

# *Nivedini*

Vol. 3 No. 2 December 1995



*Women's Rights are Human Rights*

*Women's Education and Research Centre*

## Our Objectives

To study and research the various aspects of women's subordination in Sri Lanka in order to sensitize men and women on gender issues.

To establish a forum for women to express themselves as writers, researchers, poets, and novelists; to publish their works in Sinhala, Tamil and English.

To disseminate information relating to women and create awareness and increase consciousness on feminist issues.

To strengthen the women's network locally and internationally.

To extend co-operation to and solidarity with other oppressed and marginalised groups in Sri Lanka (such as refugees, unemployed and slum dwellers) with projects for rehabilitation and general upgrading of their lives.

To serve as a resource and documentation centre in Sri Lanka that will become part of the network of research and study centres on Women's Studies in the Third World.

What does 'Nivedini' mean?

Nivedini derives from a Sanskrit verb. It could mean either, that which is placed before you ritually and reverentially, or a carrier of knowledge with a female gender suffix 'ni' (derived from the verb vid, to know.) We use it with the second meaning.

### Correction:

On the cover of the last issue of Nivedini (Double issue) Vol. 1 No. 2 Dec '94 should read *Vol. 2 No. 2 Dec. '94* and Vol. 2 No. 1 May '95 should read *Vol. 3 No. 1 May '95*



Women's Education and Research Centre

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The views expressed in the articles are  
not necessarily those of the editor

*From the Editor*

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## **A Plea for Peace**

When we wrote our last editorial there was hope that sanity has returned to the political scene. We thought that the state and the anti state ideologies have come together towards a negotiating process. That, in our opinion was indeed an event worth recording in the chronology of the Sri Lankan political history. Evidently the Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge government has understood the ethnic problem and has comprehended its complexities. She has unlike her predecessor conceded that there is indeed a problem that needed a political solution.

The renewal of the war, however, has given us a feeling of helplessness. Events have moved fast. We hear now official statements such as war for peace from a government that came into power with promises of peace. And there are political analysts and others conceding the legitimacy of such claims. We are confronted with a series of dilemmas.

We, feminists have not only politicised the personnel but have also made meaningful and significant contribution by entering the male dominated mainstream politics. We are however, more active in the alternative politics. With the on set of the war between the LTTE and the government, the defunct Women for Peace has become active again to the point of staging a demonstration against the government asking the government to stop the war and asking Pirabhakaran to enter the negotiating process. Our language though always couched in idioms of protest, though loud, clear and articulate, is a language of peace not violence and war. Women for peace which is constituted of many (5) women's organisations created political history by being the first organisation to protest against the war and to support the devolution package officially and organisationally. The same slogans were shouted in Beijing by the same organisations in the peace march. Women's Education and Research Centre is reiterating its stand for peace and for

the implementation of the devolution package.

## Unfinished Tasks of Feminism

Ours is an age of celebrities and grand personalities, around whom hysterical cults evolve. In Tamil Nadu when M.G.Ramachandran died there were twenty eight people who committed suicide. This kind of cultic devotion and fanaticism can also lead to exonerating the faults and inadequacies of the idol.

When the jury delivered a not guilty verdict in the double murder trial of O.J.Simpson it evoked a lot of reactions. Whether he committed the double murder, whether there was reasonable doubt, whether the white policemen planted evidence because they were racist, and whether the members of Jury acquitted him because they were racist are matters of debate, and speculation. But what came out without any trace of doubt was Simpson's history of domestic violence against his ex-wife Nicola Brown Simpson. Perhaps the Jury was right in declaring that evidence related to the battering did not affect their decision. What are the implications of this statement?

Is wife battering an issue punishable by law? Does his acquittal exonerate him from the crime of domestic violence? How can so many of his fans celebrate his freedom unmindful of his attitude and actions towards his wife? It forces us to conclude that feminism's burden is being increasingly placed on feminists and they have to grapple with issues of oppression single handed without the support and cooperation of the members of the Jury, public and cultic devotees, devotees who are blind to issues, ideas, and actions of their leaders which are far from being celebrated. Domestic violence, we find, is trivialised again.

It is the same with Mother Teresa - She has become an icon and an idol. The rationale of such a phenomenon extends to treating her as above criticism and prevents the subjection of her ideas to a rational dissection - There was controversy and an unwarranted outrage that a critical documentary was produced for British TV. While not denying her the

credit for the services she is rendering for the destitute, she has to be questioned on her stand on certain issues. That she associated her mission and got donations from the most oppressive dictators such as Bobby Doc Duvalier, Enver Hoxha and the fundamentalist group such as Phalagist Christian group have to be subjected to a critical evaluation. On the same line her views on issues like contraception, abortion and sexuality have to be condemned as conservative. This springs from a deeply religious view that sex other than for reproduction is evil. To say the least such views are anti-women. The question that we raise is, are such people above criticism when they do engage in anti-human discourses which smack of anti-human values, while engaging themselves primarily in charity and social rehabilitation agendas?

Ananda Cumaraswamy could very easily legitimise Rama's reasons for sending Sita to the forest in Ramayana. The civilian washer-man has raised a question of propriety whether the king could accept as pure his consort, who lived in Ravana's court for so long. As a righteous king, Rama should respect the concern of his subject people and hence he is right in sending away his wife whom he knows is pure and chaste, is the argument put forward by Ananada Cumaraswamy. And if we question the propriety of such an argument, there certainly will be people, the traditionalists and a few Hindus, who would label such criticism as sacrilegious.

There was an uproar in Calcutta when the famous journalist Kuswansingh pointed out rather rashly that Rabindranath Tagore's contributions to the Bengali literature have been greatly exaggerated and that they do not have such merits as is claimed. Such a pronouncement, it was urged, has wounded the nationalist sentiments of the Calcutta based intellectuals who are organising campaigns to reclaim Rabindranath Tagore. Rabindranath Tagore and O. J. Simpson, Mother Teresa and Ananda Cumaraswamy have been created as icons for various reasons due to some social perceptions and to their contextual placements in the socio-political scenes. They do have followers who want to identify totally with the ideologies and actions, to the point of creating cults out of them. We see here a phenomenon, that isms and ideologies are taking a back seat over personalities.

Moving over to the Sri Lankan scene we have no cults which surround personalities- We have no Mahatma Ghandis MGRs Tagores or Mother Teresas and as such there are no cults. - We have lesser mortals who are subjected to criticisms - But we too have major contradictions. - We have among us Marxists who would divide the working class on ethnic and religious belongings. We have the ultra Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna which became Sinhala chauvinist and anti plantation labour. We have the Tamil national liberation groups with claims to Marxism which were/are anti Sinhalese.-And not surprisingly racists among the feminists. - Feminism, it should be remembered evolved out of personal experiences of subordination, discrimination, exploitation and oppression. It would be expected therefore, that feminists should extend their sympathy to other forms of oppression.- But sadly no, some of the Sri Lankan women from the minority community had strange experiences at Beijing conference.- experiences bordering on racist politics. In the South Asian tent in Beijing there appeared some pamphlets against the devolution package. Constructive criticism of the devolution package is no racism. But that the Sri Lankan feminists did not think of meeting in Sri Lanka and having a dialogue but having to carry such pamphlets for distribution and display in Beijing, smacks of mischief .- That same pamphlet was published in a Sunday paper in Sri Lanka at the time of the conference under anonymity further illustrates the motive.

## Statements

We have in this issue of Nivedini a separate section on statements. In the contemporary socio-political situation there is considerable confusion among the people on various issues such as the ongoing war, the devolution package, legal reforms, feminist issues and the Beijing conference on women. By publishing the statements we are recording the various viewpoints of feminists which should be given sufficient weightage when the history of Sri Lanka is written, perhaps at least as alternative political view points.

## Uduvil

In this issue there is an extract from a book found in a bookshop that sells old books in Hamdon, USA, titled **Uduvil 1824 - 1924 by Minnie Hastings Harrison B.A and published in 1925**. This book offers interesting information to those interested in the history of education in Sri Lanka. This Section also gives a few insights into the early attitudes towards female education in Jaffna, and the process of induction into missionary education. The author says that a desire to compile a record of one of the oldest boarding schools in Asia led the Uduvil Girls Association to appoint a committee. This committee called the History Committee used the following sources.

- The Minutes of the American Ceylon Mission 1816-1924,
- Reports of Uduvil School, beginning with 1833,
- The biography of Mrs. Winslow by her husband,
- Extracts from missionary magazines published in America and Ceylon,
- Lists, programmes and songs furnished principally by Miss Howland and Mrs. Paul-
- Innumerable conversations with old girls, and
- Answers to a questionnaire sent out to a limited number of them.

## Another UN Appointment for a Sri Lankan Woman

We have been informed that Ms. Nimalka Fernando has been appointed as the President of the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism. With an economic and social status and an accredited lobby to the UN, the movement has its headquarters in Japan and a regional office in Geneva.

While extending our cooperation, we congratulate Ms. Fernando and wish her well on this timely appointment.

# Dilemmas of A Transformative Research Ideal Refugees and Resettlement in Sri Lanka<sup>1</sup>

*Joke Schrijvers\**

In the latter half of 1993 I carried out research on internal refugees and resettlement in Sri Lanka. As a result of civil war, since 1983 tens of thousands of Sri Lankans have lost their lives, 'disappeared', or have been displaced. Due to a fresh outbreak of violence in 1990, new waves of internal refugees have spread over the country. In October 1990 this was aggravated by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's sudden expulsion of all Muslims who were living in the north, altogether more than 75 000 people (Hasbullah 1991, 1992:24). Thus, 'within three or four months *one in every sixteen Sri Lankans was displaced* from his or her place of origin' (Abeysekera 1993:2). Official estimates speak of 618, 420 persons in 1993 still displaced within the country. The actual numbers - including those who without state support were able to take refuge in the houses of relatives or in rented rooms - are much higher.

Exploring the subject, it struck me that little was known about the actual experiences, needs and priorities of the refugees themselves.<sup>2</sup> Relief and rehabilitation work by the state and most non-governmental organizations<sup>3</sup> has been designed and carried out in a top-down manner. I wished to contribute knowledge in support of the interests of refugees themselves, especially women and children. Because of the continuing civil war I was not sure about the political space for action in this field.

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Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter and my requirements, it took quite some time to find a suitable research assistant. We agreed to try out each other, starting research among Muslim refugees. After the first day of work I wanted to continue with her, but to my dismay she did not want to carry on with me. After her experience of assisting in fact-finding missions on recent massacres, she could no longer bear it to merely talk to people who needed help. The refugees were fed up with all the people who came to their camps, looking around and asking questions, without taking any concrete action.

There I was, feeling uneasy and useless after one day 'in the field', sacked by my assistant - and that with my activist reputation among the scholarly establishment! As a feminist researcher I had met with quite some opposition during my career for always trying to link academic work with action for change - inside as well as outside academia (Schrijvers 1985, 1991, 1993, 1994). I could fully understand my assistant's decision, but I had also become sceptical of the relief programmes for the refugees, which seemed to increase their dependancy instead of empowering them. I felt that in order to really support them, more indepth knowledge about their own views and experiences was badly needed (cf. Hensman 1993:6). How could they be involved in research which would stimulate relevant action? After a long search I found new assistance. The experience described however urged me to reflect even more critically on my own role and approach.

In this article I will first explore the links between feminist scholarship and the politics of research. Then I will discuss the complexities of taking sides, examining the characteristics of *dialectical* and *dialogical* research within the broader perspective of what I called a *transformative* approach (Schrijvers 1993). Finally I reflect on my current study in the context of a country torn apart by war. To what extent could I practice my own ideals?

## A View from Below

The idea that social science serves human objectives is as old as the discipline itself. Since Marx, liberation from oppression has been defined by some as the aim of social science. However, what was defined as knowledge

and how it was to be researched by the social science profession are now seen to have run counter to those aims. A neo-positivist methodology, adopted from the natural sciences, treated people as objects about whom knowledge was to be collected dispassionately. It tried to deny or nullify the influence of the research process on the researched by making the researcher invisible in the results. The processes of collecting data, analysing and writing it, whilst depending on social interaction and professional authority, were presented as simple and transparent. What was considered 'value free' research is now seen as an obfuscation of the power relationships involved (Schrijvers 1993:33-41). First the agenda for research was set by professional social scientists in a way later revealed to be Euro- and male-centred (Rohrlich-Leavitt et al. 1975; Schrijvers 1979); second, the researched had no input in defining relevant topics of research; third, they were objectified and disempowered during the research process; and fourth, far from the results being useful for their 'liberation from oppression', they were produced primarily for the academic community and secondarily for use by governments.

From the 1960s, a *view from below* was sought particularly by Latin-American scholars, but also by a minority of social-scientists in rich countries (Huizer 1979). Feminism added to this view from below, the perspectives of women. This transformed the entire approach, as women could not simply be *added*: the theoretical and methodological rules which had excluded women's experiences and perspectives had to be changed (Watkins 1983:87; Harding 1992). Based on the multiple experiences of women themselves, the feminist perspective revealed that what had been presented as 'objective' knowledge in general was not more than the untenable generalisation of the subjective experiences and views of men (Rich 1979:207). Academically as well as socially and politically this was indefensible. The feminist view, as a world perspective preceding specific theories, changed the perception of the nature of power relations and undermined the credibility of *all* existing theoretical approaches - including those from below (Caplan 1988; Schrijvers 1985: 143-165, 1987; Bell *et al.* 1993).

## The Politics of Research

Since De Beauvoir, feminist theory has been dealing with subject-object dichotomies and hierarchies. She revealed the dominant construction of the female as 'the other' and began the process of finding ways to constitute and claim ourselves, women, as subjects (Bowles & Duelli Klein 1983; Mascia-Lees 1989:11). Knowing the feeling of 'otherness', feminist anthropologists consciously tried to mediate between the positions of the subject and object of anthropological research. Hence our extensive writing about the 'self', and about sex and gender in field research (Golde 1970; Whitehead & Conaway 1986; Warren 1988; Bell *et al.* 1993).

The undoubted subject in the total research process, the often implicit 'knower' who studies those to be 'known', is of course a much more problematic category than suggested by academic practice. 'We', the 'learned ones', have long been wrapped in silence. In the words of Said (1989: 142)

This silence is thunderous. ... you will begin perhaps suddenly to note how someone, an authoritative, explorative, elegant, learned voice, speaks and analyzes, amasses evidence, theorizes, speculates about everything - except itself. Who speaks? For what and to whom?

Feminist theory and practice, probably more deeply than any other approach, have dealt with the problematic issues of knowledge, power, representation and authority. However, in the majority of cases it has been the learned voices of white women which have theorized - about 'all' women and gender relations, or, especially in the case of feminist anthropology, about 'other' women. Black feminist critiques demonstrated that these power structures were reproduced by the dominant feminist perspective with its all too often universalising theories of male oppression and female solidarity (Hull *et al.* 1982; Mohanty 1988, 1991; Mohanty *et al.* 1991; Steady 1981).

Gradually, it has become clear that ethnic and race relations crosscut gender, as do class, culture, and age. Generalisations have given way to (comparative) studies which stress historically and locally specific contexts. Claims to universal knowledge have come under heavy attack, to make place

for partial perspectives. Although I find this development extremely valuable, I also notice that the post-modernist preoccupations with discourses, representations and texts have increasingly undermined the direct links between politics and feminist studies that were so clear in the beginning.

Some aspects of the feminist critique of ethnocentric representations of reality were appropriated in the course of the 1980s by post-modernist scholars. Mascia-Lees *et al.* (1989) argue that constructing the 'other' entails relations of domination and that the so-called 'new ethnography', with its narrative devices and dialogical experiments which aim to give the 'other' a voice in the text, may 'constitute a masking and empowering of Western bias rather than a diffusion of it' (ibid:11) (see also Harding 1987; Hartsock 1987; Nencel & Pels 1991:18; Okeley & Callaway 1992). Although post-modernism can contribute to the erosion of dualistic theory and universalistic, totalitarian and ethnocentric paradigms, they conclude that those who wish to confront these power relations 'would do better to turn to feminist theory and practice than to post-modernism' (Mascia-Lees *et al.* 1989: 32-3; also Bell *et al.* 1993). Stacey (1988:26) agrees, arguing that acknowledging partiality of representations is not enough: the ethical issues have to be taken into account. Post-modernism can support an extremely relativistic and amoral attitude, which implicitly embraces a political choice: the *liberal*, survival-of-the-fittest, and the taken-for-granted attitude which entails taking sides with the more powerful forces in society (Schrijvers 1993:37).

Feminist theory and methodology have shown the highly problematic nature of the representations of research (whose voices, whose perspectives, whose theories?), the communications (what kind of research interactions?), the texts (whose authority?), and the objectives (in whose interest, for what?). We are still struggling with the complexities of connecting political critique, theory and practice. How can we create more equitable relations during the research process, especially within the context of severe political repression, in Sri Lanka and in many countries today? How can we support the *envoicing* (Harding 1987) of participants whose voices are seldom, if ever, heard and integrate into the research their interests and concerns?



## The Complexities of Taking Sides

To my knowledge, Maria Mies (1977) was the first to systematically conceive the methodological criteria for a feminist social science. I quote her first postulate:

The postulate of *value free research*, of neutrality and indifference towards the research objects, has to be replaced by *conscious partiality*, which is achieved through partial identification with the research objects (Mies 1983: 122).

*Conscious partiality* is different from mere subjectivism or simple empathy. *Critical consciousness* and *exchange* are crucial elements of this approach. The researcher takes the side of a certain group, partly identifies, and in a conscious process creates space for critical dialogues and reflection on both sides. This enables both research 'subjects' and 'objects' to become more aware of the power differences and dynamics involved, and of distortions of perceptions to be corrected on both sides. Paradoxically, precisely through this process of *partial identification* a critical and *dialectical distance* is created between the researcher and the 'researched' (Mies 1983: 123). Feminist standpoint theory equally emphasizes that, whereas Western thought has 'started out' from the lives of dominant men,

starting thought from women's lives decreases the partiality and distortion in our images of nature and social relations. It creates knowledge...that is...still partial in both senses of the word, but less distorted than thought originating in the agendas and perspectives of the lives of dominant group men' (Harding 1992:181).

I like to avoid terms like the 'researched', 'informants', 'respondents', and 'interviewees'. The limitations set by language itself to express more egalitarian relations between the researcher and the other subjects of research are revealing for the problems involved. We need terms which do not create dichotomous, hierarchical oppositions between an active subject and a passive object. The term *participants* perhaps best expresses the more egalitarian relations between researcher and those with whom the research takes place (de Josselin de Jong 1977)<sup>4</sup>.

*Conscious partiality* may open the way for a socially situated, contextualised knowledge which is more explicitly inter-subjective and dynamic; the result of unique, time- and place-specific dialogues which continuously raise new questions and images of reality in a *dialectical* way. This critical approach departs from the notion that knowledge is *created* 'in the interaction between researchers and those whose ways of living they try to understand' (Kloos 1988:228). This entails complex ambivalences as feminist researchers continuously struggle with the alternate positions of constructed and experienced 'other'. Being aware of the importance of building on our own experiences as women, there is no typical 'woman's life' from which feminists can start. Women's lives in many cases are structurally opposed (Harding 1992: 181). From its inception, feminist studies have deconstructed the categories of their own analysis, even that of 'women', thereby questioning their own methodological and political points of departure (Alcoff 1989; see also Harding 1986; Scott 1988). Informed by women's global and local social movements of tremendous diversity, feminist studies have continued to problematize subject-object hierarchies (see e.g. Jayawardena 1986; Sen & Grown 1988; Jaquette 1989; Shallat 1990; Gandhi & Shah 1992; Khasiani 1992).

This brings us back to the politics of research. If people belong to a socially or economically vulnerable group (as often pertains to women in comparison to men of the same background), there is a good chance that more powerful people, although belonging to the same society, will deny the 'truth' of the interpretations they adopt. A critical, dialectical approach leaves room for interpretations which question the dominant order of things, which are counterpoints (Wertheim 1964) to the status quo. How to embody these counterpoints in the practice of research?

## Theory and Practice

Bearing the political and epistemological complexities in mind, it is not surprising that one of the key dilemmas in feminist studies is how to bridge the gap between theory and practice. This dichotomy is a fundamental structural element of positivist social science theory (Mies & Reddock 1982:iv). According to the academic values of distance and detachment, it

is commonly accepted that 'good' researchers should not engage in action; at least not during the research itself. Research is considered an intellectual activity, whereas action is classified as social work. The distance between subject and object, ego and alter, expert and target-group, is established and maintained by a rigorous dichotomization of the two parties concerned, and reproduced by the norm that the researcher and the researched should not change places. The hierarchy in this classification is evident - academic work has more prestige and it is paid better than social work. It is precisely this mechanism of hierarchical dichotomization which keeps researchers from feeling responsible for the use of their written products.

For me a way to handle this dilemma has been to distinguish the *dialogical* approach, within the full context of dialectical research, as a specific focus during fieldwork (Schrijvers 1991). If dialogues form the main communication process in this stage, the objects of research become subjects as well. They are conceptualized as social actors who themselves actively participate in the research and therefore co-determine the outcome (see also Torres 1992). They, too, are constructing knowledge and interpreting reality. The researcher is not in a top-down manner projecting her or his own received conceptions, classifications and interpretations of the situation, but does so in dialogue with the other actors. The outcome is inter-subjective and negotiated, there is not one 'reality' or 'truth'. The different interpretations are seen as constructs created by many subjects, leading to different, situated knowledges (Haraway 1990: 183-202). This dialogical approach makes room not merely for a plurality of views, but for advocacy and action based on those views which are not part of the dominant discourse. By creating space for (possible) action the need of analysing the power relations during the research becomes even more clear.

