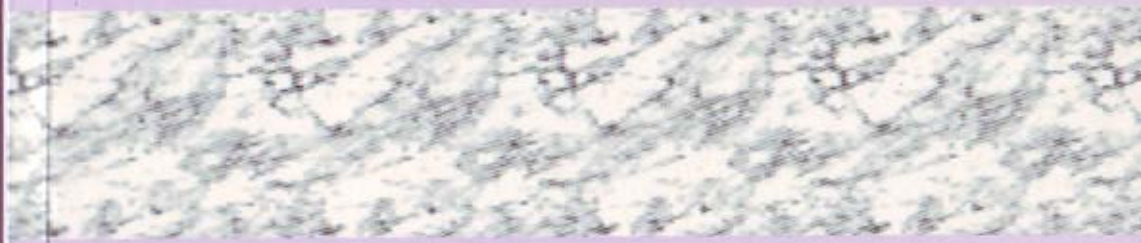
NJGS

Nivedini
Journal of Gender Studies

Vol. 11. July/Augst 2004



A WERC Publication

Contents

Nivedini

Journal of Gender Studies

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Malathi de Alwis
Kumari Jayawardena
Maithree Wickremasinghe
Neloufer de Mel
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Publisher
Women's Education & Research Centre

designed by
B.A. Sunandaseeli
Printed by
Karunaratna & Sons,

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ISSN No. 1391-0027

From the Editor

I would like to start the editorial by expressing my concern with the contemporary political situation in Sri Lanka which is drifting to increasingly ambivalent uncertainties and insecurities. We, Sri Lankans were happy at the turn of the political events when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam who have been fighting for a separate Tamil State (to a great extent supported by the Tamil people) together with the Sri Lankan State initiated a peace process. The guns became inactive, silenced and the killings for the most part ceased. People breathed the air of peace and happiness to a certain extent though in the face of a massive destruction of infra-structures and dislocation and displacement of people and amidst a mass of people called internal refugees living in their habitat of sheds and badly constructed halls. The happy event for women, however, was the appointment of the sub-committee on gender to assist the peace process in general. The main agenda of the Sub-committee on Gender is however is to make interventions at the level of gender and to integrate women's concerns into the peace process in terms of the future development. It was a fact that there is a general tendency among all planning efforts to side line women's concerns. The women's groups were agitating for long, that women should be mainstreamed into the peace negotiation and the appointment of Sub-Committee on gender was the result of our continuous agitation. We are happy that one of our board member also was appointed to the committee. The peace negotiations was welcomed by all sections of our people who are hopelessly divided on the lines of ethnicity, religion, class, caste and gender. There was unity in the quest for peace. However, the recent turn of events, dissolving of the parliament which was followed by the general election, the results of which has led to a hung parliament had again caused anxiety in our minds. The party that commanded the electoral majority could not have the parliamentary majority. The political instability was compounded further by the break up of LTTE into two factions on

the basis of regions, the North and the East. The result was violence, killing of rivals. Traitors and loyalists both were threatened on both sides. There is speculation for further violence. The country is led again to political instability – a weak Central Government with an ambivalence of policy lines. The members of the coalition government do not agree on important issue on the principles of peace negotiation. The general state of insecurity, fear, uncertainities at the level of the people are not good signs for a stable future. But the we live on hopes and are hoping against hope.

And what does it mean for women? Particularly unfortunate is state of the Sub-committee on Gender which has ceased to function. It becomes effective only when the peace negotiations restart. The bill on the Domestic Violence Against Women waits to be passed as a law. And the Bill on women Rights needs to the presented at the Parliament. These are the priority issues in the minds of many.

We, at WERC are looking forward to the SAFRA conference. (South Asian Feminist Research Association) which is to be held from the 4th – 6th November. We are expecting about 25 participants from South Asia and 14 from Sri Lanka both as paper presenters and discussants.

The primary objectives of the conference is a critical assessment of historical and contemporary issues in shaping women's lives and setting an agenda for the new millennium. The conference will attempt to identify the different priorities that would emerge in each region, their dynamics and their linkages with mainstream priorities viz-á-viz culture, State, violence and media. At the same time this conference will provide the space for women from different parts of the region to come together and discuss unrepresented and unexplored issues as well as those which would emerge from the mainstream priorities we have already identified.

This will enable us to identify the action to be taken in building a future for women, replete with skills to cope with any emerging situation.

Conference Theme

Themes identified for the conference are within the following major areas:

1. Shrinking Space and Growing Threats, Is Post feminism a myth – An analysis of the claims of Post feminism in the context of emerging new facets and dimensions of patriarchal practices relating to globalisation and non-Globalisation factors.
2. Shrinking Space and Growing Threats, a Feminist Critique of the Histories and the Cultural Formations.

The formulation of SAFRA and the general concentration on South Asian issues implicitly question the global hegemony of Anglo American Women's Studies. While being careful not to belittle the contribution of the Anglo American feminists, to feminist theories and for academically including Women's Studies as a discipline within social sciences we are venturing into looking at specificities of the South Asian women's problems to theorise on them, to comprehend and understand most of commonalities that link the South Asian women being subjected to the same colonising experiences and same cultural contexts. This is to learn from the west and go beyond.

