

The Need for Certainty versus the Subjectivity of Memories: Examining Trauma Narratives in Rohini Mohan's *The Seasons of Trouble*

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Highlights:

- The paper interprets formalist devices of narrative journalism as effective forms of communicating traumatic truth rather than journalistic restrictions.
- It applies Erikson's theory of Collective Trauma to a South Asian non-fiction work, extending the largely Western application of trauma theory.
- The paper also employs Balaev's literary analysis of Cultural Trauma to demonstrate that victims' repression and silence are socially constructed and not universal by nature.
- It recognises post-war gender roles reassignment as a subsequent collective trauma within post-war Tamil communities in Sri Lanka.
- The paper also adds to an under-explored field of narrative journalism's collective trauma stories and South Asian Trauma Studies.

Abstract

The Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009) was a time of deep trauma for the Sri Lankan and diaspora Tamil populations. This paper explores Rohini Mohan's narrative non-fiction, *The Seasons of Trouble* (2014), as a space where journalistic expectations of verifiable certainties encounter the fragmented, culturally mediated memory of trauma. Using Kai Erikson's theory of Collective Trauma and Michelle Balaev's critique of classical trauma paradigms, the book explores three central narratives, namely Mugil, a former female LTTE combatant, Sarva, a Tamil man tortured under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and Indra, his mother, who attempts to extract him through bureaucracy. The paper shows that Mohan's structural methods of narrative, withholding and bodily metaphor are not journalistic limitations but deliberate representational techniques of ethnic conflict, sexual violence, oppressive power conflicts, and forced displacement. The study also reveals that gender reassignment and post-war surveillance after the civil war served as forms of secondary communal trauma for the female ex-combatants. The work contributes to the under-researched fields of trauma theory, narrative journalism and gender in post-war South Asia.

Keywords: ethnic conflict, sexual violence, trauma, non-fiction, memory, Sri Lanka, gender.

Introduction:

Narrative Journalism has emerged as a pivotal writing technique that conveys the consequences of conflict in people's lives. Traditional war reporting relies on official statements, verifiable facts and numbers as well as institutional perspectives but narrative non-fiction highlights the fragmented, visceral personal stories of those who have suffered through the atrocities (van Krieken and Sanders, 2019). This study explores the tension between journalistic consistency and the fragmented narrative of traumatic memories in Rohini Mohan's 2014 work of narrative non-fiction, *The Seasons of Trouble*. The book is set against the background of the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009), the conflict between the Sri Lankan Government Forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE),

when witnesses to the war struggled with different accounts of history, imposed silence, and the political pressure of laws like The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), making it difficult to speak out against the conflict and reveal its reality.

This paper argues that Rohini Mohan's *The Seasons of Trouble* (2014) is not just a documentary narrative of war but a literary-journalistic text whose formal structure, with a non-chronological narrative, ambiguous disclosure of events and metaphors, represents a calculated stance about the representation of the trauma in the conflict. The three central characters of this text are Mugil, a former female LTTE combatant, Sarva, a Tamil man detained under the PTA and tortured under suspicion of being an insurgent, and Indra, Sarva's mother, who fervently navigated the state's bureaucracy to secure his release. These characters and their stories are organised within the tension of what is spoken and what is suppressed. This paper analyses the conflict through two primary frameworks. The first framework is Kai Erikson's Collective Trauma Theory, which understands trauma not only as an individual psychological injury but as a wound to the whole community that fractures social bonds, violates shared identity, and causes widespread social displacement. The second is Michelle Balaev's critique of classical trauma theories, which asserts that there are no universal mechanisms for survivors' trauma responses but individual, cultural and social contexts that determine how traumatic memories are narrated, what can be articulated and what remains repressed.

Research Questions:

The study is structured around three research questions.

1. How does Mohan's narrative journalism deliver a 'truthful' account of the Sri Lankan Civil War using the subjective and fragmented memories of trauma survivors, and what does this mean for non-fiction writing?
2. In what ways do Mugil and Indra's experiences show the paradoxes in how Tamil women redefine their gender identities after the war, and how does the post-war transformation of gender identities count as a form of secondary collective trauma?
3. How does the book exemplify individual and communal trauma conceptualised by Erikson and Balaev?

