The White Van Syndrome: Fear, Trauma and the Culture of Intimidation in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The research paper examines how ordinary objects, like white vans during the Sri Lankan Tamil conflict, undergo a transformation in meaning, becoming symbols of fear through their association with illegal abductions. These objects, once neutral, take on a sinister role, spreading terror within vulnerable groups, particularly the Tamil minority. The study highlights the psychological and social impacts of this shift in perception, where fear permeates not only the immediate victims but also the broader community, creating an atmosphere of mistrust and anxiety. The white vans thus became a powerful motif of terror during the conflict.

Method. The paper uses the theory of classical conditioning as the methodological framework for analysing trauma responses. Specifically, it will explore how neutral environmental stimuli like a white van become associated with traumatic experiences, leading to the continuous perception of threat.

Result. The study found that fear is created within human being through associations. The association of white van to a fear eliciting object in the conflict zones of Sri Lanka derives as it was used for illegal disappearances.

Conclusion. Analysing the psyche of characters in the novels *Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki* (Ramakrishnan 2018), *Island of A Thousand Mirrors* (Munaweera, 2016) and the documentary *White Van Stories* (Manimekalai, 2015), the paper states how white vans became synonymous with terror, intimidation and trauma in the Sri Lankan psyche. These vehicles became synonymous with illegal abductions, deeply embedding fear in the national psyche, regardless of their actual use, perpetuating a collective trauma.
Keywords: Fear, trauma, Sri Lankan Tamil ethnic conflict, white van, forced disappearance

War and conflict have tragic impacts on societies, not only do they disrupt the less powerful communities, but also they disseminate fear and bring out lasting psychological scars. More than physical violence that wars embody, the psychological wounds that wars leave behind on a community compels them to live in trauma of their memory and fear of an uncertain future. The everyday objects which were once harmless in their lives, gradually become objects of fear as they are connected to terror during the conflict. These objects, transformed by their associations with violence, become potent symbols of fear and trauma, deeply ingrained in the collective memory of those affected. The fear towards the object triggers within them a traumatic memory whenever the objects or the thoughts of the objects appear. Quoting Inbal Goshen and Raz Yirmiya(2007) in the article "The Role of Pro-inflammatory Cytokines in Memory Processes and Neural Plasticity" describes the ways in which fear conditioning works in humanbeings that elicit fear responses in them towards a normal object and how they are transformed from their usual status of a normal object to that of a fear eliciting object. He states, "Fear conditioning is the learning that a neutral stimulus predicts the appearance of an aversive event. The combination of a neutral (conditioned) stimulus and an aversive (unconditioned) stimulus renders the formerly neutral stimulus a frightful quality, so that even when it appears by itself, without the aversive stimulus, it will elicit a fearful conditioned response" (Goshen & Yirmiya, 2007, p. 341). Sharon L Johnson (2009)in his book *Therapist's Guide to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Intervention* delineates the ways in which fear conditioning works in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder through the theory of classical conditioning. Quoting Dawn R Collins, Denis Pare and S Maren, he states:

> Classical conditioning is a process of learning whereby the expressed fear response to a neutral conditioned stimulus (specific environmental features) is paired to an aversive unconditioned stimulus (traumatic experience). As a result, the conditioned stimulus is able to evoke the entire spectrum of responses (behavioural, autonomic, and endocrine) that generally only occur in the face of danger. The result for trauma survivors is that this conditioning leads to a generalising of cues which in turn leads to a continuous perception of threat, thus becoming conditioned to context or cue-specific. It is the rule rather than the exception that memories are reactivated by cues associated with the original traumatic experience. Unfortunately, every

> time a traumatic memory is retrieved, it becomes integrated as part of a perpetual (ongoing) emotional experience and becomes part of a new memory (Johnson, 2009, p. 112).