A few words about this issue of Nivedini – This issue is a mix of issues. Nivedini really does not confine itself to one theme, Two decades of war in Sri Lanka has created many categories of people. Categories of people as migrant women and men international and regional refugees, internally displaced, disabled soldiers, traumatised men and women, female heads of Households and female combatants. Categories of literature called literature of the War Era, Feminist literature of the War era have also emerged. Two of the papers deal with the two of the

categories. One, with the ideology of masculinity and the other with the feminist identity in armed conflict. The author's contention is that there is a masculine ideal, and that there is essentially a male ethnic self determination in Sri Lanka is a debatable point. The paper on female headship among Muslims in Eastern Sri Lanka deals specifically with a group which claims a position of political marginalisation in contemporary Sri Lankan politics. This is an empirically researched paper with useful statistics. Lakshmi Holmstrom's paper on Literature of Resistance significantly takes on two signifiers – women's writings and women's writing of a woman who belong to a marginalised social caste group called "Dalits" in India. It speaks of caste and the multiple oppression that the woman was subjected to on the lines of ethnicity, class and gender. Radhika Coomaraswamy's paper on the Disrobing of Draupadhi is a story of one of first encounters with the notion of violence against women. She raises important questions and the implication it has from a gender perspective on human rights and the State's complicity with the violation of women's right.

We also carry two book reviews and are reproducing a paper - the Socialist Feminist Project for its continued relevance.

Female Headship among Muslims in Eastern Sri Lanka A Case of Changing Household Structures

*Kanchana N. Ruwanpura**

Using data and case study evidence gathered from fieldwork in eastern Sri Lanka during 1998-99, this paper flushes out particular situation of Muslim female-heads. What direct and indirect factors linked to the conflict leads to female-headship? There is support for the contention that the patriarchal households may be altering to factors beyond the ethnic conflict. Therefore, it is important to highlight these complex and dynamic relationships in linking the rise in female-headship to conflict, social, economic and political factors.

Introduction

Supportive kin structures have been the hallmark of most Muslim communities, with women usually being maintained by their male relatives. Literature on female-headship at a global scale shows that this is a fast disintegrating reality (Youssef and Hetler 1981, 1984, Islam 1991, Hamid 1995, Buvinic and Gupta 1997). Likewise, the initial evidence indicates the same for Sri Lanka – albeit primarily because of conditions

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brought about by the armed conflict (Samuel 1994, Kottegoda 1996, Thiruchandran 1999). Since there are no studies in Sri Lanka that focus particularly on Muslim female-heads, it is difficult to learn about the history of female-headship in the community.

But, the increasing incidence of female-headship in Sri Lanka requires us to understand possible reasons for this emerging phenomena (Weerasinghe 1987, Perera 1991, Aturopane, Rodrigo and Perera 1997) – and move beyond attributing the rise in female-headship only to the armed conflict. We need to understand whether female-heads are most likely to be widows? If so, was the death of the spouse from natural causes or was it linked to the conflict? Do female-heads also belong to non-widow categories: are there cases of separation, abandonment and divorce? If so, what structural changes and economic pressures may be taking place that is leading to a rise in female-headship? And if so, what does it reveal about traditional support structures that may be disintegrating because of economic pressures and social transformation? In short, try to understand whether the patriarchal household structures – as assumed in the development discourse, and subsequently in much economic and social policy planing – are changing, and what this change implies for gender-sensitive policy-planing. To do so, I draw upon fieldwork carried out during 1998-99 for my doctoral studies for this paper to focus on the particular position of Muslim female-heads in eastern Sri Lanka, in a modest attempt to understand and explore some of these changes.

The next section of this paper begins by providing a brief synopsis of the fieldwork and the methodology employed for the larger study, on which this article is based. After carrying out this task, section 3 of this paper goes onto look at the profile of female-headed households among the Muslim community in eastern Sri Lanka. My purpose in section three of this paper is to show the numerous ways in which women are propelled to assume headship of their households, and how these routes are because of the conflict as well as "non-conflict" factors alike – i.e. economic pressures, social transformations, and structural changes.[1]

After providing a profile of the female-heads of households, section 4 of this article goes onto unpack the demographic factors and cultural institutions that may provide partial explanations for some characteristics observed in their profiles. This also paves the way for understanding the kind-of livelihood strategies that these households use to ensure the socio-economic welfare of these households, which is dealt with in section 5 of this paper. This section show how decisions on the livelihood and coping mechanisms used by these households are formed and shaped by their perceptions of culture, norms and values. Consequently, Muslim female-heads of households in my study were found to depend on their older children to support them – and this is shown in the penultimate section, section 6, of this paper. This sketch of Muslim female-headed households will attempt to illuminate and expand the debate on the same in Sri Lanka, which usually tends to focus on 'war-widows'. The purpose is to acknowledge and recast the discussion along altering household formations and structures – and thus challenge the dominant discourse of patriarchal households that infuses development thinking even in Sri Lanka[2] – rather than merely concentrate on 'war-widows', an aberration brought about by the armed conflict. With a discussion of some of these issues, this paper concludes, section 7, with the need to focus on the break-up of patriarchal household structures – as this is likely to profoundly influence the way in which policy debates are framed and shaped in Sri Lanka.

Doing Fieldwork in Eastern Sri Lanka[3]

The fieldwork for this study was done in 1998-99 at which time eastern Sri Lanka was still engaged in a protracted ethnic conflict. I worked through and with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in each district of eastern Sri Lanka, namely Ampara, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee – some of which worked with female-headed households, although primarily "war-widows", and others simply worked in feminist/gender issues.