On the basis of my own experience I distinguished five characteristics of dialogical communication (Schrijvers 1991: 170). The first is a *dynamic focus on change*. The results of research do not form an artificial, static construct, but they reflect the dynamics of life. If possible, the research contributes to bottom-up change of an emancipatory nature. The second characteristic is *exchange*: 'researcher' and 'researched' continuously change places, as both are subject and object, active and passive and the interpretations of both are open for discussion. The third characteristic is the *ideal of egalitarian*

*relations*. The researcher and all participants in the research become acutely aware of power inequalities that separate them. The less powerful will sense an increased effort of the more powerful to take a perspective from below, which in itself can facilitate the development of more egalitarian relations. This process can be aided by verbalizing the differences. Fourth, *shared objectives* and priorities of research are determined by all participants. The researcher and the funding agency lose the prerogative to regulate this stage of the research process. Fifth is a *shared power to define* the image of reality produced by the research. All participants are empowered to construct concepts and categories, discuss results and determine the course and outcome of the research.

Many obstacles are encountered when trying to practice this *research ideal*. I refer for instance to the stage of writing as a major dilemma of representation (c.f. Clifford & Marcus 1986; Bell *et al.* 1993). So long as the researcher remains the one who exclusively carries out this final stage of research, the ultimate 'power to define' will remain with her or him.

Dialogical communication appears plausible with people who are relatively powerless. What about sharing the power to define with the more powerful? In principle, this would imply the envoicing of those who already have the power to shape and define the image of 'reality'. It would thus help to maintain the (conceptual) status quo, and as such run counter to an approach 'from the bottom up'. However, the distinction between 'the powerful' and 'the powerless' is too simple, and too rigid. During research, power relations between the researcher and the other subjects may change continuously (Schrijvers 1991).

If transformation inspired by a critical view from below is the explicit aim of dialectical research, I prefer to speak of a *transformative approach* (Schrijvers 1993: 37-41). Based on a critical conception of knowledge, a transformative approach aims at bridging the gap between theory and practice, and supporting processes of change from the bottom up. The term 'bottom up' is complicated because 'the poor', the 'vulnerable', or the 'oppressed' comprise an extraordinarily heterogeneous category. As a researcher you have opted to be an intellectual intermediary in this transformational process, by trying to enter the perspectives and the interests

of those for whom you have chosen within the given context. You interrogate yourself time and again: in whose interests do I make my choice of perspective out of the heterogeneous reality existing in the research situation, and how relevant is the acquired knowledge from *their* perspective? What possibilities do I have for returning the insights gained back to them? There is a great temptation to omit or forget these sorts of questions, because scholarly prestige is not awarded on the basis of judgements made by the people on whom the research is based (Schrijvers 1991, 1993: 37-41).

If a transformative approach includes *direct* action for change, it is usually called *action- or partisan research*. Action-research not merely allows for inter-subjectivity in the construction of situated knowledges. The researcher explicitly takes sides with a certain category or group of people who want to change their situation. Consequently all actors become involved in a combined process of research and action (Huizer 1979:23). The aim is primarily to create knowledge which directly helps to bring about socio-political change such as desired and defined by the participants in the research. One of the participants is the researcher who acts as a facilitator in the process of change. The decision to take sides with a certain category or group of people does not mean that the researcher, as a *tabula rasa*, passively has to accept the interpretations of the other actors. It means that *all* parties create room to make explicit their points of view so that they can exchange and discuss their interpretations - among which are their images of each other and of the power relations at stake. For security reasons action-researchers, feeling responsible for the use of their written products, often decide not to publish the knowledge created.

## Research and Transformation

In my earlier research in 1977-1978 in a small Sinhalese village in the North-Central Dry Zone of Sri Lanka, I decided to side with the interests of economically deprived, (semi) landless women. During the last stage of research, on their request I supported their establishing a collective farm. I remained involved for years afterwards (Schrijvers 1985, 1991, 1994). This research contained many elements of what I now call a dialogical,

transformative approach. What happened during my current research among refugees in Sri Lanka? To what extent could this be labelled as *transformative*? It is rather confronting to interrogate myself now, after this research experience in a country torn apart by war. This time, I feel the space for transformation from below has been quite limited.

First of all, given the overall political crisis and the sensitive nature of the subject, a period of three months was far too short to reach the level of indepth understanding that is a prerequisite for *partial identification and exchange*. Also, this time I could not speak the language (Tamil) myself. Having to rely totally on the translation of assistants was a serious barrier to dialogical communication. Secondly, it was not at all clear to me *whose side to take*. Internal refugees in Sri Lanka are an extremely heterogeneous population. They can be differentiated according to their socio-economic, regional and ethnic background (Sinhalese, Sri Lanka Tamils, Indian Tamils, Muslims<sup>5</sup>) and according to age, religion, caste and gender. There were refugee camps in the rural areas all along the war frontier from the North-West to the East, as well as in the capital of Colombo. Refugees who were better-off did not live on relief, whereas many who had been officially resettled were still depending on state and non-governmental support. State policy has clearly favoured Sinhalese refugees, but all ethnic groups have experienced extreme, traumatic violence. The future prospects of Tamil and Muslim refugees were most gloomy, and according to some the Muslims received least attention of all. After two months of research in various locations I found it impossible and even immoral to decide which category of refugees would deserve my *conscious partiality* most! Even my feminist consciousness did not help me in the beginning. I was not sure whether women refugees were the most downtrodden of all. Inside the camps the women continued the child care and domestic tasks they had before, although under extremely miserable conditions. These gender-ascribed tasks gave them a certain sense of meaning and identity. Wherever they could they also worked for an income, inside or outside the camps, and many of them appeared to have had more inner strength than the men to bear the unbearable. Within the space of the camps the men, hanging around or sleeping, seemed the most displaced of all, especially if the opportunities for earning were minimal. Having lost their properties, land and employment they had lost most of what used to constitute their identities as *men*. There

was a high degree of male alcoholism and violence in the camps. I felt perhaps most empathy for the many children who had grown up in refugee camps and had never known a period of peace.

It was only during the last month, when I had worked more in-depth in one location, that I realized why primarily women and girls needed support. In spite of their impressive strengths, within the camps as well as in the outside world they were kept at the very bottom by processes of power that were not neutral but were gendered. Becoming more familiar with them I learned how vulnerable they were when it came to physical autonomy and how confined in their mobility. Their ability to take the lead, to define and change their own situation was very restricted. This experience again taught me that there is no general indicator for deciding beforehand whose interests to support through research activities. My ideal of *conscious partiality* helped me to analyze the total, heterogeneous context, in which each time new choices have to be made as to for whom, how and for what purpose the research will take place and what power relations are influencing it.

The dilemma of taking sides as a matter of course also complicated the ideal of serving *shared objectives*. Refugees from different ethnic backgrounds had fled from the (often combined) violence of the State Forces, the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), Security Guards, Death Squads and various militant groups, but they had suffered violence also from 'ordinary' people belonging to other ethnic groups. They had been induced to fear and hate the 'ethnic other' with whom they lived in peace before. This increased their vulnerability in the overall political crisis, and deepened their fear of resettlement even in so-called 'cleared' areas. As the roots of the conflict had not been taken away, people told me time and again that 'all the things that happened may happen again'. Within the context of a complex civil war, a decision to support the interests of one ethnic group of refugees, for instance to obtain more physical and economic security, might endanger the lives of other refugees. The characteristics of transformative research in such a context seem to be a distant ideal. The more I started to understand the depth of the crisis in Sri Lanka, the more powerless and at times ludicrous I felt with my research ideals. However, having acquired more critical distance now, I can also see some encouraging elements.

Although I was worried that direct help did not form part of the research, I was struck by the explicit and repeated appreciation of many refugees for my *immaterial* concern. I was told in different camps: 'You are the only outsider so far who has sat down with us and came back again to listen at length to our stories'. My attitude obviously strengthened their sense of human dignity and identity, which were precisely the qualities that had been taken away from them - first by their traumatic experiences and later by their institutionalization into refugee camps and a system of 'relief and rehabilitation'. To a certain degree, therefore, my approach established a more *egalitarian basis for exchange* than immediate 'help' would have done. By telling their own stories to a complete outsider, they gained some power to conceptualize their own experiences - a first step towards re-defining their identities.

Looking back now I believe that the envoicing of relatively powerless people by the *sharing of defining power* is a decisive element in a transformative approach. It empowers them to co-determine the course and outcome of the research, and thereby guarantees its inherently *dynamic* nature. From the start, my research agenda was set by the concerns of refugees themselves, as I encountered them throughout my fieldwork: their concerns for physical and economic security, and a future for their children.

I decided to go to Batticaloa District which had just been declared 'cleared' and safe enough to resettle the refugees. After resettlement the Tamil and Muslim communities were forced to live together again as neighbours, even though the ethnic polarization between these communities very recently had led to extremes of violence. Gradually I understood more about the role of both the Sri Lankan state and the leaders of militant groups in this process of ethnic polarization. Concepts of masculinity and femininity (gender identities) appeared to be crucial elements in the construction of ethnicity and violence; the power mechanisms at work were highly *gendered*. This view helped me to *partly identify* with the women in both communities, which also opened my eyes to the different barriers to increasing their sense of security. On the one hand the Muslim community; compared to the Tamils; offered their women, and especially widows, more support. On the other hand the non-governmental sector in Batticaloa District was predominantly favouring the Tamil community, which had already resulted



in the formation of tens of 'widow's groups' - a doubtful construct in face of the social stigma attached to Hindu Tamil widows. We started dialogues with groups of Tamil village women, in which we encouraged widows to exchange their views and feelings with women whose husbands were still alive.<sup>6</sup>

One of the ways I sought to use this information in a process of change from the bottom up was through *advocacy*. In the offices in Colombo, I exchanged views with several key bureaucrats, foreign agents and non governmental officers, urging them to take into account the situation from the perspectives of resettled people. This of course confronted me with the harsh realities of a state in political crisis: hidden agendas, ethnic prejudice, corruption, threats. At this stage I found it difficult not to get antagonized against policy-makers who openly served the interests of the Sinhalese majority. It was clear that if there was any space at all for change-from-below, it had to be found within the non-governmental sector. Most of the NGO's however were also used to work in a top-down and patronizing manner, and ethnic prejudice could be found in this sector as well.

I developed close contacts with a small women's organisation (most of them refugees themselves) who were an exception in the NGO sector, because within their own group they practised what they preached: the necessity of bridging ethnic oppositions (cf.note 3). I also started sharing information with human rights activists<sup>7</sup>, who could use some of our findings for their reports.

During the last month of research, I became involved in *direct action-for-change*. A group of refugees in one of the camps in Colombo had organized themselves to oppose the intended closure of the camp and forced resettlement in the Eastern Province. They were Indian Tamils who originally came from the plantation sector, but had established their lives in Colombo years ago. They were badly affected during the 1983 riots, after which they stayed in camps for two to three years. Transported to the east, they were given pieces of land which were too dry to make a living. Education and health care, too, were totally inadequate. The new violence in 1990 made them flee back to Colombo, where they had been staying in camps for the last three years. Their children could now go to school, and

most of them earned enough in the informal sector to keep their families going. Thus they refused to be 'resettled' in the east where they did not belong. 'We don't want to be refugees, we don't want charity or relief, we only want a piece of land in Colombo where we can build a little house, live in peace and earn our living. We are from here,' they said.

The army and police came by night to close the camp. A group of 125 people - men, women and children - stayed back on the street. It was the rainy season. From that night onwards until the end of my stay, my research activities became largely determined by the needs of these people, who had been displaced by force even from their refugee camp. Together with my Tamil assistants I visited churches and charitable institutions in search of an alternative place for them to stay, went back to the people on the street to see how one pregnant woman was keeping and to talk with the leaders of the group - who were all males. I participated in meetings of non-governmental organizations discussing the problem, interviewed state officers in charge of the camps, and talked with political activists. By acting as a broker of information I tried to influence the decision-making process and support countervailing power. When I had to leave the country, most of the refugees on the street had found at least a temporary place to stay.<sup>8</sup> These last weeks of research came close to *action-research*, and I am sure that, had I been able to stay longer, the elements of *shared defining power*, *advocacy* and *action* would have prevailed in my approach. However, in the context of civil war and repression, the space for a truly transformative approach which would benefit the interests of any group of internal refugees in the long term was severely limited.

## Conclusion

This case study shows that a feminist-inspired transformative research approach provides a perspective on systems of domination which is relevant in studies not just confined to 'women'. My work with refugees benefited from feminism's appreciation of the heterogeneity of experience of people in particular categories, yet their shared positioning in systems of domination. What counted as knowledge and the methods to produce it were equally informed by feminism and *a view from below*. Through *conscious*



*partiality* my aim was to gain knowledge less distorted than that originating from the agendas and perspectives of the more powerful. Through a dialogic approach I tried to do this *with* participants rather than *on* research subjects so as to enable them to influence the agenda for advocacy and action. Even if in the context of repression and civil war truly transformative research was not possible, its components do change the power relations in research in a very practical way. This shows the challenge a feminist-inspired, transformative ideal offers to both supposedly neutral positivism and apolitical forms of post modernism.

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## Notes

1. This article is a slightly revised reprint from chapter 2 (Participation and power: a transformative feminist research perspective) in: Nici Nelson & Susan Wright

(eds), *Power and participatory Development; Theory and Practice*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1995.

2. An exception is the study 'Journey Without a Destination' by Rohini Hensman (1993) about refugees in Britain and Sri Lanka. At the time of my research the Sri Lankan edition of her book had not yet been published.
3. There are of course exceptions, such as the small NGO SURIYA, staffed by Tamil, Muslim and Sinhalese women who all participated in the refugee camps and closely interacted with the refugee women themselves.
4. Although de Josselin de Jong (1977) turned 'the people in the field' into active subjects, he did not explicitly problematise the power relations reproduced and constructed during the research. Thus the anthropological gaze (Marcus 1992) remained focussed onto 'the other', and the researcher continued to be the invisible producer of knowledge.
5. The Muslims, or Moors, as adherents of the Islamic religion, constitute a distinct community in Sri Lanka. Although commonly considered as an 'ethnic' minority, the Muslims consist of several ethnic groups (the Moors, Malays, Indian Moors, Borahs and Memens). Apart from the Indian Moors, who have been virtually absorbed by the Sri Lanka Moors, the others are tenacious of their distinct ethnic identities (Hussain 1993:87).
6. I worked together with research assistants who asked me not to mention their names in my publications. I am deeply grateful to them for the quality of their work and their human concern.
7. They belonged to the group of *University Teachers for Human Rights*.
8. Inspired by the protesting group on the street, refugees in another camp succeeded in postponing the date of closure at least until after the next school exams in December 1993. By the end of 1994 however the Tamil refugee camps in Colombo had all been closed. The Muslims who in 1990 by the LTTE were expelled from the north were still living in camps, also in Colombo.

## Women in Contemporary Sri Lankan Tamil Fiction: A Study of Three Novels

*Sitra Maunaguru*

Feminist literary criticism emerged as a result of the second wave of the feminist movement in the west. Though there are different schools in feminist criticism the main thread which runs common to them is the study of the construction of gender images, gender ideology and the concern over the experience of women that is reflected in the literary texts.

"At its best feminist criticism is a political act whose aim is not simply to interpret the world but to change it by changing the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read" [Fetterly. J : 1978 : viii].

The study of literature is an important aspect of feminist studies since literature is a part of cultural practice. Social construction of gender takes place through the working of ideology and the ideology of gender is inscribed in everyday discourse and is produced and reproduced in cultural practices.

Using gender as a concept to analyze the ideological implications of a text is a political act since gender is not simply a differentiating factor but in patriarchal ideology its meaning is "...division, oppression, inequality, interiorized inferiority for women" [Barrett. : 1980 : 112-13].

In the literary production the writers call upon the same signifying codes that pervade social interactions, the rituals and symbols that make up social practice. Feminist criticism questions the values implicit in the

literary works and it exposes the collusion between literature and ideology.

For literary analysis, it is important to set out a framework in order to understand literary works. Ideology is a useful concept to understand and explain literature. Althusser has defined ideology as that "systems of beliefs and assumptions - unconscious, unexamined, invisible-which represent the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" [Althusser : 1971 : 162]. It would be useful to use this concept since literature and culture are inextricably linked with ideology.

"For literary analysis, the concept of ideology is especially useful since literature and culture are sites at which ideology is produced and reproduced. In imaginative works a moving ideology can be fixed and brought to consciousness and its contradictions can be made visible. Criticism using the notion of ideology focuses both on what is stressed as intentional and on what appears subliminal, discordant and unintentional. With the notion, we can read against the grain and aiming to uncover a truth but investigating how a transcendental concept of truth was formed at all. Literature inevitably colludes with ideology, which in turn is inscribed in literary forms, style, conventions, genres and the institution of literary production. But it does not simply affirm, and it can expose and criticize as well as repeat." [Janet Todd : 1991 : 86].

Expressive realism is still popular among the Tamil literary critics in Sri Lanka as a literary approach. Thus they assume that literary texts express the author's experience and reveal the truth about his or her world, and as they do so, they provide access to the universal aspects of human nature. As an aesthetic theory expressive realism has been subjected to extensive criticism in recent times. One school of thought, particularly the Marxist, assumes that author and text speak from a position within ideology and fictional truth and authenticity should be understood in relation to a particular historical view of culture and art. The psychoanalytic critic rejects the possibility of authentic and mimetic art and sees the literary text "as a system of signs that constructs meaning rather than reflecting



inscribing simultaneously the subjectivity of the speaker and reader”.

I agree that the literary text is not a transparent media which reflects the reality but a signifying system which inscribes ideology and constitutive of reality. In this regard feminist criticism is more allied to the deconstruction school of thought.

## The Sri Lankan literary Scene:

The last decade had witnessed an emergence of feminist consciousness among women in Tamil society in Sri Lanka. This resurgence was responsible for various controversies on women's position in society. Various issues pertaining to women were debated publicly and became one of the several attractions of a younger generation. Young women began to articulate their ideas through art and literature. The activism of women in this period was also reflected in literary and other cultural activities. Journals and collections of poetry have been published during this period. Young women writers have discussed in their works the various issues confronting women in society.

It is important to question how far this new thinking was incorporated into the general literary trend and how it was dealt with in literary texts.

In many contemporary Tamil novels women are cast in sexually defined roles. Women are seen as self-sacrificing mothers, good obedient wives or bad dominating ones, betrayers, seductresses, single women or as providing inspiration to male artists and professionals. In addition to this, the over-all treatment of women is confined within the framework of patriarchal ideology.

I would like to examine the treatment of women in Tamil novels by analyzing the following three novels written by two males and one female writer.

Anal by K Danial [1986]

Kuveni by Senkaiaaliyan [1991]

Thuyilum Oru Nal Kalaium by Kohila Mahendran [1986] a woman writer.

The first two are prominent writers and belong to different literary groups. K. Danial is held high among the progressive literary groups both in Tamil Nadu and in Sri Lanka. He is praised for his social commitment in literature. Senkaiaaliyan is also a popular writer and has so far written 27 novels.

Anal and Kuveni have gained institutional acceptance at literary and academic levels. Anal is a prescribed text for students who offer Tamil literature as a subject for the external B.A. degree at the University of Jaffna. Kuveni is the first publication of Tamil Thai Pathipakam, a publication bureau of the LTTE in Jaffna. Ironically it was awarded the prize for the best Tamil novel published in 1991 by the North East provincial council.

These three novels mentioned above are set in three different points of time in the history of Sri Lanka. Kuveni is set in the pre-historic period and it deals with the landing of Prince Vijaya and the subsequent development in the human settlement pattern of Sri Lanka. Anal deals with caste issues and Christianization during early twentieth century Jaffna. Thuyilum Oru Nal Kalaium is set in contemporary Jaffna.

## Women Characters:

First, I will deal with the women characters depicted in the novels Anal and Kuveni. Danial the author of Anal, considers literature a revolutionary weapon which could be used in establishing a classless society. He claims that the novel Anal is a transparency of the social reality in Jaffna at that time.

“The novel is set in the village where I was born and bred. All the characters are known to me very much and some of them are still alive; all the incidents narrated here are nothing but true”[xxxvi]

All the main characters that help the plot are male like the other novels of the author. The women are cast as unimportant characters in the movement or weaving of the story. They are introduced as wives, sisters, and daughters of the males. Even the agricultural wage labourers when they come to work in the fields are introduced by the author as wives or widows and as relations of the men, though their men never appear in the novel. In one sequence the narrator in the novel introduces the women labourers one by one as they enter the field for work, as follows.

"Pari wife of Kanthan;  
Poothi widow of Kari the nephew of Nanniyan;  
Selli wife of Nanniyan"[66]

Another interesting example is Pari, a middle aged woman who is very helpful to others according to the story. The first time Peri appears she was introduced as the wife of Thampan. However in all the later instances she was referred as wife of Thampan and thereafter she was always referred to as the wife of Thampan. The way in which the women are identified in the novel points to the fact that the author considers them always as the dependents of men, simply as their relations. Simone de Beauvoir's concept of women as the 'other' explains this feature.

She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute-She is the Other". [de Beauvoir : 1961 : xvi]

The narrator in Anal acts mostly as a traditional male who views women as physical persons. The women are described as bodies; the physical description also suggests that the purpose of the women's body is for the pleasure of the males. The body of women is sensually evoked using allegories which are usually pleasing to the senses with sexual overtones. He refers to the lips, breasts, hair and complexion of women with great enthusiasm comparing them with fruits and flowers.

However, the antagonism of men over the sexuality of women is also expressed in a subtle manner; when referring to pregnancy the women's

protruding abdomen has been described. The author never refers to a pregnant woman as 'karpini' or 'pillaitachi' as they are the usually referred to in Tamil. "A woman with a protruding abdomen" is the sentence by which they are usually referred to in the novel. This is considered a socially impolite terminology.

The murders of women which take place in the novel, are mentioned very casually and the narrator seems least concerned about them. There was only one killing of a man in the novel and it was described in detail. There were four murders of women and only passing references are made to them. Some may consider these murders as reflections of the violence against women in society at that time; it could be; but the question is, why hasn't the narrator shown any concern?

