Chapter IV

Conclusion

The representations of the woman militants bring about the question as to what is the role of the writer/representer? Do they merely represent it any way and call it reality or should they have a social responsibility and be responsible for the images they are producing which will have an effect on society? The role of the writer is questioned in the Tamil movie Kannathil Muthamittal (A Peck on the Cheek) in which the writer Thiruchelvan is accused by Indra for using Amudha’s story to make money and be famous and not doing anything about Amudha’s situation as she is in a refugee camp. It is after this episode that he tries to adopt Amudha and as a result gets married to Indra. Through his act of adopting Amudha, Thiruchelvan becomes a responsible citizen and writer.

The movie Kannathil Muthamittal (A Peck on the Cheek) also shows how lives are disrupted because of violence. There is not one character in the movie that is not affected by the conflict. Lalitha Sridar states that the movie “chooses to enter the issue of terrorism but refuses to take a side on it.” This is because the movie concentrates on the futility of violence which affects people across class and nationality. From Shyama’s family to the crowd that comes to listen to Thiruchelvan’s speech to the minister who is killed by a suicide bomb attack, all are affected by the violence that is unleashed in the country by both the LTTE and the army. Sharif Abdullah who was once a terrorist himself, says that it is important to change the consciousness of the terrorist rather than to resort to violence:

I have had the soul of a terrorist. In my youth I personally experienced the anger, the alienation, and the emptiness that led me to a series of violent encounters with the ‘white power structure’ in Camden, New Jersey. For years, I mistakenly believed that whites were the problem and that violence was the solution (130).
“David Levinson (1989) argued in an eighty-eight nation study on family violence that one of the key factors that determine violence against women in the family is how a society chooses to resolve its conflicts. If conflicts in the community and with the state are resolved violently then it is more likely that disputes in the family are also resolved violently” (Coomaraswamy 2002, 79). This situation has been prevalent in Sri Lanka within the last two decades and it is probably why the goals of the feminist movement in Sri Lanka have remained focused mainly on violence from the 1980’s (Perera-Rajasingham 1).

In the portrayals of Nirmala and Dilip in the Sinhalese movie Kalu Sudu Mal (Colourless Flowers), Kamala and Wasantha in the novel The Road from Elephant Pass and the movie Alimankada, we find two couples facing an indecisive moment in the line of duty. Doesn’t this go to show that human bonding, relationships and love can be more powerful than any ideology that they have been indoctrinated with? Or is this merely reel and not real?

Although there are no records of women backing out of a suicide attacks, literary representations show women as the ones who have doubts. Urmila in the short story Forbidden Area, Nirmala in the Sinhalese movie Kalu Sudu Mal [Colourless Flowers], and Malli in the Hindi movie The Terrorist change their mind at the end before carrying out their assigned missions. Urmila is seen to change her mind about her mission at the last minute although the play says it is for good reasons. It is her wish to be married which undercuts her agency and undermines the value of her reason which is the fact that she wants to kill the President and not a Tamil political opponent of the Supremo. Even the character of Dhanu in “Appointment with Rajiv Gandhi” does not illuminate a political consciousness or a love for the cause. She is simply doing what she has been assigned to do. However Kamala in The Road from Elephant Pass is cleverly put by the novelist in a scenario in which she finds a way to redeem herself but at the same time goes ahead with her task. She does not come out in such a bad light as she confesses the truth to Wasantha, that her information is part of a plan to trap the army, even though it’s at the last minute and he cannot do much. However the review of the movie Alimankada
by Nanda Wanasundera in the *Island* newspaper states that the woman militant’s ‘inconsistency’ was disappointing. For Wanasundera the fact that Kamala teases Captain Wasantha and says “Paithyam” in Tamil which means ‘crazy’ is a hint given to the audience that this is an illusion, a ‘crazy’ idea and that for her to live with the Captain is not possible in reality. It is possible now that the war is over but it was not possible for Nihal de Silva, before 2003 when he was writing, to envision a woman militant of the LTTE being married to a Captain in the Army.