There was, however, no sophisticated means of selecting my sample. Many of the female-heads interviewed were either those who were willing and able to be interviewed or were linked to grass-roots organisations. A

sample selection bias towards more involved female-heads in the community is likely, though not all organisations operate via a politicised feminist base.

In the absence of comprehensive household listings, female-headed households were selected randomly through the direction of villagers and NGOs. Then through informal discussions and word-of mouth, the purpose of the survey was explained. The enthusiasm with which it was received facilitated the subsequent work. The research assistants, some 10 young women, undertook the survey more or less simultaneously. Initial surveys by the research assistants were conducted under my supervision, with subsequent questionnaires been individually carried out by the assistants. During the one-year period in Sri Lanka, I travelled frequently between the three districts, and all the in-depth dialogues and informal discussions with female-heads and the other community members (mostly women) were carried out by me.

While questionnaires can be useful, their limitations are many. Anthropologists raised similar concerns when feminists pointed to the androcentric assumptions that are at the core of the empirical tradition (Leach 1967). Feminist economists, too, have increasingly documented their reservations about relying on the questionnaire method, and have called for a broadening of the methods used in conducting research in economics (MacDonald 1995, Berik 1997, van Stavern 1997). So while I began with collecting and analysing quantitative data, another phase of my fieldwork focused on unstructured dialogues, conversations and interviews as a means of gathering information critical for putting some flesh on the bones of the statistical account. The narratives and anecdotal evidence recounted in this paper are, therefore, based on ethnographic techniques of conducting research.

Profiling Muslim Female-Headed Households

To make the argument household structures may be changing it is necessary to begin by better understanding the types of female-headed households that can be found in eastern Sri Lanka – and in this case

among the Muslim community. To do so the questionnaire administered posed the relevant questions to gather information on the marital status of these households, and where widowhood was the reason for women to assume headship then proceeding to examine the reasons for spousal death. This basic information provides an outline of the different types of female-headed households found among the Muslim community – and whether factors other than those directly attributable to the conflict is found among the category of widowhood (*de jure* headship) too. This information is provided in Tables A and B, with an analysis of the quantitative evidence.

Table A: Marital status of Muslim female-heads*

	Ampara	Batticaloa	Trincomalee	All Districts
Deserted	2.9%(1)	6.1%(3)	10.0%(3)	6.2%(7)
Divorced	0.0%(0)	10.2%(5)	3.3%(1)	5.3%(6)
Married**	*17.6%(6)*	*20.4%(11)*	*20.0%(6)*	*20.4%(23)*
Separated	5.9%(2)	6.1%(3)	10.0%(3)	7.1%(8)
Widow	73.6%(25)	57.2%(27)	56.7%(17)	61.1%(69)
Sample Size	**34**	**49**	**30**	**113**

* District differences are NOT statistically significant.

** The married row consists of *de facto* female-heads supporting their families because their husbands are unemployed, suffering from a terminal illness, physically disabled, alcoholic, mentally unfit to work, and/or any other reason that precludes them from supporting the economic well-being of the household.

Widowhood is the main source of female-headship in all three districts, with Ampara registering the highest incidence of widows in the region. A significant proportion of female-headship, however, also occurs because of desertion, separation, and/or divorce. This varies from 8.8% to 23.3% within the region. Interestingly, desertion, separation, and/or divorce are lowest (and widowhood highest) in Ampara, where economic conditions are healthier. This begs the question whether economic pressures are more likely to thrust men into shirking their economic and social responsibilities. Similarly, does a relatively stable economic environment keep women from more "conservative" social groups with their spouses, even though there may be serious shortcomings in these

marital unions? Islamic norms allow women to remarry, but it is a rarity in the region. This is not simply because there are in-built mechanisms within kin structures that make marriage work (McGilvray 1989:209), but also because women are increasingly "called upon to preserve...traditional customs and to be an identifiable symbol of community which believes itself to be under siege" (Samuel 1994:17).[4] So while these components of *de jure* and *de facto* female-headship should be unpacked, *de facto* headship among married women hovers in the 20.0% range too, which is high. Once again Ampara has the lowest level of *de facto* headship. Significant proportions of married women do take over the economic responsibilities of sustaining their households, even among Muslim women. Since widowhood is high among female-heads, it is equally important to query the causes leading to the death of spouses. Here too there emerge patterns reflecting the economic and conflict status of the districts (see Table B). Widowhood because spouses died of natural causes are highest in Ampara, while in Batticaloa and Trincomalee their deaths are closely linked to the conflict.

Table B: Reasons for spousal death*

	Ampara	Batticaloa	Trincomalee	All Districts
Killed (state sponsored)	0.0%(0)	0.0%(0)	0.0%(0)	0.0%(0)
Killed (paramilitary)	16.0%(4)	33.3%(9)	41.1%(7)	20.3%(14)
Killed (non-conflict related)	0.0%(0)	0.0%(0)	5.8%(1)	1.4%(1)
Missing**	8.0%(2)	18.5%(5)	6.0%(1)	20.3%(14)
Natural causes	76.0%(19)	44.4%(12)	47.7%(8)	56.5%(39)
Suicide	0.0%(0)	3.8%(1)	0.0%(0)	0.0%(0)
Sample Size	25	27	17	69

* District differences are statistically significant between Ampara and Trincomalee (sig. = 0.032), marginally significant between Ampara and Batticaloa (sig. = 0.066), but NOT between Trincomalee and Batticaloa (sig. = 0.172).

