

Friendship, Justice and Sri Lanka's Armed Conflict: A Study of Somaratne Dissanayake's *Saroja*

Nalin Jayasena¹

Writing about a nation emerging from three decades of violent conflict requires one to rethink identities irrevocably altered by the dehumanizing effects of war. Since the conclusion of the armed conflict in May 2009, there has been much talk of reconciliation but more often than not, the debate has been framed by the discourse of terrorism, on the one hand, and human rights or war crimes discourse on the other. This paper attempts to circumvent such regressive approaches to reconciliation by focusing on the politics of friendship by examining Somaratne Dissanayake's first feature film *Saroja* (1999), which focuses on the subversive friendship between a Sinhala schoolteacher and a Tamil Tiger.

In Chapter 8 of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that friendship is the very foundation of a unified nation. "Friendship seems too to hold states together, and lawgivers to care more for it than for justice; for unanimity seems to be something like friendship." Not only is friendship the glue that holds communities together but friendship also supersedes the law, because Aristotle views friendship as the cornerstone of unity. He goes so far as to say that where friendship exists, there is no need for justice; however its converse, justice without friendship, is futile. Indeed as a nation emerging from a protracted civil war, contemporary Sri Lanka is a space where minority communities demand that state-sanctioned injustices be redressed, but if justice without friendship is counter-intuitive, it is imperative to forge new partnerships between these two communities through a redefinition of Sinhala-Tamil relations.

Further reinforcing this link between friendship and justice, Jacques Derrida remarks, "friendship plays an organizing role in the definition of justice, of democracy even." Derrida's reiteration that "fraternity" is located between equality and liberty and is the foundation of the French Republic has particular resonance to postwar Sri Lanka. If Tamil militancy in Sri Lanka was launched on the demand for equality (and liberty) for Tamils, to invoke the concept of fraternity or friendship is to highlight that reconciliation cannot occur in a cultural vacuum.

Keywords: Friendship, Justice, Armed Conflict, Somaratne Dissanayake, Saroja, Film.

¹ Department of English, Miami University of Ohio, USA. jayasen@miamioh.edu