

Documenting A Nation: The Sinhala vs. The Tamil Imagination

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 2

Month: February

Year: 2026

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Citation:

Shanthi. "Documenting A Nation: The Sinhala vs. The Tamil Imagination." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. S2, 2026, pp. 45–48.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS2-Feb.10179>

Shanthi. P*Assistant Professor of English**Bharatidasan Govt. College for Women, Puducherry*

The idea of imagining a nation is influenced by the global flow of mass mediated images and ‘transitional diasporas’ that constantly restructure the idea of culture paving the way for imagination as a ‘social practice’ (Appadurai) To apprehend this intricate disposition of national imagination, this paper reads Callum Mcrae’s documentary, *Killing Fields of Sri Lanka (2011) vis-à-vis Lies Agreed Upon*, a documentary released by the Ministry of Defence, Sri Lanka, in response to the former. This paper by reading the aforementioned documentaries using the theoretical framework of Arjun Appadurai and Kristeva comprehends the discourses and counter discourses on /of democracy, statehood and freedom disseminated through the images.

Modern nations and nationalisms are rearticulated through image and digitized spaces. “New Media Cultures” (a term used by Bignell) not only challenge the authenticity of the written texts but also questions agencies of ‘political activity’. Coordinated by the “private and public interests” they entail new tropes of identification which create, comprehend and sustain discursive practices. Visual texts by sidelining the assumptions of legitimacy mobilise the “distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations and film-production studios)” (Appadurai, MAL,35). Appadurai devises mediascapes as, “image-centred narrative based accounts of strips of reality” to those who live in margins. In his preface to “Fear Of Small Numbers”, he draws our attention to genocide and ideocide and states ideocide comes into play when “Whole peoples, countries and ways of life are regarded as noxious and outside the circle of humanity and as appropriate targets for what Orlando Patterson called “social death” “(117). In the media saturated (Meek 26) society, any form of collective experience of trauma or conflict is comprehended and altered by the visual medium.

In an era besieged by information societies, media plays a decisive role in influencing the human psyche. The digital scapes focus on the causal interrelationship between documentary and collation of societies. The films in their mechanics of concretizing cumulative identity subsume an interpretive approach which mostly tends to be

subjective. Contrasting to this perception an element of ‘objectivity’ (which is claimed as myth by theorist like Fox) has been associated with documentaries.

While acknowledging the fact that documentary can be “constructed” to a certain extent, documentary as known for its ‘sobriety’ and ‘authenticity’ documentary exposes a rendering of the world “that bears a recognisable familiarity” (Nichols, ‘Introduction’ 42). The ‘semiotics’ of present documentaries can be determined either by ‘organic approach’ as advocated by Nichols or Renov’s ‘cinematic idiom’. Even though the credibility of documentary as a form is being constantly debated, the turmoil projected in documentaries invokes and provoke ideological questions creating “a spectacle out of the ordinary” (Rayner 60).

Killing Fields of Sri Lanka encapsulates the final weeks of the Sri Lankan Civil war in 2009. Directed by Callum Macrae and presented by Jon Snow the documentary was broadcast in the British TV station Channel 4. It premiered at the 17th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva on 3 June 2011 (www.channel4.com/news/un-screens-channel-4-sri-lanka-war-crimes-film). Since it attracted international attention and enormous viewership Channel 4 decided to surrender its copyright and uploaded it on You Tube for free. From then on, various organisations (Human Rights Watch in particular) have been screening the documentary for varied audiences.

The documentary has a couple of sequels namely *Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields: War Crimes Unpunished on 14 March 2012* and *No Fire Zone: In the Killing Fields of Sri Lanka*, 2013. The Sri Lankan government irked by the *Killing Fields of Sri Lanka* dismissed it to be a fabricated account. Nevertheless the government responded to the Channel 4’s accusation with a counter investigative documentary *Lies Agreed Upon* which was released on August 2011 at Hilton Hotel, Colombo. Following this an anonymous publisher identified through the website address [www.Engage Sri Lanka.com](http://www.EngageSriLanka.com) came up with a book *Corrupted Truth: Channel 4 and Sri Lanka*, which is a similar negation of war crimes. While this book has been oft quoted in the Sri Lankan newspapers, channel 4 retaliated to this with *Uncorrupted Truth* - a booklet.