Since the novel deals with caste, the issue of gender casually treated in the text though it was not the intention of the author. The exercise of control and domination of high caste men over the depressed castes is maintained through various mechanisms. The most blatant one is the sexual oppression of women of the depressed caste. Anal deals with this aspect. It is sharply focussed in the novel. The harassment of Sinni and the rape and the murder of Monica are some of the incidents that portray sexual violence. However, the gender issues that arise from sexual violence are not articulated in the novel. Rather the cruelty and the perversion of high caste men seem to be the concern of the author. The response of the women to the cruelty that is inflicted on them are not narrated.

The narrator in the novel seems to consider the readers to be all males. He has a formula that high caste women are morally loose and chase after men of lower caste; while women of the depressed castes are dignified and do not surrender to the desire of upper caste men.

The story of Anal seems to be a story about men as the main characters are all males. It takes place in two villages, one is in close proximity to Jaffna town and the other is Tirunelvely. But it does not involve any woman from that village. The absence and invisibility of women signify the fact that the novel has a male biased outlook in dealing with social

issues.

## Kuveni

The author of this novel states that its object is to point out the "mistakes of the ancestors of the Tamils of Sri Lanka and how it had paved the way for the present political issues." [Foreword]

"We [Tamils] are now reaping the results of the mistakes of our ancestors. This book tells the story about one of them - Kuveni - who committed the first error." [ibid]

In short, the discrimination the Tamils face as an ethnic minority in Sri Lanka, has originated from some unwise action of their ancestors during prehistoric times. In this regard Senkaiyalian tries to interpret history. His interpretation is based on the popular Kuveni Vijaya myth and Arya Diravida constructions which emerged during the nineteenth century.

The author's view is that the people who were living in this country in pre-historic times were Yakkas and Nagas, both tribes belonging to the proto Dravidian race who had achieved different levels of material development. The Nagas lived in the northern region at a somewhat higher level of civilization and Yakkas were in the North-west region leading a nomadic life. They were also portrayed as a hunting tribe and as having a woman leader, suggesting a matrilineal tribe. The Yakkas made a great mistake in allowing the Aryans to live in Sri Lanka. As a result they became a mixed race. "Yakkas having mixed with the Aryans lost their distinct culture; Nagas in the Northern region did not experience this loss" [ ].

The author's claim that the Northern Tamils belong to a "pure race" not touched by any foreign influence is to be questioned.

My concern here is how women are cast in this interpretation. It has been told that the matriarch of the Yakka tribe was Kuveni, the mythical figure. She was portrayed as one who disliked the ways of her tribe and desired the life style of aliens. In the very beginning of the novel she

declares her dislike for the youth in the tribe. Theradatta a youth of the tribe was in love with her but he was turned down by her. He was cast as a wise man who travels to other parts of the country, learning aspects of the culture of other tribes and introducing the good elements to his people. He introduces linga worship to the tribe, and the monogamous family.

In contrast to this male character Kuveni was portrayed as one who admires the life styles of the outsiders. She was aspiring to a different life. This new aspiration led to the destruction of the whole Yakka tribe. In fact she was sexually attracted towards Vijaya on the first occasion when she saw him. This attraction was the reason for her to allow Vijaya to live in the island. Not only did she permit him to live there but she also became his partner.

It is said that the first time Kuveni and Vijaya met, she fell in love with him. It would be interesting to note the narrator's intervention when Kuveni meets Vijaya when he landed on Sri Lankan shores. It runs as follows;

"Who are you?" Kuveni asked Vijaya

"I am Sinhala Vijayan, Prince of the country of Lala.' She stared at him and thought to herself; "What a colour! how smart he looks! is he one of the devas?"

"Are you from the country of Rama"" she asked.

"Yes; what country is this? who is the king here?" Vijaya asked in reply.

"I'm the leader of this group; Women have a high status here" said Kuveni.

"Men are the leaders in our society; we treat our women like flowers" Vijaya said.

"Women as flowers! his words are so sweet" she thought to herself.

"Let them stay on the shore; give them some food;" Kuveni ordered one of her men.

At this point Theradatta entered the site [and he said]

"Mother please send them away from this soil"

"Theradatta, be patient; they came here because their ship is broken and they will go back after a few days, till then let them stay here" Kuveni said.

"We stay for a short while" Vijaya said to Theradatta politely.

Kuveni looked at Theradatta, it seemed that she was begging something from him.

"As you please mother" said Theradatta and left. [108-111]

However, Theradatta was not at all pleased by the presence of Vijaya and his group. He asked Kuveni to send them away. The wisdom of Theradatta is expressed in the following;

"Mother, we made a big mistake by allowing the Aryans to stay on this soil. They did not come here to get our help, it seems they have come to occupy our land. They are not travellers but warriors. They are deported from their country for committing a crime; they will destroy our Yakka tribe or they will try to mix with us and make us Aryans". [ ]

Kuveni is portrayed as one who did not listen to this advice and is completely overwhelmed by the physical appearance of Vijaya. The author expresses his ideas as follows.

"Kuveni led Vijaya to commit the same crime again for which he and his followers had been deported from the shores of Lala".

Kuveni was madly in love with Vijaya, she was not prepared to give up her love and she was ready to pay any price for that pleasure. Finally,

when the Aryans waged war on the Yakka tribe the author says;

"Their matriarch committed a great mistake; she had given them not only food and shelter but submitted herself too. Now the lustful Aryans will own the Yakka women and the whole tribe will be destroyed" [ ].

The ultimate message is that a woman was the cause of the tribe to lose its heritage and this was linked to her sexuality. The 'original sin' was committed by a woman; women's links with aliens is dangerous. This message evokes so many other meanings and moral undertones. The political context in which this narrative was written also gives added meaning to the text.

The second Eela'n war had begun in mid-1990 in Jaffna. During this time the discourse on ethnic identity stressed the protection of the purity of the group by not having links with the 'outsiders'. Those who have links with others are considered traitors. Women's links with other people were looked upon with suspicion. It is a common fact that in similar situations their sexuality becomes the focus of control. The last sequence of the novel has to be read in the context of backdrop. At the end of the novel, the stoning of Kuveni was written as an inevitable result which she deserves for her fault which the author considers a 'original sin'.

According to Mahavamas, Kuveni is a Yakkni who was transformed into a beautiful woman when she ate the food given by Vijaya. She allowed Vijaya to stay with her and consented to the slaying of her tribe's members. She bore his children and was deserted by Vijaya when he married a Pandya princess and apparently was killed [not by stoning] by a member of her tribe.

Senkaiyalian having used this story as the base interpolated many incidents and has woven a story conveying a new meaning. In short the message is that the woman who submits herself to an alien man allows him also to invade her land; As a result she becomes a traitor. "Women, if left uncontrolled, can be dangerous" is another message implied in the vel.

## Thuyulum Oru Nal Kaliyum

This novel by Kohila Mahendran was published in 1986 and deals with the moral and psychological placement of Tamil women in conservative Jaffna society. The story is about a marital relationship and raises many questions in the context of freedom of choice and the individualism of women in a male-dominated society. The woman protagonist in this novel has been portrayed as a socially committed intellectual and an independent person. The story is as follows:

Poorani is a woman with many talents and intellectual capabilities who teaches in a high school in Jaffna. She was married for seven years. The husband is a business man whose interests were incompatible with her interests and her social commitments. Poorani is friendly with Indran who also teaches in the same school and finds solace in her friendship with him. The husband is jealous of her and always tries to dominate her; he is also suspicious of her friendship with Indran. After seven years Poorani becomes pregnant and the husband suspects that the pregnancy might have been caused by one of the other men. This infuriates her and she leaves him; Indran ask her to marry him and he is also willing to father her child. But she refuses the offer saying that she wants to be on her own for some time.

The whole novel is a discourse about the of the husband and wife and Poorani's psychological battle with herself about their relationship.

At the very beginning of the novel the levels of incompatibility between Poorani and her husband are brought up. The husband was not educated like his wife and was expecting her to comply with his ideas. This forms the basis of the problem. She was trying to adjust herself by analyzing his behaviour from a psychological perspective. She decides that the husband's inferiority complex comes out in his repressive behaviour. However, she questions her marriage; She often thinks that she should abandon marital life.

"Marriage is the mistake I made and the worst is marrying a business-

man" she thought. [p:17]

The thought of ending the relationship increases as time passes.

"Those who lived before my time and who are living at this time were and are submitting themselves to the control of men like my husband and are unable to express their interests and die without a fulfilled life. All the women should wake up from this slumber... I must wake up first" [p:76]

But it appears that at the same time she is confused as to how far she should go.

"I must bring about a revolution" part of her mind insists.

"It is necessary for a woman to have a rebellions spirit but it should not develop into a force which could destroy her" again she thought. [p:103]

However, she decided to leave her husband. The concluding chapter contains a discourse on marriage, love, sex, family and fatherhood.

The novel created a stir among the literary community due to its thematic treatment. I remember that at the book launching ceremony in mid 1985 one critic called the novel subversive. Another critic, though sympathetic to women's cause, titled his write-up on the novel as 'In revolt against a husband' expressing his confused reactions to the novel.

"One can explain that a conjugal affair is basically one with give and take attitudes and therefore the wife should have adjusted her life, and that instead of confronting her husband she should have tried to convert him to respect and love her rather than use her only as a sex object. But then the idea of revolting against hypocritical practices would have been lost. In that sense the end is justifiable. But it could have gained strength had the writer presented her heroine as a self- critical analyst and also seen the plus points of her husband in greater detail" [Sivakumaran K. S



Island 14.9.1986]

The critic's message clear by is that the woman should have continued to live with the husband correcting him rather than leaving him. Subramaniam, a popular literary critic while accepting the novel's feminist attributes in his foreword to the novel also suggests that the novel as a whole could be read as a symbolism of the struggle of the Tamils for self-determination in Sri Lanka. He interpreted the decision of Poorani to part from her husband as the Tamil's intention for a separate state. All these criticisms indicate the attempts to overlook, dilute and subsume the issues of patriarchy and its critical treatment in text.

However, it is important to note that the author herself questions male dominance within the framework of patriarchy. Though the text challenges the institution of marriage it does not reject it. The point at which Poorani decides to leave the marriage explains this idea. Poorani's breaking point with the husband occurs when he suspects her pregnancy. Her chastity is questioned and it is her 'dharma' to safeguard her dignity. At this point her "leaving" can be justified since she is "pure"; she is chaste; she does not live with or marry any other man. In addition to this she defies sexuality and this would make her action acceptable according to the existing ideology.

"I have experienced enough sex without love; I have developed unbearable hate against it. What I need is love without any sex"  
[p:129]

The declaration by the heroine to live on her own is to assure a watchful society that she would be leading a sanyasi's life.

However, the story leaves room for the typical happy ending that the husband, after realizing his mistake could return to the wife - the act which could reaffirm the powers of women's chastity. The author even though a woman who could discuss the sensitive issues such as love and sex openly in a novel confines her ideas to the limitations of patriarchal ideology. This may be either due to her ideology or due to the fear of societal disapproval that can emerge when women try to express dissent

against the accepted traditional values. Then this becomes a threat to the free expression of ideas and forces them to resort to a self-imposed censorship. Kohila's foreword to the novel clearly indicates the self-imposed censorship.

There are some ideas I have expressed in the novel; but there are many things which I am not able to express and which I do not like to express"[iv]

When probing into various issues with regard to women in literature one can see the differences of attitudes up between the male and the female writers. The detailed textual study of the above three novels highlights the differences. Even though there was space in *Anal* to deal with the gender issues connected to caste, Danial failed to bring them out by concentrating only on male characters. The author of *Kuveni* takes a clear reactionary view on women which I have discussed in this essay. This shows that even the writers who are progressive on other issues are not concientized handle the problems of women. But if women writers try to bring out the issues concerning women they have to face opposition from society.

In conclusion it could be said that feminist consciousness is being incorporated into the contemporary Tamil literary scene - however small - by the women writers.

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## The Business of Child Prostitution

*Maureen Frances Seneviratne*

On November 23, 1994, at 9.30 a.m. in the Criminal Court of Turnhout, near Anvers, Belgium, the trial opened against John D. Stamford, Founder and Co-Editor of the "Gay Spartacus Guide", -one of the best known and widely circulated of such journals in the world.

Yet, The "Spartacus Gay Guide" had been openly sold for twenty four years, since it was founded by the Accused, John D. Stamford. Described as a "Guide", written for homosexuals, according to the Organisation, Terres des Hommes Foundation, Lausanne, which conducted press conferences in Brussels, Paris and Geneva a week before the trial opened, the "Spartacus Gay Guide" is not in itself, either scandalous or original. Also, according to them, "Homosexuality was by no means the object of this (press) conference nor was it the object of the trial."

The trial was about PAEDOPHILLA : about the prostitution of children, facilitated and actively promoted by means of the "Spartacus Gay Guide", by its founder and co-editor - and paedophilia is an offence on the Criminal Codes of every country of the world. It is also Big Business.

The Trial of John D. Stamford had its echoes and re-echoes in many countries in the world, including Sri Lanka, which had been listed in his "Guide" as a "destination" for sexual deviants for several years and has reference made to its "attractions" in the Guide published for the years 1994/1995 as well. It is described in this journal as "a place where almost every sexual desire could be met" and where there is "no control of HIV/AIDS status upon entering the country" but where "if your illness becomes known or you are accused of risky behaviour (whatever that may mean) you may be deported."

But in a way the doom of John D. Stamford began in - and with Sri Lanka, a long time ago, infact more than a decade ago. It is indeed interesting to find that if Sri Lanka was unable to offer specific evidence against John D. Stamford himself, to be used at his trial as some other Asian Countries were able to do, at best the ball began to roll. Human Rights organisations internationally and nationally were alerted about the most atrocious and criminal aspects of sex tourism, when a study of this issue was done in 1980/1981 on the streets and on the beaches of Sri Lanka.

Tim Bond, a Terres des Hommes delegate having heard strong rumours of paedophile activity in this island-country, travelled to Sri Lanka on a humanitarian program and during his stay was able to unearth the most horrendous and criminal activities being committed upon the most marginalized and most vulnerable of children by persons entering on "tourists visas". The scenic attractions the country afforded the genuine holiday-maker was not their concern. After his investigation of what was termed "boy prostitution" in Sri Lanka, he returned to Europe to obtain and verify the origin of the information he had received on-the-spot. He was able shortly thereafter to reveal not only what he had seen and heard and found, but also what he had concluded of the extent of the direct responsibility of the "Spartacus Gay Guide" and more specifically of its "Holiday Help Portfolio" for paedophiles in each country they wished to visit, usually Third World destinations where laws against this crime were (and in some places still are) weak.

As a result of the findings in Sri Lanka, Tim Bond and Terres des Hommes, Lausanne, Switzerland, decided to officially intervene; first with the Sri Lankan government, "in order to develop legal texts protecting minors as victims of prostitution, as well as a working agreement serving the children." (From text of Terres des Hommes Foundation's Press Conference : November 1994)

"The official response was polite - but of little consequence," was the Organisation's rueful comment. John D. Stamford on the other hand was not slow on his part to react : In 1982 he wrote to Terres des Hommes, Lausanne : "It is always our hope that our enemies can be brought to a

degree of understanding of man-man and man-boy sex." He even indicated that the Sri Lankan studies had "enormously improved" the sales of his Guide. He advocated further studies giving even more salacious information, to boost his sales more, which went to prove that paedophilia can be a big business for publishers of Guides such as "Spartacus" offering to deviants babies, and boys from the age of puberty and even younger, mentally retarded and physically handicapped boys as well as young unaccompanied boy children who themselves earned but a pittance. John D. Stamford was at the centre of the web : the promotion of profit-making paedophilia on an international level for two and a half decades at least before the axe fell.

Here in Sri Lanka recent court cases monitored by the PEACE Campaign (Protecting Environment And Children Everywhere) and still in progress reveal similar information and structures within the country with affiliations and clear cut connections with international networks of paedophilia, raking in the shekels, while the abused/exploited children are paid as little as Rs. 20/- and at the most a mere Rs. 100/- to Rs. 200/- and given some goodies like T-shirts, sweets, a bicycle perhaps if they are "lucky" for the sexual services rendered. The local/international networks are so strong and so professional that abusers can, with impunity, reside in rented "safe houses" and/or small guest houses/hotels. Having entered the country on tourist or business visa they easily obtain their supply of children through the local agents and pimps, extend their visas and continue to remain for months in the country. Being in many instances rich men themselves, business-men, professionals, retired bureaucrats, money is no problem to them and some even set themselves up in the Third World countries where it is so easy to find children to abuse and to draw others to visit the country and pay big money to indulge in their nefarious purposes.

If revelations were made to the government of Sri Lanka by Terres des Hommes as far back as 1981 and later, a decade later, from 1991 the PEACE Campaign (Protecting Environment And Children Everywhere) carried out an on-going lobbying exercise to raise awareness, and to motivate the government to pass more stringent laws to protect children, it still took several years from the time of Tim Bond's revelations before

a Committee was appointed in 1992/1993 with a view to recommending amendments in this area of child abuse to the Penal Code of Sri Lanka (which itself dates back to 1883 and the period of British Rule). It was on the 19 September 1995 that the Bill to Amend the Penal Code was passed in Parliament: a landmark in socio-legal history in this country. Such measures as minimum punishments, the irrelevancy of a child's so-called "consent", compensation to the child-victim, new laws against incest, child trafficking, sexual exploitation (clearly defined) have been brought into the Penal Code to protect the child and it only remains for the police to enforce the law and for our arbiters of justice to act positively to punish offenders who commit such a heinous crime.

In Sri Lanka in the first two months of 1995 five foreigners were brought to Courts accused of child sexual exploitation and scores of rapists have also come before the law. The momentum has to continue and the information given to the police has to be followed up by them and acted upon positively. What has already happened here, even under the old, weak laws is encouraging to child rights activists. The case of John D. Stamford in Belgium, which continues to give rise to immense publicity, if spectacular is not unique.

The trial of Stamford, anyhow, is the trial of the commercial promotion of sexual exploitation of a multitude of children in all countries around the world. ("Spartacus Guide" introduces readers to about 150 countries in the world). According to Bernard Boeton, Director of Information of the Terres des Hommes Foundation, "One cannot for 25 years provide openly available information about addresses, prices, pick-up places, etc... without being considered an accomplice, promoter and agent of the sexual exploitation of the most miserable children. One cannot advertise that by becoming a member of the 'Spartacus Club' subscribers will have access to children (selected and 'sampled' by Stamford himself) - and then take refuge in a simple legal debate on a publishing misdemeanour or pretend that the sole financial profit came from the sale of the Guide, and not the services which are offered and promoted in it." Business in the sale and violation of the bodies, minds (and for those who believe in it, the souls) of young children offered sexual satisfaction to no more and no less than criminals. For a child, every child, any child is NOT a sexual partner.

We cannot do better than end by quoting (as was quoted at the press conference conducted by Terres des Hommes, Lausanne, held prior to the trial of John D. Stamford) from a homosexual periodical DIALOGAI published in Geneva (in its editorial of Feb-March 1994): "Just like the rape of young girls should not be confused with heterosexuality, the rape of young boys should not be confused with homosexuality. I clearly say rape, since I find no other word to describe paedophilic relations... When sexual tastes involve the wholeness of the other person, and particularly of another person who is helpless, they deserve the most absolute condemnation..."

When the deliberate, harrowing, organised rape of young children the sexual assault upon their bodies is at the centre of a profitable business enterprise for some, the child's rights activists among others would call it perfidy on a monstrous scale and deserving not only of condemnation but punishment on a scale equal to the unspeakable damage done to the child and through the child to the whole of society.

## Natioanlism Refigured: Gender and Contemporary Popular Cinema

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### I

A new nationalism is in the air today, a nationalism suffused with romantic love, with the most intimate and "private" of emotions. Popular cinema in India draws our attention to this phenomenon: *Roja* (1992), for example, is advertised as "a patriotic love story", and one of the most successful films of last year was called *1942: A Love Story*. This nationalism appears to be premised on the detaching of the new middle class from the Nehruvian state of the post-Independence years, a process that leads to changes in the meaning of some of the key terms of our political life, such as "secularism", for example. It is almost as if the hitherto hidden logic of the national-modern is now acquiring visibility owing to a new configuration of forces which include the rise of the Sangh Parivar and the liberalization of the Indian economy. The portrayal of "mainstream" characters--unexceptional, not particularly "heroic"--in commercial cinema provides one point of access to this complex configuration. Central to the shift in the national imagery, as I shall show, is the figure of woman. In the negotiation of the new modernity, the woman is not presented as just a passive counter; rather, her agency is shown as crucial for the shifts that are taking place.

The Indian "woman" is produced in a particular conjuncture between nation (imaged as an autonomous, sovereign, nation-state) and modernity (including both processes such as democratization or the spread of mass communication and discourses such as those which produce the very distinctions between "tradition" and the "modern"). Unlike gender, however, caste and community (or religious identity) are not privileged sites for the

representation or staging of modernity and nationhood. [I refer here to lower caste-class and Muslim.] On the contrary the pre-modern or non-modern, as well as the anti-national, is often staged as caste and community. To put it differently, invoking identities based on community and caste would be unacceptable to the secularist who has laid hegemonic claim to the nation in the post-independence period. The leaving-behind of caste/community by the national-modern, curiously enough, is facilitated by the claim of "women" to modernity and the nation.<sup>1</sup> The claim, however, is an incomplete one, and an analysis of it might well point to the multiple fault lines and incoherences in the formation of the national imaginary.