** These are men who have gone missing since the beginning of the conflict, and where female-heads suspect that it is due to their being abducted and then killed by either para-military groups and/or the State. There is, however, little way of knowing if some men used the conflict as a pretext for simply disappearing and avoiding economic responsibility for their families.

The tabulated presentation of the leading causes of widowhood among female-heads indicates that female-headship is not just a result of the conflict. Although such households could depend upon their kin providing an extended family network that would absorb them into their fold, this may no longer hold true in eastern Sri Lanka. Changing economic conditions as well as civil unrest put many pressures on kin support. Sustaining such support becomes less easy, with more women having to bear the cost of the household economy. This indeed is an ironic twist. Muslim female-heads are expected to preserve traditional values when the very material circumstances and basis of "traditional values" are rapidly disappearing. Indeed, the resistance of cultural values in spite of changing economic conditions is a reality with which female-heads have constantly to grapple. They must struggle to meet their economic needs without violating acceptable cultural norms. As Rifaya, a *de facto* female-head, mentions: "*Islamic culture is resistant to change, and this is so even when the material realities are changing. Islam is Islam. Just because there is no husband how long can we be inside the house? Only if we earn can we eat.*" So will economic realities push accepted social and cultural borders? The answer is moot because there is no necessary uni-linear relationship between the economic base and cultural norms. Clearly, however, realising female-heads' capabilities will require addressing their economic needs, since this is one crucial dimension through which women may be empowered. To evaluate the economic position of female-heads, I begin by looking at the reasons for *de facto* female-headship.

In a community where women have limited visibility and presence, why do significant numbers of Muslim women have to assume *de facto* headship? According to the data below (Table C) while the unemployment of spouses remains one reason, illness and alcoholism also push women into taking over economic duties.

Table C: Causes of *de facto* headship*

	Ampara	Batticaloa	Trincomalee	All Districts
Alcoholic	16.7%(1)	27.3%(3)	33.3%(2)	26.1%(6)
Mentally unfit to work	0.0%(0)	9.0%(1)	16.7%(1)	8.7%(2)
Physically disabled	0.0%(0)	0.0%(0)	0.0%(0)	0.0%(0)
Terminal/Major illness	66.7%(4)	18.2%(2)	50.0%(3)	39.1%(9)
Unemployed	16.6%(1)	45.5%(5)	0.0%(0)	26.1%(6)
Sample Size	**6**	**11**	**7**	**23**

* District differences are NOT statistically significant. The significance rate are: for Ampara and Batticaloa (sig. = 0.370), Trincomalee and Batticaloa (sig. = 0.273), Ampara and Trincomalee (sig. = 0.637).

Unemployment among Muslim men is highest in Batticaloa. Alcoholism[5] is another factor that makes women take over the responsibility for decision-making in the household. To some extent matrilineal practices that give women autonomy within their households are likely to promote female-headship in such situations. There are many illustrations in the case studies, where an adult son's presence did not preclude women from identifying themselves as household heads.[6] But this need not translate to ease of access to appropriate economic resources, given the socio-cultural restrictions on women's mobility. In this context, it is important and necessary to unravel the extent to which female-heads have the ability to access resources. It is difficult to expose the problems female-heads have in accessing resources through mere tabulation of data, especially where sample size are so small that any sub-division results in very small cell sizes. Substantiating this also requires listening to the narratives of female-heads, their particular experiences as well as the multitude of income sources they depend on for augmenting the household budget. Many of these experiences will also be determined by the demographics of the household, and this is analysed in the next section.

Culture and Demography

Since the primary reason for Muslim women becoming household-heads is widowhood, this may point to an underlying cause being the significant difference in the average age of wives and husbands, a feature of other South Asian countries, evident in Sri Lanka as well. While my questionnaire did not discover age at marriage of husbands, it inadvertently obtained this information for married *de facto* female-heads through demographic data on households. Age-difference between married partners showed notable age gaps of 7-10 years. Where the marital age of female-heads is very young (13-17) assuming a wide age gap between partners is not implausible. The age structure of female-heads at marriage (Table D) shows the relevant patterns. In all three districts between 22.3%-35.3% of female-heads were married at 11-15 years, with another 50.0%-65.4% female-heads marrying at 16-20 years.

Table D: Age groups of women at marriage

	Ampara	Batticaloa	Trincomalee	All Districts
Age: < 16 years	35.3%(12)	22.4%(11)	23.3%(7)	26.6%(30)
Age: 16-20 years	50.0%(17)	65.4%(32)	50.0%(15)	56.6%(64)
Age: 21-25 years	14.7%(5)	10.2%(5)	16.7%(5)	13.2%(15)
Age: > 26 years	0.0%(0)	2.0%(1)	10.0%(3)	3.6%(4)
Sample Size	**34**	**49**	**30**	**113**

Since nearly 75.0% of the sample were married between 11-20 years of age, there is a greater probability of them becoming widowed at an earlier stage of their lifecycle. The rationale for marriage at tender ages is usually expressed as: "*This is usually the norm in our community. And although legally marriage is not allowed until a girl reaches puberty, usually our male kin work together with registrars so that they put a false age in the marriage certificate.*"[7] There were yet other female-heads, who mentioned that their families were poverty-stricken and "*if the man's family was not interested in a dowry then such a man was considered a* ***god-send*** *since this took a heavy burden off our families.*" Interestingly,

many female-heads were fairly well aware of the legal stipulations against child marriage, but revelations of their personal experiences show how male kin connive with public authorities (usually men) to overlook legislation protecting women. So the issue here remains one where protecting "customs" is considered more important than protecting the interests of women. Such practices not only ignore women's well-being but they also spill over to their household structures with very particular implications. For female-heads, it implies assuming headship at young ages since the financial support from traditional kin structures is lacking. Table E below shows more detailed information on the age structures of marriage for female-headship, and it does not paint a pretty picture.

