations”, and “the story of that glorious human(itarian) operation”, *Maatha* by Boodee Keerthisena (released on 20 January 2012) documents a number of newsworthy incidents of the civil war, ranging from the LTTE’s attack on the Yaal Devi train¹⁰ in Jaffna to the official closure of the war with the GOSL’s victory over the LTTE’s last strongholds in the Vanni on 18 May 2009. The film blatantly exploits many clichés of war cinema in terms of cinematography and editing. For example, the scene of sunlight sparkling through the jungle foliage resembles scenes in Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986) and Edward Zwick’s *Blood Diamond* (2006). The attack on incoming troops whose blood is mixed with the sea water echoes the opening scene of Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Many of the graphic battle scenes in which bodies are mangled in explosions resemble Randal Wallace’s *We Were Soldiers* (2002). The film builds up a suspense-thriller plot woven around two lovers within the

¹⁰ One of Sri Lanka’s main express train services between Jaffna, Kankasanturai (KKS) and Colombo was initiated in 1956. The train was the main mode of transport between the South and the North. It was attacked by the LTTE on 19 January 1985. After the closure of the war, the GOSL initiated a project called ‘Uthuru Mithuru’ to rebuild the northern railway line.

LTTE who discover themselves amidst heavy gunfire in the Vanni battlefield. However, the film is incapable of building up fully-fledged characters with depth and complexity. Its focus is overwhelmed by detailed depictions of military action—the film shows entire ground, aerial, and naval missions from the point of conception to execution—and hence seems to fall into the category of ‘news documentary’ rather than a feature film. Works of this nature play a role in ‘legitimising’ war. De Mel states:

In effect they legitimize an array of military tactics in the course and conduct of ‘just’ wars, so that the violence of aerial bombing and missile attacks on military targets or set battles at land and sea became accepted and naturalized. Films and literature that glamorize these battles, as well as 24/7 news that relays graphic footage of bombings and missile attacks live to millions of viewers over satellite TV play their part in legitimizing these forms of violence still further. (2007: 196)

The film’s title resonates with patriotic notions associated with ‘motherland’, a trope intricately connected with post-colonial nationalist movements in South Asia. However, the question arises as to ‘whose’ motherland the film is talking about? The film’s biases are obvious even before the events unfold on the screen. It is scripted by Ariyaratne Athugala, the then Chairman of the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation—the ‘official’ television network of the GOSL—who later became the Director General of the Government Information Department (*Target* website). Considering the amount of state sponsorship the movie later garnered in terms of publicity, it would not be a mistake, against this backdrop, to question the film’s politics of ‘truth-telling’. The film invites a critical engagement with its practice of narrating history and constructing ‘collective memory’—a key component of ‘memory industries’.

The film was promoted with the tagline: “*Sathya lowata pasak kala*” (Enlightening the world about the truth) (Theatrical poster), and with a condemnatory label against “those who forgot human dignity” (Theatrical trailer). Thus, before the spectator stepped into the cinema, the binary opposition between human and non-human had already been imposed on him/her. Similarly, the theatrical trailer conveys the message that while the LTTE overlooked humanity, the GOSL troops emerged as ‘saviours of humanity’, because “in the aftermath of a shocking war, they saved...humanity and love” (*Maatha* Trailer). The ‘humanitarianism’ of the GOSL offensive against the LTTE is thus announced even before the action is staged.

The film features a high caste, middle-class Tamil family, in which the father is a government school teacher and the mother, a housewife, which is buffeted by the events of war. Parvathi the eldest daughter, on the verge of marriage, joins the LTTE in order to prevent her brother being conscripted as a child soldier. In tandem with this, the trajectory of Yoga, the male lead character who is an LTTE soldier, is narrated. As children, both survive the LTTE’s attack on the Yaal Devi train. Later, they meet in the battlefield amidst heavy exchange of fire between the LTTE and the GOSL. Despite their ideological split—Parvathi argues that her “wish is not to die but live in the country that we’ll liberate”, while Yoga wants to give up arms saying “We cannot win this war,” they develop a relationship and Parvathi becomes pregnant with Yoga’s child. When the fighting intensifies and the war comes to an end, with heavy losses for the LTTE, they give themselves up to the GOSL.

The film's depiction of the child soldier bears resemblance to those portrayed in films such as Edward Zwick's *Blood Diamond* (2006) and Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire's *Jonny Mad Dog* (2008). Despite Parvathi's continued attempts to rid her brother from the LTTE's agency, he remains loyal to the LTTE ideology. He inculcates violence to the extent of committing parricide. At the end of the film, the boy's dead body is seen amongst the debris. The family is wrecked—the father is shot dead in an attempt to escape from LTTE control with a group of refugees, the younger daughter is used by the LTTE as a human bomb against the relief workers of the government forces, and the mother goes insane and wanders through the debris searching for dolls. Only Parvathi is redeemed because she falls into the 'protective' hands of the state. There is an indication that she will start a new life with Yoga and the unborn baby. The mentally disturbed mother seems to symbolise the 'insanity' of Eelam—the 'proposed homeland' for Tamil people while the Sinhalese 'motherland' celebrates a jubilant victory.