The fear that balloons and kites created after the Palastine –Israel war among Israeli residents near Ghaza border exemplifies the ways through which normal objects like balloons and kites can turn to be fear eliciting objects during the time of conflict. The meaning of balloons and kites that were often associated with celebrations and innocence, shifted to suspicion and danger after the conflict. This shift in meanings from the familiar to the feared, contributing to a broader sense of insecurity, arises out of its association with Hamas and Islamic Jihad. These militant groups employed incendiary balloons and kites to cause disruption and harm to the Israeli territory. The transformation of these innocent objects to weapons disrupts the popular perception of associating balloons, creating a sense of unease and vulnerability. Balloons and kites became fear-eliciting objects in the conflict zones of Ghaza, due to their unpredictability, the psychological contrast they create and the ease with which they can be deployed. It blurred the concept of safe and unsafe spaces that led to a more pervasive atmosphere of fear. The exhibition "Everyday Objects Transformed by the Conflict" curated by the cross-community organization 'Healing Through Remembering' explores how ordinary items were repurposed or reinterpreted in the context of troubles in Northern Ireland. Objects like radios, cars or household tools took on new meanings during the conflict as tools of surveillance, violence or resistance. This exhibition illustrates the ways through which conflict pervades daily life and alters the perceptions of the mundane. The association of the ordinary things with terror impels the community to view these objects with suspicion and fear later. As every conflict alters the meanings of everyday objects to that of fear eliciting objects, the study aims to analyse how an ordinary vehicle a white van turned to a fear eliciting object during and after the Sri Lankan Tamil ethnic conflict. The study also illustrates how symbols of fear are created and sustained in conflict, highlighting the impact of such symbols on individual and community as a whole.

Sri Lankan Tamil Ethnic Conflict

Following Dutch and Portuguese colonisation, Sri Lanka faced British colonisation, which brought with it suppression, exploitation, and a divisive "divide and rule" strategy. This legacy contributed to prolonged political unrest and cultural turmoil in the country. The situation was further exacerbated by the "Sinhala Only Act" of 1956, enacted by Oxford-educated Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. This act aimed to consolidate support among the Sinhalese Buddhist majority and significantly affected the Tamil community, fueling political and cultural tensions. The dreams of Sri Lankans for a secular and egalitarian society were shattered by post-independence insurgencies in 1971 and 1987–89 and by conflicts between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities.

The LTTE, formed by Tamils who felt marginalised by the Sinhala language's status as the national language, sought a separate Tamil nation. This conflict was triggered by the "Sinhala Only Act" passed by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, which contrasted with the policies of the United National Party led by Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake, who was in power earlier. Despite the 1987 constitutional amendment granting Sinhala and Tamil equal status as official languages, Tamils continued to feel like second-class citizens, exacerbating tensions. The situation escalated after the LTTE ambushed and killed thirteen Sinhalese soldiers in July 1983, leading to violent reprisals by Sinhalese against Tamil-owned properties. The India-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987, which aimed to bring peace by deploying Indian troops, eventually led to conflict between the LTTE and Indian forces. This conflict culminated in the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by an LTTE suicide bomber. In a twist of fate, a breakaway LTTE faction led by Muralitharan, alias Karuna, provided the Sri Lankan government with vital intelligence on LTTE positions and strategies. This, combined with arms supplied by China, enabled the Sinhalese army to defeat the LTTE forces, led by Prabhakaran, who had not prepared a successor. By April-May 2009, the Sri Lankan army had successfully dismantled the LTTE's power.

Dissemination of Fear as a War Strategy

Dissemination of fear was used as a major strategy by Sinhalese government and LTTE during the ethnic conflict as a way of reasserting their superiority. The climate of fear that is consciously constructed by the powerful sections of the country created within the low power groups a kind of fear that restricted them from speaking about the injustices that they have undergone. The uncertainty of their future lives and their disbelief in the government and legal systems created fear within them and they considered silence as a defense mechanism. Rohini Mohan (2016) in her article "The Fear of Rape: Tamil Women and Wartime Sexual Violence" observes the ways in which the climate of fear endorses and aggravates the purposes of perpetrators. She states:

> Even as I recorded testimonies, deaths and rapes in numbers and details, reconstructed survival stories, and gathered evidence of unthinkable war crimes, the glue in all conversations was the repeated anecdotes of fear, the pungent odour of mistrust, and a disabling sense of despondency about the future. These seemed to stem from trauma and grief, but equally from the loss of faith in government and community leaders to bring justice for war crimes, past and ongoing. Unaccountable violence underlined not only ethnic but also social and gender inequality. The infrastructure of oppression, in other words, disproportionately affected the vulnerable sections of the population, like women, children, the aged and the disabled. (Mohan, 2016, p.262–263)

The fear also stemmed from the realisation that in a society that prioritises female honour will interpret the instance of rape as an inability of women to protect their

virginity. The raped women will be crucified where the perpetrator will enjoy impunity. The fear of victim blaming silences the victim. R Pain in her article "Whither Women's Fear? Perceptions of sexual violence in Public and Private Space" states about the fear victimisation complex where she states "men are more likely than women to be victims of violent crime, women are more fearful than men"(Pain, 1997 as cited in Yodanis, 2004, p.657). Carrie L Yodanis (2004) in her article "Gender inequality, violence against women, and fear: A cross-national test of the feminist theory of violence against women" analyses the ways through which fear subjugates women. She delineates that personal victimisation is not necessary to produce fear within women, indirect experience—knowing and hearing about the experiences that women underwent—can also be a reason for fear within women. She ends the article by emphasizing the link between the culture of sexual violence and the culture of fear. She states:

