

Women's Writing in Sri Lanka
Subjectivities and Historicism



Selvanachiyar (1945)



*Meenachchi Ammal
(1940)*



*Mangalammal
Masilamany (1920)*



A Bible Woman (1843)




Tamil Girls in a Boarding School (1824)

Selvy Thiruchandran

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Subjectivities and Historicism

Selvy Thiruchandran


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Preface and Acknowledgements

This is part of a research study conducted by Women's Education and Research Centre on "Women's Writings in Sri Lanka." A brief note on the research programme would not be out of place here.

The main research is periodised into three parts, pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial. This publication is on the Tamil writings of the colonial period. While there was hardly anything produced in Tamil or English by women on the island during the pre-colonial period, there were indeed Sinhala women who had written in one form or the other. But research on Tamil women's unwritten literature in the form of lullabies and dirges was undertaken and is to be printed. The research on the English writings of the colonial period and the Sinhala writings of the pre-colonial and colonial period is being finalised and will be published shortly. The research

on the post-colonial writings of women in all three languages has already commenced and the release of three publications is planned for the year 2002.

Zaair Foundation gave us the funds for this research, through Ms Mia Berden was for the most part responsible for this grant. As someone associated with the women's movement she perhaps realised the need for this research in Sri Lanka. We acknowledge with thanks the contribution made both by the Foundation and the support given by Ms Berden to this research on Women's Writings in Sri Lanka.

The collection of data for this study proceeded in a rather a circuitous route. We travelled through many libraries, institutions, and knowledgeable people, collectors and librarians. One of the main problems with this research was the absence of source material about Tamil writings in the National Archives. Some of the works of the women authors we have traced could not be found in the National Archives or in the public libraries. In this connection Rt Revd Dr S. Jebanesan, the Bishop of Jaffna, came to our assistance. Through him we appointed another Research Assistant to search the Jaffna College library, at Vaddukoddai in Jaffna. It has to be mentioned that the books and pamphlets we were looking for were those lost when the Public Library in Jaffna was burnt down. It was Dr Jebanesan who suggested that I make a visit to Chennai and search for the materials there in Christian missionary and other private libraries and libraries in the universities. It bore some fruit, but not enough to fully satisfy us. Dr Mangai and Dr Arasu from the University of Madras helped to identify a few libraries. This

helped to trace some articles written by women in the colonial period. I thank them all for their help. However, we were not able to trace major works of interest such as the following:

Urutira Kanikaiyar Katha Sara Tirattu, the lives of some famous nautch dancers (which is in fact the autobiography of the authoress), by Ms. K. Anjukam, Meenambal Print Works, Colombo.

Incidents in the Life of the Last king of Kandy By Miss Bava-Wesley Mission, Batticaloa.

The first was a biography of a Devadasi woman referred to by her caste name, Urutira Kanika ('prostitute') and is perhaps the only existing historical autobiography of a Sri Lankan Tamil woman. This book, I am sure, is the only source for retrieving details regarding the institution of prostitution in Jaffna from a historical perspective.

I still have an unhappy feeling that we have left out other important material, lying somewhere in some cupboard or in some house unseen, unattended and therefore undocumented. Those who are aware of any such material that we have not accessed can help us by providing the necessary information. We can bring out a revised edition in the future.

The staff members of Women's Education and Research Centre Ms Vinodini de Silva, Ms Dhamayanthi Sivasundaram and Ms Sunanda Seeli, were of immense help, the former for coordinating all activities relating to the research and organising the seminars, and the latter two for typing the manuscript. Ms Sunanda Seeli

performed the additional task of formatting the manuscript. I thank them all for the kind cooperation rendered to me.

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Colombo 06

Introduction

There is no history of printed Tamil literary works in Sri Lanka before 1835. The printing press was introduced to Jaffna in 1835. There is also no trace of women's writing before the 18th century. The general patriarchal social relations of keeping young women and girls secluded in homes may account for the small numbers of educated women in the past. The early educational system in the Tamil region in India was made up of what is called the *tinnaipalli* (See notes 1) and the *kurukula* (See notes 2) system. Both these generally did not accommodate women. *Tinnaipalli* was an ad hoc arrangement where an educated man, learned in literature grammar and arithmetic used the raised platform constructed along the mud walls of the house to teach little boys more as a pastime and social service. The children were not charged any fees. The *kurukula* system of schools was a residential arrangement like a boarding school, where the students resided with the teachers and paid their

fees in kind. Interestingly there is a reference to girls and boys being part of the school in one of the long poems found in Jaffna, which describes certain features of how this system operated (see notes 1). This was collected from an oral tradition and does not indicate the period or the date in which the school system operated in Jaffna. There is also evidence of this system operating without the residential arrangement, where the pupils visited the teacher at his home at dawn, when the cock's crow gave the signal of the rise of the sun, and went home for their meals in the mornings, afternoons and for their dinner (see notes). This would be very similar to the *tinnaipalli* system. There is no evidence to indicate that girls were part of this school system in Sri Lanka among the Tamils.

However, there is evidence that women, though they had not gone through any formal education, were versed in pedagogical poems of early Tamil literature. They could recite and quote from them easily. Women could also recite and sing liturgical hymns of the *saiva* literature such as the *tevaram* and *tiruvacakam*. Though unlettered as children, these women were taught to memorise by the elders both men and women. It may be noted that the oral tradition, including that of the lullabies and the dirges, was maintained by the practice of memorising. Interestingly there was also an ad hoc arrangement, though later in history, through which young girls were tutored at home by the teachers (K. Sivathamby from personal discussion). This system was of course limited to the middle and upper-caste children. There is also evidence from oral tradition to show that there indeed were women astrologers and physicians who practised indigenous medicine. This tradition, is continued even now.

The early education of girls in Sri Lanka, institutionally or in a systematic way was connected with the missionaries and conversion to Christianity. On 15th February 1886 when 24 girls graduated from Uduvil Girls' School, which was the first school for girls set up in South Asia, Revd. Dr Hastings remarked that, in 1816, when the missionaries first came to Jaffna, not a single girl could read, there are nearly 5,000 girls studying in missions schools and there are 1,000 native Christian female communicators in the different missions. It was also reported that there were men and boys who could read and that people did not think it worthwhile to teach the girls. "What are girls for, excepting to cook food and that girls could not learn to read any more than the sheep," was how the attitude towards girls' education was expressed (Leitch, Mary and Margaret, 1890: 116). In keeping with the general trends of teaching feminine skills, the girls who won the 19 prizes, it was reported had got them for "general scholarship, for needle work, deportment, punctuality, attendance for music, for neatness of persons and dress and for cooking." (ibid: 83-84).

There is also reference to "Bible Women." The Bible Women were in fact educated women chosen by the missionaries to teach the Bible on home visits to women. (ibid: 65) In other parts of the world where there were conversions, the same system of Bible Women was found to be in practice. The Bible Women, 21 in number attached to the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram, were spiritual healers and physicians. There is evidence to say that they, in fact, underwent a training programme before they were appointed. First aid and midwifery were part of the lessons that were given to the women. Health and personal hygiene were also included

(Lalrinawmi Ralte, 2000: 41). In Sri Lanka, too, the same system must have existed, though Mary and Margaret Leitch did not write about it in any detail.

What we are concerned here is whether these women engaged at any time in any kind of writings: social, literary, religious, or political. There is no such evidence, but perhaps it has been lost to us. One does not know whether there were documents housed at the Public Library of Jaffna, reduced to ashes when the library was burnt in 1981.

In doing this research focusing only on women's writings, it is not our aim to emphasise the differences between men's writings and women's writings but to locate differences if there are any within socio-political and social-cultural contexts.

Most part of the biographical notes of the women writers that find mention here were resurrected from ad hoc references to them in other sources. Strangely no woman has left an autobiography in Tamil, and women's biographical texts in Tamil are unknown in Sri Lanka. This indeed is a difference specific to Tamil women, and may be to women in Sri Lanka, but why this is so, is precisely a question worth examining. It is possible that women authors have penned parts of their life stories into other texts, the lived experiences that are underneath their consciousness, the gendered specificity of their beings. More about this is discussed in the first chapter.

Data collection for this research has spanned over two years. Only published literature was collected, including newspapers, journals and books. It is worth mentioning here that though a

considerable period was spent in searching for material on women's writings, the results were very disappointing. After an intensive search we came up mainly with the phenomenon of absence. Women's poetry drew a blank. There were a few women who have written short stories but with not much critical literary value. Whether to call this a peculiar factor, or to say that patriarchy explains everything, becomes a difficult question for a researcher. That a few women wrote becomes even more significant than the absence phenomenon. Class position and conversion to Christianity certainly had their implications for access to educational institutions and therefore for creative writings.

The National Archives of Sri Lanka has a few structural constraints. Since every Tamil has become a suspect of terrorism in the present historical context, Tamil researchers are scrutinised to such an extent that it creates uneasy feelings – the atmosphere is unfriendly, not conducive to any productive research. Three of our Research Assistants were even arrested within the premises of the National Archives on suspicion of being members of LTTE, despite having all the necessary papers and credentials such as the National Identity Cards, and letters of introduction to the Director of Archives seeking permission to use the National Archives. Strange indeed is the official situation within the Archives, where there are no Tamil Officers or someone conversant in Tamil language to help with accessing the Tamil documents. The Sinhalese officers, however helpful they were, could not meet with our requirements, and there was considerable delay. We were told that for nearly a decade the National Archives was unable to collect the Tamil publications brought out in the north and east. Whether it is

true or whether they could not access them due to their inability to read Tamil was not clear. However, the Sinhalese staff tried their best to help us, under great constraints.

The public library staff was extremely helpful in getting us some of the documents we wanted. Some of the gaps that we missed in the National Archives were filled by the public library.

This publication has two sections. One deals with literature-fiction, and the other with non-literary writings. The selection is not based on any rigid scientific formulae – rather, those that were felt to be relevant, relevant to decipher women's sensibilities.

Sri Lankan women's writings cannot be collapsed under a homogenous category. The locations of their habitats with very peculiar socio-political ethos had a determining effect on their writings and the differences are indeed marked. There arises a question of cultural identity and therefore a question of representation. The Tamils of Sri Lanka fall into three groups: the Tamils of the north (Jaffna) Tamils of Batticaloa and the Tamils of the hill country. While the first two categories are indigenous to the Sri Lankan polity and claim citizenship rights, the hill country Tamils were brought from India to Sri Lanka by the British as indentured labourers in 1828. There are wide disparities in the levels of the culture they practice. Their caste and class locations, creating differential experiences, have also become fundamental to the differences. While the language they speak also has differential intonations, pronunciations and sometimes meanings, it can be said that they speak through their literature and their writings, from a particular place (habitat) and from a particular history, and from a

culture which is specific. What they say is "in context" positioned and their discourse is "placed." (Hall, 1993: 392). It cannot be said that these Tamils have a common historical experience and a shared cultural code. They always speak of their differences on their own, because they feel so. This is particularly the case with the up-country Tamils, who were always politically and culturally marginalised not only by the state and the majority Sinhalese, but also by the Tamils of Jaffna and Batticaloa, as the 'inferior,' 'other' and as those who belong to an inferior culture. The oneness that should characterise the Tamils as belonging to the same ethnic community was absent for a long time in their history. The class position of most of the hill country Tamils and their 'late arrival' into Sri Lanka have jointly conferred on them a secondary status. These identity constructions as superior and inferior are based on a re-telling of the past cultural identities. As rightly pointed out by Hall (1993: 394), this is not something that transcends place, time and history. They too undergo transformation, subject to the continuous 'play' of history and power. Their writings reflect a continuous play of history. That this volume cannot reproduce any hill-country Tamil women's writings also can be explained by play of history as a non-factor. That these women have created both lullabies and dirges then become even more significant both creatively and historically.

