

Abinaya Balasubramaniam Abstract

“The Teardrop-shaped island: Postmemory and trauma in Sri Lanka”

My paper investigates the narratives of ethnic Tamils who have either fled Sri Lanka when the civil war heightened in intensity throughout the 1980s and 1990s or for those who were raised outside of the island but can feel and identify with the experiences through passing of stories. For those of us who come from a Tamil Sri Lankan background, conversations about death and disappearances have become ordinary. The intergenerational gap of knowledge transfer, and the emerging feelings of home that are transmitted mostly depend on what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory.” In her work with descendants of Holocaust survivors, Hirsch defines postmemory as:

the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective...trauma of those who came before ... It is to be shaped...indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction...(2012).

I draw on Hirsch’s analysis to understand postmemory in the lives of second-generation Tamil Canadians. In my research, I bring a feminist analysis to bear on questions, including how the affective coordinates of “home” shape the stories that are transmitted across generations when “home” is a place where many have never been. How is the relationship of the “generation after” shaped by the fleeting, yet ordinary observations about trauma and death? While existing research examines the migration patterns of Tamils to Canada (Amarasingam 2013; Wayland 2004), there has been little study on gendered experiences of the Tamil Sri Lankan diaspora. Memories raise particular gender, race, and class subjectivities and it is precisely this gap in academic writing that I examine. Furthermore, I investigate how grief, loss, and fear shape “home,” in the concept of postmemory and how histories of violence carry affect.