

ATTEMPTING THE SRI LANKAN NOVEL OF RESISTANCE AND RECONCILIATION: A. SIVANANDAN'S *WHEN MEMORY DIES*

Since the number of English novels produced in Sri Lanka continues to be small, despite a marked increase in output over the last few years, any new novel that appears is subjected to considerable scrutiny and inevitably compared and contrasted with previous work. A. Sivanandan's monumental novel *When Memory Dies* is no exception. It is partly, like Vijaya-Tunge's *Grass for My Feet*, Lucian de Zilwa's *Scenes of a Lifetime*, and Kenneth M. de Lanerolle's *Southern River*,¹ a work of remembrance--"partly" because *When Memory Dies*, in spite of its opening words, "[m]y memory begins, as always, with the rain - couched against the great wall of the old colonial building that once housed the post office,"² is not really set up as an autobiographical novel. The novel, furthermore, discloses parallels with Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies* and Carl Muller's Von Bloss Trilogy³ because it chronicles the social, political, and other changes in Sri Lanka over three generations, a period that saw the country transformed from a Crown Colony to a postcolonial or, some would argue, a neocolonial State. Then again, in trying to capture life in Jaffna before the ethnic conflict, the novel shows points of convergence with Jean Arasanayagam's *Peacocks and Dreams*.⁴ And, written as it is by one who is now domiciled abroad, *When Memory Dies* also belongs to that increasing list

¹ J. Vijaya-tunga *Grass for My Feet* (London: Edwin Arnold, 1935); Lucian de Zilwa, *Scenes of a Lifetime: The Autobiography of Lucian de Zilwa* (Colombo: H.W. Cave, 1967); Kenneth de Lanerolle, *Southern River* (Colombo: Hansa, 1971).

² A. Sivanandan, *When Memory Dies* (London: Arcadia, 1997) p.5. All subsequent references are to this edition and are incorporated in the main body of the text.

³ Yasmine Gooneratne, *A Change of Skies* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1992); Carl Muller, *The Jam Fruit Tree* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1993), *Yakada Yaka: The Continuing Saga of Sonnaboy von Bloss and the Burgher Railwayman* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1994), and *Once Upon a Tender Time: The Concluding Part of the Von Bloss Family Saga* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1995).

⁴ Jean Arasanayagam, *Peacocks and Dreams* (New Delhi: Navarang, 1996).

of Sri Lankan expatriate novels.

To point out similarities between this novel and others, however, is not to suggest that Sivanandan merely repeats the concerns that have been covered by previous writers. Not only is *When Memory Dies* substantially more ambitious than many of the works cited above, but it will surely achieve a distinctive place in Sri Lankan Writing in English for the patently subaltern stance that it adopts and for its treatment of the ethnic conflict from angles and on a scale that have not been attempted previously. Raja Proctor's *Waiting for Surabiel*⁵ is perhaps the only other Sri Lankan novel which gives such primacy to the subaltern, but it lacks the breadth, length and depth of *When Memory Dies*.

Sivanandan's book fits in neatly with the kind of appraisal made popular by members of the Subaltern Studies Group who dispute the claims of many "traditional" historians and historiographers. The latter conclude, for instance, that the Nationalist Movement in India was conducted and rendered successful by a few leaders of the *elite*. These formulations, as Said points out, ignore "the constitutive role of an enormous mass of subaltern Indians, the urban poor and the peasants, who throughout the nineteenth century and earlier, resisted British rule in terms and modes that were quite distinct from those employed by the elite."⁶ The Subaltern Studies Group believes, therefore, "...that elitist historiography should be resolutely fought by developing an alternative discourse"⁷ which gives primacy to the contribution of the marginalized, like workers, peasants and women to such struggles. Sivanandan has improved on these objectives by constructing a novel that presents subaltern perspectives, foregrounds subaltern themes, focusses on subaltern characters, and formulates subaltern solutions to the problems besetting the island. Conditions in the country are such that these "solutions" cannot be effected. But they do provide a basis for equitable, harmonious living when (or if) the blood-lust is replaced by even a modicum of normality.

