A Review Article of
*The Seasons of Trouble: Life Amid the Ruins of Sri Lanka’s Civil War*
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K. Vela Velupillai
Tottvägen 11
169 54 Solna
Sweden

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kvelupillai@gmail.com

“[N]othing can be expressed in a form which is entirely exempt from misunderstanding.”


The book being reviewed here, The Seasons of Trouble: Life Amid the Ruins of Sri Lanka’s Civil War, by Rohini Mohan, is made up of three parts, in addition to a Preface, an Acknowledgement and a three-page ‘chapter’ titled A Brief History of the Sri Lankan Civil War. Part I, unseen, consists of 12 chapters, divided into chronicles dating events from June, 2008 till March, 2009 (chapter 2 is for June 1980) – a period amounting to ten months, since it is not consecutive months, some are missing and others are ‘doubled’. The 52 pages of Part II, claustrophobia, is divided into four chapters, from April, 2009 to June, 2010 and Part III, refuge, consisting of 152 pages and 14 chapters from August, 2010 to April, 2013, a period of 33 months, therefore some of the chapters double (triple and overlap) up.

However, the author has impeccable credentials, if the acknowledgement pages (xi-xiii) are to be taken seriously. Among others, the respectable Sithie Tiruchelvam, Jayadeva Uyangoda, Seelan Kadirgamar and Radhika Coomaraswamy are ones with whom Rohni Mohan has interacted. If I have understood well³, both Sithie Tiruchelvam and Seelan Kadirgamar have, unfortunately passed away. It is poignant to note that the former was the wife of Neelan Tiruchelvam and the latter a cousin of Lakshman Kadirgamar, both murdered by the LTTE.

It is, to use Pessoa words, a book of disquiet, for many reasons, above all because it tries to chronicle the seasons of trouble – the time of the civil war between government forces and the LTTE, extending over many seasons, till the overwhelming, if also indiscriminate, defeat of the latter, by the former. But it is not a book of disquiet in Pessoa’s sense; the book is disturbing in chronicling a series of inaccuracies – of events, translations, Tamil words and phrases and much else, some of which will be listed in this review.

The narrative is through the words and experiences of three who were caught up in different aspects of the civil war; Mugil, a former LTTE woman cadre, Indra a supposedly Tamil, vellala, mother of Sarva – only the last goes by his own name, Sarvanantha Pereira. Indra is supposedly brought up in a vellala, Tamil hindu, family somewhere in Jaffna (or in the

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² The parts are without capital letters.
³ By this I mean that Seelan Kadirgamar is the same person as Silan Kadirgamar! If so, Ahilan Kadirgamar, an early and steady guide of the author (p. xi), is a son. Both Seelan and Neelan (through his Mother) were from Chavakacheheri, a key town in the Northern Province. However, I am surprised that Ms. Mohan has not used the wisdom, on things and events Sri Lankan, of Jayantha Dhanapala.
Northern Province), but has living experience in Nuwara Eliya, Negombo and Colombo (due to her father, brother and sister). Sarva has experience in living in Negombo, Nuwara Eliya, Chavakachcheri, the Vanni – then in Kuala Lumpur, South America and the UK (Wales and England). Only Mugil’s life is entirely confined to the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, in Point Pedro (where she was born some time in 1980), Kilinochchi and Puthukkudiyiruppu (PTK) in the Mullaitivu district.

*All* novels, whether fact-based or semi-fiction, tell a story via one or more individuals, who have some kind of cultural, political or social place in the society which is depicted. It is, to some extent – but only *some* – true of the three protagonists through which the seasons of trouble, in contemporary Sri Lanka, are depicted. At least two of the protagonists, Mugil and Sarva, for different reasons – one (Mugil) voluntarily, and the other (Sarva) coerced – do take part, or are swept by, events that determine the fate of the society that they live in; Indra, on the other hand, is driven by purely individual, family, concerns – as if these can be separated from the currents of society. Sarva, even if he is coerced into membership or training by the LTTE, is basically like his mother; he is concerned only with his own welfare, subject to his mother’s whims and fancies (for they are nothing more than that).

