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The Ethics of Care in the No Fire Zone: Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage*

ISABEL ALONSO-BRETO

Universitat de Barcelona

alonsobreto@ub.edu

The ethics of care is a central element in the novel *The Story of a Brief Marriage* (2016), written by Anuk Arudpragasam in response to the slaughter which the Tamil community suffered in the final months of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009. This article discusses the novel from this theoretical perspective, positing that care is played out as a strategy to enhance the jeopardised human condition of those involved. The narrative bears witness to the intense suffering of this community at a time when the situation was deadly for civilians, who were confined in the so-called “No Fire Zone.” Paradoxically, this area was systematically shelled, its conditions responding to what Achille Mbembe has described as necropolitics. In the midst of this horror, however, Arudpragasam’s novel finds a deeply moving ethics of care in people’s attitudes to one another, which signals a desperate attempt to keep the bereaved community together or at least maintain an essential sense of humanness. Care is also identified as *intentio auctoris* since the novel becomes a powerful reminder of the huge toll of human lives and the immense pain that occurred in this dark episode, as well as the failure—or lack of interest—of the international community to intervene in order to save thousands of innocent lives.

Keywords: ethics of care; necropolitics; Sri Lanka Tamils; Anuk Arudpragasam; Sri Lankan civil war; war fiction

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La ética del cuidado en la Zona Libre de Fuego:
The Story of a Brief Marriage, de Anuk Arudpragasam

La ética del cuidado es un elemento central en la novela *The Story of a Brief Marriage* (2016), escrita por Anuk Arudpragasam en respuesta a la masacre que la comunidad tamil sufrió en los últimos meses de la guerra civil de Sri Lanka en 2009. Este artículo analiza la novela desde esta perspectiva teórica, postulando que el cuidado constituye una estrategia que potencia el sentido de humanidad de los personajes, el cual se encuentra en jaque. La narrativa da testimonio del profundo sufrimiento de esta comunidad en una situación crítica para la población civil, que fue confinada en la llamada “Zona Libre de Fuego,” la cual, paradójicamente, fue bombardeada sistemáticamente. La situación respondía a lo que Achille Mbembe ha descrito como necropolítica. En este brutal contexto, la novela de Arudpragasam retrata cómo una conmovedora ética del cuidado emerge entre los confinados en un intento desesperado de mantener unida a la afligida comunidad o, como mínimo, preservar un sentido elemental de humanidad. La ética del cuidado también se identifica en la *intentio auctoris*, pues la novela constituye un incisivo recordatorio de la pérdida de vidas humanas y del inmenso dolor que ocasionó este oscuro episodio, así como también del fracaso—o la falta de interés—de la comunidad internacional para intervenir y salvar miles de vidas inocentes.

Palabras clave: ética del cuidado; necropolítica; tamiles de Sri Lanka; Anuk Arudpragasam; guerra civil de Sri Lanka; narrativas de guerra

I. INTRODUCTION: THE NO FIRE ZONE

The ethics of care is a central element in the novel *The Story of a Brief Marriage* (2016) and this article discusses the narrative from this theoretical perspective, posing as its main argument that care is played out as a strategy to enhance the jeopardised human condition of those involved. The novel was written by Tamil author from Sri Lanka Anuk Arudpragasam in response to the slaughter which his community suffered in the last months of the Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2009), that is, between January and May 2009. Arudpragasam's writing bears witness to the intense suffering of his community at that time, choosing, though, to tell a story that emphasises the compassionate human feelings that those living inside the deadly "No Fire Zone" (NFZ) needed to nurture with extraordinary intensity in order to deal with the ordeal they were forced to endure, which eventually caused the death of thousands of them.

