

The Ritual Sacrifice of Richard de Zoysa: “Not really one of us, hence one of them”

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In *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard (1979) understands ritual sacrifice as a means of stalling the cycle of vengeance. What is sacrificed—person or otherwise—is not the offender, but someone “akin” to the offender; as such “sacred” and as such “pure”. According to Girard, it is crucial that the sacrificial victim is not party to the conflict. If this were not the case, the whole point of sacrifice is defeated; it won’t bring the cycle of violence to an end. Punishing the actual offender repeats the original offence and does not stop mimetic violence.

This brief essay attempts to understand Richard de Zoysa’s death as a modern instance of sacrificial violence, in a Girardian sense. It argues that de Zoysa was an insider/outsider in terms of class, which unfortunately qualified him for sacrificial violence. The point here is not that the state thought of de Zoysa’s assassination as ritual sacrifice, but that it bears the characteristics of a ritual sacrifice. The logic here being: not really one of us, therefore one of them.

Amongst the high-profile political assassinations in Sri Lanka in the 80s and 90s, de Zoysa’s assassination is special. He was assassinated during a time when the killing of well-known public figures had become commonplace enough: Vijaya Kumaratunga (1988), Rohana Wijeweera (1989), and Rajani Thiranagama (1989) amongst others. What then makes his assassination special, so to speak? Let us also remember here that countless other unknown, young and old, men and women, died during the time, caught up in the mayhem conjured by the civil war and the second JVP insurrection; many of whom have not been memorialised. Amongst all these politically motivated killings, why is de Zoysa’s so important, deserving of its 35th remembrance, for which this essay is being penned?

Arjuna Parakrama (2006) in his elegy for de Zoysa entitled “For Richard” writes,

You’ll get eulogies, a funeral for what it’s worth
A memorial lecture next year, that Sena and thousands
Of others won’t.

Why does de Zoysa merit such posthumous appreciation, unlike the “thousands of others”? In some ways this was also the question that was raised by Ranjan Wijeratne, the state minister of defence at the time, who was considered by many to be accountable, if not responsible for de Zoysa’s killing. Responding to Nimal Siripala de Silva who demanded a non-partisan parliamentary commission to investigate de Zoysa’s death, Wijeratne questioned why it was necessary to have a special commission to investigate this assassination when so many “special” people had been assassinated, including Vijaya Kumaratunga, whose deaths were not probed by a special commission. Disingenuous though it is, Wijeratne’s question does contain the kernel of truth; somehow de Zoysa’s death was “special.”

Well, there is the obvious explanation here. De Zoysa was an insider; by that I mean a class insider (I will go on to argue insider/outsider). He belonged to the ruling elite, if not to the bourgeoisie that has had significant control over the country at least since the country’s independence. Ironically enough, de Zoysa belonged to the class that the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was attempting to overthrow (in theory). This was a cause with which de Zoysa was in sympathy and this, according to some, prompted his assassination by the ruling regime.

Drawing attention to de Zoysa’s class background, Vihanga Perera (2015) states that, “Richard’s is by no small means an elite inheritance and property. Born to a socially and financially affluent de Zoysa-

Saravanamuttu amalgam, Richard's life is well set in a trajectory that would pass over the reach of 'politics'" (3). Perera argues that the emergence of de Zoysa—a child of privilege—as a human rights activist and later, essentially as a martyr, was an unlikely event. De Zoysa, who was meant to be out of the reach of "politics," embraced politics and was ultimately claimed by it. He who had all the right credentials to live a bourgeois life of safety and privilege chose politics, and a politics that would set him at odds with a ruling regime manned by those belonging to his own class.

De Zoysa's death was so special because, more so than anyone else like Vijaya Kumaratunga, or Rajani Thiranagama, or Rohana Wijeweera, de Zoysa was an insider, but therefore a traitor to his own class. As such he occupied the position of an insider/outsider. Here we have an instance where the elites kill one of their own, or in other words sacrifice one of their own. And his sacrifice was meant as a message; an example meant to bring the violence against the state to an end. And, arguably, his death would end the violence of the state against its enemies, thus ending the cycle of vengeance.