The film repeats narratives of war which were the flavour of the month in almost all Sri Lankan media during the course of the Humanitarian Mission. Using a documentary style, it presents several 'truths' about the evolution of the civil war. One of the prime narratives is the predicament of IDPs. According to the film, the LTTE was solely responsible for displacement and other agonies experienced by civilians, and their survival is entirely at the mercy of the GOSL. The LTTE embodies the epitome of ruthlessness and vice. They abduct and conscript women and underage children, force civilians to leave their dwellings, and kill dissenters. Conversely, the film presents overwhelmingly positive depictions of the government forces. This creates a crystal-clear division between 'us'—the government—and 'them'—the LTTE. This situation points to a question of 'martial virtue,' which is "not an inherent category that [someone] naturally possesses, but one brought into being and constituted by processes that define the socio-political order" (de Mel 2007: 11). While the military virtue of the GOSL soldier is valorised and canonised, the LTTE's capacities are denigrated and dehumanised. Following the tradition of many Hollywood war movies based on civil wars and conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, *Maatha* focuses on a key 'demonic' aspect of the LTTE: ethnic cleansing. The LTTE in one instance massacres a large group of Muslims observing religious ceremonies in Kattankudy.¹¹ This scene further heightens the 'otherness' of the LTTE. On the other hand, the GOSL consists of personnel of all main ethnicities and religions in the country. There are Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and Christians in the government forces working in alliance against the common 'barbaric' enemy—the LTTE. The 'othering' of the LTTE sheds light on a key concept in military literature—'military orientalism'. Building on Edward Said's articulation of the hegemonic relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, or in other words, 'the Occident' and 'the Orient,' Patrick Porter in *Military Orientalism: Eastern War Through Western Eyes* says:

It would be saying too much to claim that the west defines itself purely through the non-Western 'Other'.... But the 'Wild East' has played its part in generating the West's sense of self. The nature of others' warfare remains a highly charged political

¹¹ The LTTE massacred 103 Muslim worshippers at Kattankudi Jumma Masjid mosque in the Batticaloa district on 3 August 1990.

question. As well as a means of survival, war is a medium through which we judge the calibre of our own and other civilizations. (2011: 3)

Both Said and Porter interpret Orientalism in terms of hegemonic relations between ‘the East’ and ‘the West’ and thus as a cultural phenomenon. *Maatha* builds up an ‘us vs. them’ dichotomy between the two factions within one geographical space. It uses the ‘uncivilised’ LTTE military tactics as a touchstone to gauge the ‘civilised’ nature of the ‘humanitarian mission’ undertaken by the GOSL forces.¹² In this context, the notion of ‘Tamilness’ is seen as problematic because it is conflated with either terrorism or victimisation—both in need of recuperation. It must be noted that the film does not create a fresh narrative, but re-confirms an already existing narrative in the psyche of the people. The film also reiterates popular media constructs of ‘heroism’ and ‘patriotism’: if you are with *us*, you’re ‘civilised’, ‘human’, ‘heroic’ and ‘patriotic’; if you’re with *them*, you’re a ‘barbaric’, ‘inhuman’, ‘ignoble’ and ‘traitor’. Similar to the coloniser’s ‘benevolent’ mission of ‘enlightening’ the colonised, LTTE cadres need to be ‘civilised’ under the GOSL’s care. Such a vision is further reiterated by *Selvam*, as later discussed in this paper.

Furthering the nuances of ‘military orientalism’, *Maatha* places little emphasis on GOSL forces’ setbacks. In terms of military expertise, they excel in planning and organisation, motivation, intelligence, leadership, and execution. The air strikes, ground raids, naval attacks and sniper shots are planned and executed to perfection. On the contrary, the LTTE lacks proper leadership and combatants defy leadership. They constantly question the purpose of what they are fighting for. They lack intelligence, training and experience, and are unknown to ‘ethical’ warfare. This is a common paradigm in the war-movie genre. For example, in films such as *Black Hawk Down*¹³ by Ridley Scott and *Act of Valor*¹⁴ by Mike McCoy and Scott Waugh, Africans are referred to as ‘skinnies’ who have an inferior understanding of military strategies. A similar idea is conveyed in *Maatha* which condescendingly looks down on the LTTE military mechanism.