Killing Fields of Sri Lanka produced and circulated a (dark) image of Sri Lankan government and administration. This montage of footages was shot by the victims, witnesses, LTTE and Sri Lankan soldiers from their mobile phones and cameras. Snow, warns the audiences about the — disturbing nature of the documentary. Gruesome images of Tamils murdered in the last stages of war are exposed and are accompanied by statements of ‘witnesses’ / ‘victims’, the ‘volunteers’ (Vany Kumar), a few former LTTE combatants, bureaucrats and UN workers (Benjamin Dix, Gordon Weiss).

The documentary shows Tamils desperate for asylum turning to the UN “a western forum pleading with the “international eyes on the ground to see the truth” (00:05:59). Their discontent with internal political power system is entrenched in their pleas. But when the UN deserts them and Ban Ki Moon’s pretentiousness visit only reduces the Tamil condition as being a “showcase for the foreigners” (00:45:41) the “survivors” lose hope in the UN are persuaded to look “to international community for justice” (00:48:31). The final section of the documentary carries abysmal images called “war trophy” (00:33:29-31) that records images of naked and raped Tamil women combatants (00:43:53). Appalling images captured by soldiers and civilians not only signify the unimpeded supremacy of the Sinhala regime but also bring to fore the influence of media, and the power it vests within the individual (in disseminating the images). The recurring images of retreat from the ‘no fire zones’ signify the need among the Tamils to imagine a separatist nation. The text focusing on war atrocities urges the audiences – the Tamils to reconstitute a new conception of nation.

Lies Agreed Upon demonstrates that the Sri Lankan nation state has been exploited by media-channel 4 and the LTTE operations. This documentary accuses the LTTE as “principal agent of death” (‘Lies’ 00: 52:54) who “took the will and freedom of innocent people with brutal control” (00:53:44). Unlike the statements of the foreign correspondents and diplomats produced in Fields of Sri Lanka, it includes the proclamations made by the ‘native’ Tamils. The victims – the Tamils (including civilians and government physicians from Vavuniya, Killinochi and Mulaithivu) refute all the claims made by Snow and Macrae’s team. The state sponsored video clip critiques the “disturbing images” constructed in KFSL as providing a “dramatic opening” where “liberal lies are presented as authentic” (‘Lies’ 00:00:05-13). Further it indicts channel 4 as mollifying the separatists and distorting the figures, the body of work produced by Channel 4 is considered as a “lie [that] had to be dress [ed] up” (00:08:20). It records the conciliatory efforts of Sri Lankan soldiers and how women residents in IDP camps feel safe with the Sri Lankan soldiers and affirm that “we have never experienced any sort of harassment from the army” (00:31:05) deliberately repudiating the lewd remarks passed by the Sinhala soldiers in Killing Fields of Sri Lanka. This documentary tries to assimilate Tamil national sentiments into a Sri Lankan nationalism via narratives of the individuals (mostly the women). The Sri Lankans in their defense paint a picture of the army being the “father and brother” to the Tamils -a protector who dutifully rescues the woman combatants from the LTTE and restores them within the domestic realm. The women talking in this documentary refute and feel ashamed of the alleged crimes of the Sri Lankan soldiers harassing the Tamil women.

Unlike KFSL concentrating on the war period LAU focuses on the post-war period which incorporates the Tamils into their national frame by providing education, vocational training ,dozer training , agriculture programme, computer training. Snaps of the former soldiers as teacher volunteers are shown. It accuses channel 4 of either being “ignorant or naïve” (‘Lies’ 00:57:57) of the diasporic networks that fund the civil war in Sri Lanka or being “complicit” (00:58:00) with the guerilla forces. To validate their statements, testimonials of former LTTE commando’s family members and media personnel are included. The former LTTE members assert in this video that the LTTE disguising themselves as Sinhala army massacred their own kith and kin in order to frame the Sri Lankan government.

