

# THE IMMIGRANT LITERATURE OF SRI LANKAN TAMILS: SOME REFLECTIONS

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My son is in Jaffna  
wife in Colombo  
father in the Wann  
mother, old and sick in Tamil Nadu  
relatives in Frankfurt  
a sister in France  
and I,  
Like a camel that has strayed in Alaska  
am stuck in Oslo.  
Are our families  
cotton pillows  
to be  
torn and scattered by  
the monkey fate?

V.I.S. Jayabalan  
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**T**he literary creations of displaced Tamils, living in foreign countries, constitute a new phenomenon in contemporary Tamil literature and culture.

Journals, collections of poetry, short stories and novels in Tamil are being published in significant numbers in countries where Sri Lankan Tamils now live, such as Canada, Britain, Germany, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, France, Holland, Australia etc. More than forty journals and some newspapers are being published in these countries; some of them are backed by functioning art and literary groups, among which are *Kalam Ilakiyakkulu* and *The dal Pathipakam* from Canada, *Suvadugal Pathipakam* from Norway, *Thoondil Kulu* from Germany and the Assesey Group in France. Sometimes the groups associate with each other in their publishing efforts; for instance, the Canadian group which edits and publishes the journal *Kalam* has a network spreading into France, from where it receives help from friends and into India, the journal being printed until recently in Madras.

Another significant development is the annual literary encounter that takes place in Germany. Nearly 50 to 60 writers, literary enthusiasts, sociologists and even political scientists drawn mainly from the Tamil community in Europe assemble for this annual event which has been taking place since the mid-eighties.

These trends signify that the Tamil diaspora has begun to articulate its identity in the cultural arena. To understand this identity in its context, it is necessary to look at the socio-political background of the vast numbers of Sri Lankan Tamils scattered all over the world.

A rough estimate of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora indicates that over 300,000 Tamils now live dispersed throughout the world, mainly in the countries mentioned earlier. A rough estimate has it that nearly 85,000 Tamils now live in Toronto alone, Canada having become a popular destination for migrants. As described in Jayapalan's poem quoted at the beginning of this article, members of a single family may be scattered in several different countries.

Tamils have been migrating to the West from the early sixties; chronologically and socially, they fall into two distinct groups: the pre-'83 and the post-'83 immigrants, with much larger numbers involved in the latter group.

The pre-'83 immigrants are those who started departing after the first manifestation of anti-Tamil violence in post colonial Sri Lanka in 1958. The majority of them came from the urban elite in major cities such as Colombo and Jaffna and were mainly professionals and intellectuals. Discrimination against Tamil professionals was rearing its head and the Sinhala only language policy was not in favor of English educated Tamils. Frustrated, they left in the 60s and 70s for Britain, the USA and other English speaking countries. Some of them emigrated to British colonies in Africa, in search of greener pastures; after gaining some degree of financial stability, they eventually settled down in Britain or the United States.

The immigration laws of the countries of their choice were then not so rigid as they are now. Employment opportunities too were good. They were thus able to gain access to administrative and management level employment according to their educational and professional competence in the countries of their choice where they are now comfortably settled.

The post-'83 immigrants were of a different category. The development of the ethnic conflict in the late 70s, the military excesses and violence against Tamils in '77 and '83 exposed to many Tamils the political reality that they are an oppressed minority in Sri Lanka. This was the





cause for the unprecedented exodus of youth from the Jaffna peninsula and for the wide extension of the social strata from which migrants originated; now youth from remote villages in the Jaffna peninsula were departing to the industrialized countries of the West in large numbers. A youth, born and bred in a remote village which had never enjoyed the luxury of electricity, now found himself suddenly thrust into the midst of a metropolitan city and perplexed by the technological wonders of every day life. Unlike their earlier counterparts, they were not educated in English and had only proceeded to either Ordinary Level or Advanced Level.

At the beginning they migrated to countries such as England, Germany and France. In recent years access to these desired countries has become difficult due to the tightening of immigration laws. They therefore seek entry into other countries such as Canada and Australia where laws are comparatively flexible.

These recent immigrants identify themselves as "refugees" in the countries where they live; they even refer to the 'dole' as "*ahathik kaasu*" which literally means refugee money. Most of them are employed by small businesses, in vegetable and flower gardens, restaurants and petrol filling stations.

The Tamils who had gained entry to these countries, both legally or illegally, not only identify themselves as refugees but also with the black communities in those countries to some extent. The recent antagonism towards immigrants and the revival of the neo-nazi movement in West-European countries have compelled the Tamils to accept that they are a part of the 'colored' people.