Furthermore, the film sheds light on a ‘lucrative lesson’ learnt during the war—‘atrocities tourism’. Writing on the ‘legacies’ of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia that was responsible for death and disappearance of two million people, Cathy Schlund-Vials notes that remembrance sites have become commodified in a context of ‘atrocities tourism’. ‘Genocide tourism’ has become “a thriving global business” and they weave a “perpetrator-driven narrative of wholesale ruination” (Schlund-Vials 2012: 62, 69). She further says, “[T]hese sublime spaces” are “the country’s new revenue fields, fertile grounds for foreign investment, domestic development, and governmental support” (2012: 63-64). In a similar way, the former LTTE sites have become lucrative tourist sites in post-civil war Sri Lanka. The *Maatha* trailer boasts, “real action has been shot in real places”. Arguably, the film offers a visual tour to ‘actual’ memory sites, and initiates a visual form of atrocities tourism. In other

¹² It must be noted that this dichotomy existed during all the wars of Eelam (I–V), and not a unique feature of the Humanitarian Mission.

¹³ Directed by Ridley Scott, *Black Hawk Down* (2001) accounts a failed US mission to capture a Somali warlord during the Battle of Mogadishu in 1993. The film is adapted from a book of the same name by Mark Bowden published in 1999.

¹⁴ Directed by Mike McCoy and Scott Waugh. *Act of Valor* (2012) features various successful missions accomplished by a US Navy SEAL team against a terrorist plot targeting the USA.

words, it makes use of a capitalistic appeal of the spaces associated with the ‘humanitarian mission’.

Gamani — Protecting ‘Us’ from ‘Them’

Gamani by Rear Admiral Sarath Weerasekera, released on 19 August 2011 also claims to be based on ‘a true story’—the LTTE massacre in Gonagala, a border village¹⁵ in the Ampara District of the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka on 25 August 1999. The beginning of the film portrays a group of Sinhala-Buddhists returning home from an almsgiving held in memory of a fallen soldier. On their way, the unarmed civilians are mercilessly hacked to death by a group of LTTE cadres. In return, the villagers are given training by the military in using firearms consequent to persistent requests by the new Sinhala teacher of the village school. Eventually, the villagers successfully thwart another attempt made by the LTTE, exterminating all the enemies.

The idea of protecting ‘us’ against ‘them’ pervades the film. Notably, the title, ‘Gamani’, means ‘village leader’ in Pali.¹⁶ In constructing ‘us’, and validating ‘our’ mission to eliminate ‘them’, the film promotes an extreme version of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism or what might be called Buddhist chauvinism. The Buddhist monk in the village temple emphasises the vital role played by ancient Sinhala-Buddhist ‘heroes’ in protecting their ‘motherland’ from Tamil and Chola invaders. He reminds the villagers that protecting the motherland is an obligation of ‘rightful’ citizens. When the villagers prepare to leave the village subsequent to the initial LTTE attack, the monk commands them not leave, but to fight for their ‘own’ land, following the tradition of ancient Sinhala-Buddhist kings. He exclaims: “We are a nation with brave blood. You must know our ancestors fought Portuguese, Dutch and English with their swords bravely. We belong to such a nation. We should stay here even to die. If anybody wants to leave, just leave. If the village guard cannot save the village, I will disrobe and take up arms”. He also mobilises the villagers to rally around the temple to fight terror with terror saying, “You must know, that we will never leave our village even though they’d slaughter us. Did we leave when Chola, Pandya and Soli attacked us? Our kings prepared an army and defeated them and chased them beyond the sea”. His words point to another phenomenon in Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism that has coincided with the intensifying military conflict—the militarisation of religion. The highly nationalist sentiments that he expresses contradict the essential values of Buddhism—particularly the advocacy of non-violence. Violence, albeit in the form of defence, is celebrated and justified when it is inflicted upon LTTE cadres. The child who had become dumb upon witnessing the first carnage regains her voice when she sees an LTTE combatant being strangled to death by a village guard. Moreover, she revels in witnessing the enemy’s death at the hands of the Sinhalese. The film defies Buddhist humanistic teachings according to which violence needs to be replied with non-violence, and suggests that violence needs to be counteracted with more intensified and well planned

¹⁵ A border village can be geographically located on the border of an area where fighting takes place. In popular jargon it would mean a village threatened by terrorist attacks during the period of war.

