

# Bodies on the line

## The Story of a Brief Marriage

By Anuk Arudpragasam

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Hands on his knees, a father woefully stares at two lumps of flesh on the ground, his infant child's severed hand and foot. I was reminded of this haunting photograph from Congo's brutal colonial past as I read Anuk Arudpragasam's exceptional debut novel *The Story of a Brief Marriage*. Like that frozen time capsule, Arudpragasam adroitly captures the humanity of Tamil civilians trapped in a warzone that is closing in on them and that will ultimately seize their own bodies from them.

Starting memorably with the line "Most children have two whole legs and two whole arms..." the novel is set over the span of a few hours at a Tamil refugee camp in Northern Sri Lanka in the final months of the infamous 2009 military offensive by the Sri Lankan army. Our protagonist is Dinesh, a recently orphaned young man in his late teens who helps the lone doctor at the clinic, housed in a former school building, treat the injured. When Dinesh receives a proposal of marriage for a young woman Ganga from Somasundaram, her father, he acquiesces, ostensibly to escape being drafted into the LTTE but also because of his deep yearning for a human connection. Thus, the stage is set for a marriage that is already fraught with the knowledge that its flames could be extinguished any moment. The imagery evoked by lines such as "[t]he waveless surface of the sea was perforated by a thousand pellets..." remind us that the next round of shelling is just around the corner. That tension ratchets up as the novel builds up to a denouement that, regardless of our knowledge of Dinesh and Ganga's fates, will have all the markings of tragedy.

Novels about ethnic conflicts immediately set up certain expectations in our minds. We expect a grand canvas, a large cast of characters and an exposition about its historical background. The brilliant decision Arudpragasam makes is to pare all this down. The novel is intimate, taking place in a single location. There aren't more than three named characters and the exposition is limited. And we only get access to the thoughts of the protagonist. *The Story of a Brief Marriage* is above all a novel that cogitates about bodies in the mind. In fact, the book almost plays out like a memoir of a body during wartime. What happens when the body keeps going even after the mind has already conditioned itself to its end?

Collective trauma suffuses the pages of this novel. The people in the camp are largely silent in their transitory lives. "When the practical concerns of life had been dealt with, when all one's plans had been settled, what was left, really, for anybody to say?" All tents in the camp are erected around the clinic like a prayer circle around a place of worship before the apocalypse strikes. Even the reactions of these camp survivors are not born out of fear but inevitability, seemingly going through the motions of protecting their body. The women are compared to the tails of geckos that thrash around even as they are disconnected from their life source while the men are like frogs whose spinal cords have been separated from their brain — stoic and unresponsive to stimuli.

These evocations of disembodiment are repeatedly mined to rich effect in the novel. We follow Dinesh as he goes through the mundane rituals of the body: breathing, shitting, eating, sexual arousal. He continues to perform all these functions even while preparing for the eventuality of death. These bodily rituals are described sometimes in ponderous detail: "... his thin, weak body struggling to send out one final offering into the world". Yet, it's this measured pace that allows tasks of daily habit to take on richer metaphysical meanings. One of the more moving acts of renewal in the book starts with Dinesh's decision to take a bath in order to make himself more presentable to his new wife.

As bodies take centre stage, their scars are at times the only tenuous links between mind and body. Dinesh and Ganga's first attempt to connect after marriage is through talking about the scars on their bodies. Yet, this bodily violence is evoked matter-of-factly, never in a prurient manner. At times, Arudpragasam also employs his lyrical prose to squirm-inducing comic effect. Dried flesh is compared to a twig. Early on Dinesh wonders if he should touch a young boy's amputated limb to see if it's like "rotten fruit". A man walks around looking for his missing arm and trying each limb like he is "shopping for clothes".

While the threat of daily shelling by the Sri Lankan army looms large in the skies, Dinesh attempts to reduce the distance between him and his new wife on the bridge of their matrimonial ties. Though we are never given access to Ganga's thoughts, she exists as more than a construct in Dinesh's mind. In a panel discussion Arudpragasam made a strange revelation: the novel apparently started out as a tale about a man who decides to masturbate after a period of abstinence — till the war started seeping into it. Despite the novel's sordid beginnings, Dinesh's interest in Ganga isn't lascivious. In her, he wants to find someone he can connect with. Dialogue is sparse between them but in the few hours encompassed in the novel they come to a quiet understanding of each other.

Making eye contact at such times gave you no choice but to see yourself through the eyes of the person looking at you, to acknowledge things you were ashamed of that till then you'd managed to hide from yourself or ignore, and in such situations, therefore it was imperative, even

before attempting to cover up one's nudity, to avert one's eyes.

Even their silence connects rather than distances.

While Arudpragasam has admitted in interviews that he doesn't care for characters, the ones in his novel are nonetheless indelible. Somasundaram and Ganga are sympathetically etched. Somasundaram's choice to marry off his daughter and delegate his paternal duties to Dinesh is pardonable: his attempt at protecting her since he has given up. Ganga is frequently impenetrable but her steeliness is posited as a defence mechanism: "... if she was letting herself shiver, cry, or shudder, then it was not because she was ignorant of this fact but because she knew her body had to respond in certain ways to what happened, because she understood that it would do what it needed to do, regardless of her, and there was no point trying to stop it".

Then there's Dinesh himself. The novel keeps flitting between an omniscient narrator observing him from a distance and one burrowed in his mind. The sense of time almost standing still defiantly seems like something processed through the fog in Dinesh's mind. His preoccupations are existential and his sentimentality (about doorknobs and his own excreta) provides this dark book some welcome notes of optimism.

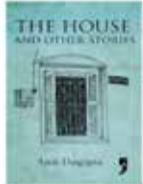
It was as if in the hours he'd spent there his body had shed some warm, imperceptible substance in the earth, something that filled the little space with an understanding of him...

At times these pontifications can come off as those of an urban philosophy student (read Arudpragasam) rather than someone trying to survive the night. That's especially the case with a groan-inducing segment that belongs in a lesser novel where Dinesh spends time with an injured crow.

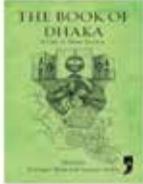
Yet, it's to Arudpragasam's credit that these incongruous elements are rare. The English language can sometimes seem ill-equipped to capture the inner-life of a person who exists in the global South in a completely different cultural context. Yet Arudpragasam manages to etch Dinesh's inner life in English without losing the Tamil cultural nuances. As Cathy Caruth (*Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, BHU Press, 1996) notes, "trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures". Arudpragasam himself grew up in a privileged upper-caste family far from the conflict zone. In essence, we are reading a novel that is about its author's burgeoning social consciousness; his words entwining his literary career with the devastating fates of his people.

Those looking at the novel to gain an idea of events or the significant moral compromises of the Sri Lankan civil war may be disappointed. However, *The Story of a Brief Marriage* proves that details of an event are less visceral than its experiences. Also, for what it's worth, one of the few expository sections where Dinesh thinks back to his evacuation from his village and his mother's death is beautifully rendered, providing a tantalising glimpse at a successful version of a more conventional novel. Yet, I'm glad Arudpragasam didn't write that novel. Instead, he's produced a strange, hypnotic beast — a novel that locates all of life's big mysteries in the body of a weary individual. A novel that has just won the DSC Prize For South Asian Literature 2017 and also the Shakti Bhatt First Book Prize 2017. ■

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