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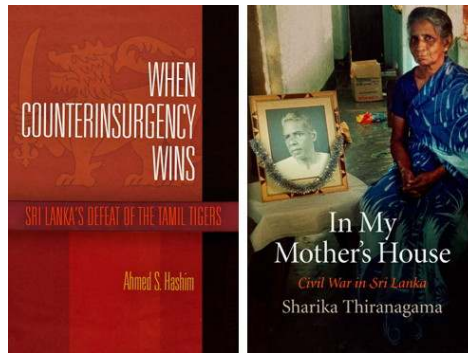
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Thiranagama, Sharika (2011) *In my Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 320 pages.

- 1 Ahmed Hashim's *When Counterinsurgency Wins* (2013) and Sharika Thiranagama's *In my Mother's House* (2011) may appear similar at first sight. Both books look back on Sri Lanka's ethno-separatist war; both pay close attention to the rise and fall of Tamil militancy; and both are published by the University of Pennsylvania Press. However, in crucial ways, they are opposites. Hashim's book is a military analysis focusing on the Sri Lankan government's victorious campaign against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Thiranagama's is an ethnographic account of how Sri Lanka's Tamil and Muslim society were irreversibly transformed by the war.
- 2 The former aspires to provide a drone's eye view; the latter is a partly autobiographical account of individual and collective coming of age under war-time conditions. The former seeks to explain why the LTTE lost the war; the latter seeks to offset the LTTE as the pivotal protagonist. The former rubs shoulders with military intelligence; the latter is written from the position of the subjects of that intelligence. And—for those readers who prefer a short and frank verdict—the former enlists a few relevant insights on counter-insurgency tactics, but disappointed me overall; the latter in my view is among the best books written on Sri Lanka. In fact, the flaws in Hashim's book underscore why Thiranagama's is such an important contribution.
- 3 *When Counterinsurgency Wins* consist of an introduction and five substantive chapters, positioning Sri Lanka's war in relation to wider debates in security studies (1) and reviewing the background to the war (2), earlier military campaigns (3), an analysis of the final phase of the war (4) and a discussion of post-war Sri Lanka (5). The book's limited value lies in its chapter 4: 'Eelam war IV: a military analysis'. In sixty-five pages, the author details the re-escalation of violence triggered by the LTTE's blocking of the Mavil Aru sluice gate in July 2006, the subsequent military campaign in the east culminating in the conquest of Thoppigala, the gradual military enclosure of the LTTE's strongholds in the Vanni and the final defeat of the militants in May 2009. So why did the government win? Ahmed Hashim discusses the military tactics including the observation that while the LTTE started to fight more and more like a state, the government improved its use of guerrilla-style tactics with long-range patrols and penetration units, and mimicked Sea Tiger swarming tactics with many small boats. Other factors include the swelling of the ranks, enabling an approach of simultaneous and sustained multi-front attacks, forcing the militants to split up their limited numbers. Finally, improved radar and intelligence capacities, aided by Indian and American pointers, disrupted the LTTE's arms supply (though the stocks found after their defeat raise the question whether the movement was defeated before these disruptions made a real difference). Alongside military tactics, Hashim attributes the 'success' of counter-insurgency to the uncompromised political support for the campaign, improved Sri Lankan diplomacy and harnessing of popular support, the LTTE's lack of forces following the breaking away of a faction from the east (the Karuna split) and LTTE missteps.