¹⁶ Professor Senarat Paranavitana in a contribution to the *Ceylon Historical Journal*, examines the etymology of the term *grāmanī* (or *gāmanī*) as appearing in both Vedic and early Pāli literature. Accordingly, the term *grāmanī* denotes a concept of mobility. *Grāmanī* is, literally, one who leads (from the Vedic root *ni*) the *grāmai* (village). The leader of every such *grāma* had to be naturally designated as *grāmanī*. He led the *grāma* in the truly physical sense (Perera 1978: 169).

violence. In a similar vein, it also echoes the GOSL's tagline that terror must be dealt with terror—a 'lesson' the government 'learnt' by looking up to America's 'war on terror'.¹⁷

The film's obsession with 'our ways' is further exemplified in the use of *angampora*¹⁸ to overpower the enemy. The film focuses on this home-grown military art used by Sinhala-Buddhist kings in their battles with 'Chola' or Tamil 'invaders' in the past, to suggest that home-grown military solutions are adequate for the contemporary ethnic problem. Even though the Chola identity is distinctly different from the present-day Tamil identity, the film woefully conflates the two. Ritigala Sumedha, the *angampora* fighter who single-handedly disarms all the armed LTTE cadres is characterised as an image of a 'masculine heroic Sinhalese', with long hair, bushy moustache, bare and hairy chest, and stern looks. His incomparable success story stresses the nationalist claim that Sri Lanka should resolve the country's problems on its own, using home-grown tactics, without foreign assistance.

Similarly, the film also questions the role of NGOs in the civil war and accuses them of promoting foreign agendas. Representatives of *Sama Pravardhana Organization*—an NGO dedicated to 'promote peace'—visit the village monk and question his violent stance which would contradict the non-violent principles of Buddhism. The monk's answer is blatant:

Those who call the measures to save innocent people as contradictory to Buddhist philosophies are fools who have no idea about terrorism or Buddhist philosophies. Killing a man is *parajika*,¹⁹ it aborts the monkhood. But killing someone for one's own safety is not *parajika*, even Lord Buddha has preached so.... So what's the role of the present-day monk? Is it going into woods and meditating while his devotees are being killed, or helping save those innocent people?

The monk scathingly criticises political solutions which call for a non-military path. He redefines the role of the present-day monk as a one full of political responsibilities. By associating the idea of promoting peace to the NGO, the film greets NGOs with derision.

The film also tries to 'rewrite' history, a common phenomenon of the war film genre. The Sinhala teacher's attempt at interpreting 'Black July' is a good example in this regard. She explains to a Tamil young woman 'rescued' by the Sinhalese home guards, what happened in the 1983 July riots. According to her explanation, it was "terrorists on both sides" who ignited the ethnic fire. This is facetious reference to a historical 'truth' and it fails to recognise socio-political complexities surrounding the actual events. Reflecting on 1983, Gananath Obeyesekere recounts that the July riots were not driven by mob mentality but were well thought out and orchestrated by hyper-nationalist groups affiliated with the then government (1984: 167). *Gamani*, in these terms, simplifies memory of the 1983 riots and narrates it in a way that is acceptable to Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists.

¹⁷ This idea is reflected in Sri Lankan ambassador to Turkey, Bharathi Davina Wijeratne's conversation with *Sunday's Zaman* on 21 June 2012 in which she says "Terrorists must be dealt with in the language they understand" and the speech of Secretary to the Ministry of Defence Gotabaya Rajapaksa at the Graduation Ceremony of the Asymmetric Warfare Course (published in *The Sunday Observer* on 21 April 2013).

¹⁸ *Angampora* is a style of martial arts unique to Sri Lanka that dates back 5,000 years. It was practiced by ancient Sinhala kings and warriors (<http://angampora.org/>).

¹⁹ *Parajika* means 'the forbidden'.

Importantly, the film attempts to portray dissent against the LTTE from within the Tamil community. It suggests that innocent Tamils are against the LTTE concept of the *Mahaveer*²⁰ family. The mother of a fallen LTTE cadre laments and accuses the LTTE leadership: “Being a *Mahaviru* family is useless for a mother without her child. It is a shame to kill the innocent for personal profits according to our religion (Hinduism).” The take on non-violence in the name of Hinduism at this juncture, and the justification of violence in the name of Buddhism in matters concerning the nation and nationality, are highly arbitrary. This is undeniably a way of manipulating religious chauvinism to ‘programme’ the public mind in favour of the GOSL’s military endeavours against the LTTE.

***Selvam*—‘Sinhalsed Civilization’: The Ultimate Redemption of an ex-LTTE Combatant**

Sanjaya Leelarathna’s *Selvam* (released on 25 November 2011) brings another key element of post-war era to discussion—rehabilitation, which is a main pillar of the GOSL’s reconciliation programme. Promoted as a ‘Sri Lankan Tamil movie’ (Movie poster), the film stars a real ex-LTTE combatant, Shanthalingam Gokularajan, in the lead role who has ‘regained’ a ‘normal’ life by virtue of being rehabilitated by the GOSL. Somewhat similar to *Maatha*, the film leans towards a documentary style. It recounts the trajectory of Gokularajan as ‘factual evidence’ for the success of GOSL’s rehabilitation endeavours. He is presented as an ‘exemplary’ figure for all Tamils who took the enemy’s side during the war. In a symbolic act, he snatches away the cyanide capsule around his neck, takes off the LTTE uniform and throws it away, and dances while singing in Tamil and Sinhala about the need to give up arms. The finale of the film sees him as a university candidate with a promising future.