Rohini Mohan tells the story of conversations between her and them with disarming frankness, and to this extent she is candid and non-committal. One – *at least I*, with roots in post-independence Ceylon, later Sri Lanka – was disturbed by the events that the author chooses to depict, as ‘truthfully’ as possible. It led me to refresh dates of traumatic and historical events, the obvious ones of the *Chenmani massacre* (p. 69), *Thileepan’s hunger strike* which led to his tragic death (p. 83)⁴ and other significant events – dating back to several hundred – or even a couple of thousand – years. Suntharalingam’s letter to the Prime Minister of the time, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, dated 28th May, 1957 (p. 29)⁵ refreshed my own faltering memories and, separately, also his reference to the 1802 *Treaty of Amiens*.

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⁴ Thileepan, a Tamil, born as Rasiah Parthipan, died in a way reminiscent of Bobby Sands’ death, a Catholic in Protestant majority Northern Ireland. In the mid-1990s I spent some years as a Professor at the Queen’s University of Belfast.

⁵ The author, correctly, states that in this letter Suntharalingam refers to *Ilankai* (Suntharalingam, 1957, p. 21), but he did originate the modern use of *Eelam* (or *Eylom*) in 1959.
The excellent article by Professor Suryanarayan (2011) enlightened me on the shenanigans attempted by S. J. V. Chelvanayagam, in the 1960s, with C. N. Annadurai, leader of the DMK, in India.

Of course, I refreshed myself on the so-called battle between Elara and Dutugemunu, on Parakramabahu I & IV, familiarized myself with the histories of Anuradhapura, Sigiriya & Polonnaruwa, the colonial period of Portuguese, Dutch and British, all the way to the formation of the plantation economy (Blackburn, 1997), based essentially on tea, the import of indentured labour from South India, by the British, to work in the tea plantations, the death by disease (leaf-fungus, Ferguson, 1887, p.66) of coffee growing in (the then) Ceylon, the import of east African, women, deep sea divers for (natural) pearl fishing, the shameful history of the disenfranchisement of Indian Tamil labourers employed in the tea plantations, the ‘riots’ of 1915, 1958, 1977, etc., my own view of the evolution of the ideology of LTTE as a radical alternative of the more Gandhi-based philosophy of the Jaffna Youth Congres, the episode of Vivekananda-inspired impetus that was initiated by Anagarika Dharmapala and the doctrine of the Rajapakses that is, essentially, an expression of it, and much else.

The author candidly acknowledges the obvious fact that:

‘None of the people in this book are entirely representative of Sri Lanka or the communities they belong to, but they inherit the same conflict and its after-effects.’

But is it even possible to find people who are representatives of any of the communities of Sri Lanka? Up-country and low-country Singhalese, Northern and Eastern Tamils (with variants of Indian Tamil of the hill country), Moors and Malay Muslims, Portuguese and Dutch Burghers, let alone the various religious denominations of the Singhalese, Tamils and

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6 Professor Suryakumaran refers to Chelvanayagam as Selvanayagam! I was particularly impressed by his citing of Manimekalai, as a Buddhist example of Tamil literature, but why not, in the same sense, refer also to the other Tamil epic, Kundalakesi! Incidentally, Suntharalingam was not very sympathetic to Chelvanayagam!
7 He was the (last) Chief Minister of Madras State in 1967 when I visited it for the first time; I still remember the Tamil sign at Meenambakkam Airport: The South is being wasted; the North is flourishing (my free translation of தெற்கு தெய்கிறது,வடக்கு வாழ்கிறது).
8 Dravida Munnetrakk Kalagam (anglicised Ceylon Tamil) - இந்திய அண்மைக் கலகம்.
9 I was greatly impressed and influenced by Kamala Markandaya’s many books on this tragic issue, in particular Markandaya (1966).
10 Bizet’s Opera, The Pearl Fishers, remains one of my favourites!
11 The most recent terrorist outrage, of Easter, 2019, was committed (most extensively) in Christian houses of worship in Negombo, by ethnic Muslims; I don’t know whether they were a majority of Moors or Malays.
Burghers, not to mention the indigenous Veddahs. Indeed, the author does not make the slightest attempt to even list the various communities who inhabit – and inhabited – this tragic Island (p. 29, except the facile groupings into Singhalese, Tamils, Muslims, Burghers and Veddahs). In fact, no historical analysis, whether revisionist or reactionary, is even attempted in this somewhat shallow book.