The paper begins with a short introduction to the theoretical framework through a structured literature review, and then analyses the narrative arcs of the three protagonists through the double lens of trauma and gender. The conclusion of the paper puts together the intersection of trauma, gender and limits of journalistic representation in the Sri Lankan Civil War.

Historical Context:

The civil war in Sri Lanka, which ended in 2009, was the culmination of decades of ethno-religious tension between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority. The most well-known of the militant groups fighting for a Tamil homeland was the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), commonly known as the Tamil Tigers. However, the roots of the conflict go back to colonial and post-colonial periods when a variety of policies were introduced which exacerbated ethnic divisions. During the British colonial period, thousands of Tamil plantation workers were brought from India to work on plantations. After Sri Lankan independence in 1948, the Sinhalese-dominated government systematically denied Tamil citizens their fundamental human rights, such as access to education and employment. The Citizenship Act No. 35 of 1949, which denied automatic citizenship to Indians and their descendants, was the first of a series of anti-Tamil legislation that restricted Tamil access to higher education and employment. The 1956 election manifesto of the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party included the slogan "Sinhala Only", which signalled a decisive shift away from minority languages and marked the beginning of a new era of discrimination against Tamils in educational institutions. Tamil students who sought to enter university were subjected to quota systems that ensured that only a small percentage of available places were allocated to them. This led to the eventual armed struggle of the militants of the 1970s. In 1972, the new Constitution of Sri Lanka further entrenches Buddhist absolutism while the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) of 1982 paved the way for detentions without trial and the torture of suspects. The traumatic effect of war, conflict and post-war gender relations as depicted in narrative of non-fiction literature is the primary area of interest in this paper as war and

conflict often leads to a disruption in socio-cultural dynamics of community, often accompanied by long-lasting psychological and physical effects. The prolonged Sri Lankan Civil War left behind a gaping wound in the society within Sri Lanka and in the diasporic population around the world. Detailed accounts of war in both fictional and non-fictional narratives uncovered the horrors of the war and specifically, the individual and communal strife from the survivors' perspective (Deane, 2016).

Thesis Statement:

The paper argues that Rohini Mohan's *The Seasons of Trouble* embodies a valid conflict between the journalistic imperative for factual accuracy and the subjective, non-linear nature of traumatised memory narrative. This study analyses the narratives of Mugil, Sarva and Indra through Kai Erikson's theory of collective trauma and Michelle Balaev's critique of conventional trauma theory, revealing that Mohan's narrative techniques, with a fragmented chronology of events, withheld testimonies of survivors and illustrative language, are literary strategies to convey first-hand experiences of war rather than journalistic drawbacks. The research also examines how gender role reassignment after the conflict represents secondary trauma for female combatants like Mugil as they are forced to relinquish their identities acquired from conflicts and resume the roles of homemakers that they previously renounced.

Literature Review:

The academic study of trauma has significantly evolved since Sigmund Freud initially characterised it as a disruption in regular memory and as a wound that is so severe that the kind repressed the experience rather than integrating it within the human conscious experience. Freud's vital theory asserted that trauma is inherently a psychological phenomenon defined by unconscious repetition, nocturnal disruptions, and prolonged recovery of repressed memories. Cathy Caruth notably developed this psychoanalytic legacy in the late twentieth century with her seminal works, including *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), which integrated trauma theory into fields such as literature and the humanities. Caruth contends that trauma is paradoxical as it occurs outside the survivor's complete awareness and is understood in hindsight through its disruptive reemergence in language, dreams and storytelling. Caruth claims that trauma is inherently unspeakable as it transcends and distorts the survivor's linguistic ability, which was an essential component in literary trauma studies. Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart's (1991) works, contended from a neurobiological perspective, that traumatic memory operates differently from conventional memory, obstructing the mind's integration process and compelling the survivor to revisit the traumatic memories rather than simply recalling it. These accounts collectively establish the paradigm that trauma is inaccessible, fragmented and opposed to narrative coherence.

Nonetheless, the conventional approach of unspeakability in trauma has undergone extensive and productive critique. Michelle Balaev, in *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels* (2012), challenged the notion of repression and inaccessibility are universal reactions to trauma. She argued that the survivor's connection to traumatic memories is not merely neurological but also influenced by cultural, personal and social factors. A survivor's response to trauma and brutality is often influenced by their community, the cultural framework for understanding human suffering and the political context that dictates the feasibility and scope of their testimony. Balaev's theory is an important step forward in the study of war trauma in postcolonial settings, because in these settings, cultural norms about shame, silence and gender have a big effect on what is expressed and what is kept quiet. Balaev's paradigm opposes the universalist perspective of Western, conventional trauma theory and facilitates theories that consider unique social contexts in individual trauma narratives. This is an approach that is methodologically crucial for the current study.