The storyline woefully lacks an artistically dramatic plot. It disappoints the viewer who goes to see the story *Selvam* expecting the ex-LTTE combatant to be the title character. However, the title happens to be in reference to a Tamil boy, named Selvam, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. His ultimate dream is seeing ‘Mahinda Raja,’ a name that bears an unmistakable resemblance to that of President Mahinda Rajapaksa. The film reiterates that the disrupted future of the Tamils, represented by the child, can be redeemed only by President Rajapaksa. Therefore, they need to look up to the GOSL’s post-civil war measures to seek ‘salvation’. In a very pronounced way, the film fawns on the state politics. Similar to *Gamani*, this film also constructs the LTTE identity in extremely negative terms, and widens a segregation between the two ethnic communities. The LTTE is a ‘demonic’ organisation that victimises the Tamil community. It is with tremendous effort that the GOSL manages to erase the memories of the LTTE atrocities from the minds of Tamil youth. In this way, *Selvam* reiterates a dominant ‘truth’ that in the clutches of the LTTE, the youth were not allowed to think for themselves. Conversely, in the care of the GOSL, their lives recuperate, and manage to emerge out of the LTTE’s ‘slavery’. In a rather crude and obvious way, the GOSL’s post-civil war rehabilitation programmes are presented as ‘civilising missions’. This echoes another facet of ‘military orientalism’, in which the enemy soldier is perceived as ‘the other’—someone less civilised, and who therefore needs to be ‘taken care of’ and ‘civilised’. Eventually, the rehabilitated are given a ‘dream’ to pursue. “My dream is to become a good

²⁰ *Mahaveer* (‘great hero’) is a title conferred on a family of an LTTE cadre in recognition of his/her sacrifice to the organisation.

actor in Sri Lanka”, says Shanthalingam Gokularajan in an interview with *The Sunday Observer* on 4 December 2011.

Despite the fact that *Selvam* is promoted as “the Sri Lankan Tamil movie,” its take on Sinhala and Tamil cultures, as well as on history, is arbitrary. Reflecting on the contemporary Sinhala cinema’s failure to deal with critical moments of history, Sunila Abeyssekera contends,

The most critical silence and absence in the Sinhala cinema of the past 25 years is undoubtedly that relating to the ethnic conflict and the subsequent state of civil war in the country. In the first instance, even though Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, the Sri Lankan cinema is a Sinhala cinema; that is, a cinema that is in the language of the majority community, the Sinhalese, and a cinema that represents and reproduces the lives and concerns of the Sinhala-speaking people of Sri Lanka. In the context of a history of discrimination and marginalization of minority communities in Sri Lanka, this absence could also be considered as a part of that same process of erasure. (2001: 4)

Notably, post-civil war cinema gives a voice, or rather pieces of dialogue, to Tamil characters, unlike the pre-2009 cinema. The use of an ex-combatant in a lead role is undeniably a praiseworthy move. However, his testimony as a ‘rehabilitated Terrorist’ is distressingly exploited for ulterior political gains. He is *used* as a mouthpiece to reiterate the indispensable nature of the post-civil war military endeavours, one of which is rehabilitation.²¹ No attempts are made at reconciling the two parties. The LTTE is also seen as an organization inextricably connected to *Tamilness*, and hence the film seems to suggest that Tamilness itself is in need of improvement. As Porter argues, war is ‘a cultural act’ (2011: 1). As the film suggests, the most effective way of redeeming Tamilness would be through assimilation into Sinhala identity. The ex-LTTE combatant wins his struggle due to his success in assimilation. Thus, the film constructs a ‘truth’ according to which, the consequences of the ethnic conflict can be resolved only via ‘Sinhala’ solutions articulated by the GOSL. Even though the film does not privilege Sinhala, the majority-language, it elucidates Abeyssekera’s claim that it ‘represents and reproduces’ the interests of the Sinhala-speaking people of Sri Lanka.

***Ini Avan*—the ‘Here-after’ Plight and the Vanni Syndrome**

Ini Avan directed by Asoka Handagama (released on 21 December 2012) marks a watershed moment not only in Sri Lankan cinema, but also in the post-civil war era. As the second Tamil movie directed by an artist of the Sinhala ethnicity—after Dr. Dharmasena Pathiraja’s 1975 film *Ponmani*—and the first Tamil movie following the end of the war, it chronicles a post-war lived experience from within the Tamil community. Despite its ideological ambiguities, *Ini Avan* challenges Abeyssekera’s 2001 argument about the silencing of Tamils in Sinhala cinema via the use of Sinhala, as it uses Tamil as *the* language of the film. Sinhala is used only in one instance—a cursory moment—in the lead character’s encounter with two Sinhala soldiers.