The author is based in Bangalore, in India, ‘lived in Sri Lanka for a total of ten months’ (p. ix), over a period of five (post-civil war) years, during the writing of this book of disquiet – i.e., one-sixth of the total period; however, it is claimed – on the same page – that the author kept in touch with the three protagonists by means of weekly telephone calls(note: not at least!) from India! It is simply not possible to believe that about two hundred telephone calls were made to the three protagonists, over a period of fifty months (assuming that each month consists of four weeks and only one of the three were contacted by phone)!

The three-page concluding chapter, as well as in the body of the book, I expected to read – at least a fair amount – about the Indian involvement in the conflict(s) in Sri Lanka. In recent years the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), the Research and Analysis Division of the Indian government and the ‘South Block’ (although the distinction between RAW and the affairs of the ‘South Bock’ seem to be without any serious difference) have intervened in the internal affairs if Sri Lanka, partly to counter-balance the influence (or potential influence) of China and Pakistan. The author is not very articulate on these issues (the word Thimpu does not appear anywhere in the text). Just as a reader such as I must refresh memory with regard to events in Sri Lanka, it is useless to try to understand the dynamics of the civil war between the government forces and the LTTE without having some interpretation of India’s role in the conflict. I have been enlightened by Anderson (2011), International Crisis Group (2011) and Sashikumar (2012).

Before I proceed to the ‘nitty-gritty’ of the book being reviewed, I want to comment on the efficiency and competence with which President Rajapkase, his Defense Minister, Gothabaya Rajapakse and the Army Commander, General Sarath Fonseka executed the attack on the LTTE. It is usual to think that any developing country execution of plans – whatever it may well be – are permeated with inefficiency. This is based on the experience of aid by developed countries. This was not so in the case of the execution of even the most cruel plans, by the Rajapakse government against the ruthless army of the LTTE. Sashikumar
(op.cit.) emphasizes this point; like him, I take no sides, even though I prefer muddling through, paying attention to international opinion, considerations of human rights violations, and so on.

I have climbed mango trees, in Chavakachcheri and near Kurunegala; the foliage in the trees are different, depending on the type, which – in turn – depends (I think) on the soil. In Chavakachcheri the soil is sandy, but not so in Krunegala. I have plucked mangos from trees in Chennai and in eastern Mexico, and they are very different from the taste of the ones in Jaffna or the North Western province of Ceylon (Sri Lanka). In the garden in Chavakachcheri there were at least ten mango trees (almost all of them bearing *Karuthakolumbaan*); in Kurunegala, many more, in the same (confined) area.

Mugil’s story, faithfully (at least I think so) reported by Ms. Mohan in chapter 3 of the book is not a believable one; above all, to fall ‘asleep on a [mango] tree’ (p.39) is pure fiction, let alone to be unseen by ‘Sinhalese boys’ when she looked ‘down from the mango tree’ (p.22); and, anyway, what kind of a mango tree? Also, on the same page she is supposed to have ‘lost her T-56 assault rifle,’ but on p. 116 Mugil ‘gradually shed the façade – the gun …. .’ Was the gun ‘lost’ or ‘shed’?

I want to take now the puzzling case of John Pereira, husband of Indra and father of Sarva. He is supposed to be a catholic from Nuwara Eliya, educated – presumably – in a plantation school in Hatton, descended from grandparents who were indentured labourers from Trichy in Southern India. His father was a (medical) doctor and mother was from a Jaffna vellala family (chapter 2). If all this is true, then how did he get his surname (or even the first name)? If it was his father’s surname, how did a Trichy indentured Tamil labourers grandson get a Portuguese surname – and where was he educated to enable him to become a medical doctor! Moreover, where and how did he meet his wife, who is supposed to be from ‘the high-caste Vellalar subcommunity of Jaffna Tamils’ (p. 16).

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12 Such mango trees are rich in foliage, with thick branches, but the tree is quite low in height.

