

From Ethnic Civil War to Global War: (De)Legitimizing Narratives of Global Warfare and the Longing for Civility in Sri Lankan Fiction

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From Kosovo, Bosnia, and Chechnya to Rwanda, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Iraq, global violence and warfare appear to be a quotidian and ineluctable phenomenon, intrinsic to the reordering of global relationships of power and institutions in the post-Cold War era. In this context, globalization frequently appears as a machine-gone-out-of-human-control that works by means of immeasurable speed, operates outside of history, and invokes violence as one of its fully naturalized aspects. In contrast, I treat globalization as an unfinished process produced and shaped by contesting cultural and political narratives that negotiate and seek to shift and abrogate claims to sites of global power. I ask how and to what end global wars are better understood if read through their imperial dimensions? What are the dominant legitimizing narratives of global war? How do literary texts of earlier theatres of war reinforce or challenge these narratives of global war? How do narratives of global war generate and legitimize post-Enlightenment notions of autonomy?

In contrast to ethnic civil wars, global wars are not restricted to a national territory. Such global wars as the United State's "war on terror" may operate on a multilateral plane but ultimately pursue unilateral aims. While some critics argue that global wars are symptomatic of the apparent clash of ethnic, cultural, and religious differences and are governed by particularist ambitions for national autonomy, other critics foreground the asymmetry of violence as the most characteristic feature of global wars. The latter perspective holds that global wars rely on mercenaries, illegal arms trade, and the criminalization of so-called rogue or failed nation-states. Global wars aim at population control and are fought over questions of identity. To this, I wish to add that historically and politically, global wars are rooted in both colonial administrative practices of ethnicizing or racializing the colonized population and the legacies of anti-colonial liberation struggles.

Sri Lanka's more than 20-year old civil war usually does not count as global war since it neither disturbs nor propels the present global order of power relations. Yet, as Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000) and Jean Arasanayagam's collection of short stories *All Is Burning* (1995) stress, the Sri Lankan war depends on illegal arms trade, the engagement of international non-governmental organizations, the replacement of the state's legal monopoly of violence with the government's practice of privatizing the war by hiring mercenary armies, and the war's deep roots in Western colonialism and modernity. Both texts force the reader to examine when and to what effect representations of particular cultural and political crises become manifest in the exercise of habitual violence and turn into legitimizing narratives of global war.

While legitimizing narratives of global war come in the various guises of humanitarianism, responsibility, protection, retributive justice, and human security, most tend to deny the need to mediate, adjudicate, and historicize violence. Indeed, as *Anil's Ghost* illustrates, normalizing and, thus, legitimizing narratives of global war require the disavowal of the historicity of violence. In

particular, they rely on the rhetoric of the archaic to obscure the historical formation of violence. Moreover, legitimizing narratives of global war not only tend to rely on an archive of unquestioned historical texts, which frequently assume the status of empirical evidence, but they also translate the particular into the universal.

In *Anil's Ghost*, legitimizing narratives of global war are never absolute. Instead, they make visible the various complicities of such categories of knowledge production as "identity" and "history" with the ways in which these very categories are taken into the service of war and death. As with most of Ondaatje's writing, *Anil's Ghost* represents violence as an archaic, anarchistic, and natural phenomenon. In the novel, the randomness and anarchism of violence govern nature and humans alike and supersede history and politics. They indiscriminately compress the history, politics, and administrative organization of global wars into a total, singular present of perpetual uncertainty and political confusion. On the one hand, this way of "dehistoricizing" history is useful because, as it is the case in Sri Lanka, it uncouples a glorified Sinhalese past from its present claims to political power. Such a reading of history and violence seeks to delegitimize the ethnicized, normative narratives of national identity. On the other hand, severing politics and war from history overlooks that wars are usually fought over the historically produced unequal distribution of power and resources. Interestingly, by rejecting history as a category of identity, the novel also covers over its own reliance on historical texts from Sri Lanka's anti-colonial modernist period of Buddhist Revivalism, a period which contributed much to the Sinhala-Only movement of the 1950s and which ultimately escalated into civil war.

Arasanayagam's *All Is Burning* considers war and violence as a political and historical product and engages squarely with the development of delegitimizing narratives of global war. The short stories conceptualize the privatization of Sri Lanka's war as a global war, while questioning the viability of the demand for national and cultural autonomy under conditions of extreme and routinized political violence. They also counter dominant narratives of global war by projecting a concept of global civility based on the unlearning of ethnic and political privilege. In the story "Man Without Mask," a British mercenary hired by the Sri Lankan government for a political assassination, contemplates that the bullet holes that perforate his victim's body chart new fictions and maps of cruelty characteristic of a global politics of death that thrives on the production of both extreme violence and disposable people. Indeed, the politics of death divide the world into areas of life and death and the effects of extreme global violence are cumulative rather than relative. Global war, then, as my readings suggest, becomes embodied in those whom it negates as social subjects and thereby reduces to mere bodies or flesh. Simultaneously, it remains a disembodied enterprise for those who manage and instrumentalize the politics of death of global war. It is through this unequal relationship of the embodiment and disembodiment of global violence that the dehumanization of the majority of the globe's population takes on a normative and naturalized state of existence. Moreover, if global war is a continuation of imperial forms of warfare, as the presence of the British mercenaries in Arasanayagam's stories suggests, war must rely on strategies of embodiment, that is, of politicizing and racializing the colonized and now "disposable" body for purposes of self-legitimization, specifically when taking decisions over the value of human life. After all, on a global level, race underlies the ideological and physical division of the world into zones of life and death, a division that, in some cases, must be guarded by means of war. On the local plane, race serves to orchestrate the brutalization and polarization of the domestic population.

Arasanayagam's stories critically counter the politics of death of global war with the concepts of civility and connectivity. Both of these terms challenge those notions of autonomy that have their roots in the Kantian traditions of the European Enlightenment and which, without acknowledging the racialized

formation of discourses of the Self and the nation, posit autonomy as the chief condition of national and individual sovereignty. But rather than dismissing the notion of autonomy prematurely while recognizing the importance of political self-determination, Arasanyagam's story "The Journey" rereads autonomy on various levels as a practice of civility and connectivity and of the individual's ability to reinvent him- or herself. While the notion of civility is historically as fraught as autonomy, by invoking the history of racism, it helps expose the racial dimensions of extreme violence exercised in global and local contexts of war and displacement. It also raises the question of citizenship and rights, and the demand for rethinking and democratizing borders in the wake of the massive displacement of people caused by war across the globe. Thus, civility requires a politics of inclusion instead of exclusion and challenges the dominance of identity politics. This notion of civility develops through an understanding of the ways in which the political logic of racialized and extreme violence connects, according to the story, such seemingly disconnected events as colonialism, the Holocaust, the burning of Turkish people in Germany, the trafficking in refugees, and the Sri Lankan war.

Under conditions of global war, autonomy can neither be considered as a particularist claim nor used as a privilege bestowed upon the enlightened and mature Western individual. Rather, what is at stake is the way in which we conceptualize autonomy enacted by those who lack social and political subjectivity. In other words, the discourse of civility, as I conclude, questions how we understand a practice of the self *before* the constitution of the political and social subject and, second, extends the notion of autonomy to those without civil, political, and human rights. Thus, the practice of civility destabilizes dominant notions of autonomy and, instead of positing the Kantian sovereign subject as its conceptual foundation, imagines a different kind of non-subject as the legitimizing and ethical ground of autonomy.