Balaev's theories view individual trauma within cultural contexts, while Erikson's theory of collective trauma helps understand how the grief in Mohan's text affects the community as a whole. In *Everything in its Path* (1976), Erikson defines communal trauma as a complex version of collective traumatic memory experienced by a community deeply affected by anguish, fractured social bonds,

and deep psychological unrest. He points out that loneliness, devastation, numbness, and overwhelming terror are common symptoms in those who have endured large-scale violence like ethnic cleansing, genocide, enormous natural calamities, and terror attacks. Erikson argues that collective trauma does not mean accumulated individual trauma, but a different state of unrest where the community's ability to trust, their solidarity and shared identity are undermined and destroyed (Erikson, 1976). He asserts that collective trauma transforms the survivor's perception of society and the environment around them, resulting in a victimisation that becomes crucial to determine their group identity.

In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004), Jeffrey Alexander takes Erikson's work further by analysing how trauma becomes culturally relevant when narrated through a common thread that unites the community, which later becomes the social group's identity. Both frameworks establish the interconnected subjugation and shared cultural codes dictating the expressions of the Tamil community as portrayed in Mohan's text through the three characters, Mugil, Sarva and Indra. Their juxtaposition in the story depicts the Tamil community as a collectively scarred entity, whose identity has been significantly impacted by the carnage of the political repercussions, the civil war, and its aftermath.

The limited work on trauma theory addressing South Asian contexts is often inconsistent by nature. The Holocaust, the slavery experience of the African American community in USA, and ethnic violence against the indigenous communities in the USA and Canada were experiences of collective trauma against a subjugated community that have been rightfully analysed through the theories of collective and cultural trauma. However, conflicts in South Asia, such as the partitions, communal riots, social revolutions, caste and sexual violence, are insufficiently represented in theoretical literature. The recently published *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature* (2023), edited by Gautham Karmakar and Zeenat Khan, is an important contribution to the genre, but like almost all work in this subject, the edited volume also only analyses works of fiction authored by South Asian writers. Non-fiction narrative journalism is a genre that navigates conflicting elements like factual accuracy, confidentiality and literary narrative and it has not been thoroughly examined as a medium for trauma representation in the South Asian context.

This disparity is not only institutional. It reveals a theoretical oversight and conflict between journalistic imperatives for objective certainty and the fragmented cultural nature of traumatic memory, which has not been scrutinised in the context of South Asian War literature. Rohini Mohan's *The Seasons of Trouble* occupies this crossroads, and this paper addresses this unexamined issue. The study examines how the techniques of narrative journalism portray the collective trauma of a community under the threat of violence, subjugation and displacement.

Methodology and Scope:

This paper conducts a textual analysis of Rohini Mohan's *The Seasons of Trouble* (2014), and at the same time, it treats the work as both literature and journalism. The analysis employs Erikson's collective trauma theory to explore how the three narrative strands of the book represent the Tamil community as a collective of traumatised individuals whose sense of identity is shaped by their experiences of persecution, displacement, and censored or suppressed memory. A culturally situated model of trauma narrativity by Balaev serves as the paper's second primary framework, guiding close readings of silences and confessions that are culturally and politically conditioned, rather than depicting them as universal symptoms of trauma and anguish.

This paper studies Tamil rehabilitation and reintegration in the years following 2009 through a close reading of the people-centric narrative by Mohan. It is narrowly focused on this non-fiction text and does not attempt any broader comparative literary analysis of other narratives of the Sri Lankan war. It does, however, acknowledge and situates itself within the broader range of narratives and critical works on the Sri Lankan civil war, including war narratives by journalists such as Anita Pratap, Frances Harrison, and Samanth Subramanian, as well as scholarship and criticism on trauma theory, gender studies, and Sri Lankan civil war literature more broadly. Two major limitations of this study are that the analysis is limited by its reliance on a single non-fiction text. It does not generalise the narrative style and theme across the broader field of non-fiction literature. Secondly and more

importantly, the subjective testimonies that this text relies on cannot be independently verified as the narrative style seeks to give voice to the marginalised communities. This is not a minor challenge to the paper's concerns, but rather is the central epistemological problem that the paper seeks to investigate.