13 Not necessarily a Tamil Hindu; she could easily be a Tamil Christian, because – unfortunately – (some) Hindus who converted to Christianity (of various sorts, from about the time of Portuguese maritime colonization, through the Dutch period of 17th & 18th centuries and then the British period in the entire island till independence in February, 1948) carried their caste ‘credentials.’ John is transmogrified into a Christian Catholic (p. 209)!
Above all, Indra was betrothed to John in a so-called ‘love marriage’ (p. 15), so why did she object to her son Sava’s liaison with Malar (p. 298, ff). Indra and Malar seemed to have met ‘at a convention in Nuwara Eliya’ (p. 212) where the latter is supposed to have told the former that (p. 212; italics added):

“She spoke English and Tamil and said she could understand ‘a little Swiss’”

But there is no language called ‘Swiss’ in Switzerland (or elsewhere)\(^{14}\)! Either the author is negligent in checking Sarva’s uncritical statement or Ms. Mohan is as ignorant as the narrator; I tend to favour the latter hypothesis!

Additionally, if John was of a lower caste than Indra, what does it matter if Malar is of ‘the sweeper caste’ (p. 300)? In fact, the book’s analysis of caste, which is a curse of Singhalese and Tamil Sri Lankan society, is non-existent.

The book is written in English, with sporadic usage of Tamil and Singhalese words and phrases. Ms. Mohan is, I am afraid, not quite faithfully Sri Lankan in using these languages – but, in the case of Tamil, she may be faithful to Indian Tamil (spoken by the descendants of the indentured labourers of Hatton and Nuwara Eliya). She is incorrect, for example, in the use of the Singhalese phrase ‘kohadu’ (p. 10) and there is no place in Sri Lanka called ‘Kotayena’ (p. 213); she must mean ‘koheda’\(^ {15}\) and Kotahena – and there is a reference to ‘Patthampattaram in PTK’ (p. 326)! Then there is the incorrect use of the Singhalese phrase for ‘Happy new year’ (p. 344), when used colloquially.

As for Tamil, the author is woefully wrong in trying to impose the use of Indian (spoken) Tamil\(^ {16}\) on Jaffna (or Colombo) Tamil, of even the kind of spoken Tamil used by Muslims (whether Moors or Malays, whether from the Eastern Province or greater Colombo etc.). No Tamil speaking Sri Lankan would refer to ‘pullayar’ (p. 301, for example, instead of ‘pillayar’ or ‘pillaiyar’\(^ {17}\), as the author herself refers, on pages, 51, 57, 100, etc.); ‘molaga’

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\(^{14}\) The four languages of Swiss Confederation are *German, French, Italian* and *Romansh*.

\(^{15}\) In the Singhalese vernacular it is කොහෙද.

\(^{16}\) Sarva’s reaction to a ‘South Indian’ looking Tamil interpreter shows that the author is not unaware of the (subtle and not-so-subtle) differences (p. 302)!

\(^{17}\) In Sri Lankan Tamil it would be பிள்ளையார்.
instead of ‘milakai’ (or ‘milahai’)18 or, the Indian Tamil ‘Jeyam namade’ will be rendered by a Jaffna or Colombo Tamil as ‘Vetri engaludayadhe19,’ etc.

Some, at least, of the places that are frequented by the protagonist – and others – make no sense, in any part of Sri Lanka. For example, Mugil’s family is supposed to have (p. 24; italics added):

‘[T]aken a … boat from across the Kilali lagoon and disembarked at Kilinochchi … ‘

From Point Pedro, ‘across the Kilali lagoon!’ At least for me, the Kilali lagoon is in Trincomalee, in the northeast of Sri Lanka – but it may well be that the author refers to the Jaffna lagoon? Then, referring again to Point Pedro (p. 223), the author states:

‘POINT PEDRO HAD no special point and commemorated no one named Pedro. Yet that was its official name on documents, road signs and buses.’

This remark is an indication of the lack of etymological research in preparing the book; Point Pedro is a relic of the Portuguese period of colonization of this maritime area. It is a ‘corruption’ of the Portuguese phrase Ponta des Pedras, meaning the rocky cape! Ponta des Pedras is very different from the Tamil word referring to the same place, Parutthiththurai (பருத்தித்துளற) – the harbor (துளற) from which cotton (பருத்திய) is shipped, predominantly to South India. Point Pedro is the northern most town in Sri Lanka.

Sakkotai Cape, in Point Pedro (Photo taken by me, in September, 2017)

18 மிலகையும்
19 தவற்றி எங்களுளடயதெ}; something similar was said to me, in 1970, by a respectable, elderly, Colombo Tamil, who was the father of a dear friend of mine.
Sarva flies to many countries, and even telephones from almost all of them (most particularly from Riyadh airport) – he also travels overland, never specified whether overland or by rail, particularly in South America, without knowing, most of the time, in which country he is – without ever indicating which airline he uses.