Table E: Age structure for women assuming headship

	Ampara	Batticaloa	Trincomalee	All Districts
< 20 year age group	0.0%(0)	0.0%(0)	4.2%(1)	1.1%(1)
21–25 year age group	10.7%(3)	14.7%(6)	8.3%(2)	11.8%(11)
26–30 year age group	14.3%(4)	17.1%(7)	12.5%(3)	15.1%(14)
31–35 year age group	14.3%(4)	31.6%(13)	29.2%(7)	25.8%(24)
36–40 year age group	42.8%(12)	17.1%(7)	16.6%(4)	24.7%(23)
41–45 year age group	3.6%(1)	14.6%(6)	20.8%(5)	12.9%(12)
46–50 year age group	10.7%(3)	2.4%(1)	4.2%(1)	5.4%(5)
> 50 year age group	3.7%(1)	2.5%(1)	4.2%(1)	3.2%(3)
Sample Size	**28**	**41**	**24**	**93**

Women's age at assuming headship is usually linked to widowhood in both South Asia and other regions (Youssef and Hetler 1984:30-34, Islam 1991:21-3, Visaria and Visaria 1985:56-7), with headship peaking around 35-44 years. A sizable fraction of them belong to the 40-49-year age group, with it rising for the 50+ age group (Youssef and Hetler 1984). But in my data larger proportions of female-headed households are found in the younger age groups, though this varies somewhat across the regions. While in Sri Lanka a large proportion of female-headship in the Muslim community is the result of widowhood, their spouses have not died of natural causes. The role of the conflict has been to create younger

female-heads, even if they are hidden in the traditional category of widowhood. The average age of women assuming headship in all three districts hovers around 34-36 years, which can be attributed to both the young age of marriage and/or the conflict thrusting them into female-headship at a young age.[8] With female-headship occurring at a younger age, how do these women bear the economic responsibility for their households, given the cultural restrictions on mobility in the public sphere? With deteriorating economic conditions and eroding financial support from kin, female-heads have the options of either risking poverty or breaking norms regarding their mobility. The livelihoods they choose will reflect this dilemma and their attempts to obtain a living without violating cultural norms in too flagrant a manner. What patterns are found in the livelihoods sought?

Livelihood Strategies and Welfare Levels

For female-heads daily survival is critical, and this depends upon the possibilities for income generation and sources of employment. While meeting basic economic needs is a primary concern, the cultural context within which economic decisions are made also remains vital. Restrictions placed on women's mobility and cultural space are unlikely to make things easy in their ability to access economic resources. While material circumstances keep changing, there is no guarantee that the cultural milieu reflects social transformations. The cultural rhetoric may not acknowledge shifting material and social circumstances, and the discrepancies between reality and ideal norms. Islamic cultural patterns require protecting and safeguarding the interests of women kin members, and at the level of the household this gets translated into supportive kin structures. In eastern Sri Lanka, the existence of matrilineal structures must augur well for Muslim female-heads. Accessing economic resources and earning an income remains a fundamental concern of female headed-households. To analyse the economic well-being levels of Muslim female-heads, firstly the income patterns of their households for Ampara, Batticaloa and Trincomalee are presented. Next, sources of income, occupation patterns, household size, and reliance on children for income

of Muslim female-headed households will be discussed to obtain a broad picture of their economic support base.

Table F: Income levels and patterns*

	Ampara	Batticaloa	Trincomalee	All Districts
Mean Income	Rs. 2,916.18	Rs. 1,825.51	Rs. 2,362.50	Rs. 2,592.81
Minimum Income	Rs. 750.00	Rs. 500.00	Rs. 855.00	Rs. 500.00
Maximum income	Rs. 10,850.00	Rs. 5,000.00	Rs. 14,000.00	Rs. 14,000.00
Sample Size	**34**	**49**	**30**	**113**

Evidence from income patterns reinforces the earlier observations of the different levels of economic development in the Ampara, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee districts. Further, the intensity of the ethnic conflict translates into economic insecurity

Income groups (in Rs.)	Ampara	Batticaloa	Trincomalee	All Districts
500.00 – 1,000.00	14.7%(5)	32.7%(16)	16.7%(5)	23.2%(26)
1,100.00 – 2,000.00	35.3%(12)	36.7%(18)	30.0%(9)	34.6%(39)
2,100.00 – 3,000.00	20.6%(7)	24.5%(12)	16.6%(5)	21.3%(24)
3,100.00 – 4,000.00	5.9%(2)	4.1%(2)	6.7%(2)	5.3%(6)
4,100.00 – 5,000.00	8.8%(3)	2.0%(1)	6.7%(2)	7.1%(7)
5,100.00 – 6,000.00	8.8%(3)	0.0%(0)	10.0%(3)	3.1%(5)
6,100.00 >	5.9%(2)	0.0%(0)	13.3%(4)	5.4%(6)