The Female Combatant and the Paradox of Service:

In *Twelve Feminist Lessons of War* (2023), Cynthia Enloe writes, "when a civil movement becomes an armed insurgency, it is likely to simultaneously become top-down in its structure, intolerant of internal dissent and masculinized in its culture, celebrating the combat fighter. This is what militarization fosters" (pg. 77). This is mostly because, traditional roles of masculinity and femininity are shaped by gender relations, which are, as Sjoberg and Via argue in the Introduction of their book *Gender, War, and Militarism* (2010), "variable, discursive, and socially constructed". Yet, the conditioning of gender roles remains relevant as the construction of gender doesn't make its "social implications any less real" (pg. 77). Heidmann (2017), who analyses similar works of war literature from Sri Lanka, notes that gendered narratives of war display how, during wartime, gender roles are less rigid. In the context of war, the 'passive' female combatant overturns patriarchy as her actions would be classified as coping and survival strategies, within masculine warfare. In the ethnic and gendered context of warfare in Sri Lanka, the agency of a female LTTE combatant remained short-lived. The post-conflict discourses revealed that the gender hierarchies that were dismantled during the war were promptly restored in its aftermath, only for the patriarchal leaderships of both states to deny women's contributions and sacrifices during the war.

The most complex narrative in Mohan's text is that of Mugil, the female LTTE combatant who walked away from the organisation in order to protect her family. This narrative and her story embody the central argument of the paper as it reveals the various ways that Mugil suppressed and disclosed her experiences, and how they are conditioned by cultural psychological mechanisms that affect how individuals recount their traumatic memories. The silences and voicelessness in Mugil's narrative reveal how her words are not influenced by general psychological framework but by a specific influence on gender, militarism and Tamil nationalist discourse that have constructed her identity over the last few decades of her young life.

Despite the presence of female heroines and warriors in Tamil literature and history, in the decades preceding the civil war in Sri Lanka, Tamil society remained firmly conservative concerning the participation of women in public life and their gender roles in private spaces. When the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was founded in 1976, women were recruited primarily to non-military spheres such as fundraising, health care, and administration. However, as the war dragged on over the next decade, and the number of male combatants began to perish in the war, women were gradually incorporated into combat units. The Women's Wing of the LTTE published a manifesto promising an end to a host of social evils including caste, dowry, and sexual harassment in exchange for women's participation in the struggle for Tamil freedom. In many ways, the LTTE offered women the space to assert autonomy in areas such as clothing, public space, and career choice that were denied to them by their families and community (Dissanayake, 2017; Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 2008). However, as Rajasingham-Senanayake (2000) notes, key female combatants of the organisation were not just victims of a patriarchal organisation, but they were not autonomous decision makers in the organisation either. Their sexual behaviour, relationships, and reproductive roles were strictly controlled by the organisation (Parashar, 2014). Further, as the war drew to a close, women were portrayed by the media and in popular culture as the chaste warrior, willing to give her life for the nation, while they also fulfilled their roles as wives and mothers (Davis, 2008). Mugil, like her fellow combatants, had plainly displayed women's calibre for violence, painting a picture of aggressive masculinity that is particularly unsettling for the meaning of femininity and gender constructs in society (Megawatta, 2014).

The cultural nature of how memories are produced in the lives of Tamil postwar subjects needs to be viewed in the context of ideological structures that inspired their journey to armed combat. Reading Mugil's silences in the narrative through the prism of Balaev's theory of cultural trauma testimony allows us to explore why the young, Tamil, female combatant censors her memories in specific ways and to what effect. Mugil's narrative begins with her hiding from the Sri Lankan military