The literary genre of fiction is discussed under the subsection on literature. Other writings will be classified under political, social and cultural, whereas the differences, which emerge due to the locations of women, will be highlighted while being subjected to critical analysis. It may be noted that the lullabies and dirges, known

in Tamil as *oppari* and *tallattu* (see notes 3 & 4), are not included in this study. They are dealt with separately as part of oral literature of women. It is also of interest to note that Sri Lankan Tamil women had not written plays in the past.

This research is focused on the writings during the colonial period. There is no evidence of Tamil women's writings in Sri Lanka in the pre-colonial period, though in South India, from the earliest period of written history, i.e. from the *Sangam* period (AD 100 - 300) women have been continuously maintaining a literary tradition of fame. However, one does not know whether, in Sri Lanka in fact, no women wrote, or whether they did write and what was written was lost to us.

The history and development of Tamil poetry has been reconstructed from various sources, from 1310 to the colonial period, and from the colonial period up to 1965, during the post colonial period (A. Sathasivam, 1966). There is not a single woman listed in this collection. However, this is not to be interpreted as a total absence of women poets. If there were no records kept, perhaps the poems were not printed but remained oral. 1500- 1948 is treated as the colonial period. Sri Lanka (Ceylon then) was colonised successively by the Portuguese (1500-1658), by the Dutch (1602-1796), and by the British up to 1948. The periods thus cast are merely for convenience and as conventionally understood by Sri Lankans to have some historical meaning. This periodisation, though accepted as specific periods having the various colonisers as the markers, is not marked with distinctive socio-cultural demarcations in terms of particular and different social

formations with particular characteristics of historicisms with particular impact. Politically, however, there were changes in the masters who came to rule us. Christianisation and colonisation, however, did have their manifold influences on the psyche of our people, which transformed our history. Westernisation, it is conceded, led to a modernisation process in the colonies, which is very well reflected in our writings. The mainstream writings reflect both anti and pro views of Christianisation, colonisation and modernisation. But how women, the working class and the other marginalised groups (such as lower castes and lower classes) reacted to these processes is not historically recorded, because they wrote none or little, or they wrote but they did not receive the attention deserved.

Women Writers: Some Posers

Recently I had the privilege to attend several book-releasing ceremonies. Mostly these books were written by men. The speakers unfailingly talk about the subject of support given by wives of these authors. At the last function I attended, number of speakers referred to the same topic.

One of the speakers was discussing women's contribution to literature in terms of the support given to the husbands in their literary field. This subject was a source of amusement and laughter to the audience and to the speaker. For me it was a serious issue.

One speaker said that even the mere fact that women do not make themselves a nuisance is also a positive contribution. He did not define the term nuisance. (Is discussing a justifiable need termed a nuisance?) He went on to say that writers are not popular as husbands because they bring home reading material instead of the daily necessities for the family. It is assumed that women who are supportive do not object to this behaviour.

This kind of language shows the ignorance among this literary crowd. Firstly most women enjoy reading and not necessarily object to the husband bringing home reading material. This statement assumes that women are uneducated and do not read. It also assumes that an artist or a writer has the freedom to ignore his family's needs as if any writer can exist without the basic necessities such as food and that his wife should ignore his indifference. This I feel is grossly unfair to the wife and children. I

wonder if contribution they make to the literary world or society is adequate to compensate for the negligence of the family, as some of the books published are researched and can claim originality but most others are generally recycled stuff.

I would also like to tell the plight of women writers. I was trying to find out about women writers and their contribution from a well-known writer; his reply was that women hardly write after marriage. This may not be true in all cases, but my discussions with women themselves proved that they do find it extremely difficult to write after marriage, due to various reasons - a main reason being lack of support from their husbands. Husbands expect their wives to do their entire household chores without any assistance from them. In addition to this women are put under pressure by society to be good wives. Most of these women who can write well are also working women and the lack of support at home on household chores often puts a full stop to all creativity. These women who are under these circumstances are superwomen. Unfortunately superwomen like supermen are rare.

I also attended a book releasing ceremony of a woman writer; she herself could not attend the occasion, as her child was ill. Significantly this book was written when she was a full time student, before her marriage. Will she continue to write now? What support would her husband give?

Will he not be a nuisance by not demanding the expected wifely duties? I will be failing in my duty if I do not mention that some good husbands do exist, which does not make him or her a nuisance.

Will he be one of the good husbands similar to the proverbial good wife who is an absolute necessity for a male writer to succeed?

Should she be a superwoman? These are very important questions for women writers and to all women.

S. Marimuthu (*Ceylon Daily News* of 10/04/1999).

This epigram evokes of many pointed observations.

1

The Entry: Comprehending the Subject

This study is focused on deconstructing the different genres of Tamil women's writing in Sri Lanka, deconstruction here meaning a process of subjecting the writings to a historical analysis, identifying history from them, and placing historically both the contents and the authors. This is in a way retrieving women's history from the point of view of women. This is not to say that such points of view are necessarily the truth or the ideal but only to bring into focus those that are marginalised. From the creative literature we focus on content and emotive forms, and from the socio-political writings, we decipher in addition those views that have not been taken note of in the socio-political development of our country. Some of the statements are powerful and vivid enough to make an impact in some way or other if brought into legitimate channels.

Unfortunately, they have not been studied; neither has their symbolic significance been attested to at anytime. The significance of this exercise is manifold. Women, it would appear, have written mostly beyond ambitious notions of power-seeking or privileging their writings over those of others. They, it would seem, wrote within bondages, – of sufferings and deprivation, unfulfilled desires and heavy familial responsibilities.

Within this scenario, viewing the women and their writings with a sense of history should expand further their significance. The signification of words, phrases and idioms, and the style of writing – apart from the autobiographical notes that are sometimes hidden and sometimes vividly present – should essentially contain history if we have a sense and feel for history. It should be added that literary texts always implicitly hold a historical explanation. This is not to say that we are subjective and using, romantic aesthetics, free-floating with little or no foundation in scientifically rigorous historical calculations. This is merely to say that history is present in all activities – mental and physical, ideological and structural – and to identify the facets of history behind all activities is a task worth attempting.

On one level, history with its gender biases has been unkind to women. This research is keen additionally to situate women's statements, whether philosophical, political or literary, within a historical context. On another level we propose to identify the levels or extent to which such statements reflect the bias of the period, of the hegemonic block or the ruling elite of the times.

Challenges to historicism have included in its agenda post-colonial and feminist theories. The new historicism's inclusion of certain aspects of critical theories questions and challenges the main agenda of simply reconstructing the past from the dominant perspective. But seeing the past with its, fragmentary 'little traditions' and laying bare the hegemonic cultural and political versions seen through the lenses of a mainstream historian, the new historicism has created an agenda of inclusiveness and re-visioning of partial versions – and brought into focus the exclusion, underrepresentation and the misinterpreted representations. This process may well match the concept of historical relativism of Geertz (1992: 44). Indeed there is a deep suspicion about the authority of historical narrations – not only the scope, content and the methodology, but even the intent is under suspicion (Hamilton 1996: 189). It is not merely a question of power relations as argued by Mackinnon (1991: 131,4) but also a question of vested interests. Women, it has to be emphasised, had spaces within the power regime to protest and awaken. However, post-colonial theorists and feminists, while sharing this suspicion and making particular claims for their own particularities do not sit happily together. Accusations of marginalisation and indifference to women's sensibilities can be attributed both to the post-colonial theorists as well as to the coloniser's gaze, towards the "exotic" Asian and African women. The male-centric views cannot be attributed exclusively to the coloniser men – but also to the colonised men. Besides, the feminists' attempt to retrieve, reconstruct and theorise women's history has created a situation where we have two or three histories sitting together unhappily and disjointedly. One always makes claims for a parity of status with the other. This is not an ideal

situation. Those histories have to be combined and made into one, as part of a radical new history, and disseminated simultaneously; one building on the other and co-opting the other, into its own.

In reclaiming suppressed and lost histories, one has necessarily to reclaim women's writing per se, and not merely women's literary writings but all of women's writings as the twin process of reclamation, to produce a comprehensive and a totality of vision or a vision of a neglected domain. This research is not content to deconstruct only the racism, which may have been an agenda for the post-colonial theoreticians, and the sexism, which may have been an agenda of middle-class feminists, but also take up issues of the caste and class dimensions manifest in women's writings. For example the genres of folklore, *tallattus* and *opparri* betray traces of caste, class and gender sensibilities. This may result in attempts to also reclaim sentimentalism and personifications as argued by Hamilton (1966: 191).

The revaluation of Romanticism by modernism and their common distrust of sentimentalism and personification have combined to disqualify the idiom of many women's poetry of the period, immensely popular at that time, from critical approval. Canons of critical theory, in other words, are as much put in question by feminist scholarship as the composition of 'literature'.

We can however, not agree wholly with Showalter, who wants to establish the "female canon." What Showalter argues, as the wilderness of difference is clearly brought out in the genre of *oppari* (lament songs), *tallattu* (lullaby) and *nattupatal* (folk songs) 'sung' (and not recited) by women; but can we establish a "female canon"

and overlook the wilderness of differences that arise among the woman writers on the basis of caste, class and ethnic consciousness? Are we then talking about a female canon with a dramatically differentiated content?

There is evidence in the Asian literary canons of such wilderness of differences, and the indifferences and neglect of such episodes as Medea and Antigone. The significance of women's articulation, their efficacy and protests, is treated as marginal in the texts. The cultural critique that Lloyd wants us to engage in (1984: 109) becomes the tool to decipher the process of illegitimacy of the contents imposed by a repressive regime of males which is pervasive.

In South Asian texts there is a conventional image of Sita as passive, obedient and chaste who walked into the fire to prove her chastity when dictated to by her Lord, the avatar of God Vishnu, Rama. But there are versions of the Ramayana, that have images of an articulate rebelling Sita who refuses the fire ordeal and goes away from Rama with her two children (Chakravarti 1983: 72). This is not, however, the popular version. A choice is made of the popularised, hegemonic Brahmanic version. In the end Sita refuses the fire ordeal and after all her "trials and tribulations" and goes back to mother earth, saying enough of you (Thapar, 1997: 9).

In the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma, the all-knowing saintly sage who was generally consulted on all matters of state craft both by the Pandavas and Kauravars, abducts two sisters as brides for his two brothers. When it was realised that one of them was in love with a prince, she was returned, but the lover rejects her on the basis of the "pollution" she has acquired in the process of abduction. In a rage

she vows revenge against Bhisma and commits suicide only to be reborn as Sihandi with the sole purpose of killing Bhisma. She assumes the form of a eunuch. Bhisma meets his end through the arrows of Sihandi at the end of the Mahabharata war.

This is an episode of a protest and a heroic act of revenge by a woman who was humiliated and destroyed by a man with power and status. But in all discourses of the epic *Mahabharata*, which is called the fifth Veda, we hardly hear of Sihandi's heroism or determination, but the virtues and heroism and the wisdom of the great warrior-sage Bhisma is extolled endlessly. Men of great wisdom and justice are proverbially referred to still as Bhisma.

In the Tamil epic *Silapatikaram*, the heroine Kannaki's discourse on justice in general and on statecraft in particular is treated as the capacity and power that she acquired by possessing the great virtue of chastity, and not necessarily due to her talents and capabilities.

While saying all this we are also acutely aware of the bias of the period in the usage of words and terminology. What was meant for the readership of that time may not have the same meaning now. That the texts signify a different meaning for the first audience in keeping with the dominant ideology of that period is commonly accepted. Usage of words and terminology and their meanings can also be period-specific or time-specific. The pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial structures have differential patterns of meaning constructions, the result being that the ideologies based on them would have had differential impacts on the audiences. Therefore, we are aware that we could not expect that they would have the same

impact on a contemporary audience. But what is interesting is to realise that there indeed have been women's points of view which have been lost to history.

In this research on the focus of reconstructing history, we have to make a distinction between the literary texts and the socio-political narratives of women. Though fragmentary events may be picked for interpretation from the literary texts, we are mindful of the fictitious nature embedded in such texts. History is not merely a recording of events, but, clearly has connections with other discourses such as sociology, geography, ethnography, mythography and politics. Attempting to decipher women's writings from various discourses may become a novel exercise, as far as all discourses, including history, are concerned. Women's writings are used as Oakeshott argues (1983: 52) to discover from fragmentary survivals what may be inferred from them about a past which has not survived.

What may appear strange perhaps is our attempt at a reverse order, to what White has said. White said:

Reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences. (1978: 42)

Revising White's contention, we are looking for history from fictions and other writings – a history from women's perspective. What did the women consider, significant? Events, utterances, and

happenings, which are historically worthy, are retrieved from story-telling from fiction and from subjectivity. To reclaim objectivity and history may become problematic. White's contention that history is fictionalised (1998: 53) may be true of the work of many historians. History written by the coloniser is more fictionalised than the history written by the colonised. History by the elites is much fictionalised when they wrote about subaltern people. To retrieve historicism/historicity from the so-called non-historical narrative, i.e. fiction and poetry, by women may throw some light on some hidden areas of our history.

As said earlier in using the term 'writings' and not 'literature' (women's writing), we are only saying that this research is not dealing with only literature but writings in general. In contextualising both types of writing historically, subjective-objective categories are questioned and knowledge is understood as a process, evolving out of cultural, political and representational factors. Women are treated as agents of writing and this agency is valorised. The narratives are not necessarily seen as representations of gendered positions (while the content may reflect the gendered position), but also within the subjects' class and caste positions. The use of speech forms, and free verse with little or no attention to grammar, or forms that indulge in expression, transcending the norms of acceptance in the literary canons – are equally visible not only in the folklore of the unlettered peasants and workers but also in women's lullabies and lament songs of the upper class and upper caste. Hence, form or content are not privileged one over the other. But the gender dimensions, if present, will be highlighted with out arguing that all productions of writings by women are gendered.

Transgressions of gender codes, and gender ideology, may be present in some narratives, especially in the category of narratives in political and social contexts. The genres of poetry, fiction and dramas as cultural productions, are different from folklore or lament songs or lullabies, which are spontaneous and instantaneous.

Equating gender positions with class and caste locations has something to do with access to knowledge, education and even the elite forms of literary expressions, into which women especially of the lower classes were not socialised during previous generations. Yet this is not a statement of truth to be applied to all times and for all women. The Sangam period of Tamil literature in South India and Bhakthi (devotional) literature both bear ample witness to sophisticated literary forms of women, equal to the status of canon, though these women had little or no access to formal education. These genres of poetry represent subjective feelings with clear gender dimensions arising as part of women's experiences. This factor can perhaps be explained by the fact that both men and women were in a position of relative social equality as poets with few structured or institutional patterns of social discrimination. However, the number of such outstanding women is proportionately far less than that of men. It is equally significant that those poets who excelled and produced canons are single women, like Avaiyar and Andal or women who have become single, being cast away by husbands (Karaikal Ammayar) or those who rebelled against the system (Meera, Andal, Acca Mahadevi) (see notes 5). Of the 24 women poets of the Sangam period we have no information as to their history or personal lives. However, this tradition did not continue into the medieval period. There were few number of

women poets, and fewer still in the modern period in the genre of poems, fiction and drama. That this scenario still holds true with contemporary women should shed some light on this phenomenon. Is it a question of leisure? Is it a question finding time? Is it a question of saying one is using one's time 'purposefully'- which has gender connotations? Housekeeping, child rearing and income generation are found to be more purposeful for women, rather than poetry and fiction writing.

Subjective Feminist Literacy Criticism and the Plurality of Theories

While there is no difficulty now in acknowledging that there are diverse forms of feminism, projected or based on various theories one feels a bit uneasy to note the fact that within aesthetics and literary theories there are differences and diverse shades of opinion in understanding the phenomenon of women's writings. Feminism's political commitment to differences – differences in positions within the social science paradigms and theories – has necessarily led to taking up different positions even in theorising women's writings. In the post-feminist era it has become fashionable to emphasise fragmentary knowledge and celebrate differences and to reject totalising concepts. Women, it has already been proved, are not a homogenising category. With nation, ethnicity, race, class and caste falling within subculture – and even hegemonic culture speaking and practising subaltern language and culture – women are divided and their differences are great. However, the fact that there are different women and different feminisms is something one need not apologise for.

The professionalisation of feminism, or academic feminism, has also been subjected to some scrutiny, more often within a negative praxis of 'sitting in the ivory tower.' A similar position is seen even in feminist literary theories and the critiques within them. The lengthy arguments that have taken place among French, American and British feminists are typical of this phenomenon.

Increasingly in the 1980s there was a trend to contextualise female subjectivities. Knowing the self, identifying the self within notions of identity, raising epistemological questions on representations and symbolisations, became the norm in the 1990s, many academic feminists subscribing to one or other of the positions and theories. Female, feminism, gender, and sex have been subjected to new epistemological scrutiny and to a multiplicity of theories across social- science disciplines and methodologies. The positions taken by academic feminists – ranging from standpoint, social constructivist, strategic essentialist, essentialist, and empiricist, and postmodernist – do not however appear to be conclusive positions in the debate. There will soon be collapsing or inclusive - exclusive versions emerging out of these debates. Within the quagmire one sometimes wonders whether the comprehensive concept of an overarching patriarchy is lost somewhere and has to be retrieved into the debate.

As social subjects do women think, express and write differently? Feminist theoreticians have answered either yes or no, or yes and no at the same. If femininity and masculinity are social constructions, does it mean what males and females think, express and write are manifestations and representations of socially constructed untruths? Are the subjectivities then not real?

Subjectivities are variously explained and understood. Subjectivity is understood as something taking place and existing only in one individual's mind – illusory, unaffected by the external world and personal. But within psychology it is meant as existing only in the mind of the person who experiences (external verification not being possible).

Subjectivity also has a medical meaning, designating a symptom or condition perceived by the participant and not the examiner. However, the word's artistic/literary meaning, is more relevant for our purpose, expressing or bringing into prominence the individuality of the artist or author. Interestingly, the single word of 'subjectivity' moves into concepts with both negative and positive meanings – but the loading is on the negative side.

Indeed it is strange that subjectivism when explained does not have negative connotations. Subjectivism is understood as a doctrine that all knowledge is restricted to the conscious self and its, sensory states – a theory or doctrine that emphasises the subjective elements in experience, a theory that individual conscience is the only valid standard of moral judgment. (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*).

Social scientists and feminists perhaps vacillate between their negative and positive positions, and this vacillation has contributed to a great deal of ambivalence in feminist theorising on literary criticism. Subjectivity is also somehow connected to emotion which is dichotomised and contrasted with rationalism and reasons. Epistemological claims have succeeded in marginalising or excluding emotions. More precisely, Western social-science theories such as positivism and enlightenment theories, and Western philosophical traditions from Plato onwards are responsible to a great extent for the excluding emotions from Western epistemology. Rationality and reason are associated with the public, with an instrumental agency, with the physical and with the explicitly proven, seeable or knowable, whereas emotions are seen as impossible to prove, intangible, private, and not universal. The

former agencies are all attributes to the male self, and the latter to the female self.

Reason is objective and logical; therefore one concludes without ambivalence that reason is scientific, therefore superior. Reason and rationality demanded raw data under British empiricism and positivism, and connecting them both with natural science further devalued emotions. Western feminists have taken issue with this and have contested its gender implications. Women are required to be/are emotional. Posed against reason and rationality, emotions are subjective and not objective and therefore devalued, and therefore women's emotional subjectivity is also devalued. However, undervaluing or devaluing emotions is not part of a universal epistemological ontology.

Knowledge as understood by Eastern cultures carries an inclusiveness of emotions and subjectivities. Whether this is a situation common to Asia or South Asia one is not sure, but of the Tamil epistemological construction, emotions and subjectivities are very much a part. What is even more interesting is that men and masculinity are not excluded from emotions and subjectivities. An emotional man is not a devalued person. It is often appreciated that man is sensitive, concerned, loving and affectionate. In fact, there is a tradition of Bhakthi literature where devotion with subjective emotions is the main theme. Male authors have begged, cried, beseeched emotionally, or used soft words conveying deep emotions, to divinity in search of oneness. The metaphors and similes, idioms and phrases, are selectively used to convey deep emotions of love. This is not confined to religious experiences.

Through lovers in the Sangam literature the same scenario of human love is expressed. Men have two foremost qualities in their literary productions: construction of a unique heroism, and love and romance. Interestingly, in the experience of heroism there are a great deal of subjective emotions such as anger, pride and joy over valiant victories. In their literary production, subjective/objective emotion/rationality are not treated as exclusively feminine discourse or literary consciousness. Feminist literary criticism arose as a response to androgynous poetics, claims Showalter (1997: 60) that denied female literary consciousness. Is there a female literary consciousness apart and different from that of the men? If men too can write emotionally, does this still allow us to construct different and unique aesthetics, poetics or literary criticism for a feminine genre? During the phase of gynocritics, the study of women's writings gave way to gynesic in 1970s. The question whether there is a 'feminine' in philosophy and language is answered in the affirmative by the post-structuralist and psychoanalytical theories in combination. It is also argued that creative imagination is sexless (Gail Godwin and Cynthia Ozick) quoted in Showalter 1991: 61), and that subject matter is culturally determined and not gender-determined, imagination being genderless. These arguments are by themselves very biased. Imagination has necessarily to be grounded in a consciousness, and consciousness has necessarily to be grounded in our beings, which have identities, which are socially, culturally and historically determined. This is not a biological determination but something determined by how one is constructed, raised to what one has become, and what one has experienced under a gender category. This may well be applicable to categories of caste, class and race. The oppressed and suffering

consciousness has peculiar and particular expressions in choice of words and phrases and sentiments, metaphors and similes. It is certainly not a question of feminine irrationally, but feminine consciousness, like caste or class consciousness derived from experiences.

Would it not be difficult for a woman author to condemn Sita the heroine of Ramayana, to the fire to prove her chastity? However, this is not to create essentialist positions on the styles of writing or on the subjects. Authors of both genders with a radical perspective or with a cross-gender consciousness can cross boundaries. Female authors could very well write male-centric sentiments or give in to patriarchal norms in the name of culture, whereas Puthumai Pittan, a radical Tamil male writer, could very well write *Sapavimosanam* (see notes 6), a short story with feminist consciousness redeeming a so-called fallen woman. Abandoning any notions of sexist essentialism, we feel that the idea of female subjectivity should be focused more concretely in women's writing. Women's writing has to be seen in its heterogeneous diversity. The argument for feminine universalism, with which feminists were unduly concerned, has to be abandoned. Ethnicity, class, caste and race are important factors in creating differential self-images. The question whether all theories are equally applicable has to be tested on the writings under review, and theories cannot be applied in a vacuum or on assumptions, especially given what we have is in such a quantitative and qualitative mix. Such a proposition weighs equally on French, American or British feminist literary theories. While privileging subjectivity and emotions, we are not necessarily devaluing rationalism and reason.

Emotions to human beings are indispensable if we are to behave humanely and with humanism. Emotions are real, deep and have value, as love, sympathy, empathy, anger, compassion, irritation, shock, and fear. Any meaningful epistemology should constitute emotions as ways of expression and as equally demonstrable as reason and rationality. However, emotions have become linked culturally with women. Films, and print media and literary productions all have stereotypical cultural images of women as emotional; and in fact women are expected to behave with emotions such as love, passion, grief and sorrow whether momentarily or deeply to unrealistic levels, in order to prove their femininity. Emotions are consequently seen as private, domestic, whereas rationality is treated as public. As much as women who are not emotional are seen as culturally deviant, men who are emotional are also seen as culturally deviant and as atypical. Moreover, emotion, viewed as subjective, biased and irrational, is seen as a feminine quality – and thus devalued. However, there is a division in the kinds of emotions, out of which some are implicitly conceived of as masculine. Anger, irritation and shock are seen as masculine emotions inappropriate for women, not feminine emotions, thus they are not devalued or derogatorily viewed. They are mainly emotions tied up with heroism and violence, autonomy and expressions of fearless free will.

In arguing for and valorising subjectivity in women's writing, we want to bring into the debate the concept of autonomy. While autonomy is not within the reach of many women, being most of the time subjected to particular ways of talking, behaving and living as dictated a patriarchal culture – it would be appropriate to think

that in their writings they experience a source of autonomy and agency of self-expression. By being free to think, free to express, they constitute an agency within themselves. While saying this, we want to again reiterate that not all women question and challenge patriarchy or have a political commitment to combat patriarchy. Being women and female does not necessarily mean being feminist, and studying women's writing does not necessarily mean we are engaged in a feminist project. However, within this analysis one can still identify femininity as a 'position' which is marginalised by the patriarchal symbolic order, as femininity is described by Julia Kristeva (1984).

We would like to conclude this section by quoting of Teresa de Lauretis's definition of what we perceive as experience. When we speak of women's experience as different, it can be misinterpreted or in fact lead us into pitfalls of biological essentialism. Teresa de Lauretis (1984: 154) explains what is 'experience':

By experience, I do not mean the mere registering of sensory data, or a purely mental (psychological) relation to objects and events, or the acquisition of skills and competences by accumulation or repeated exposure. I use the term not in the individualistic, idiosyncratic sense of something belonging to one and exclusively her own even though others might have 'similar' experiences; but rather in the general sense of a process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality, and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, even originating in, oneself) those relations- material, economic, and interpersonal- which are in fact social and, in a larger perspective, historical. The process is continuous, its achievement unending or daily renewed. For each person, therefore, subjectivity is an ongoing

construction, not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one then interacts with the world. On the contrary, it is the effect of that interaction which I call experience, and thus it is produced not by external idea, values, or material causes, but by one's personal, subjective, engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning, and effect) to the events of the world.

What is being rejected is the binary oppositional placement of femininity as emotional and inferior and casting the masculinity of as rationale and superior. What we are arguing is a gendered specificity within the ungendered complex mix of rationality, emotion and subjectivity. Abandoning any notions of sexist essentialism, we feel that the idea of female subjectivity should be focused more concretely in women's writing. A note of caution is needed when emphasising the self in the subjectivity of women's writing. The pre-determined concept of her self should not be taken to extremes. Creativity and imaginations can traverse and transgress certain imposed limitations to blossom into unconventional literary canons. Besides, subversion, resistance and protest arising out of oppressed subjectivity can find outlets which would be outside the norm. These emotions could very well be the lateral components of subjectivity, hidden, as lived constructions. Is this then rationality or emotion? Can they both overlap, creating a phenomenon of emotional rationality? While not rejecting all the claims of the epistemology of modernity, feminist literary criticism should focus more carefully on gendered specificity.

2

*The First Tamil Woman Novelist:
Radical Beginnings*

The first Tamil novel in Sri Lanka was written in 1885, and the first Tamil woman's novel appeared 29 years later in 1914 published by the Christian Literary Society in Madras, India (C. L. S. Madras). That novelist was Mangalanayagam Thambiah, and the name of the novel, *Norungunda Itayam* (Broken Heart). Her class position was definitely an advantage for her. The fact that both her father and husband were men of letters and outstanding lawyers of the day were contributory factors to her achievements. We have no information about her education, but there is evidence that she was literate both in Tamil and English and was well acquainted with Tamil literature. Perhaps she was tutored at home. It appears that she developed her literary talents in her home and through her

connections with American missionaries (Sivalingarajah, 1996: iii). She has also authored another novel called *Ariyamalar*, which was serialised in *Utayatarakai* during the 1930s and published in Malaya during the period she lived there with her husband. We also know that she has to her credit a collection of articles called *Anupavakalanjiam* (The Storehouse of Experiences), which we were unable to trace. There is evidence to show that this book was translated into English by her husband Issac Thambiah, and was published in 1892 (Teliwatta Joseph, *Virakesari* 16/01/2000). *Norungunda Itayam* was published in a second edition by the Jaffna College Study Centre in 1996, the contents retrieved from the tattered and worn-out pages of a single available copy owned by the Bishop of Jaffna, Revd. Jebanesan. It was edited by Sivalingarajah, of the Department of Tamil, University of Jaffna, and was published in 1966. This novel has not merited much attention from the Tamil literary circles except sporadic mentions as a first novel by a Tamil woman.

The novel is set on a historical terrain and exposes certain facets of British colonial administration, which demanded explicit complicity to their style of governance. The heroine's father, it was alleged, was dismissed from government service because he refused to comply with the unjust colonial system.

The book provides incidental information about things like: the process of Christianisation, the American Missionaries, the demand for English education of the Tamil middle class, who set sail to study in the English medium in Calcutta, and the stagnant economy of the Northern Province that was dependent on trade with Kerala for the sale of tobacco.

The narrative of *Norungunda Itayam* is set within the parameters of the caste system and its rules of strict endogamous patterns of marriage, the dowry system, and the inheritance of property (*mutusam*), that were common practices at that time. However, we get no information from this novel about girls' education at that time, when the first girls' boarding school in Sri Lanka was set up in Uduvil(1824). Still, there are indeed some references to some patriarchal assumptions which deny a selfhood for women. Proverbs are strewn through out the text by the author, to prove a point or two. The novel is set around Kanmany, the protagonist, who is a typical humble woman. Her father's friend, who disapproved of his daughter's choice of a mate, asked rhetorically:

Do women have their independent voice?

There is no one who is more foolish than one who listens to the advice of a woman.

Can one build a shelter, for a goat where the goats want it done?
(p.59)

However, these are the proverbial utterances of the men in the novel, who the author perhaps wants to characterise as typical men of the society. But the characterisation of the women does not subscribe to the so-called proverbial wisdom of the times – and whether these trends and traits can be interpreted as a possible constructions of only a woman author, is a pertinent question. One is confronted with this question throughout when we analyse the women characters of the novel.

Ponmany, who is the friend of the protagonist is a very assertive character who has her own will on major matters. She is a very decisive and principled woman. She argued convincingly with her parents as to why she should marry the man of her choice. Her arguments are based on principles of honesty and integrity (p. 62). She is truthful to the last. She does not, like the present-day heroines of Tamil films, cry or weep and wail but expresses her desire to marry the man of her choice. She only says that, having given her word to a man that she will marry him, she has to be true to her word and cannot go against her word. Finally, when the parents arranged a marriage and wanted to force it on her, she goes away with the man of her choice on the day of the wedding. Through out her relationship with her lover, she exhibits a mind of her own, as distinct with desires and aspirations of her own, having a sense of worldly wisdom, courage and straightforwardness. (p. 76, 86). In the two letters she wrote to her lover, she made the decisions, which the man was willing to accept as sensible. Her language is one of reason, rationality and logic (p. 62, 184), not the emotional prattling which usually characterise the female protagonist in modern novels as feminine sensibilities. She advised her friend Kanmany who suffered at the hands of an incompatible and violent husband, to give up on her husband, leave him, and get back to her parents with her children(p. 184). She is prepared to turn a blind eye to public opinion. Within the Tamil cultural milieu in which she has been brought up, to elope with her boyfriend would have been viewed as a violation of the cultural values of a middle-class home.

Ponmany explained herself thus:

It is doubtful that the public (world) would view me as (a) virtuous (woman); a few would view my behaviour as bad. But I did what was right, just and according to my conscience". (p. 85).

Kanmany, the heroine, was throughout presented as a humble and passive woman who was prepared to tolerate and live with an unkind and violent husband. But not for too long. One day she walked out on him. Her characterisation is also not totally within the traditional mould. She planned her escape silently and did it with conviction. The ideology of motherhood was set aside in that she left her two young children with her husband and went away to her parents, where she was welcomed and accepted by both her parents and her brother, who showered his affection on her. No one chided her for her behaviour, for leaving her husband or children. The author gives us an implicit message through this scenario. It is a woman's right to make a choice, and it is a woman's right to discontinue an unhappy marriage. The parents and brothers have to stand by her, and give her strength.

Kanmany's portrayal as a mother raises a few questions. That she was able to leave the children behind and walk out of her home questions the very ideology of motherhood. Motherhood has over the centuries created an ideological burden on women, with roles that combine virtue, sacrifice, and maternal love. It is always presented as a woman's destiny. Its conceptualisation centres around a range of roles, activities, expectations, duties and obligations – the violations of which make a woman un-feminine.

She becomes an object of hate and ridicule and a cultural deviant. In most of the novels and short stories, the mothers and wives are made to suffer till the last, till the husbands are reformed. They do not have alternatives to the prescribed domestic role of wife/mother (Dutta, Sangeeta 1990: WS-84-94). But Mangalanayagam's portrayal of the mother is as one without the ideology of motherhood, a woman with her own ideology. There is a transgression of gender ideology in her novel.

This is not all – when Kanmany was with her husband still, the women around her, the mother-in-law and her husband's cousin, sympathise with her, console her, take her side of the argument and advise her. The mother-in-law is very untypical. Whenever her son beat Kanmany and reprimanded with harsh words, she always consoled her daughter-in-law. She would go as far as to chide her son and not any further. But the young Thangammah, who is a cousin of Kanmany's husband, was bolder and more productive. It was she who finally convinced Kanmany to go to her parents and assured her that she will help her. She advised Kanmany to divorce the husband through the courts of law. She made a very interesting statement.

What is the British system for? Isn't it there to dispense with law and justice? So take legal action against your husband and your brother will stand by you in all your decisions (p. 117).

Divorce through the customary laws of Jaffna would usually have been the legal procedure adopted, but that the British system of justice and rule of law seemed to have made an impact on the

consciousness of Jaffna society is the message one gets through the above conversation.

Thangammah convinced Kanmany:

You are a fool to suffer like this. You have become bait for your husband. Suffering for nothing. What is the need for you to live with a husband who doesn't love you, who oppresses you?(p. 120)

Thangammah's efforts finally had their effect. Kanmany agreed to work towards divorce proceedings legally and seek her brother's help. She thought aloud:

Only through a divorce can I seek happiness for my children and me.(p. 121)

Thangammah intervenes in the private and intimate side of her friend's family quite naturally. There is no suggestion that the family is a holy institution, a private realm of spouses, that whatever happens within it has to be sorted out and solved by those who are in it. The author has treated this very boldly, considering the patriarchal and the socio-cultural milieu of the times. Having problematised the ideology of motherhood, the author goes as far as to question the sanctity of the family. Kanmany left the family. By leaving the family she also crossed the walls of certain boundaries – the boundaries of protection, the boundaries constructed for 'womanly' virtues such as feminine behaviour, wifely duties, and codes of chastity.