This claim of women to entitlement is supported by the new identities fashioned by/for them in the post-Independence period on a host of different sites, a fashioning that seems to have taken new directions in the nineties. My interest in popular cinema as a major site for such identity-formation derives from the fact that it is perhaps the single most powerful medium until the fairly recent coming of television in which identities have been publicly displayed, negotiated and narrativized. The three films I plan to discuss at some length, *Geetanjali* (1989), *Roja* (1992) and *Bombay* (1995), all directed by Maniratnam, were produced in Tamil and Telugu, the second and third having been successfully dubbed into Hindi as well.<sup>2</sup> Although chronologically speaking *Geetanjali* is a pre-Mandal film and *Roja* a pre-Babri Masjid one (they are, however, uncannily close to the two events--September-October 1990 and November 1992--named here), I would like to suggest that their representations of feminine identities are emblematic, in the first case, of the anti-Mandal woman, and in the second, of the (Hindu) woman who stands for the nation (but is not necessarily the openly communal woman).<sup>3</sup> Primarily because she is Muslim, the central woman-character in *Bombay* is portrayed somewhat differently from the heroines of *Geetanjali* and *Roja*, as I shall demonstrate later. I use the term "anti-Mandal woman" to designate the self-identity of those who, by disavowing caste, are able to lay claim simultaneously to both the modern and the secular. This is not to suggest that "modern and secular" is the same as "anti-Mandal"; it is merely one way of indicating the convergences that occur, or become evident, in the 90s. The anti-Mandal agitation framed the modern as the secular, and the secular as that which had transcended caste differences.<sup>4</sup>



One of the major conceptual difficulties in talking of the new nationalism is that its vocabulary does not seem so very different from that of the older nationalism. National interest, national security, national integration and modernization are terms familiar to us since the 1950s. So is the term secularism, which has been central to liberal and left politics in India. My contention is that the continuity of terms obscures the real shifts that are taking place. In some ways, the process is one in which the contours of the national-modern are made evident, its exclusions of caste (the lower castes) and community (the non-Hindu) legitimized. To use a rather awkward term, we should perhaps speak of the "post-national-modern" (not the postmodern, not the postnational) to describe this situation in which old terms are acquiring new significations.<sup>5</sup> My paper focusses on the mobilization of these terms in contemporary popular cinema and the new subject-positions which are being produced in the films.

Today, while the composition of the national-modern is being centrally challenged by the assertion of political identities based on caste and community, the question of gender occupies a very different position.<sup>6</sup> In spite of the considerable gains of the women's movement of the last twenty years, the idiom in which feminist questions were raised is being mobilized today in very different kinds of initiatives, including the consolidation of the national-modern feminists set out to criticize. The woman who chooses, the woman who acts independently, who takes the initiative, are today admired figures in popular cinema. If we examine closely the structuring of the agency of these female (or should we say feminist) subjects, like for example Maniratnam's protagonists Geeta, Roja and Shaila Banu, we might begin to perceive the modes of their implication in the refiguring of the national-modern.

## II

In this section, I attempt an analysis of female subjectivity in Geetanjali in the light of the anti-Mandal agitation. The announcement in August 1990 of the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations by V.P.Singh, as we all remember, set off large-scale rioting by upper-caste youth who were by and large urban. Many of these young people were women who took part enthusiastically in the activities of the Anti-Mandal

Commission Forum (AMCF), which included organising batches of students to sweep the streets, polish shoes, carry luggage at the railway station, and orchestrate processions and rallies. The press represented the upper-caste youth as engaged in a heroic struggle to save the nation from impending chaos. The implementation of reservations would lead to a derecognition of merit and the consequent destruction of the country. In the battle for "merit", the truly patriotic, and truly secular, Indian was the one who rose above caste divisions; anyone who asked for reservations on the basis of caste was simply being casteist.

Prominently woven into the anti-Mandal discourse on merit was the figure of the Nation, and that of Modernity. Caste or the reservations policy (used interchangeably in this context) was decried as that which had trapped India in a residual feudalism, preventing the country from achieving the progress and efficiency which would allow it to take its equal place in the world. By decrying caste, the modern middle-class subject also proclaimed its concern for the nation.

To take a slight detour into my own discipline, English, and see how it responded to the Mandal crisis may not be inappropriate here. The study of English Literature, introduced in the 19th century by the British, had played a significant part in the formation of the liberal humanist subject who would be both modern and nationalist.<sup>7</sup> In India, the "secularism" of the English-educated subject enabled a displacement of both caste and community from the middle class sphere, so that these got marked as what lay outside, was other than, the middle class. During the anti-Mandal agitation, the upper-caste English Department students in many universities boycotted classes en masse to demand the abolition of reservations altogether.<sup>8</sup>

There are connections, no doubt, between the fact that the (old) middle class which used to stand in for the nation is marked, above all, by its Englishedness, and the phenomenon of middle class/upper-caste female "English" students emerging so decisively into the public realm to express the outrage of their class. Of all student agitations in post-Independence India, the anti-Mandal one was surely unique in its legitimization by the media and in the fond parental approval it generated. The acclamation, curiously enough, was related to the imaging of this student politicization as being "above

politics".<sup>9</sup> Precisely because of what was seen by the media as the purity and distance from conventional politics of the anti-Mandalites, their protest became the rage of the righteous who had suffered far too long because of their innate courtesy and politeness, who were now forced to take action to prevent the nation from 'going to the dogs'.<sup>10</sup> The fact of women appearing on the streets in public protest made the media recall the idealism of the freedom struggle. "Women" were imaged as morally pure, and thereby entrusted with the task of saving the nation. The enthusiastic participation of "women" in the anti-Mandal agitation along with their men, not as sexed beings but as free and equal citizens, suggests that these articulate and assertive subjects define themselves against "caste" (read lower castes). As middle-class, upper-caste "women" thus claim a space in the post-national-modern, both men as well as women of the lower castes become invisible. A parallel process can be seen with regard to Muslim men and women.

It would be inaccurate, however, to think that the upper-caste anti-Mandal women were marked primarily by their Englished-ness. Interestingly, South Indian women of this class--positioned within the national-modern-- would not, for example, have watched popular Telugu films, their first choices being English and Hindi movies. But today they are ardent admirers of films like *Geetanjali*, and "vernacular" directors like Maniratnam. What makes Maniratnam's films unique in commercial cinema is their use of realistic modes of representation, their technical sophistication,<sup>11</sup> and the seeming naturalness and spontaneity of his actors, as well as the careful shaping of a seamless "Indian modernity". The films produce as well as take shape within a "modern" space, having either discarded or de-emphasized the elements of farce and melodrama that are staple aspects of Indian-language commercial films. They make themselves available, therefore, to be celebrated without embarrassment, even with a certain pride, by the middle-class Indian. The growing popularity of Maniratnam's films across class and region in fact indicate the near-hegemonic emergence of a "cosmopolitan" taste, mediated by MTV and cable television programming.<sup>12</sup> In these films, new subjectivities, and a new femininity, is being fashioned, this being perhaps a key element in their successful appeal to younger women. This new femininity holds out the promise of a modernity without the perils of feminism or feminist politics, which are frequently ridiculed in the media, and sometimes vilified, as imitative of Western aberrations.

The redefinitions of femininity produced and circulated today in films like Maniratnam's feed at many levels into, and reflect, the popular debates around questions of "modernity" and "tradition". These debates, it seems to me, are helping to constitute an aggressive cultural nationalism which is beginning to articulate itself alongside and into the vocabulary of the multinational market economy. The re-figuring of femininity in popular cinema is linked to the emergence of a new consumer economy supported by the ongoing reconstitution of the national imaginary. It is premised on what I have been calling the idea of a post-national-modern, an idea that articulates at the level of everyday life--and in the life of commodities-- the construction of an "Indian" modernity which has resolved the older contradictions.

On the surface, some of Maniratnam's heroines don't match our conventional notions about good Indian women. The teenaged heroine of *Geetanjali*, for instance, is constantly saying, "*Lecchipoddaama*, shall we elope?", and not always to the same person. However, Geetanjali's daring and her sexual aggressiveness are presented in the narrative merely as a manifestation of her high spirits and her sense of humour. Her "abandon" in some sense comes from being abandoned, by an absent or dead mother, and by life. The boldness of the heroine becomes literally possible only on the verge of death.

What is the narrative trajectory that creates the space of feminine assertion in the film? *Geetanjali* is the story of two young lovers, both dying of incurable illnesses, the boy from leukaemia and the girl from heart disease. Set amidst the swirling mists of Kodaikanal, where the protagonists seem to have gone to die, the film unfolds into breathtaking landscapes whose lush greenness (and the yellows and reds of the heroine's "ethnic" clothes) counterpoint the tale of imminent death. Interestingly, the only images of death foregrounded in the film are the tombs and ghosts of the graveyard where Geeta, as she is called, lures unsuspecting men in order to play an elaborate practical joke on them with the help of her young siblings. Death, as far as the female protagonist is concerned, is just a joke. The tombs are simultaneously "real" as well as parodic images out of a horror-film. The graveyard is therefore what awaits (the inevitable end), as well as what sanctions a life lived in the present continuous tense. One of our first

impressions of Geeta is of a prankster in ghost-like attire who has adopted the dress for fun and out of choice, for it is not until the intermission that the audience finds out about her incurable disease.

Throughout the narrative, however, love and death are closely intertwined, as for example in the lyrical Ilaiyaraaja composition "Om Namaha" with its background music dominated by a magnified heartbeat. Although the film was not well-received in non-urban areas, middle and lower-middle class young people in large cities saw it again and again, shouting, chanting or whispering, according to context, every crucial piece of dialogue. What the film seems to reaffirm is that one should live as though one will die tomorrow. In living for today, the new consumers who form the bulk of the audience confirm their intuition that what is important is to look wonderful now, to buy their fashionable clothes (Nagarjuna's jeans and sweatshirts, Girija's neo-ethnic salwar kameez and ghagra choli) now, for tomorrow they will be as good as dead.<sup>13</sup> In fact, impending death is the only context in which "love" begins to make sense, for it is a love that is reinforced by the pretty clothes, a love that never disturbs the assumptions of the audience because not only does it have no future, it rests on the almost complete erasure of differences.

The protagonists are obviously metropolitan, but they are totally distant from, and uninvolved with, their normal context. The hero seems to be Hindu and the heroine Christian, but this is a trivial detail, used mostly for comic effect, as in the church scene where the boy calls out to God during Mass to complain about his lover. [Contrast this with *Roja*, in which another minority identity--Muslim--imaged effortlessly as both pre-modern and anti-national, is counterpointed to that which is invisibly Hindu and part of the national-modern.] Nowhere in the narrative is religious difference a point of contention, for everything is permitted for those who are about to die. The new consumer economy in which films like *Geetanjali* occupy a nodal position constitutes a new ethical self, a self premised on the need for "authenticity". Only the inauthentic, those who experience death-in-life, are afraid of death. Not the ones who truly experience life-in-death, whose moments, lived solely in the present, are authenticated by the imminence of their end.<sup>14</sup>

The centrality to *Geetanjali* of the new consumer ensures that work is never really represented in the film, except for the fruitsellers who function as local colour, and the doctor and nurse who in any case are working for the lovers. The hero, although recently graduated from college, is exempt from work partly because of his parents' affluence and partly because of his impending death. Class differences, therefore, are not represented here, except for the lecherous caretaker and his weepy wife in the parodic subplot, and they too are subsumed in the general movement of the narrative. The heroine and her sisters again don't work, except to clean the house now and then or prepare elaborately for oilbaths. Geeta is not even shown studying, for she lives in a kind of "slack" time where all she has to do is entertain herself, and others. The film also erases regional differences, for only the language spoken by the characters is Telugu, and there is no other marker to place the film in any specific region. The appearance of the protagonists is not unlike those of college students from Delhi or Bombay or Bangalore. Obviously, the hero is dressed in Western clothes like other fashionable urban, middle-class youth; but the urban heroine in many South Indian films is increasingly dressed in North Indian "ethnic" clothes. Instead of being through her clothes (*langa-daavni* or sari) the bearer of a regional specificity, the film-heroine is now marked as "Indian", like present-day urban young women themselves, through her Rajasthani-Gujarati apparel. In other films by Maniratnam (for example, the award-winning *Mouna Raagam*), we find an obligatory fantasy-sequence with a love-song set in the desert, replete with camels, turbans, mirrorwork, and chunky jewellery. The visual imagery provided by mass media for our "private" fantasies thus includes pictures of the new Indian.<sup>15</sup>

Geeta, then, is the "new woman", the strong heroine, both modern as well as feminine. While her casual clothes and "spontaneous" gestures represent her as "liberated", at the same time she carries a double burden --the burden of woman as saviour and teacher (Geeta helps the hero understand his mortality and reconciles him to the fate she also shares), who shows the hero how to deal with a death he cannot confront. The heroine is not thereby exempt, however, from sustaining the image of the truly feminine. She is allowed to take the initiative in the relationship because in spite of her shoulder-length hair she is "Indian", and a signifier of the good modernity. The film deploys a series of images which suggest a contemporary

reappropriation of that which had, for the urban middle class, been relegated in the post-Independence period to the realm of tradition (shots of herbal preparations, Geeta with oil in her hair, the large courtyard where the women sit). This reappropriation, it must be obvious, is once again centred around the woman. The bad kind of modernity is signified by the army major's lusty wife, played by Disco Shanti, dressed in tight jeans or miniskirts or sometimes only a bath-towel. This bad modernity is inevitably associated with an insatiable sexual appetite, portrayed in the "comic" scenes of Disco Shanti's seduction of the caretaker. Both the women are sexually aggressive, but whereas Geeta's actions are sanctioned by death and the audience only laughs with her, the other woman's actions are ultimately presented as reprehensible, or as something to be laughed at.

Geeta has no mother in the film, only a grandmother, who passes on to her "traditional" knowledge, imaged for the new consumer through herbal cosmetics. This "grandmother's knowledge", mobilized by multinational capital, is authenticated and refashioned in the chemical laboratory in order to create new markets in "traditional" societies. And why doesn't Geeta have a mother? If she had been part of this narrativization of contemporary female subjectivity, Geeta would have had to be schooled by her into the older femininity, to claim a place in the national-modern; she would have to be groomed for a future continuous, for the kind of austerity enjoined on us by the years just after Independence. Geeta, however, can challenge conventional models of femininity precisely because she is presented as having no future. Her father tolerates all her transgressions in the light of her imminent death. Her daring, her abandon, are permissible because they will not last, since they find full expression only on the verge of dying.

To come back to the anti-Mandal agitation with which I began this section of my paper, the anti-Mandal woman is prefigured in Geetanjali with regard to her occupation of an equal space with middle-class men, a space where differences of caste or community do not matter because they have been left behind by the secular subject. In its transition to the post-national-modern, this subject is articulated into the consumer economy, an economy naturalized by the film in its valorization of the present moment. And it is the consumer economy that legitimizes the demand for efficiency at all costs that a welfarist, pro-reservation state cannot provide.<sup>16</sup> This inefficient state

is centrally thematized in Roja, which is set in present-day Kashmir.

### III

Whereas Geetanjali narrativizes the fantasies of the new middle-class in a setting seemingly distant from the everyday world, Roja, which incidentally won the National Integration Award for 1993, dramatizes--as does the newly released and controversial Bombay-- the politics of this assertive and self-confident class.<sup>17</sup> Although Maniratnam's representative technique has for its immediate ancestor the Hindi middle-brow film of the 1970s (either in its wistful Hrishikesh Mukherjee mode or the social-critique mode of Saeed Mirza) there is no angst apparent in his characters. Unapologetic about their protagonists in every way, Maniratnam's films celebrate rather than critique their aspirations and lifestyles.

The opening sequence of Roja shows a Kashmiri militant leader being captured by soldiers of the Indian army. This is followed by another beginning, which depicts the splendid waterfalls and coves and shining green fields of the village of Sunder Bhanpur (somewhere in India), with the heroine Roja singing and romping through the landscape.<sup>18</sup> In this rapidly-presented sequence--its slickness that of a TV commercial--we see Roja, sometimes accompanied by her youngest sister, driving a tractor (for fun, since they don't "work"), playing pranks on the older villagers, dressing up in men's clothes, wearing a graduate's convocation robes, and dancing through a field where women are transplanting seedlings. As in other Maniratnam films, actual labour serves as a backdrop that enhances the lightheartedness of the heroine. Then we see her and the other girl driving a flock of goats down a hill and across the road (not work but play again) to block the hero's car so that he can be scrutinized before he enters the village. Roja is a good deal like Geeta, in spite of the "rural" origins of the one and the "urban" background of the other. Both are portrayed as uninhibited, high-spirited, self-assertive, never at a loss for words. These are women whose articulateness has been made possible by the women's movement, which has created certain kinds of spaces for women and helped bring them a new visibility, although they are recuperated into the very spectacularization that some feminists might challenge. Interestingly, Roja's high spirits, like Geetanjali's, seem to be made possible by the exemption of



the heroines from "real work",<sup>19</sup> so their assertiveness is not part of their interaction in a workplace situation.<sup>20</sup>

Rishi Kumar, the urbane hero, has come to "see" Roja's sister, since he wants to marry "a girl from a village". Not only that, he would like his bride to be from the beautiful village with which he has fallen in love ("I love the very soil of this place", as he says later). But clearly he will not marry just anyone--when the match with Roja's sister falls through because she wants to marry someone else, he turns immediately to Roja, whom he has glimpsed exactly twice until then.

Roja, who is fair, sharp-featured, obviously upper-caste, is quite different from the village women of the neo-realist "art" films of Benegal, Adoor and others. She addresses her father as Daddy, has a television set at home, is accustomed to talking on the telephone; and except that she does not know English, she is quite at ease in urban surroundings, adapting without difficulty to Rishi's upper middle class home and milieu. Roja does not therefore belong even to the genre of the "village-belle" of older commercial Hindi and regional-language cinema. Her old world and her new one are not represented as opposed to each other; rather, they exist in an almost seamless continuum. Given the rapid urbanization of the rural upper class/castes, English is no longer a sufficient marker of cultural difference or even a marker of non-Indianness. Instead, "English" can be acquired through the training in consumerism; what is more curious, English is closely associated not with the non-Indian but that which is not only assertively Indian but clearly nationalist: as indicated by the words which signify Rishi's profession and his daily activity, a point to which I will return.

What the village stands for in Rishi's eyes is a newly formulated traditionalism: the "ethnic" wedding, so much unlike the hotel or function-hall reception now seen as so tasteless by the upper middle-class, the colourful saris of the old women who dance for the couple, or the sexual frankness of the 'rustic' wedding song, which is sung in playback partly by the rap musician Baba Sehgal. All this displayed ethnicity is not at variance with Rishi's cosmopolitan modern-ness; on the contrary, it helps strengthen its self-confidence. Except for the dhoti-kurta of his wedding day, Rishi

usually appears only in jeans and shirt or sweater. On the other hand, the Kashmiri militants always appear in clothes which mark them as ethnically Muslim; it is an ethnicity which reveals them as anti-modern (therefore anti-national or anti-Indian), intolerant and fundamentalist, while Hindu ethnicity as displayed by Roja or Rishi is merely part of the complexity of being Indian. The Hindu wedding rites are so normalized that we do not pay them any special attention, or even mark them as "religious", just as we do not really see Roja's frequent attempts to pray to her idols as significant to the story. The militants, however, especially Rishi's main captor Liaquat, are always shown praying--an action shored up by intercutting and by the soundtrack in such a way as to make it seem not only an assertion of religious difference but a menacing or sinister portent. Whereas their religiosity is always portrayed as grim and humourless, Roja's prayers are funny and endearing, inviting the spectator to share her hopes and anxieties.

Rishi's occupation is "cryptologist", a word uttered in English and left unexplained, until he tells Roja in passing that she should get "security clearance" since he deals with "confidential matters" involving "coding and decoding" (all these phrases uttered in English). Rishi is shown a few times in front of a computer monitor and keyboard, working on decoding a message. His work, directly related to the security interests of the country, is presented to us as truly nationalist; and, interestingly, his nationalism, I would argue, is not anti-Western but although never stated as such is anti-Muslim. It has been asserted by some writers that since Nehruvian nationalism was pro-western but not anti-Muslim, the argument about contemporary nationalism being pro-western and therefore inclined to be anti-Muslim cannot be sustained.<sup>21</sup> There is, it seems to me, a major difference between 1950s Nehruvianism and 1990s middle-class neo-nationalism.<sup>22</sup> The conjuncture of nationhood and modernity in which the new citizen emerges also produces a secularism that proclaims its transcendence of caste and religion. The point to be made about Nehruvian nationalism is not simply that it was not anti-Muslim. (It was not simply pro-western either, but that needs to be debated elsewhere and at length.) The formation of the "Indian" in the 1950s was not explicitly dependent on an anti-Muslim discourse, because the citizen-subject was coded, among other things, as Hindu. Today, in the context of globalization, the hidden markings of the Indian citizen-subject are being revealed, and claimed



without embarrassment by the upper-caste Hindu middle-class. This lack of embarrassment can go unremarked upon in a post-cold war "new world order" in which Muslims are being relentlessly demonized. One kind of display of the markers of "difference"--here, difference as privilege--emerges as part of the positive agenda of liberalization and globalization. Difference as mark of privilege is linked, I would like to suggest, to the comprehensive claiming of the space of the nation by the new middle-class. This kind of claim is clearly manifested in the middle-class representation of the Kashmir "problem".

When Rishi's boss who is supposed to go to Kashmir to help the army; falls seriously ill, he asks Rishi to take his place. His "You don't mind going, do you?" is answered by Rishi's "Of course not. I'll go anywhere in India. Isn't Kashmir in India?" (Loud audience applause.) Roja insists on accompanying her new husband, although she has initially rejected all his advances due to a misunderstanding. So like many earlier Hindi-film honeymooners, they arrive in "Kashmir". But to an official welcome, to be put up in a five-star hotel where there are obviously no other guests. As they are driven through deserted streets, Roja asks why the town looks so empty and Rishi merely answers "Curfew". When asked why there should be curfew, he uses a favourite word: "Security". No other explanation is seen as necessary for the spectator-position the film creates. Hardly any ordinary Kashmiris are shown in the film, except for a newspaper boy and some people selling souvenirs. In two fantasy/song sequences, we do see Kashmiris--either women or children dressed in elaborate costumes. All the other Kashmiris (with one exception) are militants, and male. This depiction helps mark off Roja as the bearer of both femininity and Indianness, both implicitly marked as Hindu.<sup>23</sup>

Coming in search of Roja who has gone to the temple to pray, the hero is kidnapped by the militants who have been following him, and who demand in exchange for his release their captured leader Wasim Khan. Roja goes to the police, to report that "raakshas jaise aadmi" ("men like demons") took away her husband, who is a deshpremi (patriot, lover of the nation). The aid of the state is invoked for the "good citizen" against the militant "demons". Roja, although all she demands is her husband's return ("I don't care about the country"), is patriotic by implication, through her

representation of both Rishi and the militants, as a patriot and as monsters respectively.