It is the same in the case of the representation of Maya in the short story “Maya My Daughter, Maya the Heroine.” Characteristics such as “strong minds” and “firm convictions” which Maya’s mother attributes to men are shown to be prevalent only in a man’s world because Maya is represented as someone who is not strong enough to stand up for what she believes in. Are these the thoughts of the writer or the mother? However the notion that they had no other choice of course is glaringly aware in the text in the context of Shyama (*A Peck on the Cheek*), Kamala (*The Road from Elephant Pass*) and Maya. Nandita Das too, the actress who played the part of Shyama in *Kannathil Muthamittal (A Peck on the Cheek)* agreed that ‘it’s the circumstances which lead her to such a life and that she does not judge Shyama.”

The producer of the movie *Alimankada* says, "When writing the screenplay I was careful not to inject any private philosophies into the storyline. When people come to see the movie they will want to see Nihal’s original story. The book was a best-seller. I did not mess with the original story. I did not make my own interpretation." This is problematic because he is not admitting that the movie is his point of view or his take on the text but that this is what the book is saying or what Nihal De Silva wanted to say. How can one make a movie out of a book without interpreting it? Besides the movie has taken many liberties with the text. The movie distorts the journey in an effort to portray the captain as one who does not feel hatred towards the Tamil woman. In the scene in which they first see each other her contempt towards the Sinhala soldier is clearly visible.

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47 Interview with Nandita Das on 21st September 2009.
48 As told to Chamitha Kuruppu which is reproduced in Kuruppu’s article “The Road from Elephant Pass.”
Except for the remark by the Captain that his views on how the war should be handled are very severe (‘dharumui’) there is no portrayal of the anger he feels towards her which De Silva depicts in the novel.

Even the scene in which the two of them are stopped and questioned at a check point while they are on a cycle, he pretends to be a Muslim but does not include the situation of the Captain saying that he is with his sister-in-law without the knowledge of his wife. This scene is not included because they do not want to show the police forces in a bad light and that fact that they are racist, because in this scene, in the novel, one of the policemen calls the Muslim “Thambiya” which the author himself acknowledges is “an offensive” term (60). There is an effort to erase the violence and harassment that the people have suffered at the hands of the government forces.

The fact that Captain Wasantha too had lost a sister because of the LTTE and still does not hate the Tamil people is added in the movie. They have tried to balance the personal loss on either side and tried to cater to a Sinhala majority. In the novel it is only she who has lost so much because of the war. His side of the story is more to do with poverty. These changes in the movie move away from the liberal mindset of the novel. A scene like the one in which she erases the vermillion dot on her forehead is problematic because for most Tamil women it is a symbol of ethnic identity rather than a religious one. The movie combines the two incidents in the novel of her getting lost and the attack by the two men- which are the two incidents which really bind them together. This is a clever amalgamation due to the lack of time in the movie. Kamala is portrayed as someone who has no qualms about killing a human being. This shows her as efficient from a military point of view but also traps her in the image of the ruthless woman cadre.

An eagerness to feminize the woman militant among the representations is visible. Just as in the myth of Kannaki, “Kannaki’s revenge blurs into insignificance, while the power of her chastity carries strong mythical allusions” (Sumathy 2004, 133). The fate of women militants too, seems to be the same. Emmanuel says that “There appears to be a desire to represent feminine characteristics of women militants, whilst male militant
experience is viewed exclusively in the context of the more masculine domain of politics, bravery, courage, violence, torture and brutality. Whilst both images are constructed, the identity of the male militant is strong and affirming (even when viewed as a violent perpetrator), whilst that ascribed to the female militant is framed in the context of femininity and/or victim-hood (2002). However this applies to anything that a woman does. Every one of her actions will be connected directly or indirectly to her gender. When a man commits a crime, the part played by his gender which may or may not have influenced him is never discussed or questioned. But when a woman commits a crime she is viewed within a sexual discourse. In the context of media representations, N. K. Singhi writes that even though the woman is represented “in a modernizing idiom—outside home, working in offices…. She falls in love, can marry a person of choice, divorce her husband, write books and practice medicine. Yet her presentation, directly or indirectly, is dominantly through her looks, body and its management” (258).