> —sexual violence is associated with a culture of women's fear. The overall prevalence of sexual violence in a country is related to women's fear relative to men's—, if a culture of violence against women is created—a climate in which women know that sexual violence does occur—a culture of fear among women will accompany it—physical and sexual violence are different forms of violence against women and may be used by men against women in different ways—A culture of fear among women grows among a culture of violence against women (Yodanis, 2004,p.671–672).

Creating fear within the community in question was used as a way by the authorities to control their movements and to subjugate them. Rohini Mohan (2016) states in her article "The Fear of Rape: Tamil Women and Wartime Sexual Violence" about the changes that happened in the lives of Tamil women during the Sri Lankan Tamil conflict. She states, "The fear produces a continuing phase of pre-victimhood[---]They lack secure housing, and the proximity of the military makes them prone to sexual abuse, a constant fear that has affected their mobility" (Mohan, 2016, p.276,281).

The authorities disseminated fear within the minority community especially Tamils through the checkpoints where they were raped in the name of introspection. The case of Krishanthi Kumaraswami, an eighteen year old Tamil student who was introspected and arrested in 1996 at a Sri Lankan checkpoint illustrate how checkpoints are associated with terror and suspicion among common people. She was brutally raped and buried and her mother, younger brother and neighbour who went there to enquire about her were murdered by the soldiers. The incident, which instilled a lasting sense of fear in women, restricts them and compels them to prioritise their safety over their freedom to move.Quoting a Tamil school teacher Padmini Ganesan, Tasha Manoranjan (2010) in her article "Beaten but not Broken: Tamil Women in Sri Lanka" delineates the ways in which check points create fear among Tamil communities. She states, "Every Tamil remembers the Krishanthi case . . . . For us, the checkpoints are sort of a slow-motion thing, the trauma and the fear that we go through" (Manoranjan,

2010, p. 141). Pradeep Jeganathan (2018) in his article "Border, Checkpoint, Bodies" considers checkpoints in Jaffna, especially after Stanley Road Bomb incident of 1996 "as zones of extrajudicial arrest and subsequent execution following a logic that purported to see "enemies" of the state everywhere" (Jeganathan, 2018,p.405). Nayomi Munaweera (2016) in her novel *Island of A Thousand Mirrors* narrates the fear of the Tamil family of Saraswathi and her sister Luxshmi, who lives near the check point. The mutual fear that the soldiers and these women have towards each other, as soldiers suspects them as terrorists, while they suspect soldiers as rapists create an atmosphere of mutual distrust. This dynamic creates a vicious cycle where fear feeds into distrust, and distrust reinforces fear. Saraswathi narrates:

> After school, Amma has made us promise to hurry home. There are soldiers everywhere. They look at us from under their rounded helmets with eyes that are filled with hate, but also with fear. They think any of us, man, woman, child may be bomb strapped, jiggling with flesh-tearing ballbearings secreted under skirts and shirts---I have learned to keep my eyes averted when Luxshmi and I pass the checkpoint closest to the house, but the soldiers always lean over the sandbags, call to us in halting Tamil learned on the battlefield.
>
> "Why always in such a big hurry?" they say. "Come and talk to us, we won't bite," and smile baring their wolfish teeth. (Munaweera, 2016,p.135–136).

As check points grease devils also were a method that the high power groups employed to disseminate fear among the minority communities in post war Sri Lanka in mid 2011, through which they hope they can achieve their aim of conquering those areas. Grease devils, which are also referred to as grease man, grease *yakka*, grease monster, grease demon, grease *boothaya*, grease *peyi*, or grease *pootham*, are mysterious and elusive figures that exist within the cosmos of rural and small-town Sri Lanka. As the attack of grease devils increased in Tamil areas of the country, Tamil medias reported it as a tactic of Sinhala government to create fear within the Tamil population. As Rajesh Venugopal (2015) in his article "Demonic Violence and Moral Panic in Postwar Sri Lanka: Explaining the Grease Devil Crisis" states, the suspicion among local Tamils increased and they pointed fingers at the government in the issue of grease devils when the suspected grease devils who were caught and handed over to the police were released without any charge. He further states, "In many other cases, those identified as grease devils had, upon pursuit, run into police stations, military camps, or Buddhist temples, confirming widely held suspicions that the state security forces were in fact behind the attacks and that the grease devils were none other than soldiers in disguise" (Venugopal, 2015, p.621).The fear that grease devils created aggravated the trauma of a once victimised minority, paralysed them and led to their disbelief in the government mechanism. As Rohini Mohan observes, the grease devil became "a bogeyman to an entire community, the grease devil embodied the creeping, intangible nature of fear, helplessness and impunity. It brought home daily oppression in a ridiculous form" (Mohan, 2016, p.243).