Rishi's love for the nation is driven home through two dramatic acts performed by him in captivity. First, when his captors want him to speak into a tape recorder and ask for the release of Wasim Khan, all he says into the machine is a firm "Jai Hind". Even after repeated blows which leave his face bleeding, he continues to say the phrase over and over again, making the audience cheer aloud. When the news arrives that the government has refused to release their leader, one of the militants picks up an Indian flag and rushes outside holding a flaming torch, with which he sets fire to the flag. Rishi leaps through a window, shattering a glass pane, knocks over the militant, and throws his body onto the burning flag, driving the audience delirious. Having put out the fire, Rishi rises to his feet, partially aflame. In his jeans and sweater, with the flames licking his clothes, he looks uncannily like the full-colour pictures with which the media glorified the upper-caste anti-Mandal agitators in 1990, agitators who claimed that they were truly secular because they did not believe in caste but only in merit. Whereas in the anti-Mandal agitation, caste-difference was coded as lack of merit, in Roja religious or ethnic difference (specifically Islamic) is portrayed not only as anti-national but as signifying lack of humanity. As Rishi "burns", the soundtrack rises to a crescendo, the words of a nationalist poem blending into a triumphant chant. Throughout this sequence, intercut shots show the militant leader Liaquat deep in prayer inside the building, unconcerned about the struggle over the burning flag outside.

At the end, however, Rishi does escape, with the help of Liaquat's sister, who is mute throughout the film, though always depicted as shocked/weeping/distressed at the militant's rough treatment of their captive, and at the death of her youngest brother. The girl's femininity and her human-ness ultimately oblige her to help the patriot, make her overcome her loyalty to her community, thus attaining the secular, and presumably, becoming Indian. In spite of Roja's determined appeals to the army and to the minister who arranges to have Wasim Khan released, the exchange of prisoners does not take place, and Rishi, although he is an employee of the state, does not depend on the state for regaining his liberty. Roja pleads with the minister who is inspecting the army in Kashmir: My husband is not

a big man, but "Bharat ki praja to hai" ("he's after all a citizen of India"), and we need security. The new middle class, in claiming its complete identification with the nation, has to demonstrate that demands made on the state are not met. The new class has to show its self-reliance instead, for the state apparatus is outworn, out of date, however large and impressive it may seem.<sup>24</sup> This middle class imperative to detach itself from the state to mark its coming to maturity can be seen, as I have suggested earlier, as a rejection of the Nehruvian state which had been compelled to write into its policies a vision of democracy and egalitarian socialism. [I see the absence of the mother in Geetanjali as another symptom of this rejection.] Among the consequences of these failed policies, the middle class would argue, is the situation in Kashmir, which can no longer be dealt with by the state but only by individuals like Rishi, who has shaken Liaquat to such an extent that the militant lets him go even when he has a rifle trained on him. Liaquat is shown to have been made human, through suffering and through Rishi's goodness (i.e., patriotism). Go, he says, "ugravaadi aansu pochega" ("the militant will wipe his tears"). Rishi's patriotism or nationalism, I would contend, is not centred around the nation-state; in fact, the state in this film is one that has failed in all respects--it cannot defeat the militants, cannot rescue its employee, cannot help Roja; its failure, then, can be made to justify a middle-class rejection of it in favour of a new economic order which in endorsing privatization will ensure greater efficiency.<sup>25</sup>

If Rishi is in many ways the central character of the film, Roja is integral to his vision of love for the nation. What makes this film's portrayal of the heroine different from older representations of woman-as-nation is that the woman is no longer mother but lover. In the song "Roja jaaneman", for instance, in Rishi's reverie the rose (red/green) he sees outside his cell merges into the figure of his bride (who is especially towards the end of the film dressed in green sari/red or saffron blouse or red sari/green blouse). In turn the beauty of the Kashmiri landscape blends into the physical beauty of the heroine, who appears in this particular song-sequence dressed in Kashmiri clothes and jewellery, followed by little children also wearing Kashmiri dress. The early autonomy and assertiveness shown by Roja before marriage all but disappears in the sober woman who attempts to win back her husband's life, and whose agency actually comes to naught. In the concluding sequence, Rishi sprints to safety across a bridge while Roja runs

towards him and falls at his feet, woman-as-nation grateful for his return, before he lifts her up for his embrace.

It is evident from Roja that the conjuncture between romantic love and nationalism does not provide the same kind of space for the woman as it does for the man. For Roja, the conjugal space is configured very differently from the national space, and her love for her husband finds utterance in statements such as "I don't care about the country, all I want is my husband back". For Rishi, on the other hand, love for wife and love for nation converge, as in the "Roja jaaneman" song sequence, so that romantic love comes to be figured as nationalism. The authentic subject of modernity in the post-national-modern, then, is the one who can be both lover and citizen, in fact is lover-as-citizen. The narrative logic, then, does not permit Roja the heroine to be this desiring subject, for she has to be assigned the role of that which is desired. The representation of her agency in the film, therefore, relates to her function as the crucial mediator who enables the manifestation of love as nationalism.

#### IV

The good citizen accomplishing what an inefficient state-machinery is incapable of is as central to the narrative of Bombay as it is to Roja. In Bombay, the capacity for romantic love is not only a significant marker of modernity, it is also seen as the highest form of secularism. The newly-released film has already in its brief career been the focus of intense controversies in several parts of India. Let me take the example of what happened in one city, Hyderabad.

Bombayi (the Telugu version of Bombay) was released all over Andhra Pradesh on March 10, 1995, playing to full houses in every theatre. On March 14, screening of the film was banned in the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad as well as the adjoining district of Rangareddy.<sup>26</sup> Newspaper reports indicated that stray incidents of audience violence and representations to the Home Minister from the Majlis-Ittehadul-Muslimeen and the Majlis Bachao Tehreek had resulted in the ban order. It was also reported that leftist organisations such as the Students' Federation of India and the Democratic Youth Federation of India as well as the rightwing

Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha had opposed the ban. A statement by the SFI and DYFI declared that "the film depicted nationalist feelings and had nothing communal about it".<sup>27</sup>

The reaction to Maniratnam's films in Hyderabad may not be representative of a general South Indian response to them, nor of the response in Andhra Pradesh either. Due to its atypical demographic profile (a Muslim population that is over 50% in the old city and over 20% even in the new city), Hyderabad's political scenario and the space occupied in it by the agendas of specifically "Hindu" and "Muslim" parties may very well be unique in southern India. Maniratnam's earlier film Roja, first in its Telugu version and then in Hindi, had elicited considerable applause in new Hyderabad for its unabashed patriotism and its categorical denunciation of Kashmiri militancy. A national(ist) commonsense about what constitutes the truly secular was articulated here in its convergence with Hindutva; in fact, "secularism" in Roja was indistinguishable, as it is in other contemporary cultural formations, from the attitudes produced by the making invisible of a "Hindu" ethnicity. Bombay is in many ways not very different from Roja in its portrayal of the secular and the Indian. It is worth investigating, therefore, why the film seems to have evoked from the minority community which made no public protest about Roja a very different kind of response. We must also remember that Bombay could have the effects it has precisely because it comes after Roja.<sup>28</sup> What could be the altered political landscape today that makes such a response to Bombay possible? To answer this question one would have to take into account multiple factors relating to the national and international cultural economy, an undertaking I am not presently competent to embark upon. I proffer here, however, some remarks about the film, the response to which in my view allows us to reflect anew on major questions of cultural politics today, in particular the question of what constitutes the secular.

While the film follows Roja in the framing of its central problem--the question of the nation and the question of communalism (community identity in Roja)--it is, to my mind, marked by a certain stuttering, not so evident in Roja, when it comes to the issue of gender. This might partly account for the hostile reception in certain quarters of a film that, compared to a Roja which depicted the Muslim almost entirely as terrorist and anti-Indian,

represents in its syrupy secularism "nothing...that hurts Muslim sentiments",<sup>29</sup> and indeed is framed as an attempt to "[balance] the viewpoints of the opposing communities".<sup>30</sup> "How sad", exclaims a journalist writing in The Hindu, "...every time sincere efforts have been made towards national integration we end up in protests and riots".<sup>31</sup> There appears to be a general consensus that Maniratnam is indeed a "nationalist" filmmaker, as evidenced by Roja winning the 1993 award for National Integration. It is perhaps then the very composition of the national-modern--a composition which legitimises some identities and marginalises others--that is being contested by those who are demanding a ban on Bombay. And it is precisely around the question of gender, I would suggest, that the fracturing of this composition is becoming visible.

But first, an outline of the narrative. Shekhar, a young upper-caste Hindu from Bheemunipatnam, Visakha District, has just finished his studies in Bombay and started working as a proof-reader in a newspaper, with a view to becoming a journalist. On a visit to his village, he sees Shaila Banu, the daughter of the Muslim brickmaker Basheer, and instantly falls in love with her. After a brief courtship, and after encountering the hostility of his family and Basheer's to the possibility of his marriage with Shaila Banu, Shekhar returns to Bombay, to be joined there by the girl. They commence wedded life as paying guests in a rickety old apartment building; Shekhar gets promoted to reporter, Shaila Banu gives birth to twins; Shekhar's father Narayanamurthy (who has tried to send bricks marked 'Sri Ram' to Ayodhya as penance for his son's act) comes to visit, fearing for the safety of Shekhar's family after the fall of the Babri Masjid, and is overwhelmed to learn that the twins are named Kabeer Narayan and Kamal Basheer. Shaila Banu's parents also come on a visit at the same time. The January 1993 Bombay riots take place; the parents of both hero and heroine die in a fire; the children are lost; amidst scenes of rioting the chief protagonists search for the twins. In the concluding scenes, Shekhar makes impassioned speeches to the rioters to stop killing each other, and the children are found, even as Hindus and Muslims drop their weapons and hold hands. This bare narrative cannot possibly account for the many ingenious ways in which Maniratnam achieves his cinematic effects, some of which I shall have occasion to refer to.

What I earlier called the stuttering of Bombay has to do, it seems to me, with the portrayal of the Muslim woman. Some members of the film audience have been asking why the protagonists could not have been a Muslim man and a Hindu woman. Given the logic of gender and nation in Maniratnam, this equation would have been clearly impossible. The (Hindu) female in Roja, for instance, is shown as imperfectly secular, imperfectly nationalist, because her concern is not for the security of the nation but for her husband. It is the Hindu male, therefore, who must take on the task of making the Muslim "human", which implicitly means becoming secular and nationalist as well. Whereas in Roja it is the male militant Liaquat who is portrayed as being made human, his silent sister who helps the hero escape is shown as already human by virtue of her femininity. By aiding the hero, she transcends her community-identity and in the process stands revealed as both human and "Indian", rather than Kashmiri or militant separatist.

Bombay is even more subtle: Shaila Banu marries the Brahmin Hindu hero (who is never shown as marked by caste or community) but does not give up her religion; neither does she dress like a South Indian Hindu woman, especially since she does not wear a bindi except in two song sequences. The secular hero is obviously tolerant about all this, is in a sense attracted by the very "difference" of the heroine. While male Muslim ethnic markers in the film (prayer caps, or scenes of mass praying, for example) are ominous portents of rioting to follow, female Muslim markers of ethnicity--the burqa, primarily--are glamourised and eroticised.<sup>32</sup> Shekhar's first glimpse of Shaila Banu is when the wind accidentally lifts up her veil, and many of his subsequent encounters with her, including on the night when they consummate their marriage, thematise this visibility/invisibility as tantalising.

While in Roja the hero tries to change the militant Muslim's beliefs without necessarily comprehending why the latter might hold them, in Bombay the secular citizen attempts to understand the ethnic other, but it is an understanding that can only be accomplished through the erotic gaze. It is the feminine other who is embodiment of the erotically mysterious and unapproachable, and who therefore compels an unveiling in the act of making intimate, while the relationship of the secular nationalist with the ethnicised male can only be contentious and combative. This ethnicised male in the logic of these films, and indeed in the dominant cultural logic of our

times, cannot possibly be the hero of a narrative about the need for national integration. The only acceptable hero is the urbanised, westernised Shekhar who, like Rishi Kumar in Roja, does not need to draw attention to his caste or religion because in espousing nationalism he has transcended such identities.<sup>33</sup> If one examines the composition of the Indian citizen-subject of the 90s, the Hindu female appears as the necessary bearer of ethnicity. Thus, the initiator of the integration process, or the initiator of the romantic relationship in the film, cannot but be a man from the majority community. Bombay, then, could not have had a Muslim hero and a Hindu heroine.

This inevitability is also related to the sharp demarcation of gendered "secular" spaces in Bombay. While the hero's secularism (read, tolerance) does have a domestic aspect to it, it is manifested in this sphere only as playfulness, as in the scene where a relay of little children convey to his bride his question--"Shall I change my religion?", or the song sequence ("Halla gulla") in which he briefly dons Muslim headgear. His publicly secular acts, on the other hand, are shown as acts of consequence, when during the riots he berates his two colleagues for claiming to be Hindu and Muslim instead of saying they are Indian, or in the climactic scenes when he splashes petrol on his body and urges the rioters to burn him in order to shame them into throwing down their arms. In contrast, when Shaila Banu makes a rare appearance outside the home, it is most visibly when she and Shekhar are looking for the children during the riots, and she is called upon only to show distress and horror. Early on in the film, the heroine expresses her secularism in a mode reminiscent of popular Western feminist analyses of Islamic women: running to meet Shekhar of her own volition, her burqa snags on a piece of rusting metal; she tugs but cannot loosen it, and finally (in slow motion) leaves it behind and dashes towards the hero.

The domestic space is constantly defined in the film as a counterpoint to communalism; the increasing familial harmony (the birth of the twins, the reconciliation of the grandparents, Shekhar's desire for more children) is matched against increasing communal tension in the city. Integration, the film seems to suggest, can be accomplished within the family.<sup>34</sup> In the domestic space, Shekhar does not have to undergo any sort of transformation to prove his secularism. In any case, his "religion" is not central to his identity. Also, by virtue of being the breadwinner, there are other



conventional asymmetries in relation to male and female roles that he need never challenge. It is crucial to the narrative that the couple have children, for the film's logic suggests that it is the urbanized nuclear family which can solve the problem of communalism. This problem, indicates the film, is one of senseless hatred. Communalism is imaged here, as in some analytical accounts of recent events in India, as the resurgence of ancient hates, primordial hostilities. Thus it becomes a residue, a mark of the non-modern, of backwardness,<sup>35</sup> and, as I have suggested earlier, the anti-national comes to be staged as community (or caste, for that matter). Secularism or nationalism, therefore, appears as the "other" of communalism;<sup>36</sup> however, in the 90s, in a historical space where the privatization of secularism seems to be taking place, this nationalism need not be part of a political agenda.<sup>37</sup> As Roja demonstrated, the middle-class attempt to delink itself from the state results in a transfer of functions to that class. The efforts of the new citizen will accomplish what state policy cannot, what indeed it has worked against; it is not only state economic enterprise that needs to be privatized, but also the solution to "cultural" questions such as that of communalism. For if the problem is diagnosed as one of hatred, the solution has to be located in the possibility of love. Humanism, too, becomes a question of good individuals, happy families. And love in its modern form, as Bombay shows, achieves its most exalted and exemplary expression in romantic love, the love between individuals. It might, then, be worth asking whether the demand for the banning of Bombay, on the basis that it offends Muslim sentiments, is simply an expression of "fundamentalism" or of Muslim patriarchal attitudes. Is it perhaps an indication that the liberal analysis and solution ("hatred" and "love") is unacceptable--as inaccurate, simplistic and patronising--to those who comprise the majority amongst the victims of communal violence?<sup>38</sup> Could it point to the need to rethink whose tolerance the dominant notion of secularism embodies, and whether "love" and "tolerance" can be recommended in equal measure to both the majority and minority communities?

It is the burden of both Roja and Bombay to create the contemporary convergences between the human, the secular and the nationalist and to dramatize the condensation of these characteristics in the Hindu male who has discarded marks of caste and community. The question of the nation is posed in these films through the depiction of the Kashmir situation on the

one hand and the Bombay riots on the other. In both, the modalities of the question's "framing" collapse any challenge to the national-, or the post-national-modern, into a simple assertion of religious identity. Simultaneously with the gradual erosion of the nation's economic sovereignty and the ongoing process of market consolidation, an earlier anti-colonial nationalism turns into one for whom the "enemy" is within and needs to be either transformed or expelled. The figure of woman, indeed the agency of women, I have been suggesting, is central to the formation of the new nationalism. If the changes taking place today are being crucially mediated by popular cinema, figures like Geeta, Roja and Shaila Banu are active mediators of such changes. Characterizing the women in this fashion will allow us to form a perspective somewhat different from those analysts of Maniratnam's films who see these women simply as the hapless victims of Hindu patriarchy, Muslim patriarchy, sexism and male chauvinism.<sup>39</sup> To my mind, the ground prepared for a feminist politics by the latter approach allows women to engage only in certain kinds of protest: in a peculiar coming together of filmic portrayal and filmic critical analysis, Shaila Banu must cast off her burqa to escape from Muslim patriarchy, reaffirming in the process the stereotype of what constitutes the oppression of the Muslim woman, and reaffirming that the Muslim community is both "backward" and patriarchal. Roja too is not merely a victim of patriarchy but a key figure in its reconfiguration. I would argue, then, that a discussion of the narrative functions of characters like Geeta, Roja and Shaila Banu and of the centrality of romantic love in these films can reveal for feminism the gendering of the new "Indian" as well as the complicity of "women" in producing the exclusions of caste and community which enable the formation of the citizen-subject. A rethinking of feminist politics provoked by the questions raised by films like Maniratnam's might well have to proceed from a rethinking of those structuring terms of our daily experience as well as our politics: nationalism, humanism and secularism.

*This is a revised version of the paper presented at the 5th Bi-Annual Subaltern Studies Conference held at Colombo in June 1995.*



## Notes

1. See Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender", forthcoming in Subaltern Studies IX.
2. Maniratnam sometimes re-shoots parts of his films to incorporate regional or linguistic differences. It becomes a little difficult therefore to say where the reshooting stops and the dubbing begins.
3. One could also add that the structuring of these two feminine figures is similar, in terms of how they make a claim on the modern, the secular and the national.
4. Note that the anti-Mandalites talked of "differences", not "inequalities".
5. The modes of access to, the negotiation of and with, and the deployments of this post-national-modern would have to be understood as necessarily different for different kinds of groups, depending on their caste/ community/gender configuration and the position of relative advantage or disadvantage from which they access it.
6. See Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender", forthcoming in Subaltern Studies IX, and Vivek Dhareshwar, "Caste and the Secular Self", Journal of Arts and Ideas Nos.25-26 (1993), 115-26.
7. For a discussion of some of these issues, see Susie Tharu, "Government, Binding and Unbinding", Introduction to the Special Issue of the Journal of English and Foreign Languages (June-December 1991); Gauri Viswanathan, Masks of Conquest (London: Faber, 1990); my Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism and the Colonial Context (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1992).
8. However qualified the demand sometimes appeared, it was evident for instance from the proclamation of the national association of

- IAS officers that reservations in general (even for SCs and STs) were being targetted, and not only the new OBC reservations.
9. See Veena Das, "A Crisis of Faith", in Statesman (Sept.3, 1990).
10. A phrase heard constantly during the anti-Mandal agitation. Another common remark of the time framed the upper caste speaker in a discourse of Selflessness: "I'm not concerned for myself. I can always get a job in spite of reservations. I'm only worried as to where this is taking us".
11. "Rajiv Menon's cinematography [in Bombay] is of an international calibre", says well-known film-critic Khalid Mohammed in his review in The Times of India, April 9, 1995.
12. Sunil Sethi writes of the "lower middle-class, ethnically mixed" Delhi audience he watched Bombay with: "Film-goers seemed genuinely appreciative of the movie. I myself was greatly cheered to notice that not the subtlest nuance or bits of passing dialogue was lost on the audience, which laughed and clapped and gasped and cheered in all the right places...." ("Celluloid Metaphor of 'Bombay'", Newstime, April 16, 1995).
13. The Geetanjali version of ghagra-choli did indeed create a new line of clothing for teenagers as well as little girls.
14. I owe this point to Susie Tharu, who also drew my attention to the counterpointed images of "modernity" in the film.
15. In a perceptive essay, "Beaming Messages to the Nation" [Journal of Arts and Ideas No. 19 (1990), pp. 33-52], Ashish Rajadhyaksha discusses the impulses behind what he calls the new definitions of indigenism. Rajadhyaksha suggests that since "geographically defined regionalist identities are closely linked to geographically defined markets", the internationalization of markets obviously demands the formation of new identities. Mass media, especially TV and popular cinema, have contributed in important ways to the

- imaging of the new indigenism, an indigenism that takes up elements from diverse and continually changing folk-traditions and presents them as authentically and timelessly "Indian".
- 16 During the anti-Mandal agitation of 1990, the commonly held middle-class perception was that India's public sector had become corrupt and inefficient because of the reservations policy followed by the government.
- 17 Roja was publicly endorsed on hoardings by Chief Election Commissioner T.N.Seshan as a film every patriotic Indian must see. The BJP's L.K.Advani confessed to having been moved by the scene of the hero saving the burning Indian flag. In an interview, the Shiv Sena's Bal Thackeray, who asked for and got certain cuts in the film, acclaims Bombay as "a damn good film".
- 18 I have chosen to focus on the Hindi version of Roja, although I am familiar with the Telugu version as well. The Hindi version was a national success, and marked a confident occupation of a "national" rather than just a "regional" space (in terms of political agendas as well as markets) by the new South Indian cinema. Unlike the Tamil version, which might have interpellated its audience along very different axes, the Telugu and Hindi versions were quite similar in their structures of address. However, the Hindi version of the film does flatten out and clarify some of the ambiguity of the Tamil and Telugu versions, especially around the question of language. Also, the question of "patriotism" would be attached to very different debates in the context of Tamil Nadu politics. When the film was released in 1992 in Tamil Nadu, many people were supposed to have seen it as an exorcism of the collective guilt felt by Tamilians over Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in Sriperumbudur the previous year.
- 19 Earlier commercial cinema also portrayed frolicking heroines exempt from the compulsions of the everyday world. What I'm trying to mark here is the difference in Maniratnam's young women, given the realism of the film's narrative style which