I cannot believe that the book has been proof-read by a competent person. There are too many infelicities of spelling (Putumatalan & Putumatalan, on p. 128) and grammatical (missing ‘of’ at the bottom of p.95) mistakes for any competent proof-reader to have missed! In addition the book is devoid of either an Author or Subject Index and, of course, no reference list (how can there be, where none of the characters have time or opportunity to read books; but they do watch films and seem to find enough money to own mobile phones – there are almost negligible exceptions).

For whom is this English language book, with a sprinkling of (almost entirely) Indian Tamil words and phrases and a few Sinhalese words, intended? It cannot be for the English-reading Sri Lankan audience; the Indian reader will not be familiar with the few Sinhalese language words, but when correct, he or she can manage (but is it enough?).

As the late Professor Chelva Kanaganayakam pointed out (1998, p. 51):

‘[S]ri Lankan writing in English has achieved a measure of recognition, particularly among those interested in postindependence [4 February, 1948] writing.’

He gives as examples the celebrated books of Michael Ondaatje, Romesh Gunesekera, Carl Muller, Shyam Selvadurai, Yasmine Gooneratne and Ambalavann Sivanandan (admittedly all a decade, and more, before the end of the ‘current’ civil war, inevitably since his own article is from 1998). More recently there were Minoli Salgado and Anuk Arudpragasam with their respective award-winning books of 2014 and 2016 – as well as Romesh Gunasekere’s return with Noontide Toll, in 2014, more explicitly about the aftermath of the civil war that ended in May, 2009. There are many more20, and as the years pass, up to a point, the expatriate Sri

20 Of these, especially of the period after May, 2009, the ones that have moved me most are those by Sharika Thiranagama’s In My Mother’s House: Civil War in Sri Lanka, (Thiranagama, 2011), with Gananath Obeyesekera’s forward, Romesh Gunasekera’s Noontide Toll (Gunasekera, 2014) and Anuk Arudpragasam’s The Story of a Brief Marriage (Arudpragasam, 2016). Of course, the nature and character of the way Rohini Mohan chronicles her narrative precludes any reference to these books – but don’t the three ‘protagonists’ read novels at all!
Lankan community seems to be able produce exceptional writings in English comparable to any country or nationality, particularly in the aftermath of the civil war.

‘Sri Lankan writing in English’ seems to have accelerated after Salman Rushdie’s 1981 novel of magic realism, *Midnight’s Children*, which itself follows the Latin American tradition whose leading exponent was Gabriel Garcia Marquez and his 1967 *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The turmoil of independence and the trauma of partition meant that the sources could have been more diverse; I myself think the Tamil novel *Alai Osai* (1948), by ‘Kalki’ Krishnamurthy, captured the turmoil rather well, but it was less successful in telling a good narrative of the trauma of partition. However, it can be considered a distinguished forerunner to *Midnight’s Children* (but there is nothing of the magic realism in it). That – or, those – were, in turn, forerunners of novels written in the aftermath of the tragic civil war in Sri Lanka.

On the other hand, Leonard Woolf’s *Village in the Jungle* may well have been a one-off classic, crafted by an exceptionally serious scholar of impeccable integrity, imagining the environmental degradation wrought by the relentless power of nature, if not husbanded with compassion. It appears to have left no trace of an influence, although urban and village life has been continually degraded in the manner feared by Woolf. The tsunami was a manifestation of the power of the ocean in engulfing terrestrial life, in Sri Lanka; Woolf tried to depict the encroachment of the jungle on village life.

All of the excellent works cited earlier chronicle different aspects of man’s prejudices, convictions, beliefs and desires against those of other men, individually, socially and politically. The mutual effects of natural and super-natural forces on man, particularly during the quarter-of-a-century of the recent civil war, between the government forces and LTTE, are considered in terms of terrorism, militancy of one sort or another, faith by groups of individuals and so on. Caste, class and ethnic differences are also invoked, but somewhat disingenuously (in this writer’s opinion).