The White Vans

Like kites and balloons in Palastine, radios, cars or household tools in Northern Ireland, white vans controlled the psyche of humanbeings in conflict zones of Sri Lanka. The civilians lost control of their lives during and after the ethnic conflict. White vans became a symbol of political terror as illegal abductions during and after the war carried out by the white vans. As per the report of Human Rights Watch "Open Wounds and Mounting Dangers"

> The administration has displayed particular hostility to police investigators tasked with identifying and prosecuting those responsible for serious abuses committed under the previous Rajapaksa government from 2005 to 2015. During those years Mahinda Rajapaksa, the current prime minister, was president, and his brother, Gotabaya, the current president, was defense secretary. Thousands of young Tamil men who were suspected LTTE supporters, as well as journalists, activists, and others deemed to be political opponents were abducted, many by armed men operating in white vans, which became a symbol of political terror. Many have never been heard from again (Human Rights Watch, 2021, p.3).

The fear of white vans spreads both through individuals' personal encounters and through hearing the experiences of others. When someone directly witnesses or experiences an incident involving a white van, such as an abduction or a suspicious event, this fear becomes deeply ingrained. These personal experiences are then shared within communities, magnifying the fear as others listen to these stories, even if they haven't personally encountered such situations. The repetition of these narratives, whether through word of mouth, media reports, or community discussions, reinforces the association of white vans with danger, making the fear more widespread and deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the community. Over time, this fear evolves into a powerful, almost instinctive response, where the mere sight of a white van can trigger anxiety and suspicion, even in those who have only heard of the dangers secondhand.

The enforced disappearances and the fear that white van's spread is mentioned in Nayomi Munaweera's (2016) novel *Island of A Thousand Mirrors*, T D Ramakrishnan's (2018) *Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki* and the documentary *White Van Stories* by Leena Manimekalai (2015). *Island of A Thousand Mirrors* that narrates the story of two protagonists Yasodhara, a Sinhala and Saraswathi, a Tamil gives a neutral view of the ethnic conflict through the eyes of both the protagonists. While the fear towards the ethnic conflict and the unfortunate instances that led to her aunt Mala's husband Anuradha's murder in the streets impels her family to migrate to US, Saraswathi was pressurised to join LTTE due to the fear of victim blaming that she will be forced to bear post rape. Life of Saraswathi changed after the rape incident. She, who had the dream of being

a teacher, dreams of rape. Her fear of the sight of white van arises out of the rape that she became a victim of in the white van. She describes the instance like this:

> At the junction, they push me into the yawning maw of a white van, slam the doors shut and I am alone scrabbling on my knees, thrown from side to side on the cold hard metal. They drive for a long time. When the van stops, I huddle in a corner as the door opens, the sudden sunlight blinding. Two soldiers come for me, they grasp my upper arms, pull me, my legs and feet dragging useless against the earth into the burned-out carcass of a house, into a backroom with bullet-riddled, broken cement walls, no roof, overhead only a perfectly framed square of sunlit sky (Munaweera, 2016,p.145).

The trauma that she undergoes in this incident is so severe that even her dreams are conquered by the incident. Her membership in LTTE is a masque before the society to prove before them that she is empowered from a victim to that of a survivor and to an aggressor. In a society where honour of a woman is treated with utmost importance, her mother, who can be observed as an offspring of patriarchy, impels her to join the LTTE. Eventhough the respect that she receives from her neighbours encourages her to be a suicide bomber; her fight can be observed as a battle to achieve equality through martyrdom. Her understanding of empowerment is misguided, as she thinks it means adhering to societal norms, rather than breaking free from them.