The documentaries insinuate that the project of nation heavily relies on gender performativity. From the documentaries it is apparent that the LTTE codification places the woman within the categorical frame of warriors. Perceptions of sustaining national culture come into play. The LTTE cogitated valour as part of their national culture. They actively and forcibly recruited female soldiers (soodhya regiment) and children from ten years on. According to KFSL, Tamil women played a very active role in construing the nation. This channel 4 documentary indicates that the conflict has become a medium to empower the woman. Being part of the Soodiya and Radha regiments there are recurring images of the women combatants who are active in the demand for separate nation. Despite the subtexts and metacodes imbricated in this process the female soldier rescued from her stultifying environment and placed in a contributory space codifies power. As Anthias and Yuval Davis observes the LTTE woman soldier participates in national, materialization of a nation. The rift between the ‘battle front’ and the ‘home front’ disappears once there is no ‘sexual division of labour’ in the warfield (Yuval Davis 95).

The polysemic text, *Killing Fields of Sri Lanka* while recognizing the nation-state as the centre of power and identity production simultaneously deconstructs the connotation of nation form as a mass of land. It subtly states that the discourses of the minority and its version of nation and nationhood can only be performed in transnational space. Ideals of nationalism are invoked not to manufacture a nation but to dissolve one. *Lies Agreed Upon* signifies that the reclamation of the

land and ethno nationalistic demands of nation has lost its significance within the territorial base as the LTTE maneuvers —global fund raising network|| to construct a ‘transnational govt .of Tamil Elam’, (‘Lies’ 00:56:03).

War images of genocide encoded in the text can be decoded as discourses of hegemony and cultural imperialism. The graphic images while highlighting ‘otherness’ perpetuate discourses of/on ethnicity. ‘Truth’ and ‘Reality’ are brought out by discourses of power. As Tony Bennet states, the documentaries abounding with pluralistic views of the society provide, “a forum for contending social and political positions to parade their wares and vie for public support” (21). Both the documentaries interpellate their subjects and fashion an ideological discourse and assert, by reading the texts we understand that media has replaced “classical repressive state apparatus” and has indeed become an ‘ideological state apparatus’ (Bennett 24).

The documentaries are suggestive of Virilio idea that, though war is carried out by military forces, it is “fed by image technologies that are in total control – and continue to breed control of the processes of the sentient eye” (qtd. in Colman 203). An image thus propagated is actively proliferated by the working of transnational societies. The active online engrossment and promotions indeed become the decisive factors in propelling the circulation and viewership of the documentaries. Though the Tamils have been defeated on land, they perpetuate an idea of a virtual nation online. The idea of reclaiming the territory doesn’t exist anymore; instead the idea of nation becomes a juncture to perform their culture. Affected by network societies the audience is baffled as the lines blur between fact and fiction. Both the documentaries offer their account of a nation, along with accusations. While *Killing Fields of Sri Lanka* charts out the rampages of war it also concedes that the territorial Tamil nation doesn’t exist in Sri Lanka anymore, *Lies Agreed Upon* also dismisses the idea of a perfervid Tamil nationalism. But the documentary fails when it proffers an idea of a homogenous Sinhala territory/identity.

Works Cited

1. Appadurai, Arjun. *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on Geography of Anger*.
2. Duke UP, 2006.
3. ---, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Public Worlds, Volume I. University Of Minnesota Press, 2005.
4. Bennett, Tony. ‘Theories of the Media, Theories of Society.’ *Culture, Society and the Media*, edited by Gurevitch, Michael et.al., 1995
5. ‘Killing Fields of Sri Lanka.’ YouTube, uploaded by Tamilboii, 14 July 2011,
6. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rz_eCLcp1Mc.
7. ‘Lies Agreed Upon.’ You Tube, uploaded by digit IT magazine, 01 August 2011,
8. www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5O1JAfRXew.
9. Rayner, Philip, et al., *Media Studies: The Essential Resource*. Routledge, 2004. Renan,
10. Yuval-Davis, Nira. *Gender and Nation*. Sage, 2010.
11. Yuval-Davis, Nira and Anthias, Floya editors. *Woman-Nation-State*. Sage, 1989.