De Silva does not portray Kamala as manly or devoid of feminine qualities. In the scene in the novel in which she screams when she finds a leach on her thigh, Captain Wasantha is very amused. “I felt a rush of relief and a faint ripple of amusement. I took great care to keep concealed… ‘Get it off’, Velaithan’s eyes were wide. ‘Quickly’” (227). Women’s fears are always a source of amusement for men. Male fears are always greater and justified. Kamala’s fear stands in contrast to Wasantha’s fear of bears which is not made fun of and justified in the story by including the story of the man who was attacked by a bear and the consequences that he had to suffer.

In many of the texts the personal suffers due to the external, usually being clashes between the state and the LTTE and chaos in society. The texts show relationships which end because of these clashes. Maya dies and Nirmalan will never see her again and in *The Road from Elephant Pass*, Wasantha is missing in action which could also mean that he is dead, while Kamala has to go into hiding in Canada.

Even when women fight shoulder to shoulder with men they are not given the same credit for it as men are. Shamindra Ferdinando states in his article that Navy
spokesperson Commander D. K. P. Dassanayake said women could be motivated easily. "They wouldn't give up easily." A veteran in counter insurgency operations echoed Commander Dassanayake's opinion. "Yes. It is relatively easy to convince women" (Ferdinando). Such gender stereotypes of being “easy to convince” are part of a homogenous way of considering women.

November 25 has been marked as the International Day for Elimination of Violence against Women. It is ironic that this day coincided with the celebration of fallen heroes in the last week of November which the LTTE celebrated every year, an event which celebrates women as victimizers. Therefore in these two events we find a clash between woman as victim and woman as victimizer. The prominent presence of women on opposite sides in these conflicts emphasises the dangers of treating ‘women’ as a homogenous category, ignoring differences of class, community and political orientation; it would obviously be wrong to say that all women are opposed to authoritarian politics (Hensman 62).

While “The ideal woman is transformed as Selvi becomes a gun totting, self sacrificing aggressive woman who is willing to kill and die if necessary” (de Silva 2005, 33) it is also significant that there is not a single representation of the women soldier in Sri Lankan Literature. Although you may see her on the road carrying a gun or doing her duties at a check point, she is not talked about. Many newspaper articles appear to tell us about what they are achieving in a militaristic sense but we do not get to know a subjective point of view on these women. For example an article in The Sunday Times newspaper in January 2010 talked about the first female officer to pass out as a paratrooper and looks at their lives only from a militaristic point of view and how great they are to achieve such goals. The caption on the picture reads as “training with the men.” “In 1986, Tamil women in the eastern province armed themselves with rice pounders- a common but potentially lethal domestic implement- to prevent the dominant Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) from massacring unarmed members of a rival group” (Hensman 55). Why are acts such as these not represented in fiction or not even given any significance?
Homi Bhabha in *Nation and Narration* points out that Literature is able to function as a signifier of national identity or heritage (3). While this is true of literature, we also see how literature is influenced by nationalist thought and how nationalist thought is changed through literature. Literature has the power to endorse or to rebel against nationalist ideology as we have seen in the texts which I have examined. However while many texts subverts stereotypes some of them give into gender prejudices. This may be due to what Fredric Jameson called the 'political unconscious' where the writer is unconscious of his or her own prejudices.

The Literature that I reviewed has also shown that although nationalism is criticised for being based in fear and hatred of the other, it is very rare that it expresses hatred. It is more involved in expressing emotions such as pride and self-sacrificing love for the nation. Anderson says that “The cultural products of Nationalism- poetry, prose, fiction, music, plastic arts- show this love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles. On the other hand, how truly rare it is to find ‘analogous’ nationalist products expressing fear and loathing” (141-142). However loathing and self sacrificing love goes hand in hand in some poems published by the LTTE as well as poems such as “Amma, Do Not Weep.”