while her comrades were raped. She narrates her recollections in a controlled and anxious manner, showing that it is a narrative of survival and has been curtailed at the very moment that the witness remembers the traumatic encounter. The years of ideological conditioning under the LTTE that had taught her to subjugate her emotions for the sake of the cause had also organised her memory in specific ways. The gendered nature of ethno-nationalist militarism that determined how Tamil women could participate in armed combat had dictated her ability to speak about her past as well. This paper examines the silence in the post-war memory as a result of cultural norms that dictated her ability to speak about her past and the gendered violence that women suffered in war. The silence in this moment is so profound that the journalist Mohan was unable to speak about it in interview (Sriram, 2014). In the chapter titled 'Women as Armed Insurgents Offer Feminist Caveats', Enloe (2023) notes that, in insurgencies, both women and men committed to nursing the wounded, sent secret messages, fed warriors, raised money for the cause and so on. But, when female insurgents performed tasks that were particularly feminine like guiding, hiding and feeding, their roles would be trivialized as their 'natural duty'. Insurgent women who did not want to be handed down feminized roles incorporated gender beliefs regarding discipline, solidarity and toughness. Enloe writes that many female insurgents have testified that, in response to a patriarchal and intolerant state, the insurgency too, internalised a fierce masculinity and venerated the fierce combatant. In the context of this gendered militarism, Mugil's silence can be read as her attempt to display stability and solidarity with LTTE's ideology and not succumb to 'weakness' in a 'feminine' manner. In Mugil's own words, "Nothing in the Vanni was valued quite like self-sacrifice" (pg. 117), and in her role as a role model for recruits, Mugil had encouraged them to sacrifice themselves for a better future; her silence indicated that guilt of having failed them and the girls as the grief overpowered her morals.

Incorporating Erikson's framework for collective trauma, this paper observes that systematic sexual violence in conflict augments the vulnerability and shared trauma of an entire community. Mugil was forced to watch the young recruits being raped but this isn't just another case of sexual violence. The moment symbolised years of sexual violence against Tamil women as a war tactic, involving the participation of an entire community and the silence around it. Erikson notes that collective trauma seeks to sever the bonds of the community and replace them with a sense of shared pain, vulnerability and loss. Mugil's resolve in the Tamil resistance breaks as she witnesses the young women she recruited suffer the humiliation and shame of systematic rape and mutilation. This disillusionment is illustrated through the metaphors embodying changes in Mugil's appearance in the aftermath of the traumatic experience. As Mugil replaces her camouflage with civilian clothing and discards her chain with the tiger's tooth, Mohan presents this transformation as a change of identity. Mugil described the act of changing her clothes as "shed the façade". The act had felt like "shedding her skin. She was setting aside the only life she had known since she was a teenager" (pg. 116). The violent metaphor of shedding skin highlighted the identity of Mugil as an LTTE combatant whose identity was closely tied to the camouflage clothing and the masculinised identity of a warrior. As soon as Mugil wore the clothes of a civilian woman and took off her symbols as a warrior, Mugil's identity as a soldier was ripped away from her. For Mugil and numerous individuals undergoing this transition of gender roles post-conflict, the process is not a means of healing and recovery from trauma. Instead, it represents a perpetuation of trauma, under the guise of healing, as she was now a mother and a runaway soldier, fervently avoiding the war to save her children and her family from the chaos, violence and starvation of war. The change in identity is also an expression of self-preservation as any sign of military clothing would get her arrested and punished by both Sri Lankan army and the LTTE for either being a militant or a runaway.

Erikson's theories state that collective trauma does not simply proliferate individual sufferings. Rather, it produces a state of communal inability to maintain trust, solidarity, and shared meaning which is fundamentally compromised by the traumatic experience. In Mugil's case, the very people who had held her in high esteem for being a combatant were now vindictively judging her for deserting the ideology that united them. She was one of the civilians and shared experiences of displacement,

drone attacks on civilian spaces, and the makeshift medical camps created a condition of communal unsettlement that Erikson describes. The shared predicament is clear as Mohan writes, "These were the common threads that bound the Tamil community: the close shaves, the what-ifs, the recasting of dumb luck as courage, pain as experience, losses as tests of character. Grief could never simply be itself because it was ongoing. As the battles continued people needed to tell these stories, gather mental energy for more strife. Trace back reflexive decisions that had saved or killed someone, and glean strategy from them" (pg. 67)

This collective survival structure of having to turn grief into strategy and loss into lesson is quick in the warzone. Erikson refers to this as a community's way of staying together in the face of a wound where normal grief becomes a luxury it can't afford. In 'Notes on Trauma and Community', Erikson (1995) notes that "The wariness and numbness and slowness of feeling shared by traumatized people everywhere may mean that relating to others comes hard and at a heavy price" (pg.186) and yet, it brings together a group of people like a shared culture as, "There is a spiritual kinship there, a sense of identity, even when feelings of affection are deadened and the ability to care numbed" (pg.186).

