



# The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

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## **Relegating Humanity to Bare Body: Negotiating Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage***

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### **Abstract**

*Humanity has always been a subject of investigation over the time and has already been explored from several points of view. But the sufferings of human beings in a post-war period cannot be understood in terms of conventional theoretical insights and thus need to be made subject to theoretical insights of Post-humanism so as to divulge how and to what extent postwar survivors have to withstand inexorable onslaughts of reality to dwell in the world. Post-war survivors are sometimes forced to compromise with their basic human needs for survival and are reduced to bare bodies. During the period of war, human bodies are intently instrumentalized to retain the tension in war thereby leading victims of war to droop down before the authority. Victims of war have to bear with inhumane torture and torment until the victims fail to receive it. Victims of war are forcefully relegated to venerable position so that they cannot put up strong resistance to atrocious afflictions perpetrated by ruling authority. Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage* brilliantly exposes how postwar survivors are reduced to bare bodies by the Government in power and ominous reality in the context of Sri Lankan Civil War. This article seeks to investigate how post-war survivors are politically reduced to mere bare bodies and how these survivors have to negotiate formidable challenges to get past of their poignant survival, taking recourse to insights in Post-humanism.*

**Keywords:** bare body; State of Exception; Muselmann; War; Nation-state



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## I

Human survival in the world has always been a subject of critical enquiry because of the fact that human survival hinges on a number of variables including political, social, cultural and economic conditions of a nation-state. Human beings always have to negotiate a number of challenges forged and regulated by rulers of a nation-state to survive in the world. Broadly speaking, human beings living on the margin turn out to be the victims of despicable politics of a nation-state and have to make a series of compromises to ensure their bare survival. In postwar scenario, the sufferings of human beings get distended, as it were, in that they can neither relate their poignant pangs of survival to anybody nor can draw the attention of Government to their misery. These people, in reality, turn out to be the witnesses of their own sufferings and their voices are never heard in the society. Anuk Arudpragasam, in *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, has painstakingly represented the poignant and miserable survival of those human beings who are, in a way, relegated to bare bodies in Post Civil War scenario in Sri Lanka. Inhuman torture and torment is perpetrated on those human beings, and Sri Lankan Government is mysteriously silent on their bare survival. Insights from Post-humanism are intended to be drawn to intervene into poignant survival of the protagonists conditioned by intricate interactions among politics, culture and economy of a nation-state.

## II

This segment is intended to map theoretical debates pertaining to Post-humanism in general and to elucidate some of them succinctly thereby facilitating readers to get into the problematic and poignant survival of Post Civil War survivors in Sri Lanka as represented in the novel. Giorgio Agamben turns out to be one of the telling contributors to Post-humanism following some of his ground-breaking theoretical perceptions incorporating *Homo Sacer*, State of Exception, Muselmann, to name only a few. Agamben in his pioneering work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* has put forward the notion of bare body theoretically, in the following terms:

The sacred man is the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide; in the first tribunitian law, in fact, it is noted that "if someone kills the one who is sacred according to the plebiscite, it will not be considered homicide." This is why it is customary for a bad or impure man to be called sacred. (47)

It is quite clear from the quoted excerpt that the notion of *Homo Sacer* is a politically charged concept that bears a number of implications. For instance, *Homo Sacer* is a subject position that one has to consign to negotiate a number of appalling challenges. In other words, one is forced to yield to this category, i.e. *Homo Sacer* to maintain the tension centre and margin. Agamben has also brought out the ambiguities and ambivalences germane to *Homo Sacer*, thereby trying to



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expose the strategy of rulers. Agamben said: “. . . the ambiguity of the ban, which excludes in including, implies the ambiguity of the sacred” (51). Rulers, at times, put ban on the sacrifice of sacred men and, at once, do not let them go free, which implies that rulers intentionally instrumentalize those sacred men for their own sake and strategically put them in between life and death. The miserable lot of sacred men is always kept under cover, and most significantly, those human beings are relegated to mere bare bodies in that basic human needs are denied to them, and moreover, they are kept under surveillance. Nation-state perpetrates brutal torture and torment on postwar survivors but mysteriously law slips into a “State of Exception” so far nation-state’s atrocities are concerned. Nation-state is never subject to the jurisdiction of law because it exercises legal formulations on those powerless beings. Agamben is of this opinion that the issue of civil war certainly problematizes the question of “state of exception” and it becomes difficult to realize it in reality.<sup>1</sup> He has tried to bring out the crux of “State of Exception” in the following terms:

In this sense, the state of exception is the opening of a space in which application and norm reveal their separation and a pure force-of-law realizes (that is, applies by ceasing to apply [dis-applicando]) a norm whose application has been suspended. In this way, the impossible task of welding norm and reality together, and thereby constituting the normal sphere, is carried out in the form of the exception, that is to say, by presupposing their nexus. This means that in order to apply a norm it is ultimately necessary to suspend its application, to produce an exception. In every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without logos claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference. (*State of Exception* 40)

Giorgio Agamben has mooted the notion of “muselmann” in another important work *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, following Améry:

In the jargon of the camp, it is *der muselmann*, literally “the Muslim”:

The so-called muselmann, as the camp language termed the prisoner who was giving up and given up by his comrades, no longer had room in his consciousness for the contrasts good or bad, noble or base, intellectual or unintellectual. He was a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions in its last convulsions. (*Remnants of Auschwitz* 41)

What it implies is that a muselmann is she/he whose body is relegated to mere biological function. He is one who bends down towards the ground out of sheer physical inability and metaphorically fails to stand up against the perpetrators. Being tortured time and again, a muselmann tends to give in the hands of rulers and his humanity is consequently turned into mere bare body. He is denied minimum human respect and is compelled to yield to the tangles of reality. What is important here to note is that nation-state intently politicizes human life and



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intends to reap out of it. Here one may argue that a muslim is deliberately denied basic human rights and nation-state commits heinous crime against humanity. This argument can be consolidated by directly referring to Louis B. Sohn who has insisted upon collective rights of a group of individuals sharing a singular ethnic identity: “. . . individuals are also members of such units, groups or communities as a family, religious community.... It is not supervising, therefore, that international law not only recognizes inalienable rights of individuals, but also recognizes certain collective rights exercised jointly by individuals. . . . These rights include a right to self-determination, right to development, right to peace, etc . . . (Sohn qtd. in Jain 5). It is true in the case of postwar survivors in that collectively they live on the margin and suffer ruinous blows of nation-state. Inflicting inhuman torture in the name of punitive action is out and out a gross violation of human rights and therefore should be subjected to the jurisdiction of law.

### III

Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage* divulges the appalling ambience in Post Civil War period in Sri Lanka in which the two protagonists— Dinesh and Ganga— have to make a number of important compromises to bring ease and happiness in their life. As the tale unfolds readers are introduced with Dinesh who is himself a postwar survivor and works in a makeshift medical camp located at the outskirts of Sri Lanka. Civil war has been going on, and a few number of people have managed to take shelter in dense forest in the eastern part of Sri Lanka. On the one hand, rebels are confronting the dire and dreadful assaults by the rulers in power and on the other hand, a few innocent people are being ceaselessly pressurized by ruling government to yield to its authority over the nation-state. Dinesh who has lost his family in the ongoing civil war accidentally meets Ganga who, too, works in that camp. Then a series of spine-chilling incidents happened to their lives. Though, under multiple compulsions, Dinesh gets bound in wedlock with Ganga and it incurs plenty of complications in their life, marriage turns out to be a means to their lives.

The novel is replete with the instances of how humanity is relegated to bare body. The makeshift medical camp is surrounded by naked body parts because, as Civil War is going on, the relatives of deceased people are scared of moving away from their camps for funerals apprehending that they might get caught in between the two confronting groups. Even after the sustaining deep injuries, affected people are not carried off to the city and are left with prayers for the grace of God. When they succumb to injuries, they are immediately buried near the medical camp. Civil War has made their lives so miserable that dead bodies are not getting proper cremations: “There were plenty of other naked body parts scattered around the camp of course fingers and toes, elbows and thighs, so many that nobody would say a thing if he just left the arm under a bush or beside a tree” ( Anukpragasam 5). In another point, in the narrative,



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Dinesh finds unworthy to think of deceased human beings in reasonable way because he has understood the futility of human existence in Civil War stricken scenario:

Already by that point after all Dinesh had seen plenty of dead and injured bodies, strewn across the sides of the roads, lying in the ruins of huts and houses. He'd always done his best to not get distracted, to keep his gaze locked ahead and to keep moving forward, but surely by then his eyes and ears had registered enough to know that in general, at such times, when bombs were falling everywhere and staying or slowing down could only mean death, there was no time to stop and grieve or to deal with the deceased in any reasonable way. (Anukpragasam81-82)

It makes it very clear that nation-state is absolutely careless about how innocent people are being mercilessly butchered by nation-state itself. These people are being treated as *homo sacer* in that they are being laid on the line to hold on to power and their humanity is being trampled down. In fact, Dinesh himself is not an exception. Civil War has taken his family away from him thereby rendering him a lonely person amidst deceased bodies. He does not have anybody of his own to whom he can communicate his traumatic survival. His lonely life gets aggravated when he, along with other postwar survivors, is cornered at the furthest East of Sri Lanka from where it seems impossible for him to escape death. At that crucial time, when Civil War has wrecked havoc on his personal life, Mr Somasundaram comes up to him with a proposal of marriage— he wants Dinesh to tie the marital knot with his daughter Ganga who has already lost her mother and brother in the civil war. Whereas Mr Somasundaram plans to ensure the safety of his daughter by asking Dinesh to marry her, Dinesh thinks that though marriage can hardly bring about changes in his life, it is through marriage, he can at least get somebody whom he can share his feelings:

He hadn't taken into consideration the fact that he and Ganga could talk, that they could communicate, and that being married would mean or at least involve speech. He couldn't think of any examples, it was true, but there could be no doubt that marriage involved not only the occasional sharing of information but also conversation, speaking simply for the sake of speaking. (Arudpragasam 40)

Eventually, both Dinesh and Ganga lead their lives like “muselmann” and fail to get over the cruel reality. Marriage seems to them an open-ended possibility in the sense that they might get plenty of occasions to interact with each other to ease out their boredom. Apart from it, marriage might help them find a way out of their present disarray. In actuality, marriage brings about significant alterations in their life. Whereas once they felt that their bodies had as it were drooped down before the harsh reality, it is after the marriage Dinesh felt comfort and safety: “Dinesh felt a strange flush of warmth spread across his cheeks, neck and arms. He had felt safe and comfortable in the clearing before, but looking at it now with Ganga beside him it seemed to



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him there could be no safer or more comforting place anywhere else in the camp” (Arudpragasam 56).

## IV

Thus, before to round off this discussion, one can pertinently argue that although marriage might have opened up a fresh horizon to both the protagonists for making purposeful interactions, it cannot be refuted that Civil War has rendered humanity to mere biological functions so far Dinesh and Ganga are concerned. Towards the end of the narrative, the author has laid bare the inconsequentiality of their marriage in the following terms thereby admitting the corrosive and inescapable impact of Civil War on the personal lives of the protagonists:

Perhaps the heart only beat because of the blood’s movement around the body, and not, in fact, the other way round. Perhaps, like a mechanism that converted kinetic energy of one kind into that of another, it was only because the living body was in perpetual motion that blood circulated constantly inside, and perhaps the heart’s only function in this process was to convert the circulation of blood into sound, into a steady, two-step beat whose sole purpose was to convey the nature of one’s inner life to their living creatures, to express through its rhythm and volume the mood and feelings of its possessor to those who were close enough to hear. (Arudpragasam 190)

## End Note

1. Agamben in *State of Exception* puts forward:

One of the elements that make the state of exception so difficult to define is certainly its close relationship to civil war, insurrection, and resistance. Because civil war is the opposite of normal conditions, it lies in a zone of undecidability with respect to the state of exception, which is state power’s immediate response to the most extreme internal conflicts. (*State of Exception* 2)



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