* Regional differences are statistically significant for mean income (sig. = 0.002)

for these families, with Batticaloa emerging as the poorest region. Batticaloa is the least developed of the districts and is characterised by the lowest income levels. It is also where the armed conflict has been worst and this too must have affected the poverty of the female-heads. In contrast, Ampara has economic growth and here the conflict is sporadic; consequently, female-heads here have higher income trends and the highest mean income for all three districts. Ampara is the only

district that has an average monthly income level above the officially designated poverty line of Rs. 2,500.00 in Sri Lanka, with income levels of female-heads in Batticaloa been well below figures for other female-heads in Sri Lanka.[9]

The average size of female-headed households also varies across the regions, with household sizes mirroring the conflict and economic conditions in each district, ranging from 4.44 in Ampara to 3.59 in Trincomalee to 2.81 in Batticaloa. Conceivably, poor political, social and economic conditions in Batticaloa could be driving children away from female-headed households to other districts, where there is economic, social and political stability – relatively, speaking of course! Computing average per capita income for the three districts gives figures – at Rs. 656.79 in Ampara, Rs. 649.64 in Batticaloa, and Rs. 658.07 in Trincomalee – below the national average reference poverty line of Rs. 755.05 (Aturopane et al 1997).

Trapped at these levels of poverty, how do Muslim female-headed households survive? I hypothesise that a greater proportion of Muslim female-heads will be relegated to the informal sector, where economic insecurity and vulnerability is greatest but where seeking a livelihood is compatible with patriarchal religious and cultural norms. Economic insecurity may also imply many other things to Muslim female-heads in Batticaloa, ranging from the reduced likelihood of receiving financial support from kin to their willingness to press the boundaries of their cultural space. Also, where economic deprivation is greater do kin structures themselves get transformed? Decoding the gaps in kin structures will help show that kinship is not a fixed property; this is suggested by variations in household size where these are all female-headed Muslim households with roughly similar age distributions. We also need to evaluate the economic and cultural factors that help prop up such institutions.[10]

Regardless of cultural prescriptions, most Muslim female-heads count themselves as providing the main source of economic support

towards the household, with 55.1% and 66.7% of female-heads in Batticaloa and Trincomalee, respectively, identifying themselves as the main economic providers. The exception was in Ampara, with only 36.2% of female-heads perceiving their role as that of chief breadwinner. Differences in the extent to which families in the three districts rely on these female-heads will be echoed in the extent to which they rely on children's own contributions, as subsequently the restrictions placed on women's mobility and limited cultural space will necessarily shape the occupations they choose. So what patterns do the responses of Muslim female-heads show? Table G below provides occupational data for female-heads. Significant proportions of female-heads are in home-based/ self-employment work. Wage and agricultural labour also remain common occupational choices, with a significant number (26.5%) of female-heads in Ampara noting that they do not work.

Table G: Occupation patterns of female-heads*

Occupations	Ampara	Batticaloa	Trincomalee	All Districts
Service/Clerical/				
Government worker	*2.9%(2)*	*2.0%(1)*	*3.3%(1)*	*3.4%(4)*
Wage laborer	23.5%(8)	32.7%(16)	39.9%(11)	31.0%(35)
Domestic worker	0.0%(0)	24.5%(12)	10.0%(3)	13.3%(15)
Agricultural labourer	5.9%(2)	2.0%(1)	0.0%(0)	2.7%(3)
Animal Husbandry	0.0%(0)	0.0%(0)	0.0%(0)	0.0%(0)
Small-scale farmer/				
Home gardening	0.0%(0)	0.0%(0)	0.0%(0)	0.0%(0)
Home-Based worker	41.2%(14)	38.8%(19)	46.8%(15)	41.6%(48)
Not employed	26.5%(9)	0.0%(0)	0.0%(0)	8.0%(9)
Sample Size	**34**	**49**	**30**	**113**

* District differences ARE statistically significant for Ampara and Batticaloa (sig. = 0.000) and Ampara and Trincomalee (sig. = 0.027) but not Batticaloa and Trincomalee (sig. = 0.615).

Depending on Children and Kin

Despite female-heads' awareness of the need to educate their children, they rely on them to contribute to the household income. Children do play an important role, even though this may imply disrupting their education – especially when economic circumstances are dire. Table H show female-heads' reliance on children for the main source of economic support as 40.2%, 40.8%, and 20.0%, with economic support from kin relatives accounting for a mere 23.5%, 4.1%, and 13.3%, in Ampara, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee, respectively. An interesting point to note is that in Batticaloa, the most impoverished district, economic support from kin is lowest – a mere 4.1% of female-heads getting such support – with children providing the highest incidence of economic support.[11] Obviously, severe economic pressures added to the gravity of clashes in Batticaloa makes the economic security of female-heads more fragile. Thus the statistics collected for Muslim female-heads point to the dynamics between material realities and social structures, where economic deprivation and political instability leads to deterioration in kin support.

Table H: Gender make-up and Sources of support

Primary Sources of Support	Ampara	Batticaloa	Trincomalee	All Districts
Children	*40.2%(13)*	*40.8%(20)*	*20.0%(6)*	*4.5%(39)*
Kin	23.5%(9)	4.1%(2)	13.3%(4)	3.3%(15)
Female-heads' own income	36.3%(12)	55.1%(27)	66.7%(20)	2.2%(59)
Sample Size	**34**	**49**	**30**	**113**
Gender of children (primary & secondary earners)				
Boys	*63.15%(12)*	*68.0%(17)*	*60.8%(14)*	*4.2%(43)*
Girls	31.5%(6)	28.0%(7)	34.8%(8)	1.3%(21)
Both	5.35%(1)	4.0%(1)	4.4%(1)	4.5%(3)
Sample Size	**19**	**25**	**23**	**67**

Children's economic support towards the household plays a leading role in household welfare, but looking into gender dimensions of this

economic support contradicts the conventional views that it depends only on sons. It is true that, of labouring children, sons do play the most important role in supporting their households – with 63.15%, 68.0% and 60.8% of sons in Ampara, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee, respectively, supporting their households economically. But, a sizable number of daughters, however, do the same, the figures being 31.5%, 28.0% and 34.8% for the three districts, respectively – and this, of course, excludes domestic chores performed by daughters!