When Mugil gives up her identity as a combatant, she did not fully become a civilian. Instead, she was stuck between two worlds, not fully trusted as a civilian and not allowed to mourn her past as a soldier. Mugil's trauma manifests in the body through years of combat and a gradual breakdown of ideology whereas Sarva's Trauma is encapsulated in the brutal episode of state-sanctioned violence, which he will spend years evading in the future. Nevertheless, when analysed through Erikson's framework, their traumas are interconnected. They personify the two expressions of the collective wound of Tamil community's subjugation under a state that criminalised their ethnicity, held together in Mohan's narrative without losing the underlying differences between them.

Incarceration, Sexual Violence, and the Limits of Testimony

Sarva's story in the text narrates the circumstances that a survivor of systematic sexual violence faces when they share their experiences. It also reveals how the cultural and institutional systems affect the credibility of the testimony. He describes being detained under Sri Lanka's Prevention of Terrorism Act along with several Tamil men under the suspicion of being a Tamil Tigers supporter, as well as the psychological, physical, and sexual torture that Tamil youth endure if they are suspected of having ties with the LTTE. The International Truth and Justice Project (ITJP), in 2018, reported similar abuse patterns using first-hand testimonies to hold security agencies in Sri Lanka responsible for torture and political persecution of minorities, tracing the responsibility all the way up to the top command (Pararajasingham, 2018). This particular report places greater emphasis on testimony that previous investigations overlooked. This method is closer to Rohini Mohan's narrative approach, as it values personal accounts even as formal verification processes reject them.

The cultural codes of Sarva's environment force him to repress his trauma, according to Balaev. Due to cultural rather than psychological issues, conflict-related sexual violence against men is underreported. The social narrative portrays conflict-related rape as exclusive to women, but Tamil society's definitions of masculinity, sexual honour, and communal shame make the disclosure of male sexual victimisation uniquely and profoundly harmful. The repression of reporting sexual violence is attributed to not only cultural norms of gender roles, sexuality, and shame but also to the political prowess of the perpetrator (Traunmüller et al., 2019). The survivor must repeatedly demonstrate his suffering before institutional audiences that can discredit him as he travels across countries and continents in search of a nation that will recognise his claim, forcing him to rationalise the abuse he suffered. A key factor in the communal silence surrounding this issue is the cultural perspective among Sri Lankan immigrants that sexual violence is a Western concept that should be addressed privately (Sathasivam-Rueckert, 2015).

The treatment of sexually assaulted women also highlights the effect of the cultural codes. Post-conflict, as Mugil tries to promote awareness of the systematic rape against LTTE female troops as a war crime that should be prosecuted, the thought is dismissed by Tamil men who view wartime rape of women as collateral damage or a tragic outcome of losing. Balaev (2012) quotes Kirmayer's words, "cultural models influence what is viewed as salient, how it is interpreted and encoded at the time of

registration, and...what is socially possible to speak of and what must remain hidden and unacknowledged" (pg. 19), noting that what is unspeakable is deeply influenced by cultural ideologies. The euphemisms like "taking the honour" of women or women "not being able to show their face in public" demonstrate the cultural consciousness that decides whose pain is acknowledged and which is ignored in war's background noise. While Mugil, the former female combatant, views it as aggression against the Tamil community, the Tamil men consider it a humiliation that is better left unspoken.