⁵ Raja Proctor, *Waiting for Surabiel* (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1981).

⁶ Edward Said, Preface. *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Oxford: OUP, 1988) v-xii.

⁷ Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India." *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Oxford: OUP, 1988) p. 43.

Sivanandan's subaltern stance, which is influenced by Marxist thought, is spelled out by several individuals. Rajan who narrates the middle section of the novel declares:

Perhaps he should be a writer, a historian maybe, recover for his people the history they had lost? Put them back on course, help them change the history inflicted on them? It was not as though he had not given a lot of thought to his country, its formation, its predicament. But for whom would he write? He did not want to write for intellectuals, they made playthings of knowledge. For ordinary people? But he did not know people the way Lal knew people, he did not have the feel of them, he was still young and immature. He understood contradiction out there in society, but he did not grasp it in himself, in people. He had not till now seen conflict as necessary to one's personal growth, as an essential part of life, its motor, as natural as breathing. He had not seen that the dialectic was also a felt sensibility and, unless he grasped that, he would not be able to change anything. (p. 291)

His foster-father S.W. too declares that "the real heroes" in the workers' movement were not the educated leaders but "the ordinary people, who suffered a lot of hardship in helping the strikers" (p. 56). Lali for her part is amazed to find "wisdom and understanding and tolerance tucked away in a little hamlet beyond the reach of civilization" (p. 217) in people like Uncle Para and Uncle Pathi whom she regards as the "...real backbone of the country. They were the real custodians of our history and our culture, and they were everywhere. There was hope for the country yet" (p. 217). The subaltern "solution" to the country's woes is supplied by Vijay:

The answer was simply that the people themselves should take power [...] ordinary people, and in Sri Lanka that meant the workers, peasants, fisherfolk, market women, artisans. But for them to want to do that, each of them, each of these groups, had to be shown how the new society could improve their own lives while improving the lives of others. And even within these groups there were sections whose interests might be different, like the *andé* cultivators, or dock workers who owned a bit of land back in the villages, or estate workers who worked the land but had none, or fisherman who fished for pearls not fish. It was a mistake to think that all workers, or all clerks had the same incentive to change things. (p. 271)

Neither the "hope" that Lali refers to here nor the pat "answer" that Vijay espouses ever materializes in the life of the novel. S.W., Para, Pathi, and others either die before they can make lasting contributions or are swept aside by people who are more interested in the material rewards offered by the open economy and in promoting the "superiority" of their race and class rather than in pursuing what they regard as the quaint idealism propounded by these others. Some of the leaders who replace them, though idealistic in the same way, are unable to galvanise sufficient support to resist the "enemy." They are often reduced to fighting individual battles that achieve little. It is this decision to project reality, rather than to romanticise the marginalized for whom Sivanandan's support is total, and his willingness to depict the many instances in which subaltern movements are defeated or corrupted that places *When Memory Dies* in the same league as political novels like André Malraux's *Man's Estate*.⁸

Marginalized groups, whether set up as Trade Unions, the JVP, or Tamil militants⁹ show much promise initially, but they are eventually devitalized, corrupted, and subverted for a multiplicity of reasons. These interest groups are overcome by the might of the State, undermined when senior members make "deals" with the government, lose credibility when they begin to practise the bigotry and the chauvinism which their "manifestos" had denounced, and are ultimately destroyed when differences of opinion within the membership lead to rifts and ultimately to violence.

Although this novel refers to many politicians and public figures of our time, A.E. Goonesinha, the labour leader, is one of the few persons to be actually mentioned by name (Names of other notables are slightly altered or substituted by nicknames; for instance, Meril Sithu for Cyril Mathew, Victory Dick for J.R. Jayawardena, and Manda Shalini for Nanda Malini). Sivanandan gives considerable attention to Goonesinha because he represents the kind of labour leader who uses his position to aggrandise himself rather than to work for his followers. S.W., a true leader, instinctly distrusts Goonesinha; while Tissa, Goonesinha's loyal follower at the time, hangs on his every word. Tissa

⁸ André Malraux, *Man's Estate*. Trans. Alastair Macdonald (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1978).