Furthermore, not only the women but also the men are sympathetic to her. Kanmany's father, brother, Thangammah's

husband, and Ponmany's boyfriend's friend, who helps Ponmany and her boyfriend to elope, all engaged in activities, attitudes and thoughts dissimilar to the norm. They accepted the separation and the divorce in a matter-of-fact manner, helped Kanmany out of the oppressive marriage, sympathised with her, and criticized the institution of marriage, as it turns sour. But the author does not present these as breaking of traditions or as part of any modernity that has influenced Jaffna society. In fact modernity is not dichotomised with tradition with the latter as bad and having to be altered. The progressive trends are treated as part of normal behaviour, and we read them as universal human kindness and understanding between and among people for whose advantage institutional codes and norms should work. An argument is presented very succinctly and subtly that injustices need not be tolerated, however much they are embedded in our cultural institutions.

The author, as indicated from her husband's and father's names, must have been a Christian, yet there is no hint that Christian westernisation or modernisation was responsible for the attitudes represented by these characters.

But Christianity does enter the scenario – but through another channel. The protagonist, whose "heart was broken," as the novel was titled, met with the American missionaries on house-visit conversion missions. Kanmany being depressed and downhearted, confused and troubled, was vulnerable enough to listen and internalise all the compassionate and sympathetic words of the 'father'. However, at the end of the novel, before her death, she

became a convinced Christian and succeeded in converting some of the family members. This is also part of history that can be reconstructed: the determination with which the missionaries went about the conversion process, and when one member in the family became a Christian others did fall in line, though this was not the case all the time. Some family members remained Hindus, while others were converted in the schools and elsewhere. Whether the author had a religious agenda in the making of the novel remains an open question.

We want to stress the fact that though patriarchy is criticised and feminist consciousness is portrayed through the conversations among the characters, this is not portrayed as a revolutionary challenge, but as part of loving human kinship relations and caring and nurturing sentiments. But there is no passivity and sentimentalism in the way this is expressed; the conversations carried out are with logic and reason. The characters show courage and boldness. Logic and reason is not a masculine language here. They come easily and naturally to women as part of their consciousness. That this novel was not read by many and not reviewed is the sad part.

The author employed a clever ploy to discuss and dismiss some misogynist thoughts that were rampant in Tamil literature. Not hearing from Ponmany for some time, the lover was disturbed. He heard of a rumour that Ponmany's marriage was being arranged, with the man being chosen by her father. His friend visited him, and he discussed with him the rumour. Under the circumstance, he believed the rumour to be correct and quoted a poem, which

spelled out in detail the nature of the fickle-minded woman who cannot be trusted:

*You can trust poison, the deep river, the cyclone,
The elephant in rut, the murderous tiger, death,
The thief and the murderous hunter,
But if you trust a woman (clad in sari)
You will be on the streets
Confused, suffering and perplexed. (p. 151).*

However, the friend to whom this poem was quoted, dismissed this as empty prattling, and the story unfolds to the contrary, that there was no truth in the judgment passed on her.

There is indeed a need to place the novel *Norunganda Itayam* and its author Managanayagam Thambiah historically in terms of time and place in terms of the books radical contents. A comparison with other novels in the subcontinent that share a common cultural and political heritage would be a fruitful exercise. Most of the Tamil novels of the period in colonial regions differ in the way they handled the same themes. They usually embodied the *natkunam* – the four-fold virtues of a Tamil woman. The message had been always that these have to be upheld and essentially cultivated for the sustenance of the family and for the peaceful functioning of the household. Intense and continuous patience in the face of marital suffering is part of the four-fold virtues upheld as an extension of the concept of chastity and fidelity. The Tamil novels of this period always defined a good woman within such a characterisation. A good woman was the signifier of a series of collective concepts, which include the four-fold qualities. Whereas, in Bengali novels, the

ideology of motherhood was reinvigorated towards the project of nationalism. In Bengal there was a coming together of two ideologies. There was a specific phase of Indian history during which motherhood was given an enormous importance to lend force to nationalism (Bagchi, 1990: 65).

Religious cultural and the aesthetic domain were politicized with the help of the notion of motherhood. This was specially facilitated by the ideological aspect of motherhood (Bagchi, 1990: 68)

That motherhood was all along glorified was in fact true of much of the literature of Indian languages including Tamil.

Thus, *Norungunda Itayam* was an exception to the rule. The mother is treated first as an individual whose rights to peaceful existence is violated in the family, and she therefore seeks liberation. Second, the individual woman/wife/mother chooses to leave behind the child, which implies, while she has to take action towards her own liberation, the child is the husband's as much as hers and he has also to take care of the child. The ideology of motherhood is implicitly challenged here.

What is even more significant is the absence in Sri Lanka of historical developments parallel to Indian Nationalist Movements. Militant or Gandhian Nationalism was not part of Sri Lankan history. Hence, literature of the colonial period in Sri Lanka was not overtly nationalistic.

Another aspect of the colonial literature in Bengal was the combination of the notion of indigenous femininity with nationalism. Patriotic themes in Bengal literature picked up the woman figure and invested the ideal patriot with her qualities or reconstructed feminine roles and duties and conceptualised the familial universe with the nationalist enterprise. Consequently the nation was sacralised and feminised (Sarkar, 1987: 2011).

Mangalanayagam's novel was not patriotic or nationalistic. Neither were motherhood and femininity glorified in it, and hence motherhood and nationalism could not combine to produce a new colonial ideology like in Bengal or India. These are some of the significant factors which merit attention when we examine *Norungunda Itayam* from a historically specific period during which time the woman as signifier had differential connotations across the region.

The author wrote another novel some years later in 1938, but it does not appear to have been completed. This novel titled *Ariyamalar* after the name of the heroine, was serialised in *Udayatarakai* from 26 August 1938 to 29 September 1939, running into nine chapters. *Udayatarakai* was a fortnightly publication printed in Jaffna. *Ariyamalar* ended abruptly.

It is difficult to analyse an incomplete novel in terms of its literary merit and worth. However, Mangalanayagam Thambiah also left her stamp in her second novel. The use of proverbs and quotations from ancient Tamil literature are again evident. Her style is lucid. She engaged in long descriptive passages where she talked about foreign land and seaports through the protagonists. This

novel is again a testimony to the presence of history in literature. It also documents a special feature of the lives of the people. For the Jaffna people, English education opened the doors for administrative jobs both within and outside Sri Lanka. There was a pattern in this phenomenon. Tamils migrated to Malaya and Singapore, which was one country then and a British colony where there was a need for the English educated. Mangalanayagam Thambiah documented the migration of the protagonist to Penang and then to Singapore seeking employment. An equally important factor in the social formation of the Jaffna peninsular was, - the conversion to Christianity of the middle class, for the sake of English education. The upward social mobility of the people that followed conversions was enhanced by seeking employment and abandoning their traditional occupation of farming. The arid dry lands of Jaffna were not at all an incentive to continue with their traditional occupation with no promise of upward social mobility. It is to the credit of Mangalanayagam Thambiah that she placed her characters in a socially realistic setting, having comprehended the implications of migration.

The novel starts with the ship journey of the protagonist Segarasan, a devout Christian, who had mixed feelings and ambivalence, struggling between the guilt of leaving the mother country, and hopes of a bright future. When he arrived in Penang, called the Prince of Wales Island, he managed to get employment as a private tutor to an Englishman's children. He met his cousin *Ariyamalar*, whose family had migrated a few years ago from Ceylon, and the two families had lost touch with each other during the migration. He also met *Ariyamalar's* half-sister, who was

proposed as a marriage partner for him. He could not decide. With his contemplation, the 9th chapter ends.

We could not trace *Anupavakalangiam*, which is a collection of articles. It is claimed that both *Ariyamalar* and *Anupavakalangiam* were published in Malaya in 1921, and the latter was translated into English by her husband and published in 1922 (Teliwatte Joseph, Virakesari 16/1/2000).

3

*Non-Fiction:
Sociological and Political Writings*

This section deals with women's writing that are not imaginary fiction but those grounded in socio political reality. However, among the literature that was reviewed from the many journals and weeklies that were published during the colonial period (total of 116 weeklies indexed in the National Archives), women's contributions are pathetically few in number. What is stranger however, is that the women who have written have done so only once - and never again do we see their contributions. One is not at a loss to understand this phenomenon in terms of possible reasons: did marriage and motherhood intervene to cripple their creativity?

Ms Thaiyalnayagi Subramaniam wrote a small piece, 31 May 1929 in *Utayatarakai*, on Tamil women of Ceylon. Short and precise, this essay is very informative divided into small sections with subtitles such as "History," "Religion" and "Education." To record a glimpse of history and the sense of history that this woman deployed, we will give some of the information as it appears in this short essay.

Tamil women though mainly living in the island in the North and Eastern provinces, some have now settled in the Western and Central Provinces. Originally they were all saivites, but some converted into Christianity, due to their poverty or out of conviction. Hence, we see some Christian women also. *Saivasidhanta* is seen as the greatest and the most popular philosophy (see note 5). Saivites speak their language very clearly, and in a different dialect from their Indian sisters whose language is corrupted. These women speak 'pure' Tamil. Those who are conversant in the English language also customarily speak 'pure' Tamil. Eighty years ago they were all illiterate but Western teachers and the missionaries who set up schools gave them the opportunity to study. However, due to the attitude of the missionaries, education spread not horizontally but only to the Christian women. Therefore those who have studied up to the higher grades are mostly Christian women, with Hindu women not equalling their numbers. However, the Hindus have also set up schools and it is expected that these levels of disparity will be soon corrected. The Hindu women have generally not been as keen as the Christian women in their education. There is a special school built in Chunnakam called Ramanathan College, for Hindu women interested in education.

These women are few in number and even they stop their education after marriage. Then they become the 'playthings' (dolls) of their husbands.

I have reproduced in translation of Thiyalnayaki's essay for historical information. It is a record of a part of the history of Jaffna Tamil women's education and the patriarchal constraints imposed, while conversion patterns necessitated the breaking of some constraints. There was a twin process that historians have noted: first to become Christians (Christianisation), which necessitated a particular type of knowledge dissemination; leading to the second process of becoming educated. Education gave them a social status and provided means for upward socio-economic mobility. Men and women became victims of conversion. Some of them remained Christians with conviction but many of them later reconverted to Saivism. Thiyalnayaki's essay corroborates this, while throwing more light on the gender implications of the education process among the Tamils of Sri Lanka.

A short essay by Mrs N. Annapooraniammah from Navali (Jaffna) has a long title: "The Heroic Woman of Tamil Nadu, the Goddess of Pattini, and Celebrated by the Sinhalese, the Singularly Significant Kannakithevy" (*Tamil Nattin Vira Matar: Singalavar Kontatutum "Pattini" Teivam, Kannaki Thevyin Taniperum SIRRAPPU*). Published - 4 June 1933 in *Virakesari*, this displayed an intimate knowledge of ancient *Sangam* literature, the author dwelling on the epic story of Silapathikaram. Emphasis is given not only to the great virtue of chastity but also to her greatness, heroism, and determination with which she argues her case to establish

justice and inflict punishment on the errant king and his citizens. She mentions that many temples were built in Jaffna for Kannaki, and the Pattini worship had become popular among the Sinhalese too. An important feature of this short essay is how the author culls⁷ sociological and historical information using a literary text as her source material.