Despite her status of an LTTE volunteer, who presents herself before society as a brave warrior without emotions, the trauma that was aroused after the rape incident frames her life post rape. She carries a profound fear within her, a fear that has taken root so deeply that it has become a part of her. Yet, instead of showing this vulnerability to the world, she masks it with anger and hostility towards those she perceives as enemies. Her anger is manifested through murdering a soldier of Sinhala army that LTTE has taken as a captive. To her, this soldier represents all the soldiers who violated and destroyed her life, making him the embodiment of the trauma she endured. This anger is not just an emotional reaction but a defense mechanism, a way to cope with the overwhelming fear that she feels. Her nights are haunted by recurring dreams of the traumatic incident, dreams so vivid and terrifying that they cause her to wake up screaming. These nightmares are a stark reminder of the fear that dominates her life. She states about her dreams, “Fear wraps its fingers around my throat, bile rises into my mouth” (Munaweera, 2016, p.178). The statement reasserts that she is not just angry; she is a victim of a fear so consuming that it has trapped her entire existence within the confines of that single, devastating moment. Every aspect of her life is influenced by this fear, as if time stopped for her on that day, and she has been unable to move beyond it. She is terrified of reliving the traumatic moment of her rape in her dreams. This fear drives her to do everything possible to avoid sleep, as staying awake is her way of escaping the painful memories. She states, “I do everything I can not to go to sleep. When I sleep the dream comes and it is unbearable” (Munaweera,2016, p.179). To her, sleep is not a refuge

but a battleground, and staying awake is her desperate attempt to escape the horror that lurks in the darkness of her mind.

Like Saraswathi, Poomani Selvanayagam and Juliet D' Souza in Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki, are victims of forced abductions in white vans. Poomani, the student union's secretary of Jaffna Medical College was captured by the most powerful officer of the Sinhala soldier Lion as she convened a meeting of Women Against War. The conference that discussed the murder of the human rights activist Dr Rajani Thiranagama and screened a movie about her titled "No More Tears Sister" became a provoking factor for authorities. She was "forcibly pulled out of the hospital and taken to an unknown destination in a white van" (Ramakrishnan, 2018, p.79). The writer describes the event like this: "This was a time when white cars were feared, and her friends became extremely anxious" (Ramakrishnan, 2018, p.79). The statement underscores how fear-ridden Sri Lankan society came to associate white vans with terror during the war period. Juliet, a Sinhalese archeologist and a member of the group 'Save Sri Lanka from Fascism' is abducted in the white van due to her speech in a public meeting where she stated that "the Sri Lankan army could learn from the Tigers when it came to the treatment of women" (Ramakrishnan, 2018, p.87). Accusing her as an Iyakkam spy, using her speech at the Women's Day rally as evidence, they forced her into the white van. Through these two instances, the writer reinstates the ways in which white vans created fear not only among Tamils, but also among Sinhalese. The news that spread in the island regarding the notoriety of the white vans, and the thoughts aroused out of the experiences that are shared by the victims' relatives or media, created within the collective psyche of Sri Lanka that there is no return to life once white vans comes in their way. The newspaper article entitled "The dark terror of Lanka's white vans" portrays the presence of white vans on Sri Lankan streets as follows:

> There are no Black Marias in Sri Lanka. Not for this island any dark, caged vehicles to transport prisoners. What Lanka has is white vans, and they are many times worse than any police vehicle. Fear is the key on Sri Lanka's streets, especially in the capital Colombo and the northern part of the island. Like death, a white van can appear anywhere, pull up, pull anyone in, and speed away. The taken don't return (n.d., 2012).

Reports like these that equate the presence of white vans with death and uncertainty aggravates the fear within the Sri Lankan psyche. The fear intensifies again with the realisation that the option of filing a complaint against these abductions will lead nowhere as these are illegal. Furthermore, some who managed to file complaints and protest against the injustice were left in the dark, not even knowing whether the disappeared person was alive or dead.

Leena Manimekalai documentary *White Van Stories* that discuss these illegal disappearances using white vans delineates the fears that the sight of white vans created within the collective psyche of Sri Lanka. The beginning of the docu-

mentary itself illustrates the climate of fear that engulfs the island. The director of the documentary narrates the struggles that their team went through in a country, where cameras, microphones and tapes are looked out with suspicion by the army. She narrates,

> We film at gun point, we hide from roving eyes, we are stopped by boots at a million checkpoints. We are the broken cameras, we are the seized microphones, we are the confiscated tapes. This island is an interrogation room, detaining us, intimidating us. But the truth we seek still set us free. (Manimekalai, 2015,00:00:51–00:01:34).

The documentary that narrates the lives of the family of six victims of illegal disappearance, reasserts the fact that these kinds of disappearances spread fear among the Sri Lankan community. The narrator talks about the sordid and tragic everyday realities. She states, "Sri Lanka, where resistance is seen as sedition, systematic practice of enforced disappearances is a continuing crime" (Manimekalai, 2015, 00:01:48–00:01:56). She further states that it is a crime that has a devastating history of over thirty years and it started from 1980's. The lives of the cook who lost her elder son, a writer who lost her friend, a daughter who lost her father, a wife who lost her husband, a mother who lost her daughter and a wife who lost her journalist husband are detailed in the documentary.

The narrative of the cook named Jaya Lankarathinam who lost his elder son Revathan delineates the trauma that families go through after the disappearance of a child. The mother who is in a dilemma of whether to do funeral rites for the son or to wait for him, finds solace in spirituality. Her fear of the authorities is evident when she mentions that filing a complaint about the disappearance could result in the entire family being subjected to interrogations. Like the cook, Sandhya Ekneligoda, who addresses herself as half widow of a journalist called Prageethcriticises the attitude of government towards those who file complaints about the disappearance. She challenges the attitude of a parliament member who arrived to attend the case with the backing of other members. Like the cook, she too finds solace in religion and firmly believes that her hope to get justice is a long journey. While the characters like cook and journalist's wife find solace in religion, the mother of a daughter who lost her in the war tries to find comfort in temples and soothsayers. The story of the writer who lost her writer friend during conflict sates that writing becomes a coping mechanism for her to survive in the war torn land. Each character's response to their trauma is deeply intertwined with fear—whether it's fear of the authorities, fear of the unknown, or fear of the endless waiting. This pervasive fear shapes their actions, their beliefs, and their search for solace in a world where justice feels distant and uncertain.

The same fear grips the psyche of the younger generation, as they grow up in a land torn apart by terror. The experiences shared by Shaheed Maulavi's wife illustrate how fear grips and shapes the psyche of the younger generation. Rasiya,

Shaheed Maulavi's wife narrates how her husband, a member of the NGO Makkal Panimanai (People Work Place) were invited by LTTE members for a Tamil conference and how he was abducted from his home at 2.30am for the crime that he spoke at the conference. Even after repeated requests, the army was not ready to release him. They forced him into the white van and promised the family that Shaheed Maulavi would be back by the next day morning. But he disappeared after the incident and their constant pleas for him before the government officials found no fruitful results. She further delves into how the trauma from that incident has deeply affected her son's mind, leaving a lasting impact that manifests as an overwhelming fear. This fear has become a constant presence in his life, particularly focused on the white van, a symbol that terrifies him to his core. The mere thought of the van fills him with dread, and this anxiety is so consuming that he believes he sees the van everywhere. He says, "Mother, I saw that white van, let us not go out, they will abduct us too---Mother, let us not go near the white van" (Manimekalai, 2015, 00:42:56–00–43:06).The trauma has not only shaped his thoughts but has also conditioned him to live in a state of perpetual anxiety, illustrating how deeply the incident has scarred him. The trauma of the single incident impels him to observe any van that is white in colour with suspicion and fear. She explains how this trauma has altered his reality, making him believe that even the most harmless van could be the same one that took his father away. She tells about the psychological trauma that he is trapped into. She narrates, "Even a harmless van, he thinks is the same van that abducted his father" (Manimekalai, 2015, 00:43:15–00:43:19). This statement reasserts the depth of his psychological trauma, showing how the fear has affected him so deeply that it distorts his sense of safety and reality. The once ordinary sight of a white van now represents terror as it is linked in his mind to the traumatic event that changed his life. This constant state of fear underscores the lasting impact that the traumatic incident has had on him, illustrating how trauma can reshape a person's entire worldview, trapping them into a cycle of anxiety and fear.

Fear is created within humanbeings through associations. When certain stimuli, events, or symbols become linked with traumatic or negative experiences, they can evoke fear even in the absence of any real threat. The meaning of kites and balloons in the Ghaza border and the meanings of radios, cars or household tools in North Ireland changed during the conflict. These normal everyday objects are transformed to fear eliciting objects. In the context of Sri Lanka, white vans that were once used as an everyday transport vehicle transformed its meaning to a fear eliciting object due to its associations with illegal abductions. These abductions gave a face of notoriety to white vans and the experiences that people shared and the news that spread in media disseminated fear towards white vans in general, regardless of whether they were used for illegal abductions or not. This fear dominated the entire Sri Lankan psyche.

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