EN-GENDERING WOMEN AND WAR: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SRI LANKAN WOMAN COMBATANT

Introduction

The aim of this research project is to analyze the ways in which Sri Lankan society acknowledged women who stepped out of their traditional roles and stepped into the domain of war and combat. As Sri Lanka was in the midst of a war when I first began this research, between the Sri Lankan Army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) led by Velupillai Prabhakaran¹, this topic was very relevant. Since the late 1970's the LTTE desired to set up an independent sovereign state called ‘Eelam’ or ‘Thamiilam’² in the North and East of the island which broke out into a full scale war between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan army and it is in this war that the woman combatant gained prominence³. The war provided a platform for the birth of the female cadre and the female suicide bomber in Sri Lanka.

Literature is a medium that can effectively disseminate information about women cadres to the rest of society when there is no access to the women on the battle front. In addition, literature not only reflects society but it also influences existing ideology in society, be it ideas connected to ethnic or gender relations through the repetitive representation of certain types of gender relations and making them seem the acceptable norm, which Judith Butler calls ‘performativity’. Therefore presentation and representations of people are crucial as they can reproduce and reinforce stereotypes already prevalent in society, create new stereotypes or deconstruct them. Representations determine how the ‘other’ is perceived. These images reproduced by literature and the media are also tampered with according to the way the one that represents wants to talk about the war/cause. This is more so in the case of women militants as there are very few

¹His name has also been spelt as Pirapakaran and Pirabhakaran as well. But I will use this form which is the most commonly used.
²Ilam or Eelam was originally the Tamil word for the whole island (Roberts, 2005a, end note 20,508).
³The Tamil militant movement began in the north of the country in the 70s with random incidents of violent attacks on government agencies and robberies carried out by various groups of militants who were generally known as “The Boys” (Chenoy 103). In the late 70s they came to be known as the Tigers referring to specifically the LTTE which eliminated all other groups of Tamil militants.
interviews of them and information about them is not freely available and the main access to information about them for the general public is through fiction. Such literature, contributes to the engendering of gendered roles for women. Therefore I began this research with a belief that a deconstructive analysis of literature which reflect gender relations and notions concerning gender in Sri Lankan society, will also bring to light the ways in which power, culture and gender norms work together to build ‘mind forged manacles’ (as William Blake would call them) among people in society.

This research is also an effort to reveal how power works through not only culture but also through images and symbols. It is an attempt to look at the ways in which ideas about women have been and are continuously being generated through the power of images and what is claimed to be ‘culture.’ I adhere to Hobsbwam’s point of view that tradition is invented and that some cultures which are assumed to be very old and accepted as the norm, are not so and have been created to uphold the dominant ideology of the time (Hobsbawm et al.). In Sri Lanka some cultures and ideologies have been generated within a couple of years according to the will of the status quo and posited as the tradition of a particular ethnic group. These ideologies and cultures have been developed through certain narratives. “Whether we see ourselves as individuals or as social beings embedded in nation, tribe or any other collective identity our sense of our past, present and future is marked by various rites of passage and rendered comprehensible or significant through the device of narrative” (Krishna 33-34). Krishna further goes on to say that “Narratives not only discursively articulates reality, but are central to its endless and agonistic reinterpretation” (34-35). Therefore I analyze texts which represent the Sri Lankan woman militant as narratives which add to the discourse concerning women.

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4 I use the term gender and not sex to connect the societal roles that have been assigned to both sexes. I use the term sex to refer to the biological aspect of a human being although these terms are now seen as more complicated than this definition.

5 This line is from Blake’s poem “London.”

6 This creation of a tradition is very lucid especially in the sphere of drama with the popularity of Prof. Sarachchandra’s plays and in his molding of a new form of drama. This form was taken to be as traditional Sinhala theatre although it was a new creation in the twentieth century.
At the onset I wanted to look at Sri Lankan Society as a whole, in an attempt to unite it at least in my thesis and not leave out any community but while carrying out this research I became conscious of the fact that the focus was only on the Tamil community and leaving out the Sinhalese, Muslim and Burgher communities. This I felt was discrimination and very ironic, because this project is an effort to deconstruct stereotypes and look at a section of society, women, who have been discriminated against across communities and also in the backdrop of a conflict which rose out of discrimination and ethnic stereotyping. Therefore at the outset itself I acknowledge the fact that my focus is mainly on the Tamil woman combatant and have included the other communities whenever possible. This was not by choice but due to the fact that the LTTE was the only organization in Sri Lanka that let women participate in combat at the time when I began this research. Participating in the battlefront has given the Tamil woman combatant much more attention by scholars and artists, especially because they also form a part of the deadly suicide squad of the LTTE.

It is well known that many women were part of the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna / People’s Liberation Front) uprisings of April 1971 and 1987-89 but none of these accounts are well documented or given recognition in fiction or non fiction. Though “many women participated in the JVP insurrection of April- June 1971 and to a lesser extent in the 87-89 insurrection,” (De Mel 1998, 209) “the issue of women militants came to the fore in the 1990’s with the increased participation of Tamil women militants in combat” (Jayawardene and De Alwis 264). This is also due to the fact that in comparison the violence of the JVP and its duration is much less when compared to the LTTE and therefore has not attracted as much attention by scholars and creative writers.

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7 The Burghers are the descendants of the Dutch and Portuguese colonists in Sri Lanka.
8 The JVP uprising, which comprised mostly of university students and school going southern youth, was an attempt to overthrow the government with an agenda directed towards forming a socialist state. Unlike the LTTE struggle the JVP insurrection lasted only in two phases: 1971 and 1987-89 and it was not perceived of as a movement that had nationalist underpinnings. Its ideology was one of class struggle and they resorted to very violent means attacking police stations and killing anyone who did not obey their orders (De Mel, 209). Militarism was not crucial to their struggle although they were very violent which is probably the reason as to how the struggle was suppressed successfully by the government unlike the struggle of the LTTE. The JVP women’s wing was called the “Samajavadi Kantha Sangamaya.”
During the course of my research, the genre of literature expanded to other kinds of texts as well and not only the written texts and I have analyzed the way in which the woman combatant was represented across genres. This was due to the fact that the woman combatant has not been represented in many written texts. Therefore my primary texts consist of not only novels, novellas, short stories, plays, poems but also movies, documentaries and song lyrics that deal with the female combatant. The woman soldier of the Sri Lankan army however is completely absent in all these texts, about which I have discussed in the conclusion of this thesis.

Foucault’s theory of “will to truth” and “will to knowledge” illuminates this research as he rightly pointed out that institutions and disciplines control what is considered true and legitimate knowledge. He recognizes the author not as an individual but one that belongs to a certain group who has internalized certain ideas according to his or her circumstances. I look at the authors of my primary text in the same manner while analyzing the way they have represented the woman militant to deconstruct these so called truths that they establish.

A study of women cannot be successfully completed if it does not incorporate the male as well because feminist issues do not mean only women’s issues. As Nira Yuval-Davis points out, “constructions of nationhood usually involve specific notions of both ‘manhood’ and ‘womanhood’” (1997, 1). Therefore I have looked at male combatants but only to increase the depth of the knowledge of woman combatants (for example the mother figure in their lives). The focus on women in this thesis is not to undermine the importance of gender issues for men but the burden of masculinity and military duties on men is another thesis altogether.

Chapter One analyzes the figure of the woman militant in the light of nationalist and feminist discourses and the politics behind the way the woman militant is represented in various texts which have to negotiate with both these discourses. I begin this chapter with a discussion on nationalism because I believe that it was nationalism which paved the way for the thirty year war in the island which created an environment for the woman
combatant to emerge.⁹ I have scrutinized the various roles made available to women within early nationalism and later militant nationalism such as ‘mother warrior’ and the ‘armed virgin.’ The primary texts which I take recourse to in this chapter are Like Myth and Mother: A Political Autobiography in Poetry and Prose by Sumathy, the documentary No More Tears Sister: An Anatomy of Hope and Betrayal directed by Helene Klodawsky, the Sinhalese movie Kalu Sudu Mal (Colourless Flowers) directed by Mohamud Mohan Niyaz, the novella One More Sunrise by Maurice Perera, the play In the Shadow of the Gun by Sumathy, the novel The Road from Elephant Pass by Nihal De Silva, the Sinhalese movie Alimankada directed by Chandran Rutnam, the Tamil movie Kannathil Muthamittal [A Peck on the Cheek] directed by Mani Ratnam, the Hindi movie The Terrorist and poems written by soldier poets from the army as well as the LTTE.

Chapter Two is an investigation of the representations of the female suicide bomber in the light of how suicide attacks are viewed in Sri Lanka. Her representation, stereotypes of women in combat as either ruthless killers or ‘weak’ combatants, concept of suicide bombing and how suicide killers are engendered and gendered as well as how the concept of death is related to them and constructed around them is discussed. Many gender stereotypes have been deconstructed in texts and movies which represent the suicide bomber. Marriage, sexuality and suicide seem to be intrinsically linked for the woman which this chapter will discuss. I have also looked at how the concept of martyrdom is built around these suicide attacks. This chapter also analyzes the representations of the last few minutes of the life of a suicide bomber which has been dramatized in the four texts: the play Forbidden Area, the short story “Appointment with Rajiv Gandhi,” the Sinhalese movie Kalu Sudu Mal (Colourless Flowers), and the Hindi movie The Terrorist. The thoughts that go through the mind of the suicide bomber which have been brought to life in fiction will be scrutinized. These thoughts bring to light many assumptions about the woman suicide bomber. Besides the above mentioned texts I also have referred to In the Shadow of the Gun and The Wicked Witch and Like Myth and Mother by Sumathy, the Tamil movie Kannathil Muthamittal (A Peck on the Cheek), the

⁹ I use the term nationalism to denote an ideology which members of a community, those who are of the ‘same kind,’ share – through which they identify with the nation and express their loyalty to it (Mayer 1).
documentary No More Tears Sister: Anatomy of Hope and Betrayal and My Daughter the Terrorist directed by Tarjei Kidd Olsen.

Chapter Three compares the experiences and reasons for taking up arms of female and male militants to discern if they are very different from each other. Reasons such as revenge, poverty, and emancipation have been looked at and it analyses the way these reasons have been presented in the texts which represent militants as well as in the song lyrics of singer M.I.A. This chapter is an attempt not only to understand the reasoning behind militant behaviour but also to determine if the reasons of male combatants and female combatants are presented differently in the texts. This chapter also looks into gendered violence which is another reason that pushes women into militancy and the concept of sacrifice which again is gendered, in the way that it applies to men and women.

Chapter Four consists of the concluding remarks and observations. The question of agency of a suicide bomber is debated upon in the light of what has been discussed before. It is apparent that even when women take on the world of the male in the form of militarism, she still carries with her the gendered stereotypes that envelop her in other circumstances as well. The family as an imagined entity is discussed as it was apparent that when the notion of the nation brings about chaos in personal lives, the family as an entity gets renegotiated together with gender norms in society.