Meeting with universal acclaim and widely reviewed (Boyagoda 2016; Freeman 2016; Tóibín 2017, among others), *The Story of a Brief Marriage* was the recipient of the prestigious DSC Prize for South Asian literature in 2017 and is the focus of increasing scholarly attention (Goshal 2018; Perera 2018-2019; Shaheen et al. 2020). The narrative explores the perceptions, thoughts and feelings of a young man, Dinesh, living at that time in the north of Sri Lanka. Dinesh spends what are probably the last days of his life trying to survive in the NFZ, in a camp improvised around a school turned into a makeshift hospital. Like the others, he is trapped between the intense shelling of the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) and the constant menace of being forcibly conscripted or directly shot by the diminished Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Although the story offers little explicit reference to the actual historical or geographical context where it is set, its echoes are unmistakable. Cruel images of the deadly Sri Lankan conflict leaked from within the NFZ and were distributed on the international media. Evidence was eventually compiled in the Channel 4 documentary *No Fire Zone* (Macrae 2013), which reveals the protracted, relentless massacre of Tamil civilians as a result of the crossfire between the oversized SLA and the seditious, severely weakened LTTE, in the former's endeavour to chase off the latter once and for all. There is still some controversy as to whether this sombre episode was a genocide, although it has been recognised as such by reputable institutions such as the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal and the International Human Rights Association Bremen (2014) and has been the object of substantial analyses that reinforce this view by international scholars, critics and journalists (Boyle 2010, 2013; Weiss 2011; Subramanian 2014; see also Macrae 2015; Perinpanayagam 2015; Aiken and Rudhramoorthy 2019). At the same time, Senath Walter Perera cautions that "the manner in which the conflict between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government has been captured in English fiction by Sri Lankans has not met with universal approval" (2018-2019, 71), while reminding us that the veracity of the documentary images has also been questioned in some quarters (72). Although extremely relevant, this controversy falls outside the scope of this article, which takes its cue from Perera's

claim that “*The Story* is a compelling, and emphatically ‘neutral’ tale that has found universal favour with critics holding multiple ideological positions” (73).

In the novel, Dinesh receives an unexpected marriage proposal from Mr. Somasundaram, the father of a young woman named Ganga, and after his initial surprise he decides to accept it. In marrying his daughter in such a hurry, the desolate father hopes to protect her from possible abuse by government soldiers when they take over the territory—which, foreseeably, is to happen soon. This type of hurried marriage seems to have been common practice during the siege in a desperate strategy to protect young women from impending sexual assault by SLA members. It cannot be sufficiently emphasised that the situation was hopeless and that the chances of escaping the hell of the NFZ were minimal, since civilians who found a way to leave and surrender to SLA forces would often meet death. The only viable choice, then, was to stay in the camps and endure the shelling whenever it came, with the Tamils being killed by the dozens every day and having no other hope than an end to the horror. Survival was a matter of luck in the hellhole of the NFZ, a situation that resonates with Giorgio Agamben’s description of the Nazi concentration camp in *Mezzi senza fine. Note sulla politica* [*Means without End: Notes on Politics*] (1996) as “the place in which the most absolute *conditio inhumana* ever to appear on Earth was realized” (quoted in Mbembe 2003, 12). Achille Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics, which he defines as the situation where “weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds, [and] new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life *conferring upon them the status of living dead*” are implemented (2003, 40; italics added), clearly applies to the plight portrayed in *The Story of a Brief Marriage*. Within this horrific situation, those within the NFZ death camps attempted to improve their jeopardised lives by any means possible. Offering her daughter in marriage to Dinesh is thus a desperate attempt by Ganga’s father to take care of his eldest child, now the only remaining member of his family, since his wife and other child have already been killed in the crossfire. While parental care ushers in the minimal plot, other embodiments of care, such as communal, familial, filial or marital care, are also instrumental in survival, and they too are explored in the novel.

2. THE ETHICS OF CARE

Since the 1980s, the so-called ethics of care has been formulated by a number of scholars, although its principles can be traced in different ethical traditions from around the world, such as the Ubuntu philosophy in South Africa or the principles of interconnectedness and reciprocity of Canadian First Nations, among others. The central focus of the ethics of care is attention to the Other, a preoccupation for their wellbeing that is perceived as being far more significant than attention given to any abstract principle of justice or virtue. That is, this view of ethics capitalises on the idea that caring for the Other should be a prerequisite before thinking about universal

values of any kind. Care ethicist Virginia Held defines this ethics, specifically, as the need to focus on “the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility” (2006, 9).