The recent publications referred to earlier - journals and collections of poems and short stories - are the literary productions of these post '83 immigrants.

Living as a new immigrant in an alien environment poses many problems. The cultural system and the language are different. The need arises from this situation for reading materials in their own language and for a forum in which to meet and express their ideas. There are also eminent young writers and artists among the recent immigrants who yearn to continue the cultural activities they had developed in Sri Lanka. The identity crisis particular to immigrants also needs to be articulated through some means. These are the causes that have propelled the emergence of immigrant literary activities.

Modern technological advances in printing and the easy availability of computer software in the Tamil language are another factor making the production of books, pamphlets and journals relatively easy. Journals which were earlier hand-written or type set are now set on computers.

These literary productions, whether poetry or short stories, of the immigrant literary community possess certain identifiable common features. One of the striking characteristics in much of this writing is a continuing feeling of nostalgia for the lost homeland. This first generation of migrants, with no firm roots in their adopted countries, have perforce to think frequently their homeland. Everything round them - from nature to culture - is quite different from what they had experienced back home. The feelings of separation are therefore more real and concrete and are reflected in descriptions of and allusions to features of the familiar landscapes back home: the weather, the sandy beaches, the temples, the houses, the courtyards, the wells are all remembered with passion and nostalgia. Besides the physical environment, they also recall their cultural experiences and talk about the cultural alienation they are now subject to. In short, these expatriates are severely affected by an acute and tragic sense of separation from the cultural, spiritual and familial environment of their community; it is this that gives shape to the content of their literary productions.

I have lost my village home where  
 the sparrow will build its nest  
 the cadjan leaves will sing with the wind  
 the sun-lad will enter the shoe flower.  
 we crossed the seas  
 dreaming of wealth  
 and a house  
 with a beach in front  
 and a garden along the  
 red soil pathway  
 Alas, we have lost our identities  
 in the wilderness of refugee land.

[Selvam: 1992:29]

Another poet wonders how long he would be away from his country:

how many more days  
 will I bear the burden  
 of being away from my land  
 that floats in  
 the Indian Ocean North-East  
 like an emerald veena?  
 the thirst for my country  
 chokes my life  
 like a deadly poison.

[V.I.S. Jayapalan: ibid].



Not only nostalgia but also a feeling of guilt for leaving friends and relatives behind in the home-country find expression in some of the poems. It stems from the fact that they have physically distanced themselves from the war zone where Tamils continue to live and confront the problems of survival.

Another aspect of immigrant literature is that dealing with the situation of "being a refugee" in western countries, where they are classified legally, culturally and ethnically as a 'different' group. Faced with the reality of strict migration laws and racism, Tamil refugees feel that they are unwanted aliens. These feelings constitute a tragic backdrop to their lives and lead them to a positive identification with the 'coloured' part of the population. Colour is, of course, the differentiating factor in these countries where all non-whites are lumped together as aliens or as second-class citizens; Tamil immigrant literature often skilfully captures this reality.

The shadow itself  
shortens and dissolves  
[I] lower my eyes  
feeling ashamed  
I am a shade  
lesser than black  
but when the cat-eyed man  
strips me  
to the depth of my marrow  
does he find my blood black?  
yet there is despair in his look..."

[K.P. Aravintan: 1993:56].

The expectations the migrants had of finding the security of life, freedom and economic stability that they had been denied in Sri Lanka have also not been realised in these new lands. The bitter experiences inflicted on them by racism force on them the realisation that they are not wholly welcome here either. Literary sensibility transmutes this realisation into poetry:

In every altar  
strewn with flowers  
horses carrying  
heros with raised swords,  
those who conquered  
several countries  
even as statues  
shout with fiery voices  
GET OUT!  
statues reborn  
the swords will gleam  
where is your abode  
you who deserted your mother land?

[K.P. Aravindan: ibid. 62]

The poems are often thematically enveloped in the idea that stateless persons are on the brink of losing their souls. These people are filled with a sadness arising from the insecurities of refugee life and their sense of displacement and alienation; it imbues their lives with a tragic element which is captured in Tamil immigrant literature. The untold sorrows and frustrations of refugee life, the expression of their isolation, uncertainty, crises of every day existence, memories of kith and kin in Sri Lanka, all these form the core of their literary productions.

Since the Tamil immigrants have not yet begun to articulate themselves as a political community in those countries, the difficulties of life as refugees and the resulting alienation and isolation are generally represented as the personal issues of individuals.