In 'Trauma Theory and its Discontents', Balaev (2012) connects the trauma of the individual to the society, "The experience of suffering, no matter how private the experience, is situated in relation to the context of a culture that ascribes different value to the experience and to the individual's feelings about the experience" (pg. 17). Read through Balaev's framework of pluralism in trauma, Sarva's suppression of his trauma is not a universal psychological symptom but a socially and culturally enforced condition. The cultural codes of Tamil masculinity related to shame, and sexual honour are the very codes that regard wartime rape against women as a source of communal dishonour. These cultural perceptions make it even more difficult for male victims of sexual violence to disclose such victimisation. The unspeakability and silence surrounding Sarva's experiences are what Balaev describes as "narrative omissions must also be viewed as rhetorical techniques that convey the assorted meanings of trauma" (pg. 22). The unspeakability of Sarva's trauma must not simply be viewed as disassociation or a rupture in his consciousness. As a result of the trauma he experiences, Sarva requests male interviewers in asylum proceedings. He cannot speak of the abuse to his mother, and when he finally discloses the full account of his torture in his UK asylum interview, the statement is almost immediately absorbed by the news of his relocation. The trauma is only recollected once and officially witnessed once, and then repressed again because the institutional framework of the asylum process demands a single, legible recollection of the incarceration with no mechanism for sustaining or responding to what it hears. This is the same dilemma that the narrator, as a journalist, experiences throughout the text. Journalism demands verifiable testimony that conflicts with the recognition of trauma, by Balaev's account, does not produce the coherent, chronologically organised narrative that journalistic verification requires.

Sarva's persecution was a result of his identity as a Tamil man, which was enough to arrest him without cause and abuse him in incarceration. His suffering, not sufficiently conveyed in a singular narrative, is better elucidated through Erikson's collective trauma framework. As persecuted individuals, the Tamils in incarceration are connected through their shared experiences. Sarva feels connected to the other detainees as "a person whose feelings of well-being begin to deteriorate because the surrounding community is stripped away and can no longer supply a base of support" (Erikson, 1976, pg. 154). As Sarva's mother Indra manages to free him from jail, Sarva displays guilt over his privilege as the other innocent, abused detainees suffer the trauma of detention because they don't have the same resources as his family. In the state of shock after the conflict, Erikson notes that a predominant expression of survival is the guilt that accompanies it. The guilt denotes a shared suffering that Sarva shared with other Tamil detainees, making him feel guilt about his own relative freedom. Even after he is officially released, Sarva experiences the feeling of being a prisoner in his own home, tormented by his inability to articulate his traumatic experiences, unable to move freely in his own land, or picture a future in the country he was raised in. This ordeal connects Sarva to the collective Tamil experience not through shared identity and autonomy but through an ongoing shared oppression.

Sarva's mother, Indra's, ongoing involvement with the state bureaucracy through petitions, legal hearings, and collaborations with human rights organisations is not just an embodiment of maternal devotion. Indra's experiences represent a cultural bereavement and "loss of communality" that Erikson describes to be one of the most harmful effects of collective trauma. The breakdown of the community's trust in the institutions that were supposed to protect them is one of the major psychosocial effects of war in Northern Sri Lanka (Somasundaram and Jamunanatha, 2002). As Indra appeals to the very state that detained her son, she is forced to learn the legal language of the institution that ostracised and discriminated the Tamil youth constitutes survival in a condition where the redress is governed only by those who perpetrated the harm. Much more than bravery, Indra's story reflects

the detachment, hopelessness and terror that affects a community (Thamotharampillai et al., 2025) forced to seek justice from the power that caused the injustice.

Gender Identity and Post-War Transformation

This paper also examines the evolution of gender identity following conflict, a process that Mohan's text depicts not as recovery or reintegration, but as a manifestation of ongoing collective trauma. The female combatants in the LTTE who had the benefit of physical autonomy, professional agency, and public authority during the conflict were later anticipated by both the state and their communities to resume the subordinate domestic roles they previously relinquished. The post-war circumstances of former female LTTE combatants are defined by a dual constraint that the text articulates with accuracy, amidst the conditions of surveillance, poverty, and persistent criminalisation. Even as former female cadres attempted to reintegrate into society in post-war Sri Lanka, the lack of job security and frequent visits from Criminal Investigation Agencies of the Government put their jobs and their identity under risk (Friedman, 2018).

As female combatants like Mugil are detained and questioned after the war, it becomes clear that this forced gender reassignment is not an individual experience but a communal one. The entire community of former female combatants is subjected to a collective demand for normative femininity that functions as an extension of the state's violence. Defeating them militarily was not enough. The state institutions rendered their combatant identities unspeakable and detained them in interrogations for not complying with their domestic identities. Meegaswatta (2022) interprets the subversion of gender norms within the LTTE not as feminist empowerment, but as the substitution of one set of gender constraints with another. The post-war period finalises this reasoning by reinstating the original constraints in a context where women lack the institutional support of the LTTE and the safeguarding of active combat to oppose the state institutions that seek to detain and punish them.