As opposed to a morality based on the traditional Kantian universal norms or principles, which gave origin to what is known as the ethics of justice—whereby abstract principles such as justice and equity are regarded as the motor of human behaviour—and to the ethics of virtue—which also focuses on the individual subject (the Self)—the ethics of care is a relational guide directed by an awareness of the need to attend first and foremost to other human beings (the Other). As such, this ethics “is based on an understanding of the world as a network of relations in which the self is immersed and where a recognition of our responsibility towards others emerges. [...] for the ethics of care responsibility towards others is understood as an action that takes the shape of help. The subject is committed to helping others [...]. If we see a necessity, we feel obliged to contribute to solving it” (Alvarado García 2004, 32; my translation).¹ The theoretical seed of the ethics of care can be found in the research carried out by psychologist Carol Gilligan in her study *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982), a response to the male-oriented theories on the stages of moral development put forward by Lawrence Kohlberg, with whom she had worked. Kohlberg was a cognitive-developmental psychologist working in the tradition of Jean Piaget who concluded that women appeared deficient in moral development when compared to men (1984). Against this biased perspective, Gilligan's own research led her to conclude that women do indeed tend to have an ethical perspective that is different from—not inferior to—that of men (Idareta Goldaracena and Úriz Pemán 2012, 39). This perspective lays the emphasis on context and interpersonal relations and is not directed by the abstract rules pervading the modern, male-dominated, Western tradition. As a consequence, Gilligan designated the ethics of care as a moral perspective where the Other is considered to be central. Although this ethics is as old as humanity itself, it features more prominently in traditional cultures where community values are paramount, to the detriment of individualistic values upheld by Western modernity. In the Western tradition, the reflections of contemporary philosophers Martin Buber—with his “I-Thou” versus “I-It” paradigm—and Emmanuel Levinas—with his conception of infinite responsibility toward the absolute Other that is embodied in the Self's response to the Other's face—anticipate the deep engagement with otherness that the ethics of care entails.²

Gilligan's argument coincided in many ways with those of philosopher Sara Ruddick, who in 1980 had published the equally seminal article “Maternal Thinking.” Ruddick

¹ The Spanish original reads: “comprende el mundo como una red de relaciones, en las que se inserta el yo, y surge un reconocimiento de las responsabilidades hacia los demás. [...] para la ética del cuidado la responsabilidad hacia los demás se entiende como una acción en forma de ayuda. Una persona tiene el deber de ayudar a los demás [...]. Si vemos una necesidad, nos sentimos obligados a procurar que se resuelva.”

² Will W. Adams, for instance, uses the term *interrelating* to “emphasize the active, ongoing, dynamic quality of our participatory engagement with the rest of the world” (2007, 27).

explored the main elements that mothering entails, namely taking care of both the survival of a baby and their appropriate socialisation. Ruddick defended the idea that principles of care similar to those of mothering—or fathering, since she made it clear that maternal thinking is not exclusive to women in that both men and women can be “mothers” (1989, 40)—would need to be applied to the whole of humankind. That is, she claimed that if the conditions of human existence are to be improved, maternal values and the caring social practices that derive from them should replace the patriarchal, hierarchical, power-based, often militarised systems that govern modern societies.

Ruddick’s ideas are close to what Gilligan and subsequent scholars refer to as an ethics of care, one that is not preoccupied by universal laws or virtues applying to the individual, but rather by networks of relationality between different people and groups of people and by elements as removed from universalism as attention to the specifics of context, particularity and diversity. In this understanding of human behaviour, the moral development of the subject revolves around specific details, moments and necessities, rather than abstract responsibilities and relations (Gilligan 1982, 42). Importantly, as Ruddick advanced in her seminal study, later work has emphasised that the attention paid to human relations and care is not exclusive to women, although there is general agreement that care and the ethical universe that goes with it is more widely present in women and minority and excluded groups, where feelings of solidarity tend to appear more easily than in dominant groups, which are frequently male dominated (Cortés Pérez 2011, 3).³

3. WRITING AS CARE

In *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984), educational philosopher Nel Noddings draws an important distinction between two different forms of care. In the first, care is understood as an attitude, that is, the idea that one person should be concerned about somebody else, but without feeling the need to transcend mere sympathy for or empathy with that person’s necessities or trouble. Noddings’s second form of care begins only when something *is done* to alleviate the other person’s pain or meet their needs, in which case care becomes an activity. Thus, Noddings distinguishes between *caring about*—having ideas or intentions to care for others, as well as being concerned about those who are at a distance from us, such as homeless people in our neighbourhood or people living in far-away, poverty-stricken countries, among others—and *caring for*—which implies taking active care of others.