Parakrama (2006) in his poem for de Zoysa writes that he was made an example:

It is then, about life, your larger than life, a thousand
Lives, Life: they chose yours to mutilate as a warning to the
Rest,
And that must be the strangest compliment

While Richard de Zoysa was killed as a warning not to challenge the state and question its moral authority, the reaction to his death and his mother's (Manorani Saravanamuttu) long crusade to bring the culprits to justice, as Rajiva Wijesinha has suggested in *The Limits of Love*, brought an end to the government death squads. While extra-judicial killings continued, allegedly also by regimes that Wijesinha himself supported, the outcry against de Zoysa's death at least led to caution, or to put it cynically, to greater circumspection before such killings could be carried out. Wijesinha (2010) notes, "That does not mean that the aberrations have not recurred, but they have been nothing like as systematic as in the eighties."

It is almost as though de Zoysa's death was a sacrifice that had to be made for the killings to come to an end (although it did not, not altogether); it is as though his death was a prerequisite to end violence. In this sense de Zoysa seems to have functioned as a scapegoat; a sacred sacrifice that had to be made in order to appease the gods and bring the bloodshed to an end. Girard has noted, "The function of sacrifice is to quell violence

within the community and to prevent conflicts from erupting. Yet societies like our own, which do not, strictly speaking, practice sacrificial rites, seem to get along without them" (1979: 14). De Zoysa's killing, arguably, presents a case where a society "like our own" resorted to ritual killing. The public outcry against Richard's death and his mother's indefatigable attempts to seek legal redress—which nevertheless was never really delivered—"quelled" the violence.

Girard notes that sacrificial violence was crucial in "primitive" societies. According to him what distinguishes a "primitive society" from a "civilized society" is the absence of a judicial system in the former (1979: 19). That no legal punishment was meted out to the alleged culprits of de Zoysa's assassination perhaps reveals that Sri Lanka in the 80s and 90s had ceased to be a "civilised" society, and justice had to be sought elsewhere. That all the alleged key players in de Zoysa's assassination—Senior Superintendent of Police Ronnie Gunasinghe, State Minister of Defence Ranjan Wijeratne, and President Ranasinghe Premadasa—would all meet violent ends, thus seems in keeping with that time.

In a number of works by and of Richard de Zoysa, his status as an insider/outsider—thus opposite to be sacrificed—is manifest. As we commemorate his death 35 years later, his memory seems to be exerting a great deal of influence on the public imagination. Most notably Shehan Karunatilaka's Booker Prize-winning *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022) is dedicated to Richard de Zoysa and there is no doubt that the protagonist of the novel Maali is at least partially based on de Zoysa. Asoka Handagama's recent film *Rani* (2024) deals with the circumstances and the aftermath of de Zoysa's death, with Manorani Saravanamuttu, played by Swarna Mallawarachchi, taking a central role.

It is no accident that in Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons* the protagonist is named Malinda Albert Kabalana. Malin Kabalana is the name of the character that de Zoysa played in Lester James Peries' adaptation of Martin Wickramasinghe's *Yuganthaya*. Malin Kabalana is the son of the self-made ruthless capitalist Savimon Kabalana. Malin, after returning with a British education, turns leftist, much to the unhappiness of his father, and towards the end of the novel is elected to parliament. It is likely that de Zoysa's own politics, and also his life experience, aligned rather closely with Malin Kabalana. *Yuganthaya* is one of the most incisive critiques of the Sri Lankan colonial bourgeoisie, a class to which de Zoysa also belonged but felt, it appears, a great deal of ambivalence towards.