²¹ We perceive post-civil war rehabilitation in Sri Lanka as a military endeavour because it functions under the purview of the Ministry of Defense, and military personnel are involved in designing, activating and making decisions throughout the process.

The film presents the life of a rehabilitated LTTE combatant,²² and it ‘writes back’ to the narrative in *Selvam*. Unlike the ex-combatant in *Selvam* who is warmly welcomed into ordinary civil life by the Sinhala community, the protagonist in Handagama’s film is ostracised, excommunicated and cursed by the Tamil community. He is often made a scapegoat for the deaths and devastation caused by the LTTE. Under tremendous pressure, he struggles in search of a job. His perseverance, on one hand, is ridiculed by the well-to-do Tamil community that presumably has links with the Tamil diaspora, represented by a plump rich young man in Westernised casual attire, as well as the powerful Tamil business community that has links with the underworld. Eventually, the ex-combatant falls into the hands of the Tamil mafia—a paramilitary group in charge of drug trafficking and smuggling. In this way, his attempts at becoming a law-abiding citizen and living a ‘normal’ life are thwarted by undesirable circumstances in the post-civil war environment in Jaffna. The film’s attribution of ‘reformed’ ex-LTTE cadres’ problems to the dismissive and lackadaisical attitude of the Tamil community is undoubtedly questionable.

The film makes several claims about the ‘here-after’ trajectory of Tamils in Jaffna. Whether Tamils are ex-combatants or not, they are burdened by an overwhelming plight, and hence, are not entitled to ‘redemption’. Unemployment, lack of access to a decent and ‘civilised’ citizenship, and abject poverty are the order of the day. The only modes of survival are provided by foul-play. Against this backdrop, the future of the ex-LTTE combatant is irretrievably hapless and hopeless in spite of rehabilitation. He is looked down upon by his people with suspicion. His value system does not guarantee him progress even in the mafia. While his former life as a ‘warmonger’ is condemned by his society, the protagonist realises that the same society privileges physical strength over ethics. He replaces the physically weaker security guard at the jewellery shop by virtue of muscle power, and manages to secure employment. This dubious take on violence—the condemnation of the LTTE violence before the war was over and the necessitation of violence for survival after the guns have officially fallen silent—point to the intensity of the ‘here-after’ predicament, marked by an absence of social justice. Woefully, this environment does not facilitate any means of intra-ethnic reconciliation, let alone any form of harmony between the Sinhala and Tamil communities. While the survivors of war are struggling as a community, they struggle within themselves as well. They are in a fight with memories of loss, which points to a post-war melancholia. Freud, in “Mourning and Melancholia” concedes,

Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on. In some people the same influences produce melancholia instead of mourning and we consequently suspect them of a pathological disposition. It is also well worth notice that, although mourning involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a pathological condition and to refer it to medical treatment. We rely on its being overcome after a certain lapse of time, and we look upon any interference with it as useless or even harmful. (1917: 243-44)

The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all

²² In *Gamani*, *Maatha*, and *Ini Avan*, the lead LTTE character is played by Dharshan Dharmaraj.

activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revealings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment (1917: 244).

As the film portrays, the Tamil civil community in the North cannot properly grieve what they have lost during war, in terms of human, material, and emotional resources. Therefore, when the ex-combatant steps into civilian life, the community makes him answerable for their grievances. For instance, an old man holds the protagonist accountable for the loss of his son. Overcome by grief, the old man dies in front of the ex-combatant's house, in an ultimate expression of his disinclination to 'let go of' what is lost. The post-civil war experience is a circular memory trap for Tamils, as the film narrates it. The inability to let go of things is invariably linked to 'burdens' of memory. Jelin writes:

To overcome such situations requires considerable labour, working through the painful memories and recollections instead of reliving them and acting them out. Psychoanalytic theory refers to this as the labours of mourning. Mourning involves an "intrapsychic process, following the loss of an object of fixation, through which the subject achieves progressive detachment from the object" (Laplanche and Pontalis 1981, 435). In this process, the psychic energy of the person is released from being 'occupied by pain and recollections,' and the subject is able to recover his or her freedom. (2003: 6)

In these terms, the characters in Handagama's film are unable to regain their freedom. Interestingly, the take on melancholia is a paradigm that reverberates through Handagama's previous iconic texts on war: *Me Mage Sandai* (2000) and *Me Paren Enna* (2004). In both films, he uses the image of the Tamil woman as a reminder of the Sinhalese culpability in war. In *Me Mage Sandai*, a sense of culpability, in the form of a victimised Tamil woman, follows the Sinhala soldier on his way home from the battlefield. Drafted as a very abstract text, the film also talks about the Sinhala soldier's experiences of melancholia—his inability to let go of certain memories. In *Me Paren Enna*, the Sinhala bourgeois father hallucinates a Tamil woman on a family trip to Jaffna along the newly opened A9.²³ He decides to give her a ride, and halfway she gets down and disappears into a house destroyed by war. As he follows her, he witnesses a dead body covered with blood. This is a hallucinatory moment resulting from his awareness of Sinhalese responsibility for the atrocities committed against Tamils. *Ini Avan*, however, marks a shift in those who hold culpability and melancholia—it is no longer the Sinhalese, but the Tamils. In the film, a Tamil woman stalks the ex-LTTE combatant reminding him of his culpability for usurping her husband's job. In a broader sense, her character can be read as a symbol that constantly reminds him of his role in the devastation caused to the Tamils during war. His inability to let go of her coincides with his own experience of post-war melancholia.