Arudpragasam has stated that he wrote *The Story of a Brief Marriage* out of the wish to understand “what was happening [...] to the members of my community that historical circumstance had separated me from” (2016b). Arudpragasam repeatedly

³ Other explorations and applications of the ethics of care reach into nonhuman spheres, including animal studies, bioethics and ecology.

presents himself as a privileged person who grew up in Colombo in an upper-class Tamil family, “as insulated as someone could be from the war” (2017). In another interview he explains that the violent events that took place in the north of Sri Lanka are “the kind of subject matter that urges you to action, or urges you to find out, or to want to have a response [...] because you are forced to care” (2016c). Elsewhere he speaks of the natural inclination to care in human beings: “When one becomes aware of such things happening—especially if you share a community with the people who are suffering—there is a tendency to want to do something immediately. [...] it’s a natural inclination to action when one is in the presence of the pain of another person” (2017). In a similar vein to Noddings, Held views “care as practice and value” (2006, 39); in other words, she deems both aspects of care—empathy and action, whatever shape it takes—as necessary facets of a common ethical and behavioural framework. In keeping with Noddings’s and Held’s approaches, it may be argued that Arudpragasam’s novel shows his care both *about* and *for* his fellow Tamils—his care *about* them turning into care *for* them when he decided to write the novel.

It is my claim that in writing *The Story of a Brief Marriage* Arudpragasam cares for the Tamil community in different ways. Most importantly, through bearing witness, his story makes visible the pain suffered in May 2009, thus disclosing and narrativising social trauma (Felman and Laub 1992; Laub 1992; Schwab 2016), and, crucially, rendering ostensible the oppression suffered by the Tamil areas in Sri Lanka in the seven decades following independence (De Silva 1998; DeVotta 2000; Abdul Razak and Stavis 2008; Sivanandan 2009). This oppression continues today in the form of a severe process of militarisation and Sinhalisation of the northern and eastern areas, accompanied by a curtailing of freedoms (International Crisis Group 2012; Fonseka and Jegatheeswaran 2013). As a result, a vast diaspora of thousands of people feel that they cannot possibly return to their ancestral home, which for many is also their birthplace. This is the reason why the Tamil diaspora from Sri Lanka has been variously termed a “victim diaspora” (Cohen 2008), an “asylum diaspora” (McDowell 1996; Ashutosh 2013, 197) and a “conflict diaspora” (Pragasam 2012). Notwithstanding the differences between them, all of these terms point to the harsh experience of dispossession that Tamils from Sri Lanka have undergone. Importantly, a very significant group within this huge diasporic transnational community is that of exiled intellectuals and, more specifically, journalists, who can hardly afford to live on the island for security reasons (Reporters Without Borders 2016; Dewage 2020). In such a state of affairs, any initiative addressed at improving the situation is valuable, even the act of writing a novel that can do little more than denounce what happened, making it more visible, and mourn those who died in the terrible final days of the war. Judith Butler has written that “certain forms of grief become nationally recognized and amplified, whereas other losses become unthinkable and ungrievable” (2012, 145), the latter appearing to have been the case as regards the huge loss of Tamil lives in the Sri Lankan civil war. Arudpragasam’s novel constitutes an effort to grieve for these lives, as is discussed later on.

4. CARE IN THE NO FIRE ZONE

In *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, care features as the attitude that dominates the relationships between the inhabitants of the camp. The first chapter opens with a medical operation being carried out by a doctor who for hours on end operates on bodies maimed by bombs and shrapnel. With Dinesh's assistance, he is amputating the leg of a six-year-old child without anaesthesia. Once this daunting task is accomplished, Dinesh leaves the precarious hospital and walks around the camp to help bury the corpses, severed limbs and scattered body parts that lie around after the recent shelling. This appears to be the only way Dinesh can think of at the moment to help his community.