- 4 While Sri Lanka's troubled past of contestation and war has been studied in great detail, military analysis has traditionally been relatively weak. Throughout the 2002-2006 peace process and the subsequent escalation of hostilities, questions of relative strength, military options and their longer-term prospects provided a vital backdrop for academics and policy-makers alike. Could the war be won militarily? Were particular positions in relation to peace talks driven by either party's weakness or strength? In whose favour did the oft-violated ceasefire tilt? How significant were the effects of foreign policy measures—post 9/11 counter-terrorist policies, India's paradoxical interests—on military configurations? Why was the LTTE unable to stage a counter-offensive in 2008 or 2009, as it had in all previous periods of the war? And how significant—and avoidable—were civilian casualties from a military perspective? All these questions loomed large, but they were often dealt with in convoluted ways, with more than a few of the semantic tricks that diplomats and policy-advisors excel in. Priorities, convictions and interests often mixed with bits of empirical evidence and conceptual rigour, but did this strengthen or weaken the analysis?
- 5 A thorough military analysis thus makes for a welcome contribution to the sizable body of literature on Sri Lanka's ethno-political conflict, and it was with that concern in mind that I accepted this journal's request to review Hashim's book. Does it answer the above questions in a convincing way? Not really. While I appreciate the inherent difficulties of analytically unravelling Sri Lanka's military campaign and some of the above-mentioned observations, the book suffers from important flaws on numerous counts.
- 6 Most importantly, the study is impaired by retrospective reasoning where the benefit of hindsight is used to twist ambiguities so as to streamline the nearly pathological narrative. The loss of a battle is typically ushered in by suggestive asides about lack of motivation and morale among the troops; victories tend to be preceded by a general mood of determination and courage. If a party loses from a position of weakness, this is partially attributed to combatants losing confidence in a hopeless situation; if they win nonetheless, that is because they knew they could not afford to lose. This tendency of foregrounding factors that explain known outcomes—rather than interrogating the inevitability of these outcomes—affects the overall analysis of the study as well. Sure, the 'success factors' mentioned above plausibly contributed to the government victory, but were all of these completely new, and couldn't they have resulted in other outcomes? If there is any theoretical foundation to the way the book makes sense of its findings (the author pledges to avoid theoretical discussions, Hashim 2013: 17), it is so elastic that it seems to account for almost anything. There is regular talk of blunders, usually on the part of LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran—consistently referred to as 'VP'—but such judgements are rarely steeped in an attempt to place these moves into the contingencies, ambiguities, and multiple possible chains of consequences at the time. Unsurprisingly, this near-Newtonian certainty of causal chains and pathologies mysteriously melts away in the discussion of the post-war context where contingencies and multiplicities seep back into the plot. Clear errors and inevitable consequences make way for outcomes that are too early to judge and results that remain to be seen.
- 7 A second weakness lies in the lack of data. Hashim, a Singapore-based scholar in strategic studies, spent a month in Sri Lanka in 2010 and his listed interview sources are all placed in the military hierarchy. I was reminded of an interview with a former head of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM, charged with overseeing the 2002

ceasefire agreement), who told me about the intelligence they would receive from India and other countries during their deployment. It always came through informal channels, he explained, and therefore, 'we could never fully trust it. They were not giving it to us to be nice. We'd always ask: why do they want us to know this?' Hashim does not seem to share that frustration and suspicion. He appears to be comfortable adopting the information given to him, accepts that some aspects (mainly the LTTE side of things) simply cannot be studied under the circumstances, and acknowledges that the Sri Lankan government constrained his access. In doing so, he adds, 'the government in Colombo was its own worst enemy' (Hashim 2013: 19). Would more comprehensive knowledge, the reader is left thinking, thus not have resulted in a more balanced book, but simply in a more thorough propagation of the lessons learnt about effective counter-insurgency?

- 8 Thirdly, to the extent that sources and evidence are provided, this is done in a very loose way. Fairly elaborate paragraphs with both well-known facts, established analytical points and new detail go without attribution. And when references are provided, the intractable referencing system could barely have made tracing of the source more difficult. In other cases, the narrative style deploys gross generalizations —'the Sinhalese Buddhists are deeply disturbed by the presence of 65 million Tamils across the Palk Strait' (p. 125)—or borders on clairvoyance. Casual sentences about what the LTTE (or 'VP') thought lard the plot, and while some of these suggestions are plausible, the phrasing provides the analysis with a misleading sense of authority and obviousness. For example, readers may wonder how Hashim simply knows things like this: 'VP was clearly torn between two positions. He admitted and genuinely believed that the Tamils needed Indian support. Yet he wanted to keep India at arm's length [...].' (p. 96)
- 9 Finally, the book puts the question of civilian casualties, human rights, and alleged war crimes at the end of the war on the table—in fact, it does so with some fanfare; half the introduction is dedicated to it (pp. 6-14)—but then dodges the issue. It frames concerns over this human tragedy as a Western pre-occupation and goes on to underline the West's double standards in this regard. It discusses the UN Secretary General's Panel of Experts report of 2011 to review the LTTE's human shielding tactics and the so-called no-fire zones. Hashim argues that the report is 'problematic' on counts of lacking evidence (p. 10), and qualifies UN follow-up to the report as 'pusillanimous and hesitant' (p. 11). Hashim posits that human rights advocacy is often used as a weapon for political rather than moral purposes, which moreover only 'reinforces Tamil animosity' and 'heightens Sinhalese paranoia'. He suggests that a final judgment is impaired by western 'allegations that cannot be fully substantiated and the Sri Lankan government that refuses to engage.' (p. 12) He concludes by saying that truth lies somewhere in the middle and that these issues, though they 'cast a shadow on the Sri Lankan undertaking', 'should not preclude us from' analyzing the end of the war (p. 14). And that's that.
- 10 The rest of the book barely deals with the issue at all, though the end of chapter 4 does take note of civilian casualties, and problematizes the use of mortars: technically not heavy weapons, but 'devastating when deployed against closely packed groups of people without cover.' (p. 163) The book thus seems to try and present itself as the reasonable version of Sri Lanka's government discourse. It acknowledges some misconduct and casualties during the war and criticizes the post-war failure to address

the root causes of the conflict. But these caveats do not do away with the red thread of the book: that it sees the Sri Lanka's counter-insurgency campaign as a 'success', that lends itself for duplication elsewhere. In fact, a forward citation of the author in an earlier book suggests that the intended title of this book was 'A bright shining COIN [counter-insurgency]' (Hashim 2012). While one can see why the title was adjusted, the original one was perhaps more befitting of a book that sweeps very real concerns over war-time atrocities with very real and long-term social and political effects under the carpet of a supposed realism.

- 11 It is these long-term effects of political contestation and armed violence on the very fundamentals of society that stand at the heart of the other book reviewed here: Sharika Thiranagama's *In my Mother's House*. While she does not focus on the atrocities at end of the war, the author sheds powerful light on the way Sri Lanka's Tamil and Muslim society at large became embroiled in the longer history of conflict. The book contends 'war grounds life even as it takes it away—producing new people, new possibilities of voice, forms of heroism' (Thiranagama 2011: 12). It is through the processes of war that the subjectivities of being Tamil and being Muslim get transformed. Larger political evolvments are thus inevitably tied up with more personal contentions of generation, caste, class, locality and ideology. And by consequence, the post-war predicament is one where personal and collective identities have to be negotiated anew, because pre-war subjectivities have been irreversibly affected and wartime identities lose their grip.
- 12 Building on Judith Butler's seminal work, mainly her thoughts on 'subjection' (Butler 1997), Thiranagama thus narrates the biographies of Tamils and Muslims affected by LTTE violence from the vantage point that war is not just happening to people, but also in and through them. Displacement plays a central role in these processes and the author draws some fascinating parallels between 'the eviction' (the LTTE chasing Muslims out of the North in 1990) and 'the exodus' (the LTTE forcing Tamils to retreat with them as the Sri Lankan military conquers Jaffna in 1995). Thiranagama acknowledges the importance of longer-term processes outlasting the cadence of war, but also insists that war (*yuttam*, in Tamil) should not be treated as societal continuity. War is a distinct period, but it can also be thought of as a force of making and unmaking subjectivities. It is for this reason that she takes issue with some of the recent scholarship in the anthropology of war, specifically Stephen Lubkemann and Carolyn Nordstrom, who conceive of war as a social condition. These accounts risk effacing the political specificity of wartime experiences (Thiranagama 2011: 7-9). Thiranagama thus aspires to connect the specifics of ordinary lives to the larger historical forces and macro-political transitions that have made Sri Lanka what it is today.
- 13 The book's first two chapters explore biographical accounts of Tamil youth growing up in (and displaced from) a Jaffna marked by emerging militias and the escalation of political antagonism. Steeped in the anthropological literature on home and kinship, these chapters show how the cultural fabric of Tamil society was transformed by the war. Thiranagama juxtaposes home and homeland and highlights the paradox of displacement: the fight for a homeland required people to establish homes away from that homeland. She provides remarkable insight in the ways in which the war unsettled Jaffna society's constraining categories of family, caste, class, gender and locality. Youngsters joined militias to liberate themselves from inter-generational trappings,

often regretting this when they realised there was no way back. The spatialised underpinnings of caste and class hierarchies were affected by displacement.

- 14 This stream of analysis is picked up in chapter 5, the most significant part of the book, with the double-edged title 'the generation of militancy'. After all, most Tamil militias including the LTTE proclaimed a revolutionary agenda (at least initially) of abolishing the oppressive structures of caste, gender and gerontocracy. 'For both young men and women in this era, unmarried and often economically junior, the militant movements offered a horizontal form of kinship—one based on mutuality, a feeling of togetherness, ideological commitment—the kind of relationships that were perceived to be totally absent from the caste and hierarchically structured family and household with its vertical forms of inheritance, based on land and marriage.' (Thiranagama 2011: 197-8) Little remained however of this 'rebellion against dowry, caste, and normative family orders' (p. 212). 'Why was it that militancy, which transformed Sri Lanka indelibly in so many ways, failed to transform Tamil society in the way it wanted to?' (p. 212). Because these issues were subsumed by ethno-nationalism, Thiranagama answers, and because it is inherent to militant life to exempt itself from society at large. Cadres placed themselves in a zone of exception with exceptional lives and exceptional deaths (pp. 212-22).
- 15 The powerful nature of the book does not lie primarily in these analytical observations—articulate though they are—but in the narrative detail with which they are delivered. The biographies of ex-cadres of Tamil militias rivalling the LTTE and personal observations from everyday life provide a very nuanced and up-close understanding of life in a society at war. The person of the author is of vital importance here. The book starts out with the day in 1989 when the author—then still a youngster—waits for her mother, who is never to come home again. Well-known for her activist work for the University Teacher's of Human Rights (Jaffna), Rajani Thiranagama was assassinated by the LTTE. Her children were brought out of the country and their life in exile began. The author's tragic loss puts her in a good position to engage with people—Tamils and Muslims—who have been affected by the LTTE; they know she herself has suffered from the violence of the movement.
- 16 Whereas the chapters focusing on the Tamil community (1, 2 and 5) are very close to the skin, telling history through the eyes of particular people, the chapters on the Muslim community (3 and 4) have a less intimate tone and less of an inside-out perspective. Biographical narratives are placed in a more straightforward account of the troubled history of the Muslim community, struggling to navigate between Sinhala and Tamil nationalism. Plausibly, the methodological implications of the author's position come to the fore here. Whereas her Tamil informants tended to speak with her bilaterally, her Muslim interlocutors voiced their concerns as a group. This notwithstanding, the chapters on the Muslim community are also well-worth the read. The detailed accounts of 'the eviction' of the Muslims from Jaffna are powerful. The associated analysis of how the very category of 'Northern Muslim' came into being is sound, as is the observation that Tamil complicity in this tragedy becomes more visible now that the main protagonist, the LTTE, is no longer there to serve as a lightning rod. Moreover the author's variance in positionality vis-à-vis both communities is usefully embedded in a comparative analysis. It reinforces the author's dictum that 'one community (Muslims) had the right to speak, the other (Tamils) had the right to belong, neither had both.' (Thiranagama 2011: 37)

- 17 *In my Mother's House* stands out as an account of Sri Lanka's contemporary history. It rightly problematizes much of the academic work on the war, which is prone to reifying canonical perspectives. The better publications do show cognisance of the political work involved in selecting key dates and categories, and reducing ambivalent and contingent processes to seemingly teleological chronologies, but the underlying problems often remain. 1983 is routinely cited as the beginning of the war and the LTTE is treated as the primary militia, resulting from radicalised youth wresting the baton from the class of Tamil lawyer-politicians who had eloquently advocated the Tamil plight without producing tangible progress. The political contentions of previous decades are essentially treated as a runner-up to the war and the more mechanical studies (such as the one reviewed above) then divide the armed phases of the conflict in Eelam wars I, II, III and IV.
- 18 Thiranagama makes an excellent contribution in this regard. She manages to avoid most of these pitfalls by building the story so to say from the bottom up. The consequences of the anti-Tamil pogroms in 'Black July' of 1983—indelible but not uniform—are conveyed through, among others, the personal account of a lone survivor who returns to the family house in Colombo. Her agency is both trapped and enabled by the weight of both past and future that rests on her shoulders. Her return causes uneasiness among her Sinhala neighbours. 'First, she reminds them of a past they wish to forget, and second, as a young woman, she represents a future of residence, ownership, and possibly continuity that they also wish to avoid.' (Thiranagama 2011: 102) Elsewhere, the book's thoughtful historical review explores the flurry of insurgent groups and how they were situated in different caste, class and ideological configurations. How some high caste youngsters struggled when they joined a low caste movement like EPRLF, rather than PLOTE, which would have been more appropriate caste-wise (respectively the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front and the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam). How the initial slippage of ideas and tactics between them was erased by the brutal inter-group onslaught through which the LTTE crafted its self-proclaimed status as the sole representative of the Tamil cause. How the times of youths voluntary joining groups yielded to a time when forced conscription became meticulously organised. How the LTTE began building its institutionalised and territorialised imperium in the early 1990s, the years in which 'people began speaking of war'. (p. 25)
- 19 Despite all this praise, there are also some frictions around the book's central ambition of writing political anthropology in a way that straddles personal memorialised accounts and the larger political histories with which they interact. I have three concerns in this regard. Firstly, it would have made sense to engage with—or at least acknowledge—a larger part of the academic work on identity politics, state functioning, and subjectivity in Sri Lanka, particularly those studies that are informed both by everyday realities and Sri Lanka's larger political conundrums. Authors that remain uncited include anthropologists like Timmo Gaasbeek (2010), Rebecca Walker (2013) and Michael Woost (1994), and specialists from other disciplines such as Neloufer De Mel (2007), Tariq Jazeel (2013), Benedikt Korf (2004), Jayadeva Uyangoda (2011) or beyond disciplines (Ben Bavinck 2011).¹
- 20 Secondly, the author's treatment of the LTTE warrants more reflection. After all, the book is at once a specific story of LTTE violence against Tamils and Muslims, and a more general story of the war at large. Writing the former from the perspective of the

LTTE's Muslim and Tamil victims makes sense and it usefully debunks the movement's claim to monopolizing Tamil aspirations. Writing the latter from such a source base is arguably more problematic. Can the LTTE, its subjectivities and its de facto prominence in Sri Lanka's Tamil political landscape for most of the war be fully understood from this perspective?

- 21 Thirdly, the book could have closed with a more coherent set of theoretical and political implications. The final chapter comprises some interesting, but somewhat ephemeral reflections on Colombo. Never a unity, transformed by the war, and struggling to re-invent itself and its history, the island's capital represents a crucible of Sri Lanka at large. While it has some purchase to treat Colombo as a metaphor for the entire country, a return to the conceptual ambitions of the book would have been more rewarding. What do we learn in the end when we combine Butler's work on subjectivity with work on sovereignty, violence, displacement and exception? And does this fulfil the author's aspiration to connect the social condition of war to macro-level political realities? What do we learn about war's end and the transition that unfolds in its wake? Does the unpacking and personalising of canonical history also enable us to interrogate the apparent solidity of the current political hegemony in Sri Lanka? And what vantage points does the book provide to explore the making and unmaking of new fissures and subjectivities in post-war Tamil politics? Readers with milder inclinations may find though, that spawning these questions is itself one of the book's contributions to the debate on Sri Lanka and on war-torn societies more widely.
- 22 After all, it is from these kinds of questions that a book like Hashim's *When Counterinsurgency Wins* would have benefited. While it is clear that military analysts have little to gain from imitating anthropologists and vice versa, some basic interrogation of victory-driven categorizations and historical interpretations would have been in order. Both books engage with crucial, difficult questions, but Thiranagama deals with these difficulties in more thoughtful and intellectually stimulating ways than Hashim. *When Counterinsurgency Wins* comprises a military chronicle that takes the bigger picture for granted and lards it with numbers (battalions, divisions, platoons) and names (operations, commanders); 'In my mother's house' builds on individual accounts to re-compose the bigger picture. The former provides a somewhat sweeping chronology with clear-cut phases, blunders and apparently inevitable outcomes; the latter debunks the inevitabilities of such benefit-of-hindsight accounts with a much more rugged historical account that does not write contingency, ambiguity and multiplicity out of the story. The former takes the blurred lines between militants and civilians as an inconvenient obstacle to a clean counterinsurgency; the latter puts these blurred lines at the heart of the analysis and interrogates them conceptually. The former puts human rights and concerns over civilian casualties in the box of western hobbies; the latter largely steers clear of humanitarian lexicon and explores the deep scars of suffering in personalised ways.

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NOTES

1. The books by Jazeel and Walker would not have been published when Thiranagama's went to print (though some of their earlier work would have been).

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