In terms of the narrative structure, the film is presented as a chase—chasing and being chased. All the lead characters are chasing after survival, while being chased by memory. They are suffering from a condition that can be named the 'Vanni Syndrome'. Addressing the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in 1980, President Ronald Reagan's diagnosed the

²³ The highway from Colombo to Jaffna.

'Vietnam Syndrome' as a condition of Americans' 'feelings of guilt' about the Vietnam War (1980). In a similar way, Handagam's film talks about Tamil survivors' feelings of guilt and their melancholic psyche.

The film, despite documenting certain complex human issues through survival testimonies, does not depict certain socio-political realities of the present-day North. There is sparse military presence in the film and once the rehabilitated LTTE combatant enters society, he has 'full wings'. In practical terms, rehabilitation involves a heavy policing of ex-combatants who are under close military surveillance once they are released. The coastal belt which is a breeding ground for illegal activities, as shown in the film, would not be a space for illegal activities by Tamils in the present day. Under the current circumstances, a Tamil 'mafia' group would not be able to carry out daredevil operations in broad daylight in the Jaffna peninsula which is constantly being surveilled by the GOSL military. Defying his iconic cinematic aesthetic, which is hailed as incomparably rich in abstract expressions, Handagama presents *Ini Avan* as a more 'realistic' film. Unfortunately, its reality falls short of fully depicting the lived experiences of Tamils in the post-war North. The stark absence of Sinhala characters also seems to hint to improbabilities of the two ethnicities living together.

Afterthoughts: What Missions Accomplished, and 'Lessons Learnt'? Wither Reconciliation?

While America was still suffering from defeat in the Vietnam War, President Reagan, while making references to 'the Vietnam Syndrome', raised the need for America to bury that memory, because the United States has "an inescapable duty to act as tutor and protector of the free world" (Storey 2010: 101). Both he and his successor George Bush emphasised the need to "acknowledge and limit the meaning of Vietnam" (Storey 2010: 101). Against this backdrop, a significantly powerful role was played by Hollywood cinema. Thus emerged hyper-masculine celebrations of Vietnam veterans such as *Rambo: First Blood* (1982), *Uncommon Valor* (1983), *Missing In Action* (1984), *Missing In Action II—The Beginning* (1985), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), and *Rambo III* (1988). More than two decades after the conclusion of the war, films on the Vietnam conflict continued to be produced. Randall Wallace's 2002 film *We Were Soldiers* and Werner Herzog's *Rescue Dawn* (2002) are good examples in this regard. Despite being defeated by Vietcong guerrillas, these films portray successful and heroic endings which testify to the manliness, courage, valour, perseverance, patriotism, professionalism, fatherly and marital virtues, and above all, the humanity of Americans. Thus they are conditioning the memory of the American viewer as well as memories of Hollywood consumers across the globe. As Storey suggests, such narratives create a memory of the war, and a desire to win the war retrospectively, that enabled Bush to say that the Gulf War would not be another Vietnam (Storey 2010: 101).

Even though the GOSL did not lose the war, a similar paradigm is obvious in its handling of post-civil war popular culture. Having crushed the 1971 insurrection, the then Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike said that the uprising was a "movement of some misguided youth" (Jupp 1978: 312). Instead of carefully examining the causes for an emergence of youth unrest from within the populace, the government took strong military measures to strengthen itself against such events in the future. The army was expanded to three times its original size while the defence budget kept getting bigger. Thus the 'lessons learnt' in the

wake of the watershed class conflict in post-colonial Sri Lanka mark the beginning of militarism and militarisation which were later exercised in full by J.R. Jayewardene during the second youth insurrection in 1987. Chandrika Bandaranaike and Mahinda Rajapaksa have extended this militarisation project in relation to the GOSL's war with the LTTE. Notably, both the JVP in the 1980s and the LTTE throughout its lifetime, had taken similar militant measures, which eventually, turned "a diver's paradise" into "a landmark of gunrunners in a battle zone of army camps and Tigers," as the narrator of Romesh Guneseckera's *Reef* suggests (1994: 12).