*Varatha Vasanthangal*, which means 'A spring never to come', a poem by Anantha Prasad, depicts by the symbolic title of the poem itself the frustration over an uncertain future and the dissatisfaction caused by shattered expectations. Spring brings relief in cold Canada; it brings warmth and blooming flowers. And what a disappointment if spring does not come! This use of nature imagery gives the poet room to interpret refugee life as one full of disappointments.

Language itself is transformed in this process. Nature imagery in the context of the new countries, the contrast of cold and warm, of winter and spring, confer on word totally new meanings and symbolic significances, very different from the resonances of Tamil literary tradition. Summer in the Tamil tradition means rainless days, drought and heat; in their new habitations in temperate lands, summer is welcome sunlight and warmth. Words therefore are made bearers of new meanings. Jayapalan in a poem speaks of "summer like a sweet dream, short-lived"; in this sense, immigrant literature will have a transformative effect on Tamil literary traditions.

The other significant aspect of immigrant literature is the concern over political developments in Sri Lanka, especially of the Tamils. The poems and short stories reflect a growing disappointment that the national struggle of the Tamils has degenerated into a narrow nationalism with a militaristic out-look and been reduced to a competition for power. Critical reactions to this situation can be heard through some literary productions. There is also the suggestion that a ray of hope still exists and that this situation will one day change, lifting the struggle to a more humane level.

till  
till again  
again and again  
the soil will  
become fertile

[K.P. Aravintan: ibid.37]





The hope that the struggle of the Sri Lankan Tamils, backed by their untiring and repeated efforts, will take a positive turn finds expression in some works, even though these hopes are often undercut by feelings of lingering desperation. Hope and hopelessness are both articulated at the same time.

is it to gain  
the status of a refugee  
that I lost the zest for life  
and set ablaze the whole country?

[K.P. Aravinthan: *ibid.*:22]

Thus nostalgia for the home land, uncertainty about the future, a sense of alienation and isolation are among the themes raised in these writings; they can be seen as representing the collective memories and collective experiences, often anguished and tragic, of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees. But this is not peculiar to the Sri Lankan situation alone; it is a common feature of the creative writings of all the communities that have had the misfortune of being displaced due to political and social compulsion.

Another important aspect is the emergence of a feminist consciousness in these works. In some cities in Europe and Canada, Sri Lankan women have formed small groups to collectively address their problems; in Toronto the group is called *Vizippu*—Awareness, in Oslo *Sakthi*—Power and *Penkal Vattam*—Women's Circle in Germany. These groups have been publishing journals for the past few years. A new journal *Utha*—Purple—which was launched late last year in Germany, in its first editorial says:

The objective of *Utha* is to bring out to the open the sighs heard within the four walls of the house; encouraging the ex-writers to commence their writing again; provide a forum for discussion on various women's issues. It will not only confine itself to women's rights and emancipation but also will cast its concern on racism, apartheid, freedom of expression and on the liberation of humankind in general.

These ideals are common to most women's groups. The immigrant women in these countries have to contend with

the multiple identities they have acquired due to their immigrant status. A displaced woman is a refugee; a new comer to the country; a member of the black community; she is a worker; she is also a Sri-Lankan-Tamil woman. The tendency of immigrants to fossilize tradition and romanticize the homeland is very much a reaction to the alien culture surrounding them; this tendency is very visible in the case of Sri Lankan Tamils. It leads them to define aspects of their culture, to which they had never given much thought in Sri Lanka. In this context, it is the woman who is expected to preserve the traditional values and culture of her society; she is expected to resist the inroads of alien culture and to bring up her children according to the norms of Tamil culture. This expectation goes unsynchronized with the reality faced by these women, creating social as well as psychological problems. When these problems are discussed at an aesthetic level, there emerges a 'feminist' literature.

Such writings reflect not only their lives but also raise various ideological issues. What is culture and what is its role in human life? Why are only women expected to uphold cultural traditions? Why do men tend to exercise more control over women in foreign countries than in their own countries? Is it a common phenomenon or particular to the Tamil immigrant society only? These are some of the issues which are being raised in women's writings and they cannot easily be ignored.

This short note is only intended to introduce the immigrant literature of the Tamils to local readers and to identify some of its salient characteristics. However, the ideological and aesthetic aspects of these writings deserve deeper analysis.

#### Note

I have quoted poems from the following collections:

1. Aravinthan, K.P. *Mukam kol* [Face It], 1993
2. Ananthe Pirasad *Suya Tharisanam* [Self-revelation] 1992
3. Jayapalan, V.I.S. *Elliyuthirkala ninaivukal*, 1989 in *Thiruvach suvaduka*, Polar Imprints, 1989
4. Selvam Kaddidak Kadukku [Amidst the Concrete Jungle] 1992