Even with Muslim female-heads relying upon a broad base for economic security, their income levels remain low and economic vulnerability is very real. This overview also shows that female-heads in Batticaloa face the greatest level of economic security. Economic conditions as well as the intensity of the conflict makes their situation doubly precarious. But to treat the emergence of female-headed households as a mere consequence of the conflict is to ignore the fundamental socio-economic processes leading to social transformation in the region.

Conclusion: Female-Headship – Social Transformations or Outcomes of the Conflict?

Through a presentation of quantitative evidence gathered through a survey carried out in eastern Sri Lanka, this paper explored the various ways in which women were pushed to become heads of households. The evidence seems to indicate that the armed conflict in eastern Sri Lanka is certainly an important factor in thrusting women into assuming headship among Muslims. Equally, however, 'non-conflict' factors such economic pressures and social institutions factor into the process. Social tension and conflict coupled together with material deprivation and poverty usually place stress on 'oppressive' social institutions that increase the pressure on vulnerable groups – particularly women from socially excluded and materially deprived social groups. This highlights the numerous ways in which conflicts bear upon different communities and social groups,

and the need for a nuance analysis of the processes at play. The importance of uncovering the dynamics between the conflict *per se* and other institutional factors is that they lead to transformations in household structures, and that the latter may persist even in the absence of conflict. So where there is evidence to demonstrate that household structures are changing then there remains a case to be made for development practitioners, social and economic policy-makers to be cognisant of changing household structures as giving rise to female-headed household. And in this respect to move beyond the patriarchal household in basing development policies, projects, and practices.

End Notes

1 I realize that it may be difficult to neatly discern between conflict and non-conflict factors, because conflicts may be catalysts for various social changes and transformations. While this is the case, it is equally important to acknowledge the social changes, structural transformations and economic pressures that are occurring in Sri Lanka – which is likely to impact upon those living in conflict-affected areas, such as eastern Sri Lanka, of the country.

2 Take for example, the leading study done on female-headship in Sri Lanka, excluding the North and East, for the World Bank (Aturopane, Rodrigo and Perera 1997). Because this study relies primarily on quantitative data and does not take into consideration previous micro-level studies done on the theme, rich in narratives and qualitative information (Weerasinghe 1987, Perera 1991), ungraciously goes onto state that "the marital bond is both popular and relatively stable" (Aturopane et al. 1997:11). Thus reinforcing common misperceptions of the relative stability of patriarchal households in Sri Lanka – not to mention ignoring or dismissing the finding of their own study that 40.0% of married women assume headship! [This limitations of the World Bank study is discussed in greater detail in Ruwanpura 2001:25-27]

3 I deliberately keep this section of the paper short. A detailed discussion of the motivations for focusing on eastern Sri Lanka, the methods employed and the need for reflective research when doing fieldwork is done in greater detail in previous work (Ruwanpura 2001, Ruwanpura 2003, Ruwanpura and Humphries 2004 f*orthcoming*

4 A primary reason for men to honor their marriages under matrilineal systems is that they usually do not own property, since their parents inheritance is passed to their sisters, and their bachelor earnings may have been used towards dowries for their sisters (McGilvray 1989:209). While in principle matrilineal systems are supposed to lead to a greater degree of marital stability, with in-built mechanisms for men to stay married, changing circumstances, ranging from the difference between ownership and control to ethno-nationalist thinking, may compel women to stay married.

5 This is another way in which reality is out of step with the ideological premise of Islam, one which does not get recognition either by development planners and/or ethno-nationalists (my thanks to Dr. Jane Humphries for pointing this out to me).

6 While many women identified themselves as female-heads, where adult sons were present decision-making within the household was not the sole prerogative of the female-head. Decision-making was a shared task in such households, though there is no way of knowing of the influence of these "budding patriarchs" in shaping decisions one way, and not another!

7 The statement made by this female-head reflects the incongruities as well as the misconceptions held on marriage laws among Muslims. The General Law, along with the Kandyan, Thesawalami and Muslim Law, governs marriage laws in Sri Lanka. This positions Muslim women and girls in a particularly odd situation, where the family laws applicable to them on marriage age are different from those applicable to Sinhala and Tamil women/girls (Kodikara 1999:18). Young brides' consent is required if they have reached puberty and those girls given in marriage before puberty have the right to accept or reject their marriage upon reaching puberty. Yet, there are many loopholes in Muslim law that run contrary to the interest of women and girls – namely, the bride is not expected to take part in the *nikah* (marriage) ceremony and there is no provision for her to sign the marriage registrar (*ibid*:11-2). Consequently, girls can be given in marriage without their consent. Moreover, in the absence of proof that girls have attained puberty their minority terminates at 15 years, and so child marriages get solemnized, with courts showing unwillingness to "interfere" with customary religious practices (*ibid*:17-8). Kodikara also goes on to note some of the negative outcomes for women because of young marriage ages – especially the associated health risks during pregnancy, and for education, and income generation (1999:30-5). [My thanks to Chulani Kodikara for clarifying the legal issues on the status of Muslim women in Sri Lanka, and making me aware of the feminist legal issues involved on the topic].