I have suggested that the marriage proposal Dinesh receives should be understood as a father's desperate attempt to take care of his child. In the same way, the child herself, Ganga, is intent on taking care of her father. Mr. Somasundaram has lost all desire to live after all the other members of his family have been killed. Trauma, as physicians and scholars have demonstrated, operates in different, sometimes unexpected ways (Caruth 1996; LaCapra 2001; Stevens 2016); in the case of Mr. Somasundaram, he has slowly entered depression after the first days following his personal tragedy when, surprisingly, he carried on "as though nothing particularly important had occurred in his life" (Arudpragasam 2016a, 33). His young daughter takes care of him as best she can, among other things by cooking and trying to feed him, yet without success. When, in spite of her best efforts, she fails to make him eat anything, she gives away the food she has prepared to other people who live in the tents around theirs and are experiencing various degrees of starvation. And she does so "taking care to explain that she had cooked too much rice rather than that her father was not hungry" (34). This is a delicately caring gesture, as it protects her father's reputation—he would be regarded as weak if he refused to eat altogether—as well as her own since, as his daughter, she is expected to be able to look after him properly. It is also a generous gesture to those who receive her handouts, who are thus made to think that they are given the excess of rice and not the leftovers that another person, particularly a person in such a situation as Mr. Somasundaram, has refused to eat.

It is the suffering and trauma resulting from the loss of those he loved that prevents Mr. Somasundaram from eating. This sense of loss is in turn accompanied by a deep sense of guilt and shame, as he feels he has not been able to care well enough for his family, which was his primary duty as a husband and father. Dinesh has no doubts about this: "It was a father's duty to keep his family members safe, and [Mr. Somasundaram] had failed to keep safe his wife and son" (46). Dinesh reflects that it is only normal that Mr. Somasundaram should want to marry off his only remaining daughter and withdraw into a state of solitude: "Whether or not one had been able to keep safe one's loved ones was what mattered, nothing else, and [Mr. Somasundaram], in the end, had not. It was only natural if what he wanted above all now was to be absolved of his last responsibilities, so he could have the leisure at least to reflect quietly on his failings as a man" (46). In spite of this ingrained

patriarchal ideology, Dinesh's motivation to accept Mr. Somasundaram's marriage proposal appears to incorporate the idea of mutual care in the marital relationship, as he meditates that "he would be able to take care of [Ganga], put his arm around her slender body and comfort her, bring her close to him and hug her tight, make her feel secure, and she would be able to do the same for him also" (35). As to the extent of Ganga's eventual acquiescence in the transaction, it remains a mystery, since her thoughts and feelings throughout the text are unknown, except for her initial rejection of the marriage—which her father pays no heed to—and a few brief conversational exchanges with Dinesh once they are married. The young woman's actions, however, are eloquent. Above all, she takes good care of her father. Moreover, the first time Dinesh sees Ganga, she is holding a baby in her arms. When he asks her, she tells Dinesh that she does not know who the baby's parents are; all she knows is that now it is being taken care of by a woman, silently sitting nearby, who is not the mother. As all of these details suggest, a chain of care is wrought by the camp dwellers as they try to help one another in these dire circumstances. The early inclusion in the text of the orphaned baby who is step-mothered by several unknown women is by no means incidental, as it crucially points to an ethics of care, which regards child care as the primordial mode of active concern for the Other (Ruddick 1980; Noddings 1984).

As is hinted at by the novel's title, the bond created through marriage is the node of the story. Dinesh's thoughts repeatedly revolve around the obligation husbands have towards their wives, which shows that patriarchal rule still rigorously holds even in the extreme situation they are enduring. At one point in the novel, he remembers that some time earlier he saw a man being nearly beaten to death by his brothers-in-law, the reason being that he had attempted to commit suicide, thus neglecting his obligation to take care of his wife and small child. The in-laws punished the man severely but were careful not to kill him, because that would have prevented him from fulfilling his family responsibilities, namely, catering to the needs of his wife and child in the camp. The man was literally *condemned to live* in order to be able to care for those under his responsibility.