⁹ The JVP is called the PLF which perhaps stands for "People's Liberation Front," a direct translation of "Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna" (that is, the JVP). The Tamil militant groups are called "the Boys" throughout the novel.

believes that Goonesinha will be able to mobilize the workers for a confrontation against the bosses. He even accepts Goonesinha's approach (which is essentially the British Labour Party's approach) that "first, they give us adult suffrage and then, when we have learnt to use the vote, independence" (p. 104). Tissa's belief in Goonesinha continues until some workers who storm the Police Station to protest the assault on Goonesinha are shot at by the police.¹⁰ While Tissa is traumatized when his "disciple," Sultan, is killed in the shooting, what shatters him even more is the discovery of a symbolic partnership between the Raj and Mr. Goonesinha which is very dramatically rendered by Sivanandan:

A stunned silence fell over the crowd. They had no time to run. Now they looked around them, gazed dazedly at the dead and wounded and slowly their sorrow turned to anger. But before it could flare into riot, a voice came over the loudspeaker. "Friends," it began, and the crowd stood still. Tissa looked up and he saw his Chief on the top step above him, beside a white man in a white suit, with braid and buttons, and a plumed white hat on his head

"Friends," the velvet voice had put aside the loudspeaker. "The strike is over. The Colonial Secretary and I have come to an agreement." (pp. 110-111)

Any agreement after the killings is considered a betrayal by Tissa, and even the cautious Saha agrees with him. It comes as no surprise, therefore, when it is discovered on the eve of Independence that

The Ceylon National Congress had sold out [since] ... all they were interested in was to hold on to their lands and privileges.... As for Goonesinha and the Labour Party, they had abandoned the cause of the workers long ago. Goonesinha himself was content to sit in the State Council or to drive around in his chauffeur-driven "limousine" ... doffing his pith hat, with the ever-thinning red band around it, to imaginary crowds. (p. 146)

¹⁰ For a detailed, historical and sociological scrutiny of the events on which these episodes are based see the chapter entitled "'I Shall Have You Slipped': The General and the Particular in a Historical Conjuncture," in Michael Roberts, *Exploring Confrontations: Sri Lanka - Politics, Culture and History* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994), pp. 213-248.

Any Sri Lankan, or Sri Lankan expatriate who chooses to write a novel that privileges the ethnic issue lays himself/herself open to obvious charges. Given Sivanandan's background, a Tamil who emigrated to England after the riots of 1958, it is inevitable that any pronouncement he makes on the issue would be subjected to scrutiny by reviewers and critics intent on discovering incidence of racial bias. Sivanandan has taken up the challenge without demur. He does invoke stereotypes of the Sinhalese and Tamils on occasion, but for the most part explodes the stereotype as myth or explains the reason for stereotyping. Pandyan is portrayed as a "typical" man from Jaffna, simple, hardworking and, as the following near-Laurentian description discloses, one who lives close to the soil:

He had fought and accepted and revelled in the recurring drought and the untimely rain. He had wept when the crops failed him and rejoiced when they broke through the barren land against all the dictates of heaven. And he had celebrated his own strength at having brought them through against the will of the gods before whom only a moment before he had lain an abject suppliant (p. 11).