In my study then, it is no surprise that 26.6% of female-heads in my sample were married between the ages of 10-15 years. And it should be even less of a revelation then that they assume headship owing towidowhood through natural causes, because the marriage age of their spouses is likely to be much older. Their dying through natural causes is an expected result in such a scenario (Table B)

8 Similar patterns of younger female-heads holds true across all three ethnic groups (Ruwanpura 2001), which makes it necessary to examine this closely for its particular ramifications on households welfare levels.

9 In addition it should be noted that the national average monthly income for female-heads is from labor earnings only (Aturopane et al 1997). For female-heads in this study the figure is the total income from all sources – including remittances and children's and state contributions.

10 Uncovering the economic "roots" of cultural institutions is not the purpose of this project. It is rather to evaluate the cultural and economic dynamics in order to show their over-determined nature. For example, some female-heads noted the need to push and question cultural restrictions in the face of economic adversity, while for others adhering to "respectable" standards (read: cultural norms) was as important as meeting their economic needs. Ruwanpura (2001) carries a detailed discussion of these issues, where anecdotal evidence helps uncover them (2001:88-106).

11 This does not exclude female-heads from contributing to their household incomes, but rather points to the main source of support coming from children and/or kin with female-heads supplementing this income.

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A Literature of Resistance Autobiography and fiction of Bama a Tamil Dalit Woman

Lakshmi Holmström

In the past decade, a number of literary works have appeared in Tamil, which critics and writers have described as an emerging Dalit Literature. Bama's autobiography and fiction have a unique place in this literature as the writings of a woman and a Roman Catholic as well as a Dalit, from an ex-Untouchable community. This paper begins with a close study of her three main works: an autobiography, Karukku (Blades), 1992; a novel, Sangati (Happenings), 1994; and a collection of short stories, Kisumbukaaran (Prankster), 1996.

Anti-caste protest literature in Tamil has its roots in the nineteenth century, and was influenced by the nation-wide Progressive Writers' movement on the one hand, and a specifically Tamil-Nadu-centred Dravida movement on the other. The adoption of the term 'Dalit' in recent years by a group of Tamil writers and critics links them explicitly to the 1992 manifesto of the Marathi Dalit Panthers, to its nation-wide reference and its broad definition of 'Dalit' to include all oppressed groups.

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Tamil Dalit writing of recent years is distinguished by its aim of raising awareness of the Dalit experience, and therefore by its content; by its use of speech-styles which have thus far been considered inappropriate to literature; and by its reference to folk and oral traditions, or 'Dalit culture'. Bama brings to Tamil Dalit writing a self-reflective and critical woman-centred perspective. She captures a moment of paradox: she seeks an identity, but also a change which would end that identity.

'Bama' is the pen name of a Tamil Dalit woman. She comes from an ex Untouchable community, which converted to Roman Catholicism. She has published four main works, all in Tamil: an autobiography, *Karukku* (Blades), 1992; a novel, *Sangati* (Happenings), 1994; a collection of short stories, *Kisumubukaaran* (Prankster), 1996; and another novel, *Vanmam* (Malice), 2002. I begin this paper with a discussion of her first three works, tracing the progression of themes through them. In the second half of the paper, I explore the context of these works, by considering some broad questions. Is there an identifiable Tamil Dalit writing? If so, what are its parameters? How is it different from other and earlier writing about poor and oppressed communities? The paper ends with a brief appraisal of Bama's contribution to this writing.

Bama: the texts

Both *Karukku* and *Sangati* draw on autobiographical material in order to create strikingly new literary forms; they tell real life stories of risks taken, and of challenge, choice and change. It may be important here to make a general comment on the place of autobiographies in the development of modern writing by women in India. Tharu and Lalita, in their monumental *Women writing in India*, vol 1 (Tharu & Lalita 1991), point to the number of autobiographies which appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, heralding the start of a modern genre of creative writing by women. They comment that many of these texts 'are a personal testimony of the new sense of worth these women experience as "individuals", whose specific lives were of interest and

importance' (p.160). There is a striking parallel here with the beginning of self-consciously styled Dalit writing in India, particularly in Marathi. However, although the Tamil Dalit ideologue Raj Gauthaman said 1995:97: 'Dalits, who have for so long been treated as commodities owned by others must needs shout out their selfhood, their "I", when they rise up', we have seen few such autobiographies in Tamil.

Tharu and Lalita also point to the tension in modern autobiographic writing, between the 'life scripts that cultures provide at particular junctures in their history ', and the details of individual life which both internalize and yet struggle against these blue prints. Such a tension, in fact, is the starting point for fictional writing; novels of quest and self discovery. However, the blue-prints for a Dalit woman and for a Christian Dalit woman are very different from those supposed by the upper-caste (mainly Brahman women) whom Tharu and Lalita anthologise.

An examination of precisely these very different blue-prints and the struggle against them is the basis of both *Karukku* and *Sangati.* In the case of *Karukku,* the self exploration as woman and as Dalit takes place within the most prescriptive of life scripts. Bama, framed within the tight parameters of caste, chose to add the tight prescriptions of religious life when she became a Catholic nun. Bama has said that the book grew out of an extreme sense of alienation after she left the convent, and was written in a series of outbursts, out of a driving need to rediscover and reclaim her pride in herