

The background of the slide features a repeating pattern of stylized birds in flight, rendered in a light gray color against a slightly darker gray background. The birds are scattered across the entire area, creating a sense of movement and depth.

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State repression, forced compliance and self-justification: A psychoanalytical reading of Ediriwira Sarachchandra's *Curfew and a Full Moon*

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Abstract

Sarachchandra's *Curfew and a Full Moon* (1978) is a historical novel about the 1971 youth uprising in Sri Lanka that was driven by university students' demand for equality and social changes. The book gives an insightful account of the protagonist, Professor Amarasadasa, his relationship with several Marxist students, and his indirect involvement in national politics. The focus of this study is placed on the main character and his conflicting psychological conditions shaped by different external forces, including his privileged status in

Sri Lankan society, his interactions with those surrounding him and the state's crackdown on the young insurgents. I deploy Tilly's (2003) theory of collective violence, Foucault's (1991) theory of power, Festinger's (1957) theories of forced compliance and cognitive dissonance in the reading of Sri Lanka's historical retelling and of the novel's protagonist's hesitation and failure to act in several instances. The conclusion of the analysis is that Amaradasa's forced compliance, resulting in his action or lack thereof, is caused both by the fear of rejection from his students with whom he sympathises and by the threats of punishment from the state. This explains the character's cognitive dissonance, constant moral dilemma and self-justification that occur throughout the story. I also draw an additional conclusion that Amaradasa's priority is his own survival, a common human characteristic especially in the midst of political and ideological conflicts.

Keywords: *Curfew and a Full Moon*, Sri Lanka, collective violence, power, forced compliance, cognitive dissonance

I. Introduction

It is universally acknowledged that most, if not all, countries in the world have experienced political and social instabilities in the course of their nation building and history. In 1971, under the government of Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, a group of university students inspired by the Janata Vimukthi Peramuna or JVP (People's Liberation Front), initiated a socialist movement aimed at attacking the government for its negligence of the poor people in the country (Kearney, 1977). The movement successfully recruited students and sympathisers; education camps were operated to provide

training in Marxism-Leninism and basic military skills. It rapidly ascended into violence including raids at police stations and army camps to gather weapons; at the same time bombs were at being manufactured by the students. At the peak of nationwide insurrection in April 1971, several towns and villages were captured, police officers killed, and a plot to assassinate the prime minister schemed. This resulted in the government's severe crack-down on the students. With international assistance from its neighbouring country, India, the Sri Lankan government was able to regain control of the situation and, recapture most cities and towns, as well as imprison approximately 20,000 insurgents.

The atmosphere of life in a Sri Lankan University during the insurrection of 1971 is the central focus of Ediriwira Sarachchandra's *Curfew and a Full Moon* (1978). The novel may be classified as what Adhikari (2002) terms, literary history. Adhikari posits that literary history is "a cross between conventional history and pure fiction" (p.43) and it can achieve what history itself cannot. That is, in placing historical events in a fictional context, historical actors are perceived by the reader in terms of their experience and the meaning they make of those historical events. When reading historical fiction, the reader is also allowed to investigate the effects of history on the human psyche.

This paper, aims at investigating ways in which the 1971 youth uprising affects different characters in the novel. The focus of the analysis lies in how state repression and violence committed against the dissidents, both physically and psychologically, shape each character, especially the protagonist of the novel Professor Amaradasa, and dictate the course of their decisions and actions, which eventually brings tragic outcomes to all the parties involved.

II. Curfew and a Full Moon: A synopsis

The story revolves around the life of Professor Amaradasa and explores the dilemma he is faced with in encountering his students whose political inclinations are towards Marxism and socialist revolutions. The book is divided into three parts. In the first part, the beginning of the novel immediately sets the atmosphere of political turmoil in central Colombo with the protagonist attending a political parade led by the Communist Party. It then proceeds to give the reader more background into the political climate of early 1971 Sri Lanka in which the elections were won by the United Left Front Party and the students were hopeful for the establishment of a socialist country. As the story unfolds, however, the students become disappointed with the elected government for its failure to bring about social changes; therefore, they wish to overthrow the government. News about the students' camps in remote places where they are taught to "organise a revolution [and] conduct guerrilla warfare" (p.23) is spread around the University of Peradeniya, located near Kandy, where Amaradasa teaches.

Amaradasa's close students, Munasinha, Wijesiri and Somaratna, confide in their teacher and discuss their political bearings with him. To promote their struggle, they form a party and distribute pamphlets around the campus. As the situation gets more and more vehement, Amaradasa finds himself anxiously caught between his students' political ideologies and tendencies to resort to violence, his own beliefs, and the increasingly suppressive environment he lives in. A bomb is set off within the campus and a larger number of bombs are discovered in the students' hall of residence by police detectives. Curfews are imposed; students including Somaratna and the movement leader, Wijeweera, are arrested.

In the second part, while the protagonist and his students go on an archeological excursion, they hear the continuous firings of machine guns. It appears that police stations have been attacked by youth insurgents who, in turn, are shot to death by government forces. Many dead bodies lie on the road. Meanwhile, their accommodation is raided by police officers who suspect that the students come to Polonnaruwa to join the movement. With Amaradasa's explanations and guarantees, the group is eventually permitted to leave town.

In the final part, the turmoil has reached its peak. A twenty-four-hour curfew is first put in place and then gradually shortened; several police stations are burnt down and fear over students getting arrested is palpable. It is revealed that people are struggling to secure food supplies and "snatch up everything they [can] find at whatever price" (p.146). At the university, students as well as teachers, the government considers as sympathisers to the revolution are arrested. Amaradasa is uneasy when he sees a tortured young teacher in a van chaperoned by police officers. Towards the end of the novel, a student, Heennilame, comes to his professor for help. His brother has been detained and he believes that Amaradasa's connections and social status can help. News of more teachers being detained for questioning spreads and threats of random arrest are now visible with the presence of soldiers, jeeps, and armoured cars. Munasinha and Wijesiri secretly come to the protagonist's house in the middle of the night, carrying news of the students' defeat to him. The last two chapters which conclude the novel describe Amarada reading one of his students' letters sent from prison. It is mentioned, however, that he never replies to it. The novel ends with Amarada being taken away in a van to Colombo for questioning. The reader can assume that he will be sentenced to imprisonment for supporting the youth uprising.

III. Framework of analysis: A brief overview

The analysis of the novel is done based on three major theoretical frameworks: Tilly's (2003) theory of collective violence, Foucault's (1991) theory of power, Festinger's (1957) theories of forced compliance and cognitive dissonance.

A. Collective violence

Collective violence is defined as “the instrumental use of violence by people that identify themselves as members of a group... against another group of individuals in order to achieve political, economic or social gain” (cited in Leiner et al., 2015, p.96). It is generally agreed that the use of violence has played a significant role in creating the long term negative psychological conditions and posing more severe problems to the individuals and their communities (Bandura, 1973; Snyder, 1978; Davidson, 2008; Leiner et al., 2015). The definition is further explained in Tilly's book, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (2003), in which three characteristics of collective violence are observed. They are (i) the immediate infliction of physical damage on persons and/or objects including forcible seizure of persons over restraint or resistance, (ii) the involvement of at least two perpetrators and (iii) results from coordination among persons who perform damaging acts (pp. 3-4). The author regards soldiers, police officers and guards as those specialising in causing collective violence and inflicting physical damage.

In addition, Tilly posits that collective violence can come in the form of nonviolent violence, also known as non-physical violence (Galtung, 2001). That is, short-term physical seizure or damage is not expected; instead, passive violence brings about “injustice, exploita-

tion and oppression” (p.5). For those who experience or witness it, they can feel intimidated and psychologically deprived.

B. Power

One of the reasons why violence can be collectively or structurally committed is because of the existing power system in our society. Foucault (1982) argues that “power is everywhere and power relations are embedded in social life. Life in society, literally from the cradle to the grave, inevitably involves actions being exercised on other actions” (cited in Daldal, 2014, p.149).

In one of his most famous writings, *Discipline and Punish* (1991), it is proposed that power is a major source of social discipline and conformity. It is therefore exercised in both top-down and bottom-up manners. In other words, power is diffused, rather than concentrated; therefore, it is not only directly coercive but pervasive. The most explicit, coercive form of power can be seen from the way the state controls people and forces compliance through its law enforcement. On the other hand, the more implicit, pervasive form of power is practised through social sanctions, boycotting, gossiping, or exclusion from a community when discipline is not observed. The existence of power systems, as a result, condones the deployment of collective violence against a group of people.

C. Forced compliance and cognitive dissonance

In the field of social psychology, forced compliance and cognitive dissonance are closely related. According to Festinger (1957), forced compliance takes place when an individual is forced by others who are socially superior to act or perform in such a way that is against his/her beliefs or judgment. It is done through the use

of authority with the intention of changing the individual's attitudes or worldviews.

On the other hand, cognitive dissonance explains the psychological conflicts experienced by those who are forced to act or perform against their beliefs or values. Festinger's theory lies in the way humans naturally struggle for internal consistency. Those experiencing inconsistency can develop psychological discomfort, and will either attempt to reduce this dissonance, or avoid situations and information likely to increase it.

All of these three theories are deployed in the analysis of the novel in order to investigate how collective violence and power exercised by the Sri Lankan army, police force and government affects the characters' physical and psychological conditions as well as their decisions to act or not to act, especially those of Amaradasa and his students.

IV. Analysis

A. Violent violence and nonviolent violence

Throughout the novel, the use of collective violence by the army, police officers and government is mentioned in detail; hence, it is probably best to begin the analysis from this angle. Violence is always represented in the form of objects such as machine guns, armoured cars and army uniforms. Casualties, on the other hand, are portrayed to demonstrate the extent of such atrocities. For example, while the students are on the archeological excursion, they spot

“the van [that] was loaded with cane. Not far from this spot they saw a lorry with its back to them, standing half obstructing the road. A row of gunny bags that were stacked behind were soaked in a red liquid, obviously blood, some of which had dripped to the ground and congealed here and there. From underneath the lorry there jutted out the legs and feet of a dead body” (p.117).

According to Galtung (2001), the most explicit form of violence is seen from the number of deaths. In this short passage, the state crackdown on the insurgents results in deaths visible on the street. The description of gunny bags soaked in blood suggest that many killings have been carried out. This is confirmed by the passage that follows: “a town-council tractor loaded with dead bodies went past the booth [and] that’s the third tractor for the morning (p.118).

Violence is not only committed against the youth insurgents, but is also directed randomly towards people in general, inevitably creating an atmosphere of suppression. Amaradasa’s students who happen to be in the insurrectionary area for educational purposes are subject to humiliation caused by the police’s suspicions. Following the army raid, both Amaradasa and his students are treated with contempt and condescension. The army men’s actions including digging into the students’ pockets and waists, staring, rolling eyes, yelling and bringing suitcases out of the house are ways of propelling their legitimate authority and causing so-called nonviolent violence to the more vulnerable students. The humiliation continues through a series of verbal and physical threats: “I’ll shoot every single one of you as you stand there...I have no doubt that you came to join in

the attack on the police station” (p.122). After the statement, a shot is fired into the sky and the students are unable to make any noises.

As the story unfolds, the menace which at first seemed distant to Amaradasa eventually reaches its peak when it encroaches upon the university campus. Concerns are raised among the faculty and their exchange reinforces the severity of what has been going on

“I am told that if there is the slightest suspicion that someone is a student of the university, he is taken to the police station and detained for questioning.”

“After all, you can’t expect the police to sympathize with them, seeing how they went about attacking police stations and killing policemen, said the vice-chancellor.

“I can understand if they get hold of the real insurrectionists. But when they harass any student they get hold of...” (p.141)

According to the exchange, the abuse of power comes at the price of innocent youths being randomly arrested for crimes they have not committed or had no intention of committing. This again propagates and intensifies the atmosphere of oppression in which people are made to fear for their lives. As the novel states, being young or writing a novel with dialogues about revolutions can result in detainment for questioning, arrest or even physical torture. The psychological damage inflicted on the protagonist is haunting as described in his internal monologue:

“Every evening after dark I get the feeling that a jeep will come and carry me away...Last night I thought that this inevitable event would take place. An army car slowed down near our gate, switched off the lights and engine, and parked on the roadside. I didn’t see anything clearly because of the darkness, but I was sure the car was there. Since private cars don’t run after curfew it must have been an army car or a police car. I kept walking up and down the verandah for almost an hour, waiting to see what would happen.” (p.166)

Apparently, Amaradasa’s anxiety in this short passage stems from his lack of certainty. As the probable violence is not directly acted out and is instead metaphorically represented in the form of darkness and lack of visibility, the psychological effect is deemed more damaging. The wait night after night for something to happen keeps the character awake and incessantly worried. The irony is clearly expressed when Amaradasa describes that he “had no fear of robbers. What [he] feared was the police and the army” (p.166). The institutions that are expected to protect him and his students from danger turn out to be the ones that most effectively impose threats and horror upon them. At the end of his internal monologue, Amaradasa comes to the conclusion that “there is no escape either way” (167).

It is worth noting that while violence is committed by both the insurgents and the state, Sarachchandra is arguably more sympathetic to the former because as Goonetilleke (1993) puts it, the insurrection itself is essentially presented as “a movement of the frustrated youth of the country who have no hope of employment and no faith in the existing political system...the revolutionaries [are] both cal-

low and genuinely idealistic. The insurgency is ill-planned but well-intentioned” (pp.135-136).

B. Violence, suppression and betrayal

Having discussed how collective violence is physically and mentally committed against the insurgents and university students in general and how the abuse of power which causes the atmosphere of fear and oppression can bring about psychological damages, I further argue that the state's brutal crackdown has unavoidably affected the characters' course of actions. It either prevents them from taking actions or makes them do something that is against their values and beliefs.

Undoubtedly, the character that is most at odds with himself is the protagonist of the book, Amaradasa. Given his social standing as a university professor, he gains a lot of trust and respect from his students. They seek his help when they are in trouble with the police and they confide in him about their secret political activities. Two of his students, Munasinha and Wijesiri, come to him for shelter while they are running away from police. One of his students, Somaratna, writes to him from the prison, revealing his innermost ideas and beliefs about the insurgency that has gone wrong. Another student, Heennilame, comes to him for help after his brother is arrested and imprisoned. Amaradasa's wife, Susheela, also places her faith in him; she totally believes that her husband would do right by his students and provides support to anyone who comes to him.

Nevertheless, given the politically volatile situations and the state's excessive use of random violence, Amaradasa fails to perform the courageous, self-sacrificing roles of a saviour that has been

expected out of him. Goonetilleke (1993) explains that the character's failure to fulfill his heroic roles derives from his lack of worldly sophistication. In other words, he is out of touch with reality and the world around him. Therefore, his naiveté allows "politics to force itself on his attention" (p. 134). Based on this explanation, I further argue that Sarachchandra did not probably have any intention of making his protagonist larger-than-life or different from us. His depiction of Amaradasa is realistic in a sense that any human being will probably make similar decisions to save themselves first amidst political and ideological conflicts. As a result, in my view, despite being merely a fictional, imagined character, Amaradasa, his inner thoughts and his actions should and can be analysed with psychological theories such as those used in this study.

At the beginning of the novel, the author presents Amaradasa as a detached intellectual who realises that he is too powerless to fulfill his responsibility to the students. The students, however, are not aware of their professor's shortcomings, believing that he is their "only hope" (p.36). While Amaradasa shows little interest in politics, he is forced to comply with the students, afraid that they "would turn their backs on him" (p.37). In order to please them, he agrees to read their insurrectionary writings, subscribe to the movement's newspaper, and even provide financial support to them. The fact that he only does all those things despite not being truly enthusiastic can be perceived as a result of forced compliance. A group of students manage, to persuade him to take part in their cause. Unfortunately, those trivial actions are the beginning of catastrophic events that will follow.

As the violence escalates, the protagonist's personal crisis becomes more obvious. Through the third person, omniscient narrator, Sarachchandra allows the reader to access Amaradasa's constantly conflicting mind. After the students begin their attacks on the police stations, he "prefer[s] to believe that students had no hand in the incident" (p.61) in order to avoid having to choose sides. In this very instance, the reader can see that cognitive dissonance is used to avoid the situation that would cause discomfort to him. In addition, when urged by his wife to stand with the students, he immediately refuses and justifies his decision by blaming the students for not knowing "the seriousness of what they are doing" (p.68).

The final part of the book is, according to Goonetilleke (1993), the most moving section. It is the part where the state's violence has reached its peak and Amaradasa's conflicted state of mind has led to his downfall. Fearing that he will be arrested for his (reluctant) sympathy for the insurgents, he lies to the vice-chancellor about his financial support for the movement:

"What's all this about my having given money to the Che Guevera movement? he asked, feigning complete innocence. "I am really surprised at the gossip that gets about. According to the reports that have come to me, I am one of those people the Che Guevarists were after. How funny to imagine that I supported them!" (p.158)

This short passage reveals a great deal about Amaradasa. Having witnessed arrests, imprisonment and deaths, he prefers to lie in order to save himself from those threats. Another incident which is worth mentioning is when Amaradasa betrays Heennilame's trust.

Giving Heennilame a blank promise to use his connections to help his brother who was arrested earlier, the professor never honours the trust or the promise because he is overcome by his fear.

The most alarming betrayal of trust can be seen in the last chapter of the book in which Amaradasa's concern for his safety would desperately drive him to do something beyond the reader's expectations. His character is definitely called into question; after having received Somaratna's letter written while in captivity expressing his longing to be visited by his professor, the protagonist hesitates and his internal conflicts once again resurface: "It would be despicable not to go and see Somaratna. It was the least he could do for someone who looked up to him and who was evidently so attached to him" (p.216). After hesitation, however, he makes a decision to drive to the prison only to be told to come back with Somaratna's relatives. In the following passage, cognitive dissonance is difficult to miss, hence worth quoting at length:

"The professor's enthusiasm was considerably dampened by this set-back. How could he initiate the process all over again and go through what seemed now a complicated procedure? In the first place he had to get in touch with Somaratna's parents, but he didn't know where they lived. He would first have to write to Somaratna and get the information from him. That would take ages, and in spite of Somaratna's assurances one could never say what kind of censoring the letter might be subjected to. And wasn't the attempt he had already made to see Somaratna proof of his good intentions although it failed for reasons beyond his control? If Somaratna knew of it he would be amply gratified." (pp.217-218)

To maintain his internal consistency, he must get rid of the dissonance through self-justifications. That is, instead of admitting that he is not brave enough to meet his student in prison, he puts the blame on the complex legal procedures to comfort himself and to “salve his conscience” (Goonetilleke, 1993, p.135). Claiming that his great effort has been made and that his student should be grateful can be regarded as a sign of uttermost betrayal. It should be noted, nonetheless, that while Amaradasa may not be portrayed as a typical hero whom one can normally find in fiction, Sarachchandra is successful in crafting for his reader the atmosphere of oppression that creates this forced compliance and in making us understand, if not sympathise with, the character's disappointing decisions to eradicate his psychological dissonance. What we as readers should not forget is the fact that despite all these compromises he has made throughout the novel, Amaradasa's actions, or lack thereof, are rigidly shaped by circumstances: his students, his social standing and the political climate of Sri Lanka in 1971.

V. Conclusion

As a historical novel, *Curfew and a Full Moon* has captured the atmosphere of collective violence, abuse of power, and physical and mental damages witnessed and/or experienced by the students and their professor. In this article, I have proposed the analysis of the book based on three theoretical approaches, drawn from sociology and psychology, hoping that they could do justice to both the book and the people to whom and on behalf of whom the book speaks.

This horrendous chapter of Sri Lanka history is reimagined and retold not only as a written account but also as a reminder to us as

to how violence brings about nothing but fear, death, and casualties. Arguably, apart from the explicit retelling of such violence, Sarachandra's book offers the reader a different perspective of the 1971 youth uprising. That is, he explores ways in which external circumstances can affect, manipulate or shape the people's internal states of mind. Amaradasa, therefore, should not only be read as a character of this specific event in the dark history of Sri Lanka; instead, he should be treated as an ordinary human being who is caught in unfortunate circumstances, be it called either civil war or insurgency. In the similar manner, *Curfew and a Full Moon* should not be read in relation to such a specific country as Sri Lanka, but it should be regarded as a book portraying repeated histories of violence in human societies across the world. *Curfew and a Full Moon* may remind us of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) whose most famous line is "This is not a story to pass on" (p.290). Violence is not to be passed on (repeated); violence is not a story to pass on (to be forgotten) either.

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