He is rendered frugal by poverty and although he never thought of "[r]espect and security" as a young man, he is forced to seek the same through Saha when his farm is sold to pay for his sisters' dowries. Small wonder then that his son should initially be cautious of people in the South, who accustomed as they are to a land that was fruitful and lush, would while away their time on trivial pursuits, without having to struggle for their very existence like their counterparts in the North. He discovers eventually, however, that the South has much to offer him:

By the time Sahadevan returned to Colombo a week later, his ideas about southern people had already begun to change. They were not as uncaring and self-indulgent as he had previously assumed. Though they had cause to be; their land was kinder to them, their hardships less fraught. Perhaps that explained their outgoing natures and their easy acceptance of life's vicissitudes. His own folk by contrast were impassive and dour, their relationships more principled, their kindnesses more harsh. They gave as the southerners gave but, unlike them, they knew the cost of their giving. (p. 21)

Despite such comparisons and contrasts, Sivanandan does not delve too deeply into the problems confronting the Sinhalese and Tamils in the first part of the novel. He is more interested in providing a homely account of life in

Sandilipay, in showing the peaceful co-existence which characterized relations between the two major communities in the South at that time, in critiquing Empire, and in outlining the worker's movement. Given the hospitable environment he finds in the South, it is no accident that S.W. should be more of a father to Saha than his own father and that his best friend should be Tissa. The relationship between the taciturn, thoughtful Saha and the intense Tissa, in fact, is one of the sequences in the book that is best presented.

Another factor that is deliberately constructed and not coincidental is the author's portrayal of two major players as bastards. Para, Saha's half-brother, is the product of Pandyan and the midwife, and Saha's "son" is not his own but Lali's child by Sena, a hospital attendant whom she was on the verge of marrying when he was killed during the *hartal*. Such a strategy allows the author to challenge the notion of a pure race and to focus on the intersections among races rather than the binary opposition favoured by those who wish to maintain differences between them; in other words, Sivanandan, like Regi Siriwardena in *The Lost Lenore: A Tale*,¹¹ gives hybridity a positive value. He adopts a similar method to interrogate the whole idea of class: Saha's first love is a lame pariah, and if he had not been killed, Vijay would have married Meena, the daughter of an estate labourer. Sivanandan's insistence on having individuals from various communities and classes becoming friends, comrades, lovers and spouses does at times draw too much attention and constitutes one of the weaknesses in the novel. But the strategy is generally effective. All these characters are cast as reliable, conscientious, and morally upright. And their attitudes and actions serve as an ironic commentary on the ridiculous lengths to which others take communalism and class-consciousness in the sequences that describe the country since independence. They also suggest an alternative mode of living for Sinhalese, Tamils and other communities in Sri Lanka.

Sivanandan spares neither the Sinhala only fraternity nor the Tamil chauvinists in sections two and three in which he views with anguish the increasing polarization of the two communities. These positions are sometimes expressed by bigots and on other occasions (most alarmingly) by people who are normally reasonable. The "debate" between Rajan and Visvappa is so crucial in showing Sivanandan's impartiality *vis a vis* the communal issue that it is reproduced here in almost its entirety:

"You don't understand these *Cheenapulis, thambi*," Visvappa broke into my thoughts. They are not civilized. They have no culture. What can

¹¹ Regi Siriwardena, *The Lost Lenore: A Tale* (Colombo: n.p., 1996).

you expect from them? Where are their poets their Valmiki's and Barathis, their ... "

The man's arrogance infuriated me. I had half a mind to tell him that my wife was a *Cheenapuli* too, and my son, but he was my father's friend and a guest in our house. I turned off waiting for an opportunity to escape and wondering how a learned man like him - he was a contributor to the *Madras Hindu* and a popular Tamil novelist - could be proud of his prejudices.

"Perhaps that's why the Sinhalese want their language back," I heard my father say, emphasising 'Sinhalese' as though to give Visvappa notice that he would not have them derided as *Cheenapulis*. "We never lost ours, you know, even under the British."

"But that's because it's an ancient language." Visvappa was unabashed, "And spoken all over the world [...] Where is Sinhala spoken except here in Ceylon among a handful of people?" [...]

"You really have taught me something, Mr Visvappa, sir," my father said after a while, in measured tones. "You really have." Visvappa smiled, acknowledging the compliment as his due, and even I was taken in. "Here I was getting mad about the Sinhala-only business [...] And it is people like you [...] who make communalists of us all" (pp. 205-06).

Sivanandan finds equally obnoxious the racist and propagandist material found in school text books which is calculated to deceive immature children. One junior school history reader declares, for instance, that "The history of Lanka [...] is the history of the Sinhala race. The Land nourishes the Race, the Race civilizes the land" (p. 308).¹² Such rhetoric not only ignores the plurality that constitutes Sri Lankan society but also inculcates in young minds the preposterous suggestion that Sri Lanka is a Sinhalese preserve.

These absurd "debates" and the descriptions of damaging yet hilarious readers are soon rendered redundant, however, once the fist, the knife, the torch, the bomb, and the gun take over. Sivanandan takes pains to recount with increasing horror the atrocities of 1958, 1977, and 1983 that largely affected the

¹² See also the discussion between Vijay and his students about Sinhalese and Tamils in pages 295 and 296.

poorer classes and in particular the estate labourers who find themselves "in a sort of no-man's-land between the Tamils and the Sinhalese" (p. 355). Particularly horrendous is the gang-rape and murder of Lali who is mistaken for a Tamil, which confirms a point that Sivanandan implies throughout the book that by maiming and killing each other, the Sinhalese and Tamils are merely victimizing themselves.

Sivanandan does not concentrate too much attention on the PLF (JVP) insurgency of 1971, the first major threat to the State since Independence which serves to reinforce a comment made by Thiru Kandiah long before this novel was published that Sri Lankan English writers show "... a reluctance to confront fully and grapple with all of the issues thrown up by the events dealt with, in all of their complexity"¹³ *vis a vis* this event. Perhaps Sivanandan's decision not to devote much attention to the same was influenced by the scale and range of his novel. Too great a focus on the insurgency would have imperilled the examination of other issues and events that are equally important. What little is presented is given in retrospect. The author highlights the manner in which "the PLF leadership had gone for each other during the trials" (p. 260) and shows how dispirited and disillusioned the new generation of university students had become in the wake of the failure of the insurgency which had after all originated from within their ranks. Sivanandan also indicates (especially in the sequence at the Peradeniya University Faculty Club) how academics who had been "quick to redeem an injustice" in the old days can now only "drink to forget what we have forgotten" (p. 260). Even more disturbing and damning, however, is the author's disclosure that even the PLF which had been founded on the most "pristine" Left Wing principles was vitiated by communalism. Vijay discovered this to his cost when he had tried to speak up for plantation workers:

The party line was that India was an Imperial power and that the Indian estate workers in Ceylon, and all Tamils for that matter, were a fifth column. Vijay had opposed the view vehemently and was accused, in the ensuing row, of being fathered by a Tamil. Pathirana, it was alleged, was not his real name though that was how it stood in his birth certificate. Vijay was suspended from the party "for further inquiry"

¹³ Thiru Kandiah, "Inadequate Responses and the Attenuation of Creativity: Sri Lankan English Fiction of the Insurgency of 1971" *The Writer as Historical Witness: Studies in Commonwealth Literature*. Ed. Edwin Thumboo and Thiru Kandiah (Singapore: UniPress, 1995) p. 407.

and, though Padma fought for him tooth and nail, it was not till Vijay was discovered to be the "real" son of a Sinhalese hero of the *hartal* of 1953 that he was allowed back into the fold. (p. 254)

"The Boys," according to Sivanandan, appeared in Jaffna against the background of the language policies, attacks on Tamils in the South, their harassment in the North by the police and the armed forces, the introduction of standardization which they felt was mostly targeted at Tamils, and the denial of employment to them on the basis that they had more than their fair share of jobs during colonial occupation. As a member of Rights and Justice, his connections with the North and the South, and his credo that all socialist groups irrespective of race and creed should join hands to set the country back on the right track, Vijay is potentially acceptable to most as a mediator in the conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese. The Boys he first encounters seem reasonable enough. They are not interested in brandishing the "historical claims of the Sinhalese and the Tamils (p. 327);" rather, they wish to find out why the Left Movement had failed in the South and how well intentioned people like Vijay could be of practical use to them. The intelligentsia in Jaffna, however, are little different from the pundits in the South:

...they all had the same views and displayed the same leaden quality of righteousness as his Sinhala colleagues "back home"--the same stereotypes, the same myths, the same determination to reshape history to their prejudices, only in reverse. It was as though they had never known Sinhalese people, lived among them, married into their families, stood beside each other worshipping the same gods. All they would say over and over again and in nightmarish unison, was that they were a separate people who had, for centuries, been mixed up like an *achachru* [...] by European colonialists and now wanted to be returned to their pristine separateness in their pristine homelands. And their historical and their archaeological findings led them, like their counterparts in the Sinhalese universities, to the conclusion that they had worked for. (p. 324)

This quotation, while disclosing the futility of expecting people of the Old Guard in both camps to come together to bring the country out of the Slough of Despond it had fallen into, provides further evidence that the novel does not valorize the cause of Tamils at the expense of the majority community. Not only does Sivanandan give voice to other perspectives, but he even dramatizes the contradictions, the procrastinations, and the mistakes of those, like Vijay, who represent the subaltern perspective that he endorses.

The country, unfortunately, is not ready for compromise and concessions. The last sections of the novel concentrate on rigged elections, spurious referendums, the stifling of political opposition and more communal violence. Sivanandan cleverly insinuates Vijay into the Welikade jail as a suspected terrorist sympathiser after an interrogation that is reminiscent of scenes from Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* or Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.¹⁴ He is initially placed in solitary confinement and then with hardcore criminals because the cells have to be vacated to accommodate the "dhemmalas" (p. 367) who have been rounded up. It is under these circumstances that Vijay witnesses the infamous prison "riot" of the early 80s during which many Tamil detainees suspected of being associated with the separatists were killed, and is himself knocked senseless in trying to intervene. What is implied in the entire episode is that warders, guards, prisoners, and perhaps outsiders colluded in this "riot."

The fact that some rioters with injuries and others like Vijay who are hurt by accident were conveniently placed near a hospital reinforces this theory.

The title of this novel is taken from a conversation between Para and Vijay:

"When memory dies, a people die," Uncle Para broke into his reverie, and Vijay had the eerie feeling that the old man was privy to his thoughts before he was. But, remembering his experiences of the last few days, he asked: "What if we make up false memories?"

"That is worse, replied the old man, "that is murder." (p. 335)

An abbreviated version of this sequence is also given as an epigraph in the third section. Memory is indubitably of crucial importance to this novel. It is the recollection of his wife's brutal murder that drives Rajan insane, and remembrances of Sri Lanka before the communal clashes are often compared and contrasted with the present. The "amnesia" that Vijay suffers is another example of Sivanandan's subtle use of this motif. The "official" story of a prison riot cannot surely be sustained when an onlooker explains the incident otherwise. What the State and its supporters (Vijay's wife Manel among them) do is to persuade the public that the "other" version is a fantasy brought about by amnesia:

¹⁴ Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*. Trans. Daphne Hardy. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1978). George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1981).

Now stop it. It's all a part of your delirium. Didn't the doctors tell you? You got a blow on your head, during one of your election stunts I expect, and lost your memory, and somehow or other ended up in Colombo. (p. 368)

In such sequences, the author challenges the reader to glean the facts from what is derisively dismissed as fiction and to identify the fantasy in what is presented as given truth.

Sivanandan ends his novel not in the south, but in Jaffna, where it all began. Vijay's marriage to Manel, though "comfortable" on occasion, cannot survive the tempestuous situation in the country. They discover that their values and loyalties are at odds when the racial riots that careen out of control demand that they clearly define their separate positions on issues relating to race. Their relationship is also vitiated by Vijay's love for Meena, an estate labourer's daughter, whom Vijay meets by accident. When the Tamils in the South, and especially the estate labourers, are threatened with total destruction, Vijay breaks with Manel and temporarily gives up his politics to accompany Meena to Jaffna where he hopes to marry her.

Jaffna town and Sandilipay, however, have been transformed utterly. The "basic, fundamental, feudal" (p. 335) life that his "ancestors" had enjoyed is now replaced by one in which the boys and the army tussle for supremacy. Para's formerly cheerful and humane grandson, Ravi, is now cast as a "faceless" commander who in the crucial final scene is described as, "a portly figure in battle fatigues and side arms, flanked by two armed men" (p. 410), a man who orders Kugan to be hanged on a lamppost without taking any measures to discover whether he is the real informer.

The blurb at the back of the book glibly informs the reader that "...through the travails of their lives emerges the possibility of another future." Such a reading cannot be maintained in the face of that final scene which is rendered dramatically and with subtle irony. Vijay, a Sinhalese, and the adopted son of Rajan, a Tamil, is shot by Ravi (Para's grandson) while trying to prevent the latter from killing a low-caste toddy tapper. Ravi is now so blinded by his role as commander and of the necessity of finding a scapegoat that he cannot (or chooses not to) recognize his cousin. All that this family has stood for--concern for the downtrodden, respect for other communities, and the determination to see that justice will prevail--is destroyed in one fell swoop. Meena's anguished cry, "You have killed the only decent thing left in this land ... We'll never be whole again" (p. 410), furthermore, negates any "possibility of another future" because

by dispensing "instant justice" Ravi has prevented Vijay from marrying Meena, a much needed symbolic union between race and class.

If the government, organized labour, and even the educational system cannot be relied on to change a cataclysmic trend, the text does not show much promise in the boys either. The culminating gesture of the novel is Yogi's knocking the gun from Ravi's hand to prevent the latter from killing Meena too. This action, and the words that accompany the deed, "[t]hat's enough ... I am taking over" (p. 410) is a continuation of the in-fighting "over who would serve the people better, which faction, which dogma" (p. 394) that had already vitiated the cause, and provides a foretaste of the other leadership struggles that would splinter the movement in the latter half of the 1980s.

To accuse Sivanandan of valorizing Tamils in general and the boys in particular, then, is to indulge in a blinkered reading of this novel. No doubt, he mourns the destruction of the North and the plight of thousands of Tamils who were innocent victims in a race war that they neither desired nor carried out. He is, however, equally concerned about the dehumanization of life in the South. His anger is not directed at a particular race but at Sri Lankans from both sides of the racial divide who by their apathy or active involvement in the conflict have made the polarization complete. Sivanandan's invoking the famous concluding line from Hopkins' poem, "Thou art indeed just, Lord..." as an epigraph for the second section is very significant in this context. The line "Mine, O thou Lord of Life, send my roots rain" and the poem as a whole articulate that the speaker is sterile, that his creativity has suffered, and that he cannot function without God's grace. Given the fissures that now affect the island, there is little that Sri Lankans can do by themselves to remedy the situation; the selfless efforts of the few need to be supported by considerable interventions by Providence.

Recent Sri Lankan novels, including those written by expatriates, are characterized by their use of journalese, diffuse narrative, diary entries, and other techniques that provide a plethora of voices and styles. While Sivanandan eschews such palpably postmodernist formulae, concentrating instead on a narrative line that is relatively "realistic" and straightforward, this simplicity masks some neat novelistic strategies. The three sections of the book encompass the lives of three principals with Rajan narrating his own story and the Saha and Vijay sections--the first preceding and the other succeeding Rajan's story--being largely given in third person narrative. A closer reading establishes that the mode of narration is a shade more complex, however. Rajan, in fact, introduces himself as the narrator of the first section, but gradually effaces himself from the

story by substituting Sahadevan or Saha for "my father." Rajan, furthermore, maintains a shadowy narrative presence in Vijay's story too in his letters to his son which Vijay constantly re-reads. Since Rajan survives all the principals, it is possible then that he is the real narrator. Not only does his exilic status provide a reading of events that is at once interested and detached, but this individual who had lost his sanity after witnessing his wife's rape and murder and "flips out" again when he visits the scene some years later is, ironically, the only person capable of providing a lucid account of the "madness" prevailing in the country.