- distances it from dominant Indian commercial cinema, and which makes the women both "real" and "natural".
- 20 This exemption from "work" helps contain the heroines' assertiveness, making it cute and attractive rather than threatening.
- 21 See Arun Kumar Patnaik, "Idealist Equations", Economic and Political Weekly Vol.XXIX:32 (August 6, 1994), 2108.
- 22 To elaborate this, we would have to look into the composition of the citizen-subject in India. As Susie Tharu and I have argued in "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender" (op.cit.), the "Indian" in the nineteenth century emerges marked, or coded (since the marks are not visible) as upper-caste/middle-class, Hindu and male. The Indian comes into being, as several scholars have demonstrated, simultaneously unequal to the colonizer and claiming superiority to him in certain realms. The post-Independence Indian, therefore, professes to be more egalitarian and more welfarist than the liberal citizens at the heart of empire, and claims to strive for the eradication of all forms of "backwardness". The secular Indian citizen, then, presents "him"self as transcending caste and community identities, the assertion of which would work against the dominant narrative of progress.
- 23 Ravi Vasudevan's assertion that "'regional' identity in the figure of the woman ultimately seems to elude its translation into the rationality of the nationalist self" [Vasudevan, "Other Voices: Reading 'Rojā' Against the Grain", Seminar 423 (November 1994), 43-4] is an interesting one that could be explored further. However, it seems to miss the crucial fact that Maniratnam's films increasingly construct an "ethnic" identity rather than a specifically "regional" one. This might account for the phenomenal success of his films in "South Indian" languages as well as Hindi.
- 24 While acknowledging the point made by S.V.Srinivas ["Roja in Law and Order State", EPW Vol.XXIX:20 (May 14, 1994), 1225-26] and Arun Patnaik (op. cit.) about the increasing coercive

- activity of the state in the time of liberalization, I would argue that this is one of the signs of the changing state which indicates the reallocation of functions, that is, different things are now being demanded of the state as it evacuates its older functions.
- 25 This is where I disagree with Venkatesh Chakravarthy and M.S.S.Pandian who have argued that "the apparent inability of the state in the film actually masks its silent and powerful ability". See their "More on Roja", EPW Vol.XXIX:11 (March 12, 1994), 642-44.
- 26 The film was re-released with three cuts a few weeks later.
- 27 Report in Newstime, March 15, 1995.
- 28 I would like to comment here only on the film's reception in Hyderabad. The controversy surrounding the film in Bombay even before its release has to do not with audience perceptions but with the then-imminent election victory of the Shiv Sena and Sena leader Bal Thackeray's objections to the way in which the Thackeray-character is portrayed in the film. If we seek to equate Thackeray's objections with those of the Muslim leaders, we would be making the kind of analytical (and political) mistake that is evidenced in naming as "casteist" violence by both dalits and upper castes.
- 29 Nasreen Sultana, "Lift Ban on 'Bombay'", Letter to the Editor, Newstime, March 20, 1995.
- 30 Interviewer (Lens Eye) in "Truth or Dare", interview with Maniratnam, Times of India, April 2, 1995.
- 31 Bhawna Somaya, "The 'Bombay' Problem", The Hindu, March 31, 1995.
- 32 I should point out that BJP/Shiv Sena men are also shown in the film as engaging in aggressive public worship of Hindu gods. I

- would see this, however, as part of the problematic equalizing of Muslim and Hindu "fundamentalism" in Bombay.
- 33 It is not entirely fortuitous that the actor Arvind Swamy plays both Rishi Kumar in Roja and Shekhar in Bombay.
- 34 In an interview, Maniratnam says: "The family is the most invincible institution of our country. We lead our entire lives in the family's folds." Times of India, April 2, 1995.
- 35 This depiction makes invisible the large-scale participation of the "modern" middle class in the Bombay riots.
- 36 For a useful discussion of this process in the colonial period, see Gyanendra Pandey, The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1990), especially Chapter 7, "Nationalism versus Communalism".
- 37 The new nationalism is of necessity detached from anti-imperialism, the differences between the BJP and the RSS over the swadeshi campaign notwithstanding. Nationalism, then, becomes a purely internal question, to be asserted against non-Hindus.
- 38 I use the word "patronising" to indicate the tone of those, like Shekhar in Bombay, who exempt themselves from communalism by their modernity. Reduced to hatred, communalism becomes an emotion reserved for the non-modern and the irrational.
- 39 Chakravarthy and Pandian (op.cit.) see Roja's desire as repressed by the Hindu patriarchy whose numerous representatives include Rishi Kumar as well as state institutions. Swaminathan S.Anklesaria Aiyar, who hails Bombay as "a passionate plea for humanity to rise above sectarian mayhem", denounces the Muslim groups seeking a ban on Bombay for their "sexism" and "male chauvinism". He adds: "The concept of women as independent human beings with a right to choose their husbands, jobs or religion is alien to

traditionalists of both communities" ("Objecting to 'Bombay': Sexism More Than Communalism", The Times of India, April 15, 1995).

## Life Under Milkwood

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Information collected from a research project is deployed to provide readers with an insight into the status of women workers in the Sri Lankan rubber plantation sector. It describes the socio-economic dimensions of women workers in rubber plantations. It also gives a point of reference for understanding a myriad issues related to the plantation sector such as political empowerment, gender specific conditions and education.

### For information, contact:

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## Uduvil Starts\*

.....The occupation by European races, however, had left other traces than stone buildings and good roads. European civilization was somewhat familiar; the early missionaries found a few Tamils who knew English, and a thirst for a kind of education beyond that from old books which boys could then acquire from Brahman school-masters. How keen their desire for education was may be seen from the fact that only five years after the arrival of the first American missionaries, twenty-four schools existed in Jaffna villages, with an attendance of over one thousand children. Most of them were day pupils but a few were boarders living in the homes of the missionaries.

Yet strong as was the desire for education for boys, the missionaries early recognized a corresponding fact,- a strong prejudice against the education of girls. "It is not our custom," was the invariable answer of the parents when the missionaries attempted to persuade them to allow their daughters to learn to read. Apparently the only girls in Jaffna who could read in 1816 were a few perhaps connected with the temples. "I saw two native females, who could read and write, one in Alavetty, and one in Udupitty," writes Mr. Meigs. "I heard of another but never saw her. I think there were no others in the province in 1816, when the first American Missionaries arrived." Not only the parents, but the girls themselves, objected to any attempt to make them literate. The idea prevailed, according to an early mission report that for a woman, learning to read "spoiled her modesty, endangered her chastity, and rendered her insubordinate to the other sex. Little girls when first brought into the schools could hardly overcome their sense of shame so as to go on with their studies." But in America, in 1820, especially in New England, from which many of the early missionaries came, it was unthinkable that a girl as well as a boy should not be able to read and write. The custom of

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\*This is an extract from a book found in a bookshop that sells old books in Hamdon, USA, titled *Uduvil 1824 - 1924* by Minnie Hastings Harrison B.A and published in 1925.

ancient India, the original home of the Jaffna Tamils, was also in favour of literacy for girls, although perhaps this fact was then little known or regarded either by the missionaries or the people of Jaffna. However this may be, there was an early conviction that no real growth in civilization or Christianity could be made in Ceylon unless its women were educated. A remark made by Christian David, a Tamil pupil of the famous Schwartz of Travancore, was often quoted in the mission circle:- "The conversion of one woman is of more importance than of six men." And since conversion must be through the mind as well as through the heart, - no mere lip-conversion, as in the days of Dutch occupation,- unceasing efforts were made to attract girls to schools.

The methods tried varied somewhat in the different stations. At Manepay, whither the Spauldings had moved in 1822, the school-master on his way to and from school, used to stop at various houses and say, "If this little girl will come and study at my school, she will get a nice cloth." At all the stations in the first years, a small gold necklace also was given to each girl who could read fluently in the New Testament. At Tellippalai, Mr. Poor told a father with six daughters and one son that he would take the son into his school only on condition that he would allow two of his daughters to attend. Valliammai Vyravi, (afterwards Harriet Newell), one of the daughters, tells of how many family councils were necessary before the parents could make up their minds to incur the disgrace of having their daughters literate, and how for the sake of their only son, they finally yielded. At Tellippallai also occurred the incident of the wonderful girl who could write her own name. The headman of the village came to Mr. Poor's house to get the signature of this girl to a deed transferring some land which was part of her inherited dowry. To his great surprise, the girl, instead of indicating her signature by a mark, as was customary, wrote her name in a bold firm hand. "So," said the headman, "there is some use in girls learning to write. I will send my daughter to the missionary." And he did.

At Uduvil the difficulty of first obtaining girls may be realized by following Mrs. Winslow's letters and diary. In February 1821, she writes, "After many perplexing circumstances, we have a school of nine promising boys." In September of the same year, "I have long been trying

to obtain girls to attend school. Was much encouraged today because one came whom we have often tried in vain to get. There were before two day-scholars who have attended pretty constantly for several months, besides the little one in the family who is the daughter of the domestic. So a commencement is made." At the end of October, "I had some conversation today with a man who has often promised to send his daughter to school. 'what wages will you give her?' said he. 'It will be great wages if I give instruction, but I will give more. If you will let her remain all the time, I will give a cloth and jacket and food.' 'No, she shall not eat with your girls' ... 'Well, I see that you never intended to send her, and I have nothing more to say. 'If you will send somebody home with her every day, and give her fruit when she is hungry, I will send her.' I did not believe he was in earnest, but this afternoon, he sent the child." Under date of June 29th, 1822, she writes again "This morning a little girl was brought to us to receive in our family. This is a wonderful circumstance, and we hardly know how to understand it." Four years later, in a letter to Mrs. Bird of Calcutta, in answer to inquiries about girls' education in Ceylon, she tells more in detail the story of these first pupils. "Soon after we came to Uduvil, two little girls were often seen about the house, and sometimes looking in the door or window. If we spoke to them, they appeared alarmed and ran away. After a while ... they became more familiar, ventured to stop and listen to us, then to sit down on the door steps a few minutes, afterwards to receive a little fruit when offered, and at length, by promise of a jacket when they should be able to make one, they were induced to take a needle, and learn to sew. They were much pleased, and everyday came and sat in the door for two or three hours. We then told them of the advantages of being able to read, and persuaded them to try to learn. After about six months, they felt quite at home, and were on the premises nearly the whole day. Their parents, however, could not think of having their children "lose caste" by eating on our premises.... About this time we had a native woman in the family to take charge of my infant, and she requested to have her daughter, a girl of about eight years of age with her. Soon after, a member of our church brought his sister, and another her daughter. Thus we had three who took their food on the mission premises, but nothing could induce either of the parents of the two day scholars to leave them with us, until these three had been nearly one year in the school. One night a hard storm prevented



their going home. They stayed with the girls, and one of them was persuaded to partake of their supper. The other would eat nothing. Some weeks after this, the father of the girl who had eaten on the premises, brought her to us, and said, 'You have been like a father and mother to her, so you may now take her; but tell me what you will do for her; you must find her a husband.' The man was evidently induced to give up the child by her own entreaties. After this, we had less difficulty, in inducing others to come to us, or their parents to give them up." From other evidence, we learn that this girl was Betsy Pomeroy, (Chinnachi Vyravi) daughter of the keeper of a temple at Uduvil, and afterwards for many years the matron of Uduvil School.

By 1823, the interest and desire for education were such that the mission decided to start in addition to these boarding schools at each station, a central school for boys, where a more advanced type of education might be obtained,- the famous Batticotta Seminary. A little later, the idea of establishing a central school for girls where the mothers of succeeding generations might be fitted for the influence they would surely have, engaged the mind of the mission. Many were the discussions about the locality of the proposed school. The first decision was for Tellippalai, where the number of girls boarding with the family of the missionary was larger than at Pandateruppu, Vaddukoddai or Uduvil. But other considerations led to a change in this decision. Mr. Poor had been transferred to Vaddukoddai to take charge of the Batticotta Seminary, and the missionaries now stationed at Tellippalai - the Woodwards, - were far from strong. It was recognized that a missionary wife interested in education was indispensable for the work of a girls' school. At Uduvil there was a strong and capable missionary with an equally capable wife. It was decided, therefore, that the school be at Uduvil, and that the Winslows be in charge. "It is agreed to have the female central school here," writes Mrs. Winslow in September 1823. "I feel that it is a great object. If it is the will of God that the school should come here, may we be prepared by His spirit to enter on the work with right hearts. May the beginnings of the school be marked with His special blessing." The actual beginning seems to have been made in January 1824, when twenty two girls were gathered from the various stations, at Uduvil, and the boys they taught there were sent elsewhere. There twenty two were almost

immediately increased to twenty nine.

At first the school was held in a bungalow erected for the purpose,- in all probability, a mud building with a roof of thatch. A teacher called Solomon, who was not a Christian, but was favourably disposed toward Christianity, was employed to teach the girls lessons in Tamil in the morning: in the afternoon, all the pupils sewed under Mrs. Winslow's direction. According to a mission vote, they were paid for their sewing at first, three-fourths as much as tailors. Various arrangements were made for their home life,-an old Portuguese woman was hired as matron, a dhoby for the school washing who worked in the compound, a cookwoman also to help the girls in the heavier tasks of cooking, though from the first they themselves did part of the cooking taking turns by days or weeks. No visitors were allowed to go to their bungalow, but visitors might see them on the verandah in the presence of the missionary. They were allowed to go home once every month for a day and two nights, and also for special occasions, such as weddings and funerals. There was no equipment except "a pair of globes" kept by Mrs. Winslow in her sitting room : no text-books, as no suitable ones could be found in Tamil. All lessons in arithmetic and geography were written out daily by Mrs. Winslow. Most of the girls ranged in age from five to eleven, and were kept in the school until they were married. "They marry as soon as marriageable when they have an eligible offer," writes Mrs. Winslow, "though we should prefer having them wait longer." A proceeding much criticized in America was the giving of a small dowry, of fifty six dollars-about seventy-five rupees-to each pupil who left with a satisfactory record. "This is generally expended in the purchase of dress and ornaments, it being about half what the usages of society require as a national custom," writes Mrs. Winslow. The school was from the first under a committee appointed by the mission, who had the right to regulate the curriculum, impose examinations, and act as advisers on the question of marriage. How soon the girls were pushed on to positions of responsibility may be seen by the fact that in 1826, three former pupils had married and were teaching in girls' day schools where they did "much better with them than men."

A novel feature of the school from the first was the custom of naming the

girls for their benefactors. This custom originated partly from the need of money for the support of each girl since the ordinary funds of the mission were very limited; partly also from the desire that each girl might have a sponsor who would be interested in her spiritual growth, and pray for her conversion. Thus in the roll of pupils for 1824, we find Betsy Pomeroy, Charlotte Burnell, Ann Louise Payson, Mary Sweetzer, Harriet Newell, and many another name which originated in America. Some of the benefactors were English civilians (a Chief Justice of Ceylon was one); others were missionaries in India or Ceylon; but most were groups or individuals from Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut or Maryland. The girls seem not to have objected to their new names, though in all probability they were called by their more familiar Tamil names among their schoolmates. Years afterwards, some of them wrote their impressions of these first school days. "Early in 1824," writes Harriet Newell of Mallagam, "the girls in the boarding schools at the stations were gathered to one at Uduvil. I went to Uduvil and while there was moved to speak with my schoolmate Betsy, and Betsy with me about our religious feelings. We both went to our Pastor, and told him and asked him to teach us more about the way of salvation. He taught us and prayed with us. About this time four other girls were awakened." "Our Pastor" was undoubtedly Mr. Winslow, for in those early years every missionary husband at Uduvil was "pastor and police" for the school.

In 1826, the American Mission faced these two serious questions concerning the Female Central School:

1. Is it best to select girls from good families and from good caste, or those from poor families and low caste?
2. How long ought we to support girls in our Central Boarding School after they become marriageable and refuse to accept of a good offer? The second question admitted at that time of but one answer: the girls must be induced to accept the first eligible offer, if possible, but even if they would not, they must be kept in the school until they married if all the Christian habits and teachings they had acquired were to be preserved. About the first question there was evidently some difference of opinion-but it

was finally agreed that they should admit girls of good caste "who have some property; such girls as would make suitable companions for the boys" in Batticotta. The report adds, "we shall be able to obtain such" girls, and indeed after two or three years, the school became so popular that the mission had to limit the number which could be taken. In 1828, Mrs. Winslow writes, "Notice having been given to some extent that girls would be received to the female Boarding School, thirty seven were brought, and remaining ones were urged upon us by every plea that their parents could use." The evidence is strong that, although the first girls taken were poor, the subsequent pupils were girls with property and of good standing in the community.

Toward the end of 1825, Mrs. Winslow, always far from strong, was so unwell that a change of several months to Calcutta was prescribed for her. Her husband accompanied her, and during their absence the school was moved to Manipay where it remained for two years under the charge of Mr. and Mrs. Spaulding. During this time, an epidemic of cholera attacked the villages, and from the orphans who were left by its ravages, came new pupils for the school, several of them girls of character and influence in its later history. Though Mrs. Winslow returned late in 1826, her health was still delicate, and it was not till 1828, that the school returned to her care. By this time, the mission had voted that the number of pupils should be thirty-five, and that buildings should be built to accommodate them.

From the first, the religious influence of the school was very strong-in fact, it is a tradition that every girl who completed her course during the first fifty years of the school, became a Christian. Mrs. Winslow tells us in her diary of her habit of remembering one girl at a time with her own children in prayer. Her prayers for a special blessing on the school at its commencement, were answered by the revival of 1824, where every girl in the school became affected, and several of the older ones joined the church. "In 1825," writes Harriet Newell, "the missionaries erected a temporary bungalow at Sandilipay, and fitted it up for meeting. On this occasion, forty-one persons were received into the church, most of whom were baptized. My eldest sister, my brother, and myself were of the

number." Apparently at this time the girls' school master, Solomon, also became a Christian. In 1832, 1833, 1835, other revivals were experienced, and each time the older girls of the school became members of the church. "I had not been in school long," writes Ann Maria Spence, another of these early students, "before the twenty verses and others which I had learned in the village school appeared very precious to me. I began to understand a little of their meaning. I attended the meetings held by the Missionaries, when I heard many confessing their sins and praying with tears. I began to be anxious and said, 'Am I not also a sinner? Why, I am a little girl. I will repent after all the older girls have repented. If I repent now, everybody will laugh at me.'" A very human little girl was Ann Maria! There were, however, special meetings for little children. There was also a Sunday-school of five hundred children of whom one hundred were girls, at which the girls of the boarding school, young though they were, acted as teachers under Mrs. Winslow's supervision.

But the religious atmosphere, though very strong, was not altogether sombre. From the first, the girls loved the school, longed to stay in it, and were sorry to leave it. Most of them were married in the school itself. "The business of their marriage is superintended by the missionaries having charge of the school", says an early school report. "The girls do not wish to go home to be married, nor would they be allowed." Mrs. Winslow speaks in 1830 about the marriage of Mary Sweetzer. "We have married one of our native children, or I might say, two of them, since I last wrote-Mary Sweetzer and J. H. Lawrence, the former from the school, the latter from the Seminary, but now a catechist here. It was a pleasant occasion. Mary, however, felt sadly at leaving her home and companions. Her tears for two weeks previous evinced that her heart was heavy; and after all was over, except taking leave of us, she could hardly get away, though going only two and one half miles. They were married in the morning, in the church by Mr. Winslow after the forms of the Church of England." "Perhaps I may interest you little by telling you something of the proceedings from the time a young man proposes to marry one of these girls," she writes again. "In preparation for this interesting occasion, a profusion of cakes, made principally of rice flour, and boiled in oil, are provided, as also a variety of fruits. The parties then invite their friends. At this wedding... the bride was dressed by her

friends and the groom by his, and without seeing each other they entered the church at different times and took their seats on separate mats. They were married according to the usual forms, accompanied by a prayer, and an address on the duties of husbands and wives. They then returned to different apartments to partake of the refreshment provided. After a little time, the bridegroom came with a few select friends, and tied on the bride's neck a thali and threw a wedding cloth over her shoulders. We prevailed on them to take a piece of cake together, as a substitute for smoking which is common among them." Later in the same year she writes of the marriage of two other pupils, "The girls felt sadly at leaving, so that we were almost obliged to force them away." Mr. Winslow tells us that by 1833 twelve of these early pupils had been married to Christian husbands.

In 1832, the school was still growing. On notice being given that a few more girls would be received, seventy were brought, of whom the twenty-eight most promising were received. The mission again brought up the question of a permanent building and schoolroom. In consideration of the increasing popularity of the school they decided that sixty instead of thirty should be the number on the roll, of whom ten should be "on trial." The schoolmaster who taught them Tamil reading and writing was evidently still the same Solomon, though Nicholas Permander, an early convert of unusual ability, was Mr. Winslow's assistant at Uduvil during these years, and may perhaps have been for a time a teacher in the school. But she who was at once principal, teacher, sewing mistress and matron, was breaking under the burden. The death of the oldest Winslow boy, who had just been sent to America after a most trying parting from his parents, no doubt hastened his mother's death. Toward the end of 1833, she died in child-birth at the age of thirty-six. Amid the lamentations of her pupils, present and past, she was buried in the church at Uduvil.

Editor.



October 18, 1995

## Eileen Basker Memorial Prize

The Eileen Basker Memorial Prize was established by the Society for Medical Anthropology to promote superior research in the area of gender and health. The award is made annually, in memory of Eileen Basker, to scholars from any discipline or nation, for work (book, article, film, exceptional Ph.D. thesis) produced within the preceding three years. Past winners include Emily Martin, for The woman in the Body, Joan Jacobs Blumberg for Fasting Girls, Faye Ginsberg for Contested Lives, Nancy Scheper-Hughes for Death Without Weeping, Barbara Duden for The Women Beneath the Skin, Margaret Lock for Encounters with Aging, and Margarete Sandelowski for With Child Mind.

Letters of nomination should indicate the impact of the work on the field. Self-nomination cannot be considered. The \$1,000 prize will be given at the business meeting of the Society for Medical Anthropology during the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association. The recipient will be asked to attend the meeting to receive the award.

Submit letter of nomination with three copies of the work by June 1, 1996 to: Robert Hahn, Ph.D., M.P.H., Epidemiology Programme Office, CO8, Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta, GA 30333.

Women's Education and Research Centre (WERC)  
17 Park Avenue  
Colombo 5, Sri Lanka

Dear Sir or Madam:

I recently wrote to enlist your assistance in finding nominees for the 1996 Eileen Basker Memorial Prize of \$1000 for recent studies in gender and health. The attachment to that letter contained an erroneous date. Enclosed is a corrected notice. I would be grateful if you could publicize the award notice by means of a journal, newsletter, or other media and/or contact colleagues to nominate appropriate works. The Basker Prize provides an opportunity to broaden attention to critical issues in women's health and to encourage excellence in research. If you have any questions, please contact me at 404-639-2281.

Sincerely,

Robert A. Hahn, Ph.D., M.P.H.  
Epidemiologist  
Statistics and Epidemiology Branch  
Division of Surveillance and Epidemiology  
Epidemiology Program Office (CO8)

Enclosure

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## The Wars of the Dewas

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*Jean Arasanayagam*

Free thyself from the past, free thyself from the future,  
free thyself from the present. Crossing to the farther  
shore of existence, with mind released everywhere, no  
more shalt thou come to birth and decay. (The words of  
Truth THE DHAMMAPADA)

The first thing we did when the monk arrived was to search for a white sheet to spread on the chair which we would offer him. As time went on it became increasingly difficult to find one. Gone were the days when the almirah shelves were piled with neatly folded white linen sheets, dhoby washed, ironed and folded in a neat square. Everything was now in colour. Moreover white linen with those broad hand crocheted lace borders were no longer to be found. I had once had some intricately crocheted lace edgings but they had vanished in the wash, skilfully unpicked from the linen sheets. There were one or two left, hand stitched with fine drawn thread work but there were tears and dents in them.

"Find a sheet, find a sheet, a white one," I would call out to my daughters, on the approach of the monk.

"Oh, Freda has washed them all. Not dry yet. There's one partly dry. Shall I iron it quickly?" one of my daughters called out.

"Let's have a look. Bring it here please..." I crush the folds in my hand. Slightly damp still I'll iron it..."

Rev. Gnana is at the door.

"Reverend please come in. Give me a moment."

The sheet is brought out and carefully spread on the carved ebony chair for him to sit on.

I think to myself. We must always have a white sheet in readiness for these visits. But it never happens. Visitors come and go. The sheets get used up. One day the white sheets will end. We won't have a single left. Perhaps the visits will end too. Who can predict the future in these uncertain days. Reverend will have to sit on a bare seat without the ritual of the white sheets. White sheets... in the refugee camp in 1983 we still had one or two to spread on the bare cement floor. We had to use newspapers too. In my parents, home the sheets were always white, white Irish linen, the pillow cases, white, the frilled valance on the fourposter white, the table cloth white, of white damask with its faint embossed marking... Rev. Gnana entered and sat down. He was immediately surrounded by the family as was our usual custom, waiting to listen to what he had to say. He always searched us out when there was some crisis simmering in the country which affected all our lives.

The revolution, the *bhishanaya*, was at its height and the country was burning. We were aware, in the residential area which were lived of the comings and goings of people, strangers to this close-knit community, this middle-class enclave occupied for the greater part by retired government servants who were preoccupied with their boundaries and fences, their flower gardens, the paddy and coconuts brought in from their villages which they visited from time to time to collect the produce of their properties and fields. On Poya days the women and children would observe *sil* in the old estate bungalow which had once belonged to Colonel Hancock. Prayer meetings were held in some of the Christian homes and at Christmas time Ruth Henry had organized carol singing and candle light processions along the highways and byways of the Housing Scheme.

Life had its occasional inconveniences but then, all this was nothing new to us who had experienced time and again different conflagrations, political and racial violence, radical uprisings, the Insurrection of 1971 or



the Che Guevara movement as it was called. Now it was yet another revolution, the movement of a radical political party, the JVP youth. The Misguided Youth as they were to be named in the rehabilitation and the detention camps. At night, in our enclave on the banks of the Mahaweli ganga, we could hear the sounds of motor cycles revving up our road. Sometimes they stopped at our gate, the headlamps blazing onto our garden, two or three at a time, and we would hear the riders whispering in undertones. There were certain houses which they could enter freely, but secretly and at night. Some of them bore gunshot injuries which had to be dressed. Plenty of undercover was provided for them. No one would talk. Through fear of course. Their lives depended on their silence. There was a safe house too in the vicinity where we lived. The tenants paid a good rent, whatever was asked, and the young night riders could come and go as they wished. There was a lot of secrecy in their movements. No one ever expressed curiosity about who they were or where they came from. This was rare in a normally curious neighbourhood.

We began to adapt our lives to the changes. Accepted them as there was nothing we could do about whatever was imposed on us. We had to do without lights, without water. This was when the Revolutionaries decided that at a certain hour there should be perfect darkness or that there should be a water cut. The faintest glimmer of light would be reflected through the numerous glass panes of the windows. It was difficult without water, when the supply was cut off for a number of days. Fortunately it rained and then we left huge plastic buckets out in the garden to catch the rain water. Wrapping a *diya redda* about my body I poured bowl after bowl of icy cold water on myself. Those who had overhead tanks were luckier. That water was used for cooking. We had had a tank out of doors in our previous house in the Scheme but it was more in the nature of a pond with frothy green frog spawn, tadpoles, enormous dark brown frogs that croaked throughout the night and sometimes a drowned kingfisher floating among the tendrilling water plants.

In this house we had no overhead tank so we either went down to the river to wash our clothes or collected the rain water as best we could. The river was not yet filled with the bodies that made the sleepy old *kabaragoya* replete. The very same *kabaragoya* that later became

poisoned with the putrid flesh that floated down the river. Yes, life was continually mirroring its perpetual flux and change from one happening to another.

In the past when Rev. Gnana had visited us, I had offered him *dana* filling his *pathraya* with food which had been specially prepared for him. Then he had delivered his sermon on *karma, kama, kamma* and looking out at the window at the blossom laden Araliya trees, the birds pecking at the food on the abundant wilderness of the grass, my thoughts and preoccupations had been different. But always, we had first to find him a white cloth, freshly laundered, to spread on the chair for that was a symbol of respect deserving of one who had relinquished the world.

The monk began with his usual leit-motif. These word invariably preclude his sermon. This time it was "greed, hatred, delusion".

"These are the reasons for all the evil and moral confusion we are confronted with" he said. (We turned to the subject of politics)

"Reverend explain to us, please, why these things are happening in this society of ours, this uprising, the arrests, the killing on both sides, the detention camps. The young student whom both you and I knew, he had always been an exemplary student at the university, is now, we hear, under arrest.

The monk's face showed no perturbation.

"He had it coming to him. No one can stop these things happening whether it be assassination, death by torture, murder. Do you expect the interrogator to speak politely? In a gentle manner? Do you think they can get the truth in that way? The young man you speak of .... yes, I know him well too. He has been working for one of the social service organizations, an NGO. A special project, social development of the deprived, the underprivileged. He has explained himself. He showed letters, said he was threatened so he had to do as he was ordered by the subversives. His story did not really hold water. He had given his vehicle to distribute leaflets inciting people to rise against the establishment.

Incidentally, there were some police deaths too. Well, the investigations went on but finally, it was found that the letters were from his own typewriter".

"Where is he now?" I asked.

"On the fourth floor".

"And after that...?"

"He'll be sent to one of the detention centres. It's a world where it's either you or me. After all, take a soldier, take a policeman. They know they can be bumped off at any time, so what have they got to lose? And think of the men in the camps. There's always high tension in any camp. That's why they have an officer's mess and a private's mess. They have to drink to keep their morale high".

I sat before him, meditating on his words. My daughter Paru, brought him a cup of black coffee. After gilanpasa he would not take milk. Only sugar with plain tea or black coffee. Gnana Thera's statements, very cut and dried reminded me of what Ranjith had told me of his training as a guerilla. He was a planter and had had to undergo special combat training as an officer to equip him in the ethnic conflict in the north.

The officers had to spend time in the dense jungle, learning to survive as guerillas. Ranjith explained how even a poisonous snake could be eaten by breaking off the head or stripping it of its poison sacks and fangs.

"And then roast it on a woodfire, strip it of its skin. The flesh is like chicken... dogs too, even the mangy dog hovering around suddenly disappeared. I saw it being skinned. We had to trek for miles and miles through the jungle... our boots were so heavy and cumbersome. Feet covered with blisters. The commander told us to look after the gun like a baby... information travels fast. Even before we enter, the township is aware of our arrival. The grapevine buzzes. They watch us from everywhere, eating houses, boutiques... and all that talk about torture. It never happens with our men. No, torture never happens".

I had asked him about the commandant who had shot one of his own men.

"Well, one of the soldiers went berserk after the Anuradhapura massacre. All those innocent civilians, men, women and children, had died. He started shooting wildly - Yes he just went berserk. The commandant, a new man had to shoot him. "I had to do it. I had to," he said".

It's our boys who shoot themselves when they can't take it. When one of their buddies goes out on patrol and never returns... you should see those claymores, you have to scrape the flesh off. The doctor says he wants thousands of yards of polythene. What he gets is not enough. Parcel what's left like meat. That's war. Yes, that's the war we're fighting. The militants, they're strapped to the trees, wear two belts, those snipers, so they won't fall off when they sleep. Believe me, little boys, fifteen, sixteen, carrying weapons, setting off landmines and my own son? Singing in the Trinity College choir, Christmas carols... playing rugger... It's all a question of power. They all have weapons. Wedded to them. Spend the whole night polishing them. more precious than a wife. The gun is their companion, their life. Survival. They're out to get one man a day. Snipers..."

His long tirade made me think. Most of us were not killers then in the conventional sense of the world. We would never want our flesh scraped off claymores or be parcels of meat readied for delivery. The extent of courage we possess is a matter for conjecture... I turn to Gnana Thera, picking up the threads of his conversation and remarked:

"Greed, delusion, hatred", Gnana Thera repeated.

"That's why all this is taking place. And there's another reason too. A monk friend of mine who knows these things and has gone deep into meditation says there are evil forces, bad things happening in the spirit world. Invisible forces. We humans can never see them. The Wars of the Dewas". "Our conversation has changed so much since our first meeting", I remarked. "Then you talked of kamma, kama, karma".

"You have changed too", he told me. "You look more contented".

"Contented", I thought "More resignation to my fate after the events of '83. We had survived, but with difficulty, all the violence and the alienation. We were still ill often made to feel a people apart.... Yesterday I had met Kirthi, the boy from India. He had visited us with Khema who had been an undergrad at the university with my daughters. He had taken out a pack of Tarot cards from his pocket. I found him interesting.

"I'm Indian," he had said by way of introduction. To me, his face was universal. A beautiful face, alive yet peaceful.

I practice Zen, he continued. I have a Zen Karate school. You can come to India and meditate for ten days. He held three cards before me. I had chosen them from the pack. He studied them carefully.

"You're a woman with a strong will. Yet, you are still a child inside you. You can come to India and meditate for ten days. He held three cards before me. I had chosen them from the pack. He studied them carefully.

"You're a woman with a strong will. Yet, you are still a child inside you. You are also a woman who can live alone, in solitude. Yet, you are still waiting. You will make the discovery one day. Until then you wait, you search". Kirthi had next ranged the card in two columns. "You have this and this," he said, "but what are you waiting for?"

Did I myself know? A woman married now for many years. Who had put the past behind her. No, I didn't know which direction to go in after '83 even though I had gone for a space of time abroad, assumed a new identity. My children were grown up now... living their own lives. Thinking independently.

"Perhaps I can go back to my painting....?"

The cards lie before me. I see myself, my life in them. First a woman with an upright sword. A woman waiting for the seed to grow, plough in hand, patient. A woman in a garden of roses. I couldn't read into the

future but I would wait for the interpretation of those symbols in whatever time was left to me.

I turn to Gnana Thera again. We talk of Karma and of previous births.

"Perhaps you lived with that man or woman in several consecutive births", he explained. "That's why you can explain these attractions you have for certain people. You may have spent five hundred and seventy consecutive births with this one person".

He regards me quizzically. He feels that I am still a divided person.

"There are two parts in you," he says, "the spiritual and the sensual".

Perhaps he could help me find a sense of peace within myself.

"I shall come and see you in your mountain refuge", I tell him, wanting to explore that world he had created high up in the knuckles ranges on an old tea estate. The large sprawling colonial estate bungalow was his sanctuary. It was a terrain covered with wild ferns, flowers of yellow and purple on windswept bushes, tree ferns, wild orchids, cardamum plants growing on the slopes with their huge canna - like leaves.

I felt sometimes the need to be alone, to meditate in those silent windswept spaces on the mountains. I would move out of the rose garden with its carefully nurtured flowers into silence where no words would hammer at my brain.

I look at the pathraya lying on the table beside the monk, Myself, that pathraya. I wanted to empty it of all alms. End my life's journey, that pindapathaya. Leave the empty almsbowl to rest in the garden, to dry in the sun, all those tempting savours of food after the dana to gradually vanish.

Gnana Thera was continuing his discourse. "Karma. Rebirth, Let me tell you a story".

*Nivedini*

"The Buddha was walking with his monks. He came to a house where two frail and humble old people lived, an old man and an old woman.

Welcome my son, at last you have come back. We were waiting and waiting for you. The other monks looked away. They thought to themselves how could these two old people be the parents of the Buddha? He who was the son of the king Suddhodhana. The Buddha turned to them and uttered these words:

"They were my parents in a previous birth".

The monks were silent at this utterance.

As Gnana Thera ends his story, the image of the *pathraya* floats before my eyes, levitated, rests in space as if on an invisible cloud. I stretch out my hands. Already I am holding it again, feeling my human hungers unappeased. My pilgrimage, my *pindapathaya*, not yet ceased. I must find my way long whichever path I take, however much endurance it requires, my journey's end was not yet in sight.

*Nivedini*

.....  
**A Light in the Darkness**  
.....

*Karuna Perera*

I've put the dhal on to cook and am watching the road from the garden. From here you can see a long way down the road. No sign of mother yet. On the verandah granny is pounding away at her chew of betel leaves and arecanut. The iron pestle strikes the wooden mortar with a hollow sound. granny's bottom touches the mud floor as she squats on her haunches.

'Come back in the house... I don't suppose mother will be much longer....'

'She's never been as late as this before.'

I'm sitting by granny, staring at the garden. She is still bent over the mortar, still making that hollow sound with her pounding. Slowly the darkness comes flooding in to our very feet. A desolate moment this, when the dead sound of the iron on the wooden mortar rouses feelings of inexpressible sadness.....

'I've cooked some dhal. I don't know what else to give you, granny, since you can't eat chillies and hot things like that.'

'Just wait a while, your mother's sure to bring something.'

'She didn't have any money. I had to give her five cents for the bus.'

'Ah, well, I dare say she'll borrow something from somebody.'

'Yes, I dare say she will. Resigned, I continue gazing at the road. If Mother got into debt this week as well... she'd use her wages to settle her

debts and then be at a loss. I feel like fingering my dress. Whenever I have to bend down it splits apart with a ripping noise. Sweat and hair oil have rotted the cloth through and through. Yesterday mother asked me to wear my best visiting dress about the house. But I know she won't be able to make me another dress just yet.

When it's the turn of the family next door to give alms to the temple, they take me along to do the washing up. From the time I get there I do nothing but wash dishes till my back's nearly broken, but I still like going to the temple. That's because I never get a chance to go anywhere else. If I wore my visiting dress in the house, what would I wear to the temple? How would mother be able to make me a new dress as quickly as she'd say she could?

While I am thinking about such things, I suddenly remember the dhal I've just left cooking. I leave the verandah and go to the fire to stir the pot.

'Are you off to the temple then, Hamine?'

'Yes... just take hold of this temple offering, will you... Where's the girl?'

Granny is talking to the old woman next door. I come running forward.

'Pick me those two flowers as well, my dear.'

It isn't with very good grace that I pick the flowers and put them in her basket. They were the first flowers on my rose bush, two little red blossoms. Without a trace of feeling she had drained my hendirikka bush of all its flowers too. I must tell granny what the pious old hag had done in the morning.

'What a waste of my flowers, giving them to that stingy old crone. This morning when mother asked if she could lend her fifty cents to go to work, she croaked out 'Na-aw" almost before mother had finished asking the question. But she's got plenty of money to buy offerings for the monks. It's all your fault, granny, letting her have my flowers.'

'Be silent, child, and don't fill yourself up with sin.'

'Why, don't we lend money sometimes? As soon as mother gets her wages where does she go straightaway but to give alms? But they give their alms like a kind of loan, expecting to get it back with interest in the next life. We'll get to nirvana before these fine madams, granny.'

'Just listen to her - well, you've certainly grown too much too soon, my girl. Let's just keep ourselves to ourselves and not meddle in other people's affairs.'

I sit on the verandah once more, looking out on to the road. Granny has stopped pounding. The betel leaves are now in her gaping mouth. Thinking about the neighbours and their doings, I recall what a fine fellow our bread-man is. He comes from a long way off to sell bread from house to house, but he never hesitates to give us credit. He knows that mother will settle up with him as soon as she is paid. I've had enough now of eating bread soaked in strong dark tea. But no other person would give us credit except that man.

The old woman next door once did my mother a fine turn. I must say, it makes me boil, just to think about it. But I'm just not firm enough to say 'no' when she asks me to go with her to the temple.

Returning home with her wages, Mother had gone round by next door's kitchen in order to pay off a debt. Needless to say, she did that every time she got paid. That evening the old woman did something she'd never done before. She offered mother a seat and a glass of tea with milk. Somehow she managed to coax my mother into grinding her chillies for her that evening. Since that time I've always hated the old hag. Mother's poor hands, so sore from handling sand and cement, began to smart from the chillies and her eyes filled with tears. That's what she's like, that old woman. Whenever her serving-woman is away, the cunning old crone always manages to get someone else to do all the things that need doing.

I cried as I put coconut oil on mother's palms. She's exhausted by the time she gets home each day, I know, so I don't let her do any work



around the house. I have something hot ready for her to eat as soon as she comes home

I remember the dhal again. I must take it off the fire and cover it. Wonder why mother's not home yet.... Granny's still on the verandah munching her betel. The dark has spread throughout the house, it's time to light a lamp.

'Granny, I wonder why Mother's not yet....'

'You just go and see to the lamp.'

I get up to light the bottle-lamp, put it on the table and go back to granny. All sorts of weird imaginings come into my head. The light from the bottle-lamp does not fall here on the verandah. So the fantastical thoughts in my head writhe and wrestle unchallenged.

.....Someone killed when a scaffold fell... another buried under a mound of earth and taken to the hospital... an old man with his leg maimed by a mammoty stroke... a woman with an arm broken when she slipped while carrying a panful of sand on her head.... All these thoughts came together, ravelling my mind.

I want to get up and look out towards the road again. But I haven't the strength in my legs to get up. I look up at granny's face, wanting to say something. But I am unable to speak a word. My lips and mouth are dry. In this darkness I can hardly see even Granny's face. I couldn't say for certain how long I remained tired and apathetic like this, staring out into the dark and desolate garden.

A vague and ghostly shape moves in the darkness. Suddenly it appears in view through the weak light of the bottle-lamp. It is mother.

I get up quickly and take the bag that was in mother's hand. Granny is still on the verandah. Mother sits down there, too, and from out of the darkness calls for a glass of water. I haven't the heart to ask her why she is late. Carrying the bag, I turn to go indoors. A lovely light shines from

the bottle-lamp on the table. It sparkles all over the house. I think it shines all the brighter in here because of the darkness enfolding the verandah. As I return with a jug of water for mother, my eyes are dazzled by the light, probably because I have been sitting out in the dark for so long.

'I got ten rupees. Carolis said the boss wants me to come again next week.'

'That's all very well, but you must ask for more wages.'

'It can't be done at once. I'll speak to Carolis about it after a while.'

'Much better to speak up for yourself instead of letting Carolis do it.'

'No, the boss is a fine man, he won't ignore me, I'm sure of that.'

Water jug in hand I eavesdrop on these private whisperings between granny and mother. But I don't really understand all of it. 'What's it all about?' I ask, going up to mother. Without a word she takes the water jug from my hand. Her coarse fingers brush against mine. They are very cold. A fragrance, like that from a fine face powder, hangs about her. I'm wafted along by it and my thoughts float into space....

'Do you have to work very late at night now, mother....? They must be in a hurry to hand the building over then.'

'Never mind that, you get on with cutting up that fish.'

Silently, I go indoors. Borne along by the smell of the fish in the bag, my thoughts once more lose their way and become stranded on their journey. So I didn't need to go on that journey. Why set out when you've no clear idea of the road or resting place? But my mother, who didn't have five cents for her fare in the morning, comes home at nightfall with a fine para fish in the bag... The fish is tasty enough, but it stinks all the same.