When Dinesh and Ganga marry there emerges, however, a sense that marriage is more than a mere imposition or obligation, at least on Dinesh's part. The revision of the young man's expectations and his increasing hopes regarding his union to Ganga, together with the delicacy and gentleness of the new emotions he feels, are refreshing in the bleak context of the camp. In an environment where relationships are relentlessly upset by the continuous shelling and loss of human lives, the marriage of these two young people seems to stand as a glimmer of hope. A proper marriage cannot take place immediately, as the *Iyer*, or minister, who would have been in charge of marrying them has been mortally wounded by a bomb and is now at the makeshift hospital being taken care of by Mr. Somasundaram who, unable to do anything else to ease his pain, keeps swatting flies away from his body until he passes away. Since the *Iyer* cannot perform marriage ceremonies any longer, the father himself is obliged to take

over his role. Mr. Somasundaram marries the couple in a simple ceremony presided over by a small framed picture of Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity. As Dinesh ties the sacred *thali* or marriage necklace—the same that had been worn by Ganga's deceased mother—around his new wife's fragile neck, Mr Somasundaram reminds the young couple of their obligation to “stay together, look after each other, and be responsible for one another” (Arudpragasam 2016a, 50). Furthermore, he instructs them that “under no circumstance should they let themselves be separated from one another” (53-54), a piece of advice that turns out to be an ominous prediction of what is very soon to come, when the following day Ganga leaves their dwelling place in the forest in search of her father only to be killed in an air raid. For the time being, however, Dinesh is confident he will be able to take care of his new wife and feels his energies renewed:

He was weaker physically than at any other time in his brief adult life it was true, his arms and legs were much thinner than before, his pelvis and ribs visible easily through his skin, but advancing through the camp he had felt strong for some reason [...]. He had wanted to take hold of Ganga, to cup her entire body in his arms and let her know she could be vulnerable in his presence, that he would take care of her and keep her safe. (125-26)

Later on, when they are lying together on their wedding night, a similar thought comes to him: if Ganga can feel safe in his arms and she can be assured that he “could do anything for her that she needed and that she could be happy together with him,” then “everything would be all right” (147). In spite of his youth, Dinesh takes his obligations as a husband very seriously. Although there are several hints that Ganga also cares for him, Dinesh's reasoning is still dominated by the patriarchal view that it is the man who should take care of the woman.

It is ironic, in this light, that on their wedding night Dinesh should give way to despair and start crying. Although it is his failure to have an erection that apparently triggers this crisis, the fact is that he suddenly lets out all the sadness he has been accumulating for months, probably years, and allows Ganga to comfort him—he buries his face in her neck, thus showing his own need for protection. After crying he feels ashamed of himself, and this for two reasons. The first is that, according to his patriarchal perspective, it is he who should be comforting Ganga who, in addition to being his wife, has recently lost her mother and brother—“it was he who should have been consoling her” (152). The second reason is that, as Dinesh sees it, giving in to despair means forgetting the rest of the world, even if momentarily:

Perhaps this was why as one grew older one broke down and cried for oneself less, because tears for oneself could only come when one ignored the suffering of everybody else, or pretended at least that it was not significant. As you got older the suffering of others became more difficult to ignore, as you saw more of life and became more a part of the world it became harder to imagine that the pain you faced was unique and in need of special attention. (152)

The implication here is that Dinesh cannot ignore the suffering he is surrounded by, that he cares about those other human beings who share his plight. This care is embodied in his concern for Ganga, in his intense desire to do well for her and to gain her confidence. In keeping with assisting medical operations and burying corpses, taking care of the person he has been entrusted with is, for him, the best way to serve his community.

Dinesh attributes his crisis to his lack of sexual arousal, being thus unaware of the deep-seated reasons for his unexpected, prolonged weeping, namely, his traumatic life and experiences, including the loss of his whole family. He is consequently ashamed of having cried for himself instead of others, “ashamed suddenly for having been preoccupied with himself for so long” (152). Whatever the reasons, his feeling of shame at having cried for himself while having forgotten the suffering of others brings to mind Held’s account of the ethics of care:

The extremes of “selfish individual” and “humanity” are recognized [in traditional ethics], but what lies between these is often overlooked. The ethics of care, in contrast, focuses especially on the area between these extremes. Those who conscientiously care for others are not seeking primarily to further their own individual interests; their interests are intertwined with the persons they care for. Neither are they acting for the sake of all others or humanity in general; they seek instead to preserve or promote an actual human relation between themselves and particular others. Persons in caring relations are acting for self-and-other together. (2006, 12)

After his crisis, Dinesh realises that now Ganga is aware of his vulnerability. She treats him differently; she is more attentive and patient with him, less severe, “as though it was she who needed to look after him and not the other way around” (166). Thus, the case is made here for mutual marital care, which I suggest can be read metonymically as pointing to the ethics of reciprocal care as essential to any expectation of survival in the camp. As Noddings has remarked, care begins with intimate relations, “learning first what it means to be cared for, then to care for intimate others, and finally to care about those we cannot care for directly” (2002, 31).