Against this backdrop, it is worthwhile to observe what lessons we have learnt as a nation, and how those lessons are being narrated, re-written, interpreted, archived, and canonised. Very clearly, attempts are being made to construct hegemonic versions of truth and memory, as in the post-Vietnam War era in the United States. In this process, certain memoirs are sidelined, ignored, understated, and even wilfully erased. The 'mainstream' films in this discussion weave a similar dialogue about 'our' side of the war against 'them'. They write history in a way 'mainstream' products of 'Hollywood's Vietnam' would do—by demonising the enemy, 'belittling' his strategies, questioning his legitimacy and the cause he fights for, understating his bravery, labelling all his military measures as treason, and most notably, projecting him as a 'savage' 'other' in need of 'enlightenment.' The memory of the war created in the movies, hence becomes insular as opposed to shared or collective. These films' claims to post-war reconciliation are highly questionable. The films only intensify the divide between the Sinhala and Tamil communities instead of dissolving it.

All violent occurrences in post-colonial Sri Lanka share a common paradigm. The uprisings have found their nemesis in the State, yet as the phoenix that rises from its own ashes, their ends have left behind seeds for their regeneration. In the post-civil war era, the 'victory' is still being celebrated. The so-called lessons learnt make way for regular heavy investment in the defence budget, and the proliferation of military strength. Such measures are being commended as indispensable as well as being rendered normative through cinema. Retrospectively, looking at the lessons of our post-colonial history, we are left with doubts about the lessons we have (not) learnt about reconciliation and coexistence, despite hyped-up claims. Unfortunately, the films in the discussion do not create space for "the cause of disagreement [to be] taken away" (*Tirukkural* Chapter 53, line 9) so that the return of "who have been friends and have afterwards forsaken him" would not be possible. Instead, the visual rhetoric furthers the course of militarisation while privileging a majoritarian perspective. The depiction of Sinhala-Buddhist triumphalism echoes the *Dhammapada* words stated in the epigraph that victory "engenders enmity" while the defeated "miserably sleep" (Stanza 201). Sri Lankan post-civil war cinema endorses a discourse similar to the "enabling discourse" of Hollywood's Vietnam (Storey 2010: 101). As the films discussed in this paper demonstrate, the intentions of this discourse are to 'enable' the winning faction to take the upper hand over the defeated.

The conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities echoes Ashis Nandy's question, "Why is it that the most venomous, brutal killings and atrocities take place when the two communities involved are not distant strangers, but close to each other culturally and socially, and when their lives intersect at many points?" (2002). The films that emerge in the post-civil war era need to address Nandy's question in order to play an effective role in terms

of bringing the two communities together. Arguably, the films in the discussion, except perhaps Handagama's *Ini Avan*, are primarily commercial ventures which capitalise on Sinhala nationalist sentiments and enable the GOSL to obtain optimal political benefits from the war. Even though similar trends exist in Hollywood which would essentialise positive aspects of the state military endeavours, most notably, alternative waves find their way out with alternative narratives challenging dominant versions. As the Sri Lankan experience demonstrates, Sri Lankan cinema under the auspices of the state politics hegemonises dominant versions of memory and truth about war. Effacing historical, cultural, linguistic, and religious ties between the Sinhalese and Tamils, the communities are depicted as a binary—one as a complete foil to the other. Undoubtedly, there is a timely need for post-Sri Lankan cinema to stand on its own feet and speak of lessons which have the capacity to foster better human relationships in this ethnically diverse country.

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Reconciliation looms large in the Sri Lankan post-civil war era that dawned with the official end of the military engagement between the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. While the state-crafted political endeavours aimed at reconciliation such as the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) are yet to yield sustainable results, post-war Sri Lankan cinema's capacity for cultivating inter-ethnic harmony between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities has become a worthy topic of discussion. Since the end of the civil war, many films 'based on' or 'inspired by the true events of war' have emerged. They tend to depict negotiations and interactions between the two communities positively and negatively. As Elizabeth Jelin (2003) notes, memory construction subsequent to events of political tension involves 'uses and abuses' of memory as well as 'ownership and the meanings of 'us'. This paper analyses the construction of memory and the presence (or rather the absence) of reconciliation in four cinematic memory works, *Maatha* (2012) by Boodee Keerthisena, *Gamani* (2011) by Sarath Weerasekera, *Selvam* (2011) by Sanjaya Leelarathna and *Ini Avan* (2012) by Asoka Handagama. While arguing that these films 'abuse' memory and 'canonize' 'our' memory, this paper will illustrate how they distressingly widen the segregation between the two ethnic communities through 'lessons learnt'—such as celebrating military triumphalism, privileging 'our' Sinhala legacy over Tamil 'otherness', promoting a form of 'visual atrocity tourism', and passing culpability of war on to Tamils—which undermine the goal of reconciliation.

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Printed by Karunaratne & Sons (Pvt) Ltd.

ISBN 978-955-5801-46-1



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