Any author undertaking a novel that deals with the same themes and motifs over three generations should guard against repetition (especially in constructing character), and the danger of losing intensity and focus. Although Sivanandan has succeeded in making Pandyan, Saha, Rajan, and Vijay different from each other, despite their "blood" connections and other similarities, he is occasionally guilty of sameness in his portrayal of some of the minor characters who share socialist views. Lal, Tissa, Sarath, and Dana, for instance, are too similar to each other. Sivanandan, furthermore, cannot maintain throughout the level of intensity required from a novel that chooses not to provide many "still points." The novel could have been condensed to good effect. Sivanandan, finally, is vulnerable in his portrayal of love relationships. The only relationships that are credible are those that are barely described, like the "unspoken life which wove [Pandyan and his wife] together" (p. 9). The tempestuous marriage between the selfless Vijay and the ambitious Manel does not convince, and the Lali/Rajan and Meena/Vijay relationships, cut short as they are by violent death, are more important for their potential rather than for what they actually achieve. Sivanandan's insistence on conjoining "unlikely" couples, though important to prove his thesis, is, as already indicated, a shade overdone. Saha's infatuation for the lame, "untouchable" Rani, and the University educated Vijay's falling for Meena, the estate labour's daughter, are two such instances.¹⁵

To dwell on these lapses would be carping, however. Despite his support for oppressed classes and his predilection for pre-independence life in Northern villages, Sivanandan has no intention of falling prey to what Rajiva Wijesinha

¹⁵ Regi Siriwardena's review of *When Memory Dies*, published in *Nēthra* 1.4 (1997): pp. 74-81, which I read after I completed this article, provides some valuable insights and also analyses the novel's weaknesses in great depth.

has called "the village well syndrome."¹⁶ The simplicity associated with life in Sandilipay, though infinitely preferable to the terror that replaced it, is not complete in itself; in fact, the author takes pains to highlight some of the disadvantages in such an insular existence. The connection between jingoistic educationalists and self-seeking politicians, on the one hand, and the fanning of communal conflict, on the other, is made, but Sivanandan is not so deterministic as to place all blame on politicians and educationalists. While his support for the oppressed is well nigh total, he assembles an honest account of the subaltern, not one that is romanticized. In adopting such a posture, Sivanandan goes beyond Robert Boyers' stipulation for the political novel which would have it that "[t]he dominant ethical perspective [in a political novel] will not cancel out the other perspectives generated in the work, will not make others 'look bad' so as to have the field all to itself."¹⁷

When Memory Dies is an eloquent and (it must be said) tragic novel for our time. The socialistic "solutions" offered by the positive characters bring little relief--least of all to those articulating these views. Chances of the same solutions providing any sustenance to readers, therefore, are remote indeed. Sivanandan, however, has done justice to a complex terrain by capturing the interplay of various forces. He has articulated with compassion and insight but without sentimentality the "normality" in the island that some of us mercifully still remember, while candidly detailing the horrors of the present. Such a presentation will, it is hoped, shock, shame, or in some other way, induce readers of all communities to work towards a reconciliatory future.

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¹⁶ Rajiva Wijesinha, "Forms of Alienation: Sri Lankan Fiction in English," *Navasilu: Journal of the English Association of Sri Lanka* 11 and 12 (1994): p. 103.

¹⁷ Robert Boyers, *Atrocity and Amnesia: The Political Novel since 1945* (New York: Oxford, 1985) p. 28.