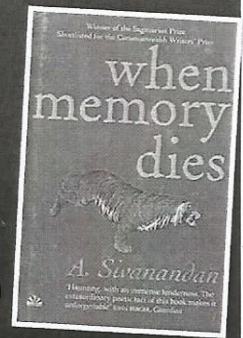


BOOK @ BEDTIME

DAVID GROVE gives Am-balavaner Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies* the thumbs up



"The British took away their past, the Sinhalese took away their future. All they have is the present. And that makes them dangerous." With a few small changes, this profound comment on the Tamil Tigers could apply to rioters in English cities, and indeed to alienated young people the world over.

The words are spoken by one of the characters in Sivanandan's novel *When Memory Dies*. This is the first book I've recommended by a writer from the third world, and the first by a living author. He was born in 1923, left Sri Lanka in 1958 and settled in England, becoming director of the Institute of Race Relations, which he helped to transform from an academic think-tank into a campaigning force against racism.

The novel is a family saga retching from the 1920s to the 1970s. In each of three generations the main protagonist is a boy experiencing all the joy and pain of growing up, of finding himself and his place in a changing society.

The heroes are all deeply opposed to communalism – basing identity on ethnic and religious grounds – and thus find their way to socialism. They stick to it despite betrayals by leaders, defeats by the state, the murder of loved ones. Sadly, those seeking national unity are marginalised by the bourgeois nationalist parties.

The reader needs some concentration to follow the comings and goings of many characters. But the effort is well worth while for the riches revealed. Because this novel is

Tea pickers in Sri Lanka
pic: Steenberg/ Creative Commons



also a study in the strategy of divide-and-rule, its origins and its dire consequences. It is the background to the bloody civil war that ended in 2009 with the Sri Lankan government's brutal military defeat of the Tamil freedom fighters.

Siva knows and loves his island country and all its people, whether Tamils or Sinhalese, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim or Christian.

He takes his characters on railway journeys through a variety of landscapes and weather. He describes the hard life of the small farmers, ameliorated by the ritual of family and religious festivals. Family members working in the towns as clerks or railwaymen return to their rural roots on rare spells of leave.

Siva weaves the personal and the political into a convinc-

ing pattern. One of the most telling incidents among many is when the socialists Saha and his half-brother Para visit a tea plantation to meet a prospective groom for one of their sisters.

He is an overseer who identifies completely with the bosses. "They say that Mr Lipton, who started as a grocer, is now a lord or a knight or something," he says with admiration. He shows them the overcrowded and insanitary huts provided for the workers. They are shocked by the conditions, but he says smugly "It's their karma. They don't know any better."

Thus differences between Tamils are manipulated by the exploiters. The overseer is a Tamil settled in what was then Ceylon; the tea pickers are Tamils too, but indentured

labourers brought from India.

Para drinks from the workers' tap and is rebuked by the overseer because it's been used by untouchables. He stalks off in disgust. The overseer puts his hand on Saha's shoulder and says: "Never mind, after all, he's not your real brother, is he?" Saha shakes him off and says: "He will always be my brother, but you will never be my brother-in-law."

A character in Conrad's novel *Nostromo* says that "for life to be large and full, it must contain the care of the past and of the future in every passing moment". Sivanandan's book vividly demonstrates the truth of this observation. We must know and cherish our past if we want to win a better future. We neglect history at our peril.