This ambivalence is well manifest in some of de Zoysa's poems. For example, in the well-known poem "Talking of Michelangelo"—published under the pseudonym Angela De Silva—de Zoysa (2006) critiques the "kaftan clad" fake Colombo literati and their pretensions to moral and cultural superiority. The title, "Talking of Michelangelo" is taken from T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", where Prufrock encounters a group of women "talking of Michelangelo." Eliot suggests that the women, despite talking of Michelangelo, do not really know about him. Women in de Zoysa's poem, similarly, despite expressing their righteous moral outrage, still do not really care about the causes that they are championing. Yet the poet wishes—no doubt ironically so—that she also belonged to their "sacred band":

O, all you splendid Amazons
Come, let me join your sacred band!
Unwrinkled yet of throat and hand
And mind, I'd like to wear the blazons
Of a lady poet too!

What this poem reveals is that, despite the poet's cynicism—is it Richard de Zoysa or Angela de Silva?—she still wishes to belong to the class—"the sacred band"—of which she speaks so scornfully. Despite being aware of the disingenuity of such middle-class literary circles, the poet claims at the end, yet again ironically, that she is happy to fit in and enjoy the perks:

I yearn to write of me and you
And the wondrous middle class
Of gracious windows barred to life
That never shook to sounds of strike
Excuse me while I fill my glass

The last line of this poem, arguably, reveals de Zoysa's attitude towards his own class. While he can discern the quintessential shallowness and inauthenticity of the supposedly cultured and politically conscious middle class, he is still content to remain on its margins, occupying a sort of insider/outsider position, while he "fills his glass." The point here is not to say that Richard was a hypocrite, rather it is precisely because he is an insider/outsider that he gained a critical awareness of a cultural sphere that remains barred to many. At many literary events such as the Galle Literary Festival, or the Gratiaen Prize award ceremony, one is often reminded of de Zoysa's poem which seems to have aged rather well.

De Zoysa's poem "Lepidoptera" (2015) offers perhaps the best illustration of his position as an insider/outsider. Vihanga Perera has noted that this deeply evocative

poem is often read as sympathetic to the "vernacular educated youth" (2015: 12) who were forced into English medium classrooms, a class and medium that de Zoysa was only too familiar with:

On broken butterfly wing, your crippled mind
Fluttered into my school room. Failed. And died.
I couldn't do a thing to stir its organs
Of poor maimed sense to life again

While de Zoysa is clearly sympathetic to the dead insect, there is nothing he can do about it. The poet expresses a certain feeling of impotence and powerlessness that he shares with the dead insect. His identification with it is quite clear, an instance of recognising the self in the other. Lepidoptera is pinned on a "cardboard behind glass" and is described as a "specimen of the educated class." This description is rather ambivalent, as it suggests both that the dead insect is for the viewing pleasure of the "educated class" and that, as a specimen "of the educated class", it belongs to the educated class.

The death of the insect foreshadows the death of de Zoysa himself. Perera notes,

The alienation and helplessness the narrator feels for the 'velvet softness' of the student brought into the classroom as if on a 'broken butterfly wing', can well demonstrate Richard's own displacement in a context where he had already ventured out of the ivory tower; his birthright. (2015: 12)

Thus, de Zoysa is someone who betrayed his birthright. The fate of the lepidoptera mirrors that of de Zoysa himself and carries the strong hint of martyrdom. Alfreda de Silva's "Lines for Richard" (2006), written after his death, similarly understands de Zoysa as a "dragon fly." She writes "one moment you were here and the next gone". De Zoysa, despite being an elite, is an insider/outsider not only within the sphere of his own class, but of the class of the vernacular educated student, a class that would rebel against the English educated middle class. It is de Zoysa's insider/outsider status that qualifies him for sacrificial violence. One of our own, and one of theirs simultaneously; not a direct party to violence, but one who must nevertheless be sacrificed for the violence to end. That I write this essay for his 35th death anniversary suggests that his sacrifice has not been forgotten.

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