Geetha Sukumaran

Songs of the Dark Times: Poems of P. Ahilan

P. Ahilan was born in 1970 in Jaffna, Northern Sri Lanka, a region engulfed in ethnic violence for years. He teaches Art History at the University of Jaffna in Sri Lanka. He began writing in the 1990s and has published two collections titled *Pathunkukuzhi Natkal* (Days of the Bunker, 2001) and *Saramakavikal* (Elegies, 2011). P. Ahilan is one of the most prominent contemporary poets in Tamil. His diction, imagery, and minimalist style sets him apart from other poets of his time. His poetic style expresses decades of violence in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka with great nuance and subtlety, producing a unique voice. As an art historian and a poet, he blends the two-thousand-year old Tamil literary tradition, mythology, history, culture, and philosophy to create a rich body of work. The Christian notion of passion is a recurring trope through which P. Ahilan articulates the experience of pain and loss.

Elegies is a collection about the final war of 2009. The poems in this volume are voices of witnesses and victims that subvert the grand retelling of 2009. By creating fragmented narration of the scenes of war, the poems produce a jagged landscape of collective memory in a clinical language. They intersect individual grief of ruptured relationships and the collective trauma of war while engaging with personal and political realms. The personal poems on human relations are structured in a language of excessive violence similar to the political poems on the catastrophic events of 2009. Devoid of embellishment, these poems amplify the immediate urgency and the ultimate inadequacy of words in the face of the extensive horror of violence affecting individuals and communities. While a Tamil-speaking reader can register the specific circumstances of the poems, non-Tamil readers respond to the language of violence and trauma of both the public and the personal.

A Mother’s Words

In the endless nights
the split open earth
witnesses blood.
Who are the children
waiting for in camps
muddied by sobs?
No son,  
No father,  
nothing ends.  

The desolate  
walk their life  
with feetless legs.  

Once,  
there were houses here,  
there were villages here.  

An eon  
deluged by the sea  
in the silence  
of history.
Him and Her

As the night snakes
the air drinks in sleep.

We savour cruelties
ripping off blood ties
in the anger
spit by an insect
sundered from
the body.

We speak
love’s phrases
eyes welled up
with venom,
in the worm infested bed,
lies swarming the genitals.

A nomad laughs
splintering time.

A stranger exits
opening endless doors.