The question of agency is of importance when it comes to women militants. “Ensure that Tamil Women control their own lives” was the fourth clause of the LTTE women’s manifesto (qtd. in De Mel, 2001, 222). The argument between *Cat’s Eye* and Swaris also leads us to the amount of agency enjoyed by suicide bombers. Although women’s taking to arms has only lead to a further militarization of society, it has certainly changed the lives of these women which cannot be ignored. The point being that even if they are simply carrying out orders of a male head in a masculinised sphere we can only say that they will be more assertive and empowered when they put down the gun. Not only have they become participators in the public arena there are “significant changes in the roles and actions of the women cadres themselves, and does seem to have radicalized many of them and altered their thinking about ‘women’s liberation’” (Alison, 2003a 57).
Swaris says that within the question of agency, one must take into account the class of the woman, as a woman from a deprived class would not have space for agency because it would only be a matter of survival for her. In *Forbidden Area*, Urmila is intelligent, has a mind of her own but has had no other choice than to join the movement which has given her some recognition in society. She has agency and a sharp mind to a certain extent not to simply carry out the orders of the Supremo in the letter. But she has joined the movement and there is no way out for her except to go ahead with the mission. Besides she knows she will have to face death anyway if she does not obey so she unwillingly carries out her own suicide after being emotionally blackmailed by Supremo.

In Kevin Sites' interview, when he asks the Tigers about how the use of suicide bombers tarnishes the image of the organization and makes the world call them terrorists Vikneswaran Malathi says, “We have nothing to worry about with that title, because it's not in our hands. Our leader knows what to do and what not to do. Everything said in the media is not the truth about the Tigers.” She does not give her opinion and simply says that their leader knows best. This blind faith is what Supremo demands from Urmila in *Forbidden Area* when he asks her to kill an old Tamil politician instead of the president. As de Mel points out, the old politician may be a reference to Minister Amirthalingam (2004, 84) as Raman says “The whole idea of separate state was introduced by him...whatever he has done he has dedicated to the Tamils” (32). This also points to the way the leaders use suicide bombers to get rid of Tamil political rivals or Tamils who were powerful. However she is asked not to question. When Urmila asks Supremo “Please make me understand” he does not see why she should be given any answers and asks “Why? You don’t trust me?” (36).

Urmila is told that she is “appointed to a special task in the struggle for the homeland” (18). There is nothing to suggest that she volunteered for this mission despite the LTTE claim that the Black Tigers are volunteers. Even in the movie *Kalu Sudu Mal (Colourless Flowers)* both Nirmala and Dilip are asked to carry out a suicide mission. Dhanu, in “Appointment with Rajiv Gandhi” does not even mention how she got
involved with the movement; let alone her suicide mission. Why is it difficult for an artist to envisage the suicide bomber as someone who has volunteered? It may be that the purpose of the literary work is to bridge a gap in society and not to reinforce stereotypes. Therefore showing them as women who volunteer would only show them as the ruthless inhuman beings they are thought to be. *My Daughter the Terrorist* makes it look like they have volunteered but does not say it explicitly.

The notion that women within the LTTE enjoy full self determination is questioned by many because of instances of Tamil women being oppressed outside the organization. The University Teachers for Human Rights has documented how the LTTE had in its prisons, until 1990, about 200 Tamil women, “held because they were believed to be anti- LTTE and who received brutal treatment at the hands of women Tigers” (Subramaniam qtd. in Alison 2003a 55). The murder of the poet Selvy and the human rights activist Rajini Thirangama are also examples of silencing criticism. A cry out against the silencing of women who apposed the organization is enveloped in the following poem by Sivaramani who committed suicide after burning all her poems. Her poem “The Insulted” reads as,

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You cannot push me
Behind the limits
Of your window

I cannot be rejected
What else?
I’m present
like a question
that cannot be
thrown aside
Cover me with insults
and indecent words
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According to Swaris, we cannot take into account the bomber's political conviction as he or she is not capable of such rationality. The majority of people in Sri Lanka would like to read a suicide attack as an act of someone who is brainwashed and has no political conviction. This way they try to negate the message given by the suicide bomber that her cause is a worthy one and that she believes in it so strongly to be able to even give up her life for it. The negation of this message is due to the fact that if they accept the bomber's political conviction they have to accept that the Tamil people have been discriminated against and that this problem has occurred due to a reason which leads back to them.

"Silenced, yet potent in her final utterance, the figure of the suicide bomber presents a singular and remarkable instance in which militarization, censorship and gendered security regime coalesce in particular ways to construct an entirely new criminological category of women" (De Mel 2007, 192-193). Therefore we see that suicide attacks have begun to assume a gendered garb but they have also produced new gender norms in the act of suicide bombing.