Balaev's framework of pluralistic trauma is very helpful in understanding Mugil's detention and her post-war identity. Mugil's attempts at post-war reintegration, such as her provisional recovery in the refugee camp, her commitment to teaching, and her gradual establishment of a civilian identity, come to an abrupt end when Sri Lankan security forces detain her. This detention and the resulting traumatic uncertainty should be viewed through a cultural lens, as Balaev (2012) observes that "the experience of trauma in the novel informs identity and consciousness through a performance that is situated in relation to particular places and cultures" (pg. 120). The detention is a forced re-inscription of her identity as a former combatant that Mugil has been trying to walk away from. Balaev (2012) also notes that "Identity viewed through an ecological perspective is therefore relational and interactive, dependent upon specific exchanges with the land and the community" (pg. 66). The detention and the subsequent interrogation symbolise a perpetual state of surveillance on Mugil and her family, indicating that any endeavour to forge a stable post-war identity, beyond her traumatic past, remained unstable. Even as her husband and children visit her in prison, Mugil contemplates her children's welfare and her husband's unemployment in the post-war society, displaying an emotional detachment to her own uncertain future. In this instance, Mugil only thinks as a mother, an identity that defies the LTTE's archetype of a warrior and the state's archetype of a threat to national security. Erikson (1976) posits that this is a social tragedy where, "Communities do not have hearts or sinews or ganglia; they do not suffer or rationalise or experience joy" (pg. 194). It indicates the effect of a society so thoroughly ravaged that the surviving women could not rationalise their identities and perspectives.

One of the most important analytical moves in Mohan's text is how it constructs a community of traumatised people from three separate stories that never directly connect. Although Mugil and Sarva are not acquainted, their suffering is structurally similar yet experientially different. The shared memory of air raids, bombed no-kill zones, rehabilitation camps that also served as surveillance sites, and a political process that silenced Tamil voices creates what this paper calls an environment of inescapable grief. It is a state in which personal and collective identity are so deeply intertwined that it is impossible to separate the personal loss from communal disaster. Sarva's silence regarding sexual violence, Mugil's cultivated numbness to the atrocities, and Indra's unyielding resolve are not different

intensities of a singular psychological response. Rather, they represent unique cultural expressions of traumatic experience, influenced by gender, generation, class, and ideological context.

Conclusion

This paper argues that Rohini Mohan's *The Seasons of Trouble* embodies a critical tension between the epistemological requirements of narrative journalism and the inherently subjective, culturally influenced nature of traumatic memory. The paper has established three interrelated assertions through a clear analysis of the three principal narratives of Mugil, Sarva, and Indra within the dual foundational frameworks of Erikson's collective trauma theory and Balaev's culturally contextualised critique of traditional trauma paradigms.

The first assertion is that Mohan's choice of narrative with a fragmented chronology of events, a deliberate suppression of testimonial disclosure, and metaphors does not compromise her journalistic writing. It intentionally employs this strategy to represent truthful accounts of traumatic experiences of war better than linear, verifiable reportage could achieve. The tension between journalistic certainty and subjective memory does not present as a problem to be resolved in Mohan's text but as a possibility for testimonial truth to be made available.

Second, the stories of Mugil, Sarva, and Indra all show what Erikson calls "collective trauma." The framework portrays the Tamil community as a persecuted collective whose social ties, shared meanings, and communal identity have been fundamentally altered by the civil war and its aftermath. While Erikson's theories on collective trauma help interpret the rationale behind the shared trauma of the three survivors, Balaev's theory of pluralistic trauma elucidates the reasons for their distinct expressions regarding it.

Thirdly, using both trauma frameworks, the paper argues that the post-conflict shift in gender roles perpetuates wartime trauma through other mechanisms. The paper observes how Mohan's text throws light on the secondary collective trauma of female combatants in the environment of state surveillance, humiliation and poverty, through strategic silence, metaphors in Mugil's narrative.

This paper offers two main areas of future study, particularly in the study of sexual violence against men in South Asian conflicts and a long-term study using testimonial narratives from Sri Lankan survivors in a comparative framework to study works of the 1971 Bangladesh war and the Kashmiri Conflict. Comparative studies examining the strategies of narrative journalism, like fragmentation and testimonial accounts of violence, can give an inclusive view on the genre and its various cultural expressions.

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