Social Thoughts of Women in the Colonial Period

The weekly *Eelakesari*, published in Jaffna in the 1930s was voiced progressive and radical sentiments. Often it took up issues of caste and engaged in a women's rights discourse. The members of the radical Youth Congress of Jaffna shaped its content and presentation. The 1938 annual number of *Eelakesari* had four women writing on various issues. Two wrote on women's rights, one on education, and another on literature. It appears that the editor had sought out those women and requested them to contribute to the annual number.

Ranee Paul's contribution was "*Vocational Education in Japan*," an article that gives an overview of the educational system in Japan while also criticizing the Sri Lankan system, emphasizing its shortcomings. Children in Japan were not pushed into Cambridge Senior or London Matriculation, as they were in Ceylon. She argued that, children's education should be designed according to their aptitudes and abilities and should be built on children's talents. She argued for a Japanese model where 75% of the students join vocational education courses such as weaving, agriculture, aerospace trade, commerce, and iron work. She marvelled at the

specially designed courses for disabled children. Ms Rani Paul, it is interesting to note, was a Vice-Principal of Methodist College, Colombo, and sister of Prof. R. H. Paul of the faculty of Engineering in the University of Colombo, from a Christian family. She was one of the members of the delegation that visited Japan in 1938 on an educational tour from Sri Lanka.

M. Mangalammal, identified her as the editor of *Thamil Makal*. ('Tamil Women,' idiomatically referred to as 'Tamil Daughters'), in an article she wrote for the *Eelakesari* annual number in 1938. The essay in the *Eelakesari* annual number, titled *Noble Powers of Femininity*, by Mangalammal (*Penmaiyyin Uttamasakti*) falls easily into the traditional mould of Tamil definitions of femininity. Bordering on a kind of cultural feminism, she praised women's powers and capacity for tolerance, sacrifice, purity, honesty, and courage.

Mangalammal argued that as long as the men are beastly and unchaste, women should cultivate those virtues to save humanity. She was not against women demanding equal rights but against women demanding that men share their duties. She indulged in a kind of women's rights discourse for Tamil women while remaining within the definition of Tamil femininity such as chastity and the noble four-fold virtues, (see note 8) such as bashfulness fear, and ignorance. She, however, advocated education for women. She was against Western dress and "Western vocations" such as driving. Her ideology held an ambivalent nationalism that was in vogue at the time. Family, household and motherhood for women were included in her agenda for women's rights. She engaged in a spiritual

discourse with an included agenda that called for, greatness and nobility within traditional definitions of 'good femininity'. She was happy to give more social and family responsibilities to women as she believed women to have innate good qualities, while the men could not be trusted and had to be guided to lead good lives.

It is interesting to note that two of the women writers in the *Eelakesari* presented themselves with their educational qualifications, and one as the editor of *Tamil Mahal* (the first Tamil women's journal). Miss V. Parameswary, who had undertaken a literary discourse and was a *Pala panditai* (a qualification bestowed after doing a junior course in Tamil studies) while Mrs T. Vetanayaki, who in fact engaged in lengthy feminist discourse, was a Pandit from the University of Madurai. Equally interesting is the fact that all except Ranee Paul, who was a Christian, have used their maiden names and not connected their names with those of husbands or fathers; two of them were married and one not. It would be interesting to go back into our history to ascertain when exactly the shift took place when women started using their married names or their father's names. It was a change effected after Christianisation and westernization during the colonial period.

Vetanayaki's "Womenfolk in Chains"

Mrs T. Vetanayaki, Tamil Pandit from the University of Madurai (India) as she referred to herself titled her article *Penn Makkal Vilanku*, "Women-folks in Chains". Vetanayaki's comprehension of the 'Woman Question' is commendable, especially when one places her arguments against the point of view

of contemporary feminist discourse. It would be appropriate to present some of the more pertinent issues she raised in her long essay. Her main arguments are given below in translation and with headings.

Gender vs. Caste

Control over women is more significant an issue than even untouchability. Women are worse off than the untouchables, and in every family women are traumatised by the sickness of oppression. In every family girls belong to a lower caste and the boys to the high caste enjoying freedom.

Since caste and 'untouchability' were issues that merited socio-political attention during this period, Vetanayaki chose the analogy of the caste system:

Men have appropriated education, politics, and even religion to themselves and have deprived women of many things in life such as knowledge, politics, autonomy, health, service to the nation, fame and pleasure. Women of yore were fighters riding vehicles, acquired knowledge, acted as messengers between kings, roamed between villages and regions, moved freely with men, and took part in musical and dance activities.

Reference is made here to Jhanse Ranee, Chittor Ranee Padmini and Avvai, the great and dynamic poet of the Sangam period.

What, is our plight today? Why are we like this? We are not exposed to other peoples' cultures. We are controlled and oppressed. We are given the wrong kind of an education.

The dowry system, incorrect attitudes to child-rearing and household labour, restraints exercised at the level of the family – these are some of the other issues discussed in her essay. She even posed the question,

When did we come to accept this state of affairs?

We need liberation. What is liberation? [She defines liberation.] Whether man or woman, the freedom to do whatever he/she wants without in anyway contravening the norms set for good behaviour – is what is meant by liberation.

She draws another analogy between the superpowers and the poor countries:

When the superpowers oppress our countries, the men are agitated but they do not realise that they themselves are oppressing the women.

The parents deck their daughters with jewels and treat them like dolls, give them dowries and get them married, while the men are happy to get a slave to serve them. The slave is even accompanied by wealth to enable them to lead happy and prosperous lives. They seek not educated women but women with dowries. She charges the parents who choose to collect wealth, with giving dowry but no education for their daughters.

Finally they give away the daughter to foolish men. She then succumbs to the man's authority.

Gender and Politics, Gender and Class, Double Standards of Morality

Though we have the right to vote we have no right to exercise that right. We have no politicians among women. We, women do not realise that we have the right and to exercise that right we do not know the means, the ways.

There is also an interesting discourse on class and gender. Vetanyaki was aware of the fact that there were indeed women who were rich and enjoyed the material things in life, possessing expensive dogs, going to movies and beaches – but of what worth is their life, she queried, when they have no freedom to express their desires?. They have no freedom to move with learned men and women. They have to eat whatever is left over by the men. They are compelled to dress for others' sake. The poor women, who have no power, are deprived of education.

When chastity is violated those who are responsible for such violations later blame the women and ridicule them. The victims and not the violators are penalised. If women are violated the onus should be on the men, but it is the women who suffer more.

Laws, Education and Separate Women's Organisation

If women are not liberated, how can the country be liberated? We have to strive to do away with those unjust laws that oppress women. Whatever happens we want freedom. What do we expect from society? Women's Institutions should be set up. We should be given comprehensive education for our upliftment, knowledge in various disciplines, vocational training, and also training in home sciences. The poor women and destitute women should be enrolled in these institutions. Single women should take over the running of these institutions. There should be women's journals. Libraries should be set up and each household should receive newspapers and journals. There should be special sections for education and health (in the newspapers and journals), likewise space should be allocated for women's issues. In the libraries (in each section) there should be one woman to represent women's interests. Women should be sent abroad for education. As an interim measure women should be given priority over men to hold responsible positions. Women should organise women's groups and they should hold women's conferences. These (which I recommend now) should be enforced by law.

Household Labour

There is also a discourse on household labour. The tedious, repetitive and hard work that women do in the kitchen, sitting for long hours in front of the fire merited attention. She argues that this work destroys women and affects their health.

Therefore cooking should be simplified. Let us make only small meals and cooked food can be substituted with fruits. Let us use few utensils and have a simple dinner around 6 p.m. so that we can have enough time to rest and live healthily. Let us not waste time unnecessarily on sewing and dressing up our children. Let us dress simply and we will realise how fruitful this will be. We can read books (instead of wasting time on cooking, sewing and dressing up children.)

Call to Young Girls

Young girl children, throw away your needles and thread. You are playful little girls. You should take to spinning like Gandhi. The restriction and control imposed on you are waiting to destroy you like poisonous snakes. Rise up to kill them now. Form girls' groups and act. Education is very important for women's liberation.

Though young in age you can handle great responsibilities, form a students' union. You can even take responsibility in Women's Organisations. Study hard. Don't falter in morals. Purity and education are needed for women's liberation.

There is also a call for the men to join the struggle – asking them to help women towards a social transformation and for the removal of the structures controlling women.

The Struggle

We are in distress, but we are not enjoying the fruits of our struggles. We have to undergo (further) distress, and suffer dishonour to struggle for our freedom. Are we not suffering now, then why can't we suffer to get our freedom? It is even good to die for that cause. Can we use a dirty container and not wash it because we will get the dirt on our hands? We only have to wash our hands later. If we fear dishonour there is no going forward. The more we give in, the more the authoritative structures will drown us. We cannot go on appeasing a society that is power hungry. Why should we succumb to the system that is controlling our honour, our dignity?

Our conscience is telling us to protest and rebel. We are not logs of wood. Our own fathers, brothers, sons, husbands, friends and elder sisters, who should be helping us are the ones who are telling us that it's our destiny- the laws are smeared with injustice. How angry and frustrated we are, and how much hatred we generate when we realise that men show us love only to satisfy their desires. It is only to prevent this kind of hatred growing in us that we are being taught (instructed) to believe that satisfying men is our duty. Therefore we should realise that those who are prepared to give us complete freedom within the brother-sister, father-daughter, mother-child relationship, are our comrades and friends. Our capacities are limited. We do not function beyond certain limits. Energies are constrained. Half of our women are like sick patients in the families. We are like bad omens. Let us get together women; let us ask for counseling

from our national leaders (Gandhi and Rajaji - see notes 9). Let us fight for our freedom. We will ask the girl-children to join forces with us. We are great people. What is the role of great people? Not slavery and service? Love without knowledge is poison. To provide tasty food to others, let us not destroy unjustly our bodies and minds. Let us not make them lazy and let us not be deceived by young men.

Often the author talks of a principle of renunciation for women. Remaining a single woman seems to be a very attractive position to her. Reading between the lines, where Vetanayaki has laid bare a series of denials, discrimination and the different kinds and levels of the oppressive structures that affect women, one gets the impression that she is suggesting true liberation for women will become a reality only by women remaining single, by not getting entangled in matrimony. Indeed there is a tradition for women to remain single, and lead a life of austerity or to become religious or do social service. Some of the Tamil poets like Avvai, Aandal, and Karaikalammayar and other Indian poets like Meera and Acca Mahadevi, rejected matrimony and became great poets. Some of their writings can be classified as protest poems. The *Teri Gatha* poems, of the Buddhist nuns, are also seen as full of protest sentiments. A few of them condemned household labour as oppressive. Vetanayaki's quest, to renounce the world and remain single is perhaps reflective of these trends of thought.

The First Tamil Journal

Thamil Makal was published in 1923, perhaps the first women's journal in Sri Lanka. It is indeed difficult to ascertain the kind of gender equality and gender sensitivity that this journal adhered to, as copies of this journal were difficult to obtain. In the National Archives there was only one single issue, co-edited by Mrs M. Mangalaammal and Miss M. Puvanesvarithevy. There are indications that the authors were influenced by the first wave of feminism in India and by the Indian nationalist movement. There are clearly inherent contradictions in the views expressed in this issue. Chaste women and worship of husbands are explained rationally, while the very radical views of the revolutionary poet Subramaniam Bharatiar are also forcefully expressed (p. 15, 21). Femininity, with its subservient and servile attitudes, and compassion, and the great qualities of chastity are praised both in the editorial and other articles, and the authors want other women to draw from the principle of *shakthi* (p.16, 31). The article on *Pennulakam* (A Woman's World) is very typical of these contradictions. It advocates education for women, praises ancient Tamil women whose primary virtue was chastity, condemns those women who demand equality like the women of the external world (meaning the Western world). The author urged that the greatest service is service to God Siva and admonished women for demanding equality of rights.

That Mangalammal, the editor of *Thamil Makal*, has come under the influence of Gandhian nationalism is evident from her writings. Nationalism implicitly has a project to glorify national

culture, national religion, and national languages. Within these the cultural image of woman as the feminine Eastern or Asian person also gets connected. Hence, *Thamil Makal* also subscribed to such ideology while also simultaneously mobilising women to organise for political rights. It is interesting to note that *Norungunda Itayam*, as literature written in 1914, is totally different from *Thamil Makal* of the 1920s and 1930s.

1930 was the period of incipient nationalism in Ceylon though it was not as vibrant as Indian nationalism. It would appear that Mangalammal is the product of an age when femininity as embodying the national had to be upheld against the Western woman as part of the project of nationalism. This is very much similar to the trends we identified in Bengali and Tamil novels in India during the same period.

Herself given to simplicity and sober manners, Mangalammal carried on her campaign. Despite all the limitations one can see in her writings, it cannot be denied that she was actively engaged in organising women and also encouraging women to take up social issues and work for a better society. Besides advocating education for women, she encouraged women to take up to politics. About the co-editor Puvanavarithevi, we have no further information apart from the fact that she edited this particular journal along with Mangalammal.

Political Writings

Dr. Nallamah Satia Vageeswara Iyer

First and foremost, Dr. Nallamah Satia Vageeswara Iyer has to be acknowledged for her contribution towards women being granted the right to vote in 1928. She was an old girl of Vembadi Girls High School, studying in Cambridge later. She served in McLeod Hospital in Inuvil, Jaffna. She met Dr Mary Rutnam at the hospital, and was influenced by Dr Rutnam's attitude to social service and politics. She had published a series of articles in the Tamil weekly *Ilankai Indian* (See notes 10) (Ceylon Indian) under her maiden name Dr S. Nallammah and within brackets it read [Dr (Mrs) Nallammah Satia Vagiswarar]. From her writings we can identify two streams of thought.

First, she was involved in raising the political consciousness of the women in country, especially the Tamil women.

Second, she believed that women should engage in and enter into politics.

Dr. Nallammah was an active member of Ceylon Women's Franchise Association. She was one of those responsible for taking the initiative to organise women to meet the Donoughmore Commissioners (see notes) to give evidence.

She contributed a series of articles to *Ilankai Indian* (see notes 10). Those published on 25 July and 3 and 10 October 1928 are important for various reasons. They give us a bit of history both in terms of the political thought and the women's movement in the

country. Two essays are titled "Women and Franchise." She welcomed the grant of universal adult suffrage by the Donoughmore Commission (see notes 11), which in fact gave political equality to women. Then she goes on to define and explain the concept of universal adult franchise and its role and function in representative democracy. She argued that the right to vote is in fact based on the concept of independence. She was not happy that the commissioners initially fixed the age limit for women at 30, while for men the right to vote could be exercised at the age of 21.

Why should women be given the right to vote?

The question sounds rhetorical, but Dr. Nallammah gave not one answer but many. The arguments she put forward merit attention. They resonate with the arguments of contemporary feminists' demand for more women in parliament and in other political positions of leadership. She said that issues such as infant mortality, the general health conditions of members of the family are fundamental to women's experiences and can only be articulated by women:

Therefore, women alone can speak about them in the legislature; even in the economic sphere, women are affected in many ways. When we look at the various issues, we feel that women should be given the right to speak out and contribute to the development of the country.

Dr. Nallammah also gave statistical information that out of 1000 babies born in Ceylon in 1928, 172 have died, while in England and Wales the infant mortality rate was only 86 from 1924 - 25.

The essay of 3 October is historically even more important. While throwing some light on the political consciousness of the author, the essay narrates the history of the Ceylon Women's Franchise Association and the socio-political conditions prevalent at the time. The Franchise Association, she said was formed in 1927. The "Constitutional reformers" who were in Ceylon during that period, went round interviewing people from various sectors and got to know people's views and recommendations, but surprisingly only men were consulted and women did not take part for some time.

Perhaps the commissions would have thought that the women of Ceylon have abdicated their work to men and that the women are leading a disinterested life, not taking an interest in national issues.

She explained:

We heard that many men have put forward a claim that it is not an intelligent move to grant the right to vote to women. We thought that this is the opportune moment ("Women and the Right to Vote, Recommendations of the Commissioners." Ilankai Indian, 25 July 1928.) that we have been waiting for when we thought the time had come, we formed the Franchise Association.

This is indeed a bold historic statement. One of the men referred to here (as having said that it was a foolish move) is Ponnambalam Ramanathan, who said on 8 November 1928, in State Council.

Women's right to vote is a stinking affair. Granting the right to women will lead to mob-rule. Please leave our women alone. You would not understand why by God's will they are in an inferior status; women's entire lives and attention should be around their homes. There is no world beyond that, don't ever let them cross the (boundary) of household responsibilities.

This is Dr Nallammah's statement in response to the above statement of Sir P. Ramanathan:

We did not stop at that. We met with the Commissioner and put forward our views concerning the major drawbacks in our national system. After extensive inquiries they agreed with our views and the position we have taken. We were confident that they would recommend the right to vote for the women. As expected, the Commission recommended that women in Sri Lanka should be given the right to vote. If we remained inactive we would not have got this right, but since we worked with dedication, we obtained our rights.

Not content with only the right, she argued how important it was that the right to vote had to be used judiciously, and how the Ceylon Women's Franchise Association had embarked on a project to explain to voters the implications of the political rights won, what they mean and how they should be used:

We have to have a sense of responsibility, with the right to vote we have to get interested in national issues.

The booklet published by the Ceylon Women's Franchise Association on "Women and the Right to Vote" in English, was translated by Dr. Nallammah into Tamil and serialised in *Ilangai Indian* for the benefit of the Tamil voters.

In her long essay on women and the right to vote, Dr. Nallammah gave very analytical insights into the political discourse of the time, identifying the pros and cons of the Donoughmore Commission recommendations and her own point of view. Whether, one has property or not, is educated or not, they have been given their right to vote, to select the representatives to govern them. She saw this as a national right.

Dismissing the argument that women will neglect the home if they enter politics, Dr Nallammah posed the question:

What about men? Does that mean that men by becoming politicians will abdicate their interest in the non-political part of their lives? Do they then become totally indifferent towards their children and withdraw their affection from them?

The persuasive radicalism that Dr Nallammah exhibited in this long essay, however, is missing in another essay titled "Indian Household/Family" (*Indian Illvalkkai* July 4 and 11, 1928). One does not have to look far to find the reasons for the absence of the same objectivity. This essay is in response to Katherine Mayo's racist polemics against the Indian cultural system. In trying to defend India's socio-economic structures and the Indian family, which are regardless hierarchical, patriarchal and caste based,

Nallammah engaged in defensive polemics. She tried to challenge the an inferiorised 'other,' constructed by Mayo through trying to defend and legitimise the problematic aspects of Indian culture, explaining the functional roles they play. Falling into a stance of defensive nationalism, she goes to the extent of defending Indian family structures and household patterns as based on mutual understanding, love and trust.

Nevertheless, Dr. Nallammah's concern for the general development of women is evident in her article in *Illangai Indian* on 13 June, titled "Women and Development." She too, it appears, was influenced by the Indian reformist movements of the time when there emerged a national awakening to the status of women in that country:

Both in India and Sri Lanka there is a lot of concern about women's issues. We women have lost out in terms of power. Can we blame it on others? On men, nationalists, or the ministers of the state? No, it is we who have to be blamed. We women have to become conscious of our social responsibility and try to uplift the state of our country which is poor. It is women who are undernourished, with no sense of hygiene and no health awareness. We have to uplift ourselves first and then the less fortunate later.

She listed a few qualities that she believed to be important: faith in God, education in our own national languages in order to realise our own glorious past, and concern for other people and their welfare.

We are totally blind to the needs of the people. We have to widen our horizons and get involved with activities that will benefit the poor.

Neysam Saravanamuthu

Neysam Saravanamuthu's entry into active politics should have coincided with the 1935 general elections under the Donoughmore Commission. However, on the recommendations of the government, the election was postponed to 1936. Saravanamuthu won the North Colombo seat with a majority of 4,943 votes, defeating M. J. de Silva. She was the only woman elected to the State Council. It is, however, disappointing that she has not written any of her political thoughts in Tamil. We learned that she, also served in the education commission for a period.

Meenatchi Ammal

Popularly known as the wife of K. Nadesa Iyer, State Council member. Meenatchi Ammal was one of those figures buried in history, her contributions were little known compared to those of her husband. A small booklet of her poems and song lyrics was published in 1940 titled *The Plight of the Indians life in Ceylon, A Rejoinder in Protest to the Ceylonese Ministers Who Want to Drive Away the Indians from Ceylon (Indiarkalatu Illangai Valkaiyin Nilamai, Indiyarai Viratta Ventumentra Ilangai Mantirikalukku Etirppu)*. It was reprinted in 1991 by Women's Education and Research Centre. The book contains ten poems. The opening poem pays homage to India, and the Gandhian ideology of encouraging local industry and agriculture, service to humanity at all costs, and reminding the Gandhian ideology about national liberation.

In the reply Meenatchi formulated to the Ceylonese politicians who wanted the migrant labourers forcibly sent back to India, her arguments are tactically and rationally arranged:

*Sri Lanka is our mother.
In this country all (including the Indians) are her children.
The ghost that divides us is frightening.
We came by ships that had sails,
That day we lost many lives in the interlude,
This was our mother country we assumed,
Distressed (now) we are in mind, seeing the injustice
(unjust acts).
These forests where tigers lived, now are beautiful,*

*Enveloped in lush green and enticing,
Like goats (to the tigers) many Indians were sacrificed,
To this cause many thousands died.
Readers, come out with courageous spirits
To fight fearlessly, confronting them in protest,
Saying: grants us more freedom.
With strength of mind, come join the struggle.*

From the discourse on rights of the citizen, in the rest of the poems she moves to the discourse on rights of the working class. The Indians were brought to Sri Lanka as indentured labour by the British to work in the tea plantations. They toiled hard and contributed immensely to the improvement of the Sri Lankan economy. By living and working in Sri Lanka for more than a hundred years, they are entitled for citizenship rights. She argued within an idiom of mother country and rights of citizens who are part of the national community by virtue of the fact of long residence.

In the rest of the poems she attacked the Ceylonese ministers for being unjust and partisan. In summary Meenatchi Ammal said:

The Indians have invested million rupees, don't you be indifferent or pretend ignorance. You are saying we have deprived the Ceylonese of their jobs. But there are jobs in Sri Lanka for any number of people. Only for the bad, lazy people there is suffering everywhere. What is the use of prattling across the land like a mad man? This exhibits only your foolishness. We have cleared the forests. Do not be ungrateful.

The themes and tones of her poems move progressively into stronger arguments of the politics of labour and minority grievances.

Meenatchi called for the unity of the labour movement and spoke of the war ahead where they must fight for their rights jointly. In her "attacks" she singled out the "Sinhala ministers" who had turned against the Indians, wanting to send them back to India. It would appear that the main purpose of her poems is to raise the consciousness of the people to become aware of their rights both of citizenship and labour. The last of her poems talked of the right to vote.

Meenatchi Ammal poems have to be viewed not so much from a literary point of view, but as a political discourse engaged with a community that was discriminated against. The main purpose was to reach out to people and convince them of the role they had to play. For this reason she used the common people's language and popular tunes. There is a paradox here: the logic of argument and the heroism that she injected, selectively used the people's words and vocabulary while not deviating from the rules of grammar. She had chosen tunes from the most popular film songs of the time, some classical and others folkloric but all familiar to people through films. She hoped that people would sing the songs loudly at meetings and gatherings.

Selvanatchiar Perisundaram

Selvanatchiar Perisundaram, who was responsible for forming the Ilangai Indiar Matar Congress, (The Ceylon Indian Women's Congress) in 1945, delivered political speeches to mainly raise the consciousness of the working class in general and of women workers in particular. In 1941 *Virakesari* carried her column called "Women's World" (*Pen Ulakam*). A content analysis of the column shows it to be generally in tune with the first wave of Indian liberal feminism. Freedom of movement, right to education and the need for women to acquire knowledge in various disciplines and to enter social service are generally the themes of her writings. However, women workers' rights seems to be her major concern.

Political consciousness was not the monopoly of popular political women only. The 23 November 1947 *Virakesari* had someone with the intriguing pseudonym *Arasiyal Manavi* (student in politics, with a feminine gender ending), writing on "Women and Politics" (*Penkalum Arasiyalum*). The student in politics draws our attention to the many women of eminence who have entered politics in India, and compares this with the Sri Lankan situation. She mentioned the names of the Indian women leaders such as Sarojini Naidu and Vijayalakshmy Pandit, and ministers such as Amirta Gowri. She lamented the lack of political consciousness among the women of Sri Lanka and pleaded with women to enter politics in large numbers. She wanted more women in Senate and in the parliament. She praised the as bravery and courage of women who have taken to politics such as Lesley Cooray, Adeline Molamure, Florence Senanayake and Nesam Saravanamuthu. She

hoped that Sri Lanka would produce more and more women politicians. Entering politics, she argued is women's right, which they should not forsake for any reason.

Meenadchi Ammal, too, would definitely be classified as a political woman of the colonial period in Sri Lanka.

Conclusions

It is generally believed that women's creative writings reflected consciously or unconsciously their socio-economic status, the restrained and the controlled selves that defined women within the household. A woman's social existence was only within the structure and ideology of the family. The structure of the family controlled and imprisoned her ideologically. She was excluded from social production and an income. Her status was under the men, with no decision-making powers even within the family. Division of labour was sexually decided, which confined her to very limited areas, like cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, looking after husbands and elders and taking over and doing whatever that men did not do, and did not want to do. Most of the early writings of women in most countries reflected these conditioned attitudes and confined roles. Women mostly wrote about the family and the household the role within it – even, glorifying these things. But underneath their writings there rang a feeling, a desire to escape. Mangalanayagam Thambiah's novel – the first in Sri Lanka – is indeed an exception, which violated the so-called sacred, the family and household of Tamil society.

However, in the socio-political writings that emerged, during the colonial period, there is evidence to challenge traditional thinking. One is struck by the recurrent theme of women's desire to enter politics. Whether it is Mangalammal, who wanted to uphold traditional Tamil femininity, or Vetanayaki, Nallammah or Selvanatchiar, they all openly advocated women's entry into politics. This seems a paradox. My speculation is that the freedom

movement in India and Sri Lanka, which demanded political rights of self-determination and did not exclude women, influenced these women. The sense of nationalism inspired women to demand political rights for women thereby contravening the conventions set for them within the traditional models. There was indeed a desire to go out into the external world, from within the internal world of household and family and domesticity. Whether this led simultaneously to questioning of the subordinate and subservient roles they played within the family, the answer is an ambivalent "No" and "Yes."

Vetanayaki's "Women in Chains" was an outstanding exception. She championed various causes such as women's education, socio-political awakening, and indeed deciphered and deconstructed the various facets of gender discrimination, including those taking place within the family and the household. Hers was a courageous and one of the boldest and most radical attempts. But this trend, however was not a popular trend. Unlike in India, the political awakening in Sri Lanka did not coincide with a movement for social reform that included gender issues. Politicians like Ponnambalam Ramanathan, or anti-Christian activists like Arumuga Navalar, did not challenge caste based institutions or patriarchy. They remained within the status quo and worked against changing the status quo. The Jaffna Youth Congress took up issues of caste and was perhaps the first organization to demand complete independence from British imperialism, but its progressive ideology did not include gender in its agenda, as the Dravida Kalaham did in India. The middle-class women, though educated, did not effectively challenge the hierarchies prevalent at that time among the Tamils.

Mangalammal, through her journal *Thamil Makal*, advocated an awakening for women but that was within the traditional definition of femininity. Tamilness was posed as a kind of progressive nationalism against Western liberal ideology. Anything and everything Western, even liberal ideologies was construed as becoming slaves in theory and practice under imperialist control. Mangalammal's views and those expressed in her journal clearly were reformist, reforming women and the Tamil society, upholding traditions while refashioning them to fit into the limited confines of modernism. Women, according to her, should be confined to definitions of Tamil femininity as explained and understood by her, as incorporating a particular spirituality that is projected as being essentially superior to Western individualism and freedom, which was thought to be without boundaries. Within the parameters constructed by her there was room for education for girls and women, going outside of domesticity to do social service, and entering politics to serve the community. This allows women to go out of their homes to attend literary, political and religious gatherings and meetings. Hence, what was considered suitable and acceptable was widened to include certain activities while not totally discarding or giving up nationalist (Tamil) culture.

Mangalanayagam Thambiah was unique in that she wrote a novel that questioned some of the traditional norms pertaining to women based on the a principle of human dignity, perhaps influenced by her Christian training. Vetanayaki's writing clearly shows the influence of India's nationalist and women's movement and the influence of *Periyar* (see notes 9). Thus her narrative is different from the usual hegemonic texts on gender. She deviated from the conventional route of gender analysis of the time.

NOTES

1. *Tinnaipalli*

Tinnai is a raised platform, like a narrow veranda constructed with mud or cement on the front exterior of a house. *Palli* means school. The school is conducted on this platform, where the teacher and the pupils sit together. Usually it is used for casual gatherings and conversation by social equals. But during specific times it is turned into an ad hoc school. The education is given only at a primary level.

2. *Kurukula Vasam*

Sanskritic in origin, this system refers to an ancient school, through which knowledge and education were disseminated. "*Gurukula*" (Sanskrit) denotes a teacher-pupil interaction through genealogical lines with a residential arrangement, where not only education but a whole range of life skills are acquired by the student by living with the guru. Such learning connotes considerable discipline and superior moral worth. In India, caste rules were strictly followed in this system where the teacher is usually a Brahmin. It is not known how this system operated in Sri Lanka. The early migrants would have brought with them the memories and traditions, and introduced them to the north east of Sri Lanka. There is one single long poem (similar to a sonnet) which documents the children's visit to their mother, requesting food items and oils of different kinds (therefore this poem is called "oil suntu sonnet for oil"), to take to the teacher, as tuition fees. This poem and another one which gives information about *tinnaipali* were both collected by K. U. Mappanar, from an ailing old man from a hospital who sang them orally, and were published by M. Ramalingam of Vadduklodai.

3. *Oppari (Lament song)*

Etymologically, *oppari* means to make noise together (*oppu*, together; *ari*, to make noise.) Crying and lamenting together at a funeral is

called *oppari*. This custom is peculiar to the Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils. Usually the crying or lamenting is a prerogative of the women, though occasionally the men take part. *Oppari* has a ritual status and dramatic elements involved in it. When a death takes place, the women in the house get together and weep loudly. Indirectly this act initially intimates the death to the neighbours. The women in the neighbourhood immediately assemble and sit in a circle around the body with their hands around each other's necks and cry. Beating on the chest is also a common sight. The lamentations flow poetically with rhymes and alliterations in tunes that are symptomatic of grief. This spontaneous and instantaneous verbal outburst usually entails the praising of the dead persons, calling attention to their virtues, personality, demeanor, deportment and worldly achievements throughout their life history.

4. *Tallatu (Lullaby):*

Tallattu is a kind of lullaby sung by mothers and women. In a sweet melody, the contents and idioms are couched in a motherhood ideology overpowered by a deep sense of affection, kindness, love, nurture, and care for the little infant. These are also constructed and improvised by women and carried inter-generationally. They were collected and published in the early 19th century. The women are the authors of these poems/songs. The themes are generally heroism for a boy and love for a girl, but nothing is out of place in *tallattu*. Uncles, aunts and grandparents along with women who look after the babies, all welcome the infants and cherish them as worthy of human dignity and love. It begins with the question: 'who is this person?' In the final analysis, the song is merely to put the baby to sleep with a sweet melody, while the messages are strewn with a lot of personal and emotional underpinnings connected with fanciful romantic notions and kinship ties.

5. *Andal, Avvaiyar, Meera, Karaikal Ammayar, Acca Mahadevi*

The famous women poets of South and North India were celebrated as saints. They broke some of the literary codes and cultural norms. See Thiruchandran, S. *Spectrum of Femininity* 1998, Vikash Publications. India:

6. *Sapavimosanam*

This is a short story written by Putumaipittan (whose real name was Virdhachalam, 1906-48) in 1943, and published in *Kalaimakal*, a popular Tamil journal. This story problematises concepts such as chastity and fidelity and questions the cultural norms legitimised in the ancient classic at the *Ramayana*. Ahalikai, who was seduced by Lord Indra, was cursed by her saint husband to become a stone. Rama, the godly king, restores her into human form years later by touching the stone by his feet. But when Ahalkai learns the story of the fire ordeal that Sita, the wife of Rama, had to undergo on Rama's command to prove her chastity and purity (she had been in Ravana's court, having been abducted by him) – Ahalikai prefers to become a stone again, not to feel the pain of such punishments that women undergo as wives of noble and great men. This time she turns herself into a stone, not having been cursed, but as a protest against patriarchy and its various manifestations, being disappointed with men in general.

7. *Saivasidhanta*

This philosophy is part of the Hindu religious system, which gives primacy to Siva. It originated in South India during the 13th century, but suffered a slow decline there. It became the predominant system in the north of Ceylon and is the prevailing religious philosophy both in texts and in practice.

8. *Four-Fold Virtues (Naatkunam)*

The four-fold virtues referred to are supposed to be followed by good, virtuous women. Bashfulness, fear, pretending ignorance, and expressing repulsion at the touch of a man (other than her husband) are qualities that are considered essential to qualify a woman as virtuous.

9. *Mahatma Gandhi, Rajagopalachari, Periyar*

Names connected with the history of the colonial period in India as statesman, politician, and radical reformer, respectively. The influence of the Indian independence movement was felt very strongly in the north of Sri Lanka and these names have entered many households in Jaffna.

10. *Ilangai Indian*

This weekly journal was first published in 1928 both in English and Tamil in the hill-country. It was edited by K. Sathiyawageswaraiyar and H. Nelliah.

11. *Dounoughmore Commission*

When Sri Lanka was a British colony, the above commission was appointed to draw up a constitution which would satisfy the political aspirations of the Ceylonese. In 1931 it gave a new constitution to Sri Lanka. One of the most radical provisos of the constitution was the granting of universal adult suffrage. Perhaps Ceylon was the first non-European nation to get this right. The commissioners arrived in 1928. They spent nearly four months interviewing pressure groups and lobbies all over the island and received memorandums and met various delegations which represented many interests. The Ceylon Women's Franchise Association was one such organisation, and the author speaks of this meeting.

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