I can't forget what granny and mother were whispering about. I take the

fish out of the bag, chop it up, wash and prepare it and put it on the fire. Small bits of bread soaked in the fish gravy would be just the thing.... I put pieces of broken coconut shells on the fire. The flames leap up with a roar. The whole house is filled with light. There's more light than from the bottle-lamp. But mother and granny have still not come in from that darkness.

*Translated by Gamini Salgado*

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## My Hands Reach the Door-Latch

*Attiya Dawood*

Mother, this tattered "chaddar"<sup>1</sup>  
Woven out of the threads of traditions,  
Take it back from me----  
You have given up trying to mend it,  
How can you pass it on to me?

Mother, this latch on the door  
You were told to keep it locked  
From the inside,  
Open it now  
Otherwise I have become tall enough  
To reach out to it.

Mother, forgive me  
I go away leaving you behind,  
I cannot bear to see my daughter  
Stumbling in the dark.

Mother, I am no bitch  
Who for the sake of a few morsels will  
Keep looking anxiously at the faces of father, brother,  
father-in-law, husband, son  
Wag my tail and beg from them.

Mother, do not give this food to me  
Which was dished out to you in charity,

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1. ATTIYA DAWOOD was born in Moledino Larik, a small village in district Naushehro Feroz in Pakistan. She has been writing poetry since 1980. Her first collection of poems in Sindhi is due to appear soon. She has been hailed as the "most important feminist writer in Sindhi" by Shaikh Ayaz who says that a "each and every poem... is lustrous like a pearl".

A fourth of my father's heritage<sup>2</sup>  
And the favour of "meher" from the husband.

I want to break away from this noose around my neck,  
I am also a creature who breathes,  
I can also struggle for survival,  
I cannot put my mind in a cage  
And hand it over to somebody.

I do not want to see the world  
from behind the veil,  
It appears so dim from there.

I remain confined within four walls  
Yet I know that a demon  
Is ravaging the city, crying that it can smell human  
blood.

The menfolk have asked me to tie the "Imam-Zamin"<sup>3</sup>,  
Armed with daggers and spears, they go to fight it  
And they tell me to look from the window, see the battle.  
But I too am threatened by the demon,  
Why shouldn't I go to fight it too?  
What sort of life is this,  
That like bread, my share of life is handed out to me,  
And in the court of this All-too-Generous, Providing One  
I am like an attending servant  
Ready to give my heart and soul.

Mother, what in the name of "ghutti"<sup>4</sup>  
did you feed me at my birth  
That all my limbs are intact  
But still I invite pity.  
Look, my hand has reached the door latch.  
From a cage kept in my father's court-yard  
I go now to free my mind.  
If at all you want to remember or help me in some way,  
Then think of the reason you spent your life in darkness,  
in spite of the blazing sun.  
If you cannot come up with any reason,  
Then open the door latch,  
And outside under the vast sky, in the open air,

Even if you can't see me

You will hear my daughter or grand-daughter's  
Free voice resounding back at you.

### Notes

1. "Chadar" is the long wrap-around used by women to cover themselves and is seen as a symbol of her modesty and honor.
2. "A fourth of my father's heritage--" refers to the share a woman can legally inherit from her father's property according to Islamic jurisprudence.
3. "Imam Zamin" is the amulet tied around a warrior or a traveller's arm seeking protection of the Imam.
4. "Ghutti" is the traditional feed given to the child just after birth.

## It's a beautiful nite.....

It's a beautiful night....  
I stare at the night that is grey,  
I feel the softness of the breeze,  
That touches my body tenderly,

Oh, how good this darkness is,  
Which protects me from the evil,  
To feel so safe, so secure,  
In this time of the day.

Mother's dying words,  
Come to my ears this moment,  
"Please be good, get married soon,  
Look after your husband, treat him well".  
Oh, but mother do you not know,  
That a husband that I cannot find,  
I sought and sought for years and years,  
But a heart that loves I never met.

Oh, but mother do you not know,  
They ask for no wife, only money and wealth,  
Land and jewels, house and property,  
Capital from me for their business,  
They ask for no education, nor for my profile,  
It's money they ask for, my dear mother.

Oh, they want no wife dear mother,  
They want no woman to share their dreams,  
Share their lives together as one,  
To live a future as woman and man,  
They are not concerned about 'me' the woman,  
the money, but I earn they count oh dear mother.

Forgive me mother, for disobeying,  
I am a spinster, forever will I be,  
And won't you be glad, for I will be safe,  
Safe from the males who crave only wealth,  
the wealth that means everything to them.

I Sell not myself in order to get tied,  
I buy not a man for wealth  
forgive me mother my disobedience

*Rocky Ariyaratne*

## Images

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This collection of work by Sri Lankan feminist researchers and scholars engages with the portrayal of women in contemporary electronic and print media. The sexualization of media and commodization of the female image in the media threaten the social, economic and political empowerment of women. Utilizing semiotics as a form of film analysis, several authors analyze perpetuation of gender stereotyping within a context of a particular system.

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Tel. 595296 or 590895, Fax 596313.

## **World Conference on Women in Beijing: Rhetoric and Reality as seen by the Sri Lankan Women's NGO Forum,**

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Over 30,000 women representing NGOs from all over the world participated in the NGO Forum at Huairou. The site 45 minutes away from Beijing was spread over 42 hectares and hosted over 8000 programmed and spontaneous activities over a period of ten days from the 30th of August to the 8th of September 1995.

The Forum's main aim was to influence the platform for Action which was debated at the UN 4th World Conference on Women held in Beijing from the 4th to the 15th of September 1995.

Billed as the largest gathering of women in recent history the Forum attracted an incredible diversity of women from different cultures, and ethnic groups who shared their experiences, aired their differences and supported concerns shared in common.

The myriad activities ranged from seminars to workshops, discussions, dialogues, theatre, film, mime, music, dance, acrobatics, exhibitions, demonstrations, vigils, tribunals, protests and meditations. Indoor spaces were complete with tents, outdoor stages and open air spaces converted into sites of activity by thousands of women not deterred by sun or rain, contributed to an ever moving tapestry of colour and action.

Among the events and activities which took place, a large number of issues of relevance were discussed each day. These ranged from:

- economy to politics;
- human rights to sexuality;
- Peace and human security to science and technology;

- religion to race and ethnicity;
- region specific issues that dealt with structural adjustment to armed conflict;
- nuclear testing to occupied territories;
- socialist societies in transition to democracy;
- refugees to xenophobia;
- youth to lesbian rights;
- education to environment;
- indigenous peoples to ethnic minorities

The Forum analyzed and strategised some of the key areas of the platform for action in large plenary sessions. Some of the issues so tackled were:

- approaches to governance including questions of citizenship and political participation;
- obstacles to peace and human security including the effects of militarisation, violence and poverty;
- challenges posed by the globalisation of the economy including the impact of the technological revolution on work;
- the rise of conservatism in its various forms including religious, nationalist, racial/ ethnic and homophobia manifestations; media culture and communication - challenges and opportunities; institutional mechanisms and financial arrangements;

### **UN Agencies and Gender Equity Strategies.**

The final three days of the Forum discussed strategies for the future; NGO structures and accountability; and finally regional commitments to future action plans which looked beyond Beijing.

Apart from the plenaries the largest attended indoor events were the



global tribunal on accountability for women's human rights, hearing individual women's testimonies on the violation of human rights; the tribunal on violence and crimes against women, and the Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet organised by the Women's Environment and Development Organisation.

Equally important were the activities that were held in the 15 special tents, which included 5 tents for each of the regions, Asia Pacific, West Asia, Africa, Latin America, Northern America and Europe, where delegates discussed common concerns, shared experiences and drew up common agendas for networking and action. Seven tents were reserved for activities of youth, indigenous peoples, grass roots organisations, women with disabilities, older women, lesbians and refugees. The Peace tent was a special area in which activities relating to militarisation, armed conflict and human rights were held, and was the focus for many of the demonstrations, vigils and protests calling for an end to war, violence against women and the abuse of human rights. One of the tents was reserved for Youth and was the site of many activities and discussions organised by young people from around the globe. Another tent was designated a Quiet Place and there was a tent specially allocated for Mental and Spiritual Healing.

### **The Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing**

One hundred and eighty one states represented by approximately 17,000 government and NGO delegates and accredited observers participated at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Each country delegation was allowed seven minutes speeches at the main plenary, while specialist agencies and NGOs were allocated five minute time slots. However, the main task of the meeting was the discussion, deliberation and final adoption of the main conference document, the Platform for Action. The three hundred and sixty two paragraphs of the document reviewed and appraised the progress made by women since 1985, when the Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000 were adopted in Nairobi. At the commencement of the meeting the platform which was in draft

listed twelve critical areas of concern and identified them as obstacles to the advancement of women, and made recommendations to the international community. They cover poverty, education, health, violence, armed conflict, economic structures, power sharing and decision making, mechanisms to promote the advancement of women, human rights, the media, the environment and the girl child.

Sixty percent of the draft platform for action was enclosed in brackets at the start of the meeting, denoting areas in dispute, particularly in relation to reproductive rights and health, sexual rights, sexual orientation, abortion, violence against women in the home, universality of human rights and women's rights as human rights, international responsibility for violations committed in situations of armed conflict, inheritance, the conceptualisation of family, etc.

The fundamental struggle at both the World Conference and at the NGO Forum was between the progressive advancement of the rights of women and conservative currents which are increasingly gaining strength through out the world. A deeply divisive issue was that of sexual rights and sexual orientation. All reference to the latter were removed from the Platform of Action due to strong lobbying from the Catholic and Islamic fundamentalist Lobbies. Sexual rights, were finally recognised and incorporated into the section on reproductive health and was a gain made by the Women's Conference. After much discussion the text reaffirming that reproductive rights rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of children and to have the information and means to do so was adopted. In addition the text calling for the elimination of gender based violence and all forms of sexual harassment, prostitution, pornography, sexual slavery and exploitation including violations resulting from cultural prejudice, racism, xenophobic ethnic cleansing, religious and anti-religious extremism and international trafficking in women and children was approved.

In relation to the issue of environment, language concerning the intellectual property right of indigenous women was approved. The

Platform for Action calls for the effective protection and use of indigenous technologies. The Committee approved language in the section in the Draft Platform on the media calling for the production on media material on women as leaders who have many different experiences, including but not limited to, their experiences of juggling work and family responsibilities.

The Committee also approved language in the Platform's section on mechanisms for the advancement of women calling on governments to give ministries the mandate to review policies and programmes from a gender perspective and in the light of the Platform for Action, it recommended improving data collection on access to health services including access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive services.

A further gain made was that States agreed to review policies regarding punitive measures in relation to abortion. A hard fought victory was also in relation to institutional arrangements for implementation of the Conference Platform. The Bretton Wood's institutions, the United Nations and specialised agencies were called upon to coordinate their assistance with women and their families in mind. It encouraged international financial institutions to provide new and additional resources to ensure that investments and programmes benefited women. Further, in relation to women and poverty, language was approved calling for the mobilisation of "new and additional resources that are both adequate and predictable and mobilized in a way that maximises the availability of such resources and uses all available funding sources and mechanisms with a view to contributing towards the goal of poverty eradication and targeting women living in poverty".

An important area that failed to secure agreement was the need for international protection for the internally displaced. The need for international mechanisms to deal with violations of human rights of people living in situations of armed conflict, the special needs of women and children in particular, were ignored by the Conference. The situation of internally displaced was seen to be the sole responsibility of national governments.

The real challenge now is in securing the implementation of the Platform for Action as Charlotte Bunch of the Centre for Women's Global Leadership noted "women must provide a third option - an alternative from global hegemony and regressive conservatism. Women must offer an alternative to the democratization of difference that marks religious fundamentalism and right wing politics. Women must demonstrate how solidarity can operate in the midst of diversity. We must continue to redefine the terms of social, political, economic debate, broadening our understanding of democracy and development".

## **Class and Gender:- who set fire to the House Maid?**

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It is commonly assumed that violence against women is committed only by men. Feminist have set aside an agenda for dealing with this subject analysing the socio-economic and social and psychological causes for the varied and multi-faceted types and forms of violence directed against women. The state and the judiciary have been alerted and an awareness created. Even the UN recognising the need to check such violence has created the office of Rapporteur For Violence Against Women and presently that office is held by a Sri Lankan woman. This should add a fresh dimension to the problems of violence in Sri Lanka.

However, the class factor in this phenomenon needs to be studied further. The class status of both the victim and the perpetrator of violence has a bearing on this. These helpless women who are hierarchically placed lower are subject to more violence. House maids, domestic helpers, agricultural labourers, peasant women, factory workers, women workers in the tea/rubber plantation sectors, and working girls have become sexually vulnerable due to their socio economic placement but management labour laws are inadequate to deal with this problem.

Of late, we have witnessed two cases of violence which have shocked us.

We were informed through the media that a housewife who having deprived regularly her domestic helper of food and proper clothing was in the habit of chaining her to her bed so that she would not escape.

However, we were happy to see the law taking its course to deal with the woman. The second case is even more horrific. The woman aged 20 who was working as a housemaid was set on fire allegedly by the house wife. We do not want to dismiss such cases as examples of sadism as such labelling usually entails deep psychological meanings which would eventually lead to trivialising domestic violence. Virakesari of 3rd Oct.

gave us the news that the housewife was released for want of evidence. The house maid has made a statement that she was set on fire by the owner of the house, a woman who has short hair. Is this evidence not sufficient? Is it too difficult to identify the woman with this description? If the act was not done by the woman who was arrested and released, who has done it? We have a charred body, - evidence enough for a homicide. Whose duty is it to find the culprit? Is not the state or the judiciary answerable to the public?

We appeal to the human rights activists, the women's groups and the progressive thinkers of civil society to join hands and seek justice.

We realise painfully that we cannot give life to the charred body. But by demanding justice we know we can prevent other such cases of inhumane brutality. When justice is administered or seems to be administered it does act as a check on those who violate rules. Hence we call on those people whose conscience needs to be mobilised into action to join us.

*Editor*

on Behalf of

Women's Education and Research Centre

## "For Equality of Genes"

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We refer to the editorial titled "For Equality of Genes" which appeared on July 25th issue of 'The Island'. This article seem to reflect a considerable degree of ignorance of feminism in general, and sexual exploitations in particular. "For equality of genes" defines the amendments to the 110 year old Penal Code as a 'Gender package'. These proposed amendments, in reality, attempt to protect two extremely vulnerable groups in the society; women and children. These amendments, moreover, will find redress to crimes committed against women and children, such as sexual exploitations, marital rape, incest and sexual harassment. Therefore, it is important to understand the amendment in its interiority as a comprehensive legal regime, not a mere 'gender package' geared towards protecting the rights of women.

The editorial questions whether Sri Lankan Women require 'extra legal protection'. This question begs a response. Yes; Sri Lankan women *do* need a comprehensive set of legal protection. Today, women encounter various forms of violence at home, and outside. Violence against women as well as children, has reached alarming proportions. A glance into any daily newspaper will highlight incidents of rape, incest, child molestation and sexual exploitation. Yet, such violence, thus far, has been systematically condoned by the present legal regimes due to the lack of a comprehensive legal framework. Therefore, proposed amendments are not a luxury and it is irrational to view it as 'extra legal protection'.

The editor seems to believe in the regionality of feminism as well as sexual violence; they are seen as 'the current fashion in the west and transplanted in the east'. Nothing could be further from reality. With this in view, we believe it is imperative to offer clarifications on some of the most misunderstood elements of feminist awareness. As the editorial has incorrectly portrayed, feminism is perceived as a western concept. The logic of this argument is flawed. Feminist awareness is neither a regional phenomenon nor a fad; it is a universal consciousness, of course, influenced by western liberal ideas. Historically, there has been a high degree of

feminist consciousness in many eastern nations, ie., in India and China, against sati, dowry and foot-binding.

The editorial asks Sri Lankan environment be given consideration when amending the Penal Code. However, we believe that no 'environmental' factors, may they be societal norms, should be given sanctions to violate the sexuality and the bodies of women and children. It is imperative to emphasize that freedom from social exploitation is not a western notion, on the contrary, it is a fundamental human right.

On the issue of single parenthood, the editor argues that it is a direct result of feminist awareness. The argument is flawed, and it is crudely deterministic. This flawed observation discounts myriad of socio-economical factors that have contributed towards single parenthood.

Finally, given these misconceptions, we believe it is necessary to clarify the fundamental objectives of contemporary feminism in Sri Lanka.

Statement Women's Education and Research Centre sent  
to the Editorial Board of Island

## Through the Eye of the Women: A new way of seeing and knowing our reality

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Once again, our country is being torn apart by war. Every day, we are told stories of battles here, attacks there. The politicians, the television, the newspapers tell us this is the way things are, and the way things must be. But is this true? Are there no alternatives to war?

The consequences of the war have been uncertainty, misery, destruction. We did not start it, but we suffer, as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers, from the devastating consequences of this. So, we have to ask ourselves; How do we respond to this violence? Have we through silence and inaction been perpetrators of this war? Is there anything we can do to bring about peace?

But, once again, our country seems so far away from peace. It appears that we are staring at war without end. But whose war is this? We are told the war is being fought on behalf of the nation. The Tamil nation against the Sinhala nation. But, whose nation is this, anyway? What is women's relation to the nation? Are we equal members of it? Or, is it a community dominated by men. In which case, do we want to be part of it? Can we change it? Can we envisage more equal, less oppressive, more peaceful, non-antagonistic forms of community? If men are for war can we not be women for peace?

Historically, the nation has always been constructed in masculinist terms. Aggressive militancy and revolutionary violence have been employed by male nationalists to establish dominance over its subjects. It is the masculinisation of political power and authority that deprives women of their agency and self expression. In this political project, women are seen exclusively as biological and cultural reproducers, regenerators and nurturers of the nation. But we are also real victims of this spurious justification of endless, meaningless war.

For, what meaning does this war have for Sinhala women in the South? Primarily, it has meant death, destruction and displacement. They have experienced what it is like to mourn without a body to mourn over. Younger women have lost their beloved ones even before they could begin life together. Women all over the south have been deprived of means of livelihood and economic stability. Their lives have become devalued as a result of this war. Shouldn't we challenge this denigration of women's lives?

Why are our Sinhala mothers sending their sons to war, to get killed and maimed? Don't they have rights and freedom, to choose, to think, to act, to say quit devaluing our lives. To choose life, over death; self-fulfilment over selfnegation; creativity over annihilation; happiness over mourning. Do they question the legitimacy of the state in waging this war against their own sons and daughters?

Mothers of the North, in contrast, do not have a choice about the fate of their sons, and daughters, forcibly conscripted by the LTTE. Women remain helpless when their sons and daughters are snatched away from their domestic embrace as cadres to strengthen the LTTE's killing machines. In this militarised, socially repressive environment, women experience fear, terror and abuse daily. Dissenting voices are suppressed and anti-LTTE activism crushed. Violently reactionary ideologies are espoused. Women are forced to send their sons and daughters on suicide missions. It is in death that glory can be achieved; heroism is valorised; celebrated as martyrs, defied as extraordinary saviours, they revel and rejoice in this glorified violence. Women are not given the opportunity to mourn their dead. Trapped as they are, it is within this cyanide culture of violence that Tamil women in the North search for a ray of hope. Their lives have become devalued as a result of this war. Shouldn't we challenge this denigration of women's lives?

Tamil women in Colombo live in fear that their husbands and sons will be abducted. The fear that the LTTE has infiltrated into the city and its suburbs has created a strong sense of insecurity and vulnerability amongst particularly Tamil women who fled the North due mainly to the military aggression of the Sri Lankan state and the authoritarianism of the LTTE.



Suspected always to be members of the LTTE, they often become victims of ethnic prejudice and discrimination. While in detention under the PTA and Emergency regulations, they face physical and sexual abuse at the hands of racially intolerant security men and women. Their lives have become devalued as a result of this war. Shouldn't we challenge this denigration of women's lives? Shouldn't we challenge this denigration of women's lives?

Muslim women in the East, after the LTTE attacks of the recent past, are no longer allowed to go out in public. In the name of protecting the community, Muslim women cannot go to the market, they cannot do their jobs, they cannot visit their friends. They are being made to bear the brunt of the increasing impoverishment of their people. The social and cultural disintegration has only increased their isolation and alienation from community support structures while they are being made vulnerable to new forms of violence from outside. The recent documented report of rape and subsequent murder of twenty three year old Muslim women by a Sinhala policeman in Batticaloa is a case in point. There is a daily struggle for survival under vastly altered conditions. Their lives have become devalued as a result of this war. Shouldn't we challenge this denigration of women's lives?

In other words, in very different, definite and special ways, women too are victims of this war. Tamil, Sinhala, Muslim and Burgher women, in all parts of Sri Lanka. We know today that most refugees are women, that most of the internally displaced are women. Up to 1993, around one million people have been displaced. Women are the bruised and the battered; they are the unseen, unheard, unacknowledged victims of this war. But, we need not remain victims. We can be the agents of change; we can be women for peace.

If this is the state of affairs, what, as women, do we do today and where do we go from here? We need a new beginning. We need to advocate multi-ethnicity and pluralism as the most enabling ideology of the Sri Lanka policy. We must reiterate our political stance, as we have done before, that a resolution to the current impasse cannot be sought in a genocidal war, but in working towards the creation of space in which

communities belonging to different ethnicities can live with dignity and freedom. The ethnic conflict began because the Tamil people were discriminated against. Without an end to this discrimination, an end to this war, without a devolved political system whereby the Tamil people can look after their own affairs, we can never have harmony in this country. This is the only true meaning of peace. We women can work towards this; we can be women for peace.

But we need new strategies for creating consciousness, social spaces for those women in the margins, for voices to be heard and faces to be seen, for us to transcend barriers and shackles that patriarchy, this masculine state, has imposed.

Women! it is time to begin, begin it all over again. Rethink your position, our position. Redefine yourselves, ourselves. To say we have done it is not enough. We need to go beyond the limits that others have set for us and see what new, creative, positive possibilities could lie ahead. Together, as women, we can do it. Together, we can be women for peace.

### A Statement from Women for Peace

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