When Dinesh wakes up after their wedding night, Ganga is nowhere to be seen. She has left what could be called their marriage alcove, a place carefully carved out and cared for by Dinesh in a clearing in the forest, a wild place that the young man had tamed into an improvised shelter out of greenery, earth and pebbles, where he would sleep so as to avoid being shot during the SLA raids or recruited by “the movement’s patrols” (Arudpragasam 2016a, 22) that is, the LTTE. Dinesh had lovingly shared the place with his new wife, but now she is not there anymore. He notices that the nearby camp is being shelled and guesses that she must have been worried about her father. He therefore goes in search of her in the tent she had until now shared with Mr. Somasundaram and her whole family before they were murdered. In a state of frenzy,

Dinesh crosses the camp under the shelling, risking his life in a desperate attempt to rescue Ganga, only to find her prostrate corpse in front of the tent, her father nowhere to be seen. Both father and husband have failed in their mission to protect her.

To make matters worse, Dinesh has also failed to accompany Ganga in her death, another basic form of human care, death being an intrinsic constituent of our being. This is particularly sad because, as is often shown in the novel, giving comfort to the dying is, sometimes, the one and only way to care. This is the case when Mr. Somasundaram tends to the expiring *Iyer* and also when Dinesh hears the call of a little black crow and, on approaching it, notices that it is fatally wounded. He then remembers that, as a child at home, he once found a small dying gecko. He decided to save the unfortunate animal as much pain as possible by taking it out of the house so that some other beast should devour it quickly. Unlike then, when he now finds the crow he chooses to accompany it in its agony instead of easing its death. To Dinesh, life itself in all its possible manifestations has become something precious and rare, if only because in the camp they are all condemned to die soon, in one way or another: “He wanted to let the crow go on living, to let it continue existing, even if it was in pain and begging to be killed. Whether or not he killed it its time would come soon, and it might as well therefore have a little more time to experience and remember what living was like before it died” (159). Care is, indeed, not limited to human beings, as it concerns anything that surrounds us. It has been defined as an activity “that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Tronto 1993, 103). Care thus extends to all realms of matter, as is made clear in Arudpragasam’s narrative. Months before reaching the camp in the NFZ, Dinesh had witnessed his mother’s death on the road as they were being evacuated once again in the company of thousands of people. After that piteous moment, Dinesh took to collecting lost or abandoned objects he found on the road, objects which “he took pity on” and “seemed to him in need of companionship” (Arudpragasam 2016a, 83). In those days, as he kept walking, he became especially fond of a doorknob which seemed to him to be particularly solid and permanent, in contrast to the vulnerability of the lives of those he had loved and lost. Eventually, though, as he felt “mounting fear that he would lose or be forced to abandon his companion”—such was the extent of Dinesh’s trauma—he decided to bury the doorknob and leave it behind, “to preempt the possibility [of being forced to abandon it] by saying goodbye to it once and for all” (84). There is little significant comment one can add to this moving chain of events. We might consider that Dinesh failed to take proper care of the doorknob by disposing of it, yet it might also be argued that Dinesh’s renunciation saved the doorknob the pain of being wrenched from its new companion to be again abandoned on the road—like the very corpse of his mother, to which I return below.

At the end of the novel, when Dinesh comes upon Ganga’s corpse, he starts tending it: he turns it over, arranges its dislocated limbs, takes it in his arms, closes its open,

surprised eyes and tries to clean the mixture of earth and blood from it. The sorrowful scene of Dinesh holding Ganga's corpse becomes a moving *Pietà* reminiscent of the one between the brothers Sarath and Gamini that closes Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000), arguably the most iconic novel on the Sri Lankan war in the West. While *Anil's Ghost* was written nearly two decades earlier, well before the end of the conflict, the presence in the closing pages of both novels of the deep pathos embodied in a *Pietà* all but emphasises the heavy toll in human lives taken by the conflict.

The way in which Dinesh takes care of his dead wife evokes the moment when, months before, he had been forced to leave his mother's corpse in the middle of the road. Back then he also did his best to give some dignity to the corpse and thus to the person who had inhabited that body—he left next to it a cloth bag which contained their scant possessions so as to “protect her and provide her also with some identity” (83). Very little can be done after death. Once murder has been perpetrated, only dignifying, grieving and mourning are possible. This is another form of care. Like Joan C. Tronto, Held claims that care goes beyond the merely biological: “all care involves attentiveness, sensitivity, and responding to needs. Needs are of innumerable subtle emotional and psychological and cultural kinds” (2006, 38). As I contended above, care is involved also in writing. This form of care is put in practice by Arudpragasam when he chooses to write *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, thus symbolically taking care of the corpse of the Tamil massacre in Sri Lanka in order to keep alive the memory of horror.

5. CONCLUSION

To quote from Hannah Arendt's reflections on the Nazi Holocaust in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “there are no parallels to the life in the concentration camps. Its horror can never be fully embraced by the imagination for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death” ([1951] 1973, 444). Waiting for his own death, Dinesh is still a survivor, defined by Mbembe, following Elias Canetti in *Masse und Macht* [*Crowds and Power*] (1960), as “the one who, having stood in the path of death, knowing of many deaths and standing in the midst of the fallen, is still alive” (2003, 36). Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, which he applies to the Palestinian case and other extreme situations like slavery and the plantation, is relevant here as well. The last NFZ established in 2009 by the Sri Lankan government seems to encapsulate the extreme conditions described by Mbembe, and the same could be said of the whole protracted civil war. The systematic oppression inflicted by the Sri Lankan government on Tamils in conjunction with the violent actions carried out by the LTTE reached a macabre climax in the months leading to May 2009, when thousands of innocent civilians were cornered by the contending forces in the civil war.

This article has demonstrated that care features prominently in *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, to such an extent that it weaves the bereaved community of surviving Tamils together. It might also be argued that Dinesh's failure to protect Ganga

echoes the failure—or the lack of interest—of the international community to protect thousands of people trapped in the deadly camps in northern Sri Lanka. To quote Perera again, “*The Story* is emphatically a political novel although an unusual one” (2018-2019, 78). In his presentation of a completely war-torn community in which, nevertheless, people care deeply for one another, Arudpragasam reminds the international community of several things. He celebrates the humanness of those who were mercilessly murdered by ruthless slayers; he revives the shame that episodes like this one should have occurred in the twenty-first century; and he denounces the fact that nothing was done to prevent or avoid, let alone stop, such slaughter. Eventually, his denunciation becomes a form of mourning, a postmortem accompaniment to those who were massacred. As Noddings concludes:

The key, central to care theory, is this: caring-about (or, perhaps a sense of justice) must be seen as instrumental in establishing the conditions under which caring-for can flourish. Although the preferred form of caring is cared-for [*sic*], caring-about can help in establishing, maintaining, and enhancing it. Those who care about others in the justice sense must keep in mind that the objective is to ensure that caring actually occurs. Caring-about is empty if it does not culminate in caring relations. (2002, 23-24)

In writing *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, Arudpragasam chose to take an active stance that goes beyond caring-about the battered Tamil community. His is an attempt at establishing some form of effective caring relationship, that is, a caring-for this community. He wrote a deeply moving piece of fiction that attempts to make sense of the suffering of those whose lives were put under such inconceivable pressure. In so doing, he allows for “horror [to be] [...] embraced by the imagination” (Arendt [1951] 1973, 444), even if not in its full enormity, which as Arendt rightfully claims is impossible.⁴

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Isabel Alonso-Breto is Senior Lecturer in postcolonial literatures and cultures at the University of Barcelona. A member of the research group "*Ratnakara: Indian Ocean Literatures and Cultures*," she has worked on authors of Australian, Caribbean, Canadian, Indian, South-African, Sri Lankan and Tamil origin, and has edited several monographic issues of scholarly journals. She is also interested in creative writing and translation.