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21 Both ‘Kalki’ (கால்கி) Krishnamurthy and Salman Rushdie, in my opinion, richly deserved the recognition granted by the Nobel Prize for Literature.
22 I learned much about this from Barker (2010) and friends who had experienced it, in ‘real time’.
23 No gender specific meaning is to be ascribed to the use of ‘man’ and ‘men’ in this essay.
The easiest parallels of the civil war in Sri Lanka would be the 12-year ‘war’ between the Commonwealth armed forces and the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA), which was the military wing of the Chinese dominated Malayan Communist Party (MCP), trying to establish a socialist economy in an independent Malaya. Another parallel of the civil war would be Mao Zedong’s employment of a Wei-Ch’i strategy in the ‘long march.’ Neither of these events were internationalized, except in limited ways. But neither of these parallels are appropriate for obvious reasons. In particular, both sides of the civil war in Sri Lanka indulged in myth-generated opinion building as a substitute for the MNCP insurgency or effective strategies of the Mao variety. So far as I know, neither side in the civil war of Sri Lanka employed the strategy of any kind of board games.

Alas, the book under consideration does not match up to the class of these books – in any sense.

I should like to emphasise three points. Firstly, and the easier one, is that I, too, am an expatriate – having spent only the first 17 years of my life in consecutively living in Sri Lanka. But I consider myself a Sri Lankan Tamil for all practical purposes; I read, regularly, the classic literature of Tamil in the original, have mastered the five epics of Tamil, listen to the classical music of the preeminent exponents of it, and so on. Secondly, I am an adherent of Zen Buddhism, whereby I worship no god but feel the path to enlightenment is open to all who can discipline themselves in the way of Sakyamuni, the Buddha, did.

Much of my professional life was spent in Belfast, Madras, Puebla, Galway and Trento – apart from trying to understand the discrimination felt by the burakumin of the outskirts of Kyoto and Osaka. I also had a house on Lago di Como, very near Ticino (the Italian speaking part of Switzerland). The protestants of Belfast, the Tamils of Chennai, the (American) Indians of Cholula, in Puebla, the populace of the Gaeltacht, in County Galway, the problems of the South Tyrol in Trentino-Alto Adige (Alcock, 1970) and the issues of Ticino resembled,

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24 A persuasive case is made in Boorman (1969).
25 For example, the sea tigers of the LTTE were ‘modeled’ on the alleged Tamil Chola dynasty naval force in the 1967 historical novel by Sandilyan called Kadal Pura. The novel is supposed to have impressed the leader of the LTTE, Velupillai Prabakaran.
26 They are Kundalakesi, Valayapathi, Sivaha Sindamani, Silappadhikaram and Manimekalai; I am the proud owner of copies of them. The first and the last of them are Buddhist Bhikkuni’s tales.
at least on the surface, the classic minority issues confronted by the Tamils – of Northern and Eastern provinces and of the Upcountry – of Sri Lanka.

All, except the problems faced by the (American) Indians of Cholula, were European problems resolved, *pro tempore*, by internal mechanisms and/or European conventions, congresses and conferences. There were – and are – other communal, minority, problems in Europe that no amount of convention-talking seems to be able to resolve; one thinks of the Flemish vs. the French people of Belgium, the Spanish-speaking and the Catalan language (and the Aranese Dialect of Occitan) speakers of Spain, as the obvious examples, but there are similar issues of the minority-inhabitants of even Britain and Sweden.

Given these unresolved, perhaps unresolvable, issues pertaining to minority languages, it should not be surprising that the Sinhalese and Tamils find it difficult, if not impossible, to resolve their differences. For the moment, they can only muddle through.

Finally, the narrative reported by the three protagonists, to Ms. Rohini Mohan, uncritically and faithfully woven into the fabric of this book, depends on a faithful recollection of events, people and places. That it is *impossible* to report past events, recollect people and places is, partly, due to *amnesia*; a ‘scientific’ description of this kind of amnesia, in the extreme – i.e. asymptotic – case seems to be due to what Alois Alzheimer (1907) described so many years ago. As Sivanandan wrote in 1997 (p. 335; italics added):

> ‘When memory dies, a people die.”

This book will not, and cannot, help in the resolution of the conflict. It could keep the fires, or at least the embers, alive, for a while, before others write what may turn out to be definitive accounts of the civil war that has plagued this beautiful Island. Perhaps that was not the aim of the author – but what is the aim of anyone writing a book like this?

**References**