In fact the whole debate about Urmila's agency between Cat's Eye and Swaris throws light on the assumptions made about the male cadres. Why is there no protest that Raman is shown as someone who is in the organization against his will? In fact it is Raman who tells Urmila to carry out the orders in the letter. He is actually more obedient than Urmila. So there is an attempt to subvert the normative gender stereotypes in the play.
When women give in to the desire to trash convention by the sensational rejection of a role they never chose for themselves, but was assigned to them by those who wrote their history, they are destined to suffer a tremendous loss of identity. They find themselves in a place that does not recognize their differences and problems, and they discover that they no longer understand themselves or other women (‘women in armed struggle do not understand women, they are estranged from being women, through militancy... they can become perfectly autonomous but they do it by radically negating themselves’ — Franceschini, 1988.) (De Cataldo et al. 93).

With regard to the question of agency, in the movie Kannathil Muthamittal (A Peck on the Cheek) we see Nandita Das on screen as Shyama, and she is more stable and has control over her life as part of the LTTE rather than when she is a wife and mother-to-be. As a cadre she is no longer merely a victim but the agony of such a choice is shown when she has to leave her daughter under the umbrella that Thiruchelvan holds over them to shield them from the rain. In the movie, Thiruchelavan writes in his story “Umbrella” that leaving this baby in India is “unforgivable” and that all these people want is some protection but the movie shows that she didn’t have a choice because of the violence. Nandita Das expressed that “whether the audience agrees with her or not is a different matter. What’s important is that they understand the dilemma.” Thiruchelvan, in adopting Amuda however does provide them protection, also symbolically with his umbrella, which represents the role that India played for these refugees.

During her visit to LTTE controlled areas in the north, Trawick’s question to Sita is, “You live close to death. It could come today or tomorrow. Do you really feel no fear?” Her answer is “Chee! If I were afraid, would I have joined the struggle? I am just exactly like the men” (153-4). It is interesting to note how she immediately connects fear to being a woman. Here Sita assumes that the men do not fear death or that more women fear death than men do. Therefore it is quite clear how many prejudices are prevalent about women and that they themselves have internalized them and behave accordingly. It
is also noteworthy that Trawick does not discuss fear of death with the male combatants that she interacts with.

It is also clear that in an arena where the concept of the nation is causing havoc in many lives, people find ‘imagined families’ or families that are created to be an ‘imagined entity’ instead of imagined communities. They find for themselves brothers, sisters, children and mothers who they are not biologically related to. Selvi is ready to die for her brother Sritharan whose father adopted Selvi and gave her a loving and caring home. Amudha in the movie *Kannathil Muthamittal [A Peck on the Cheek]*, is loved by her parents even though she is adopted and cannot be with her mother who is a militant. Some leave the nation for the family, some leave the family for the nation. The two are interchangeable and takes the place of the other in the absence of one. Therefore it is not only the nation that is an imagined entity, but also the family which functions as an institution in itself, is imagined. In this light the erotic scene in *Kannathil Muthamittal [A Peck on the Cheek]* in which Shyama and her husband rub mud from the river banks on each others face is symbolic as in that instance their love for each other and for the land come together in that moment. The fact that this scene comes just before he runs away and joins the movement and we do not see him again and Shyama later joins the group her self makes this scene very symbolic. They both sacrifice the personal for the love of the land.

The analysis of the texts discussed above has shown that the way the female militant is viewed is radically different from the male militant. Despite being a part of a militant world, a world which is considered very masculine, the woman militant carries with her the gendered stereotypes that are attached to a woman. It is also clear that the representations of war and gender roles are produced in society to help engender each other. As Mayer points out “Because nationalism, gender and sexuality are all socially and culturally constructed, they frequently play an important role in constructing one another- by invoking and helping to construct the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ distinction and the exclusion of the Other. The empowerment of one gender, one nation or one sexuality virtually always occurs at the expense and the disempowerment of another” (1).
Nationalism posits femininity as apposed to masculinity although gendered roles make it easier for a society to face a war situation. Goldstein believes that, "Childhood gender segregation is a first step in preparing children for war" (249). As we have seen the ideology of martyrdom too plays a role in the gendered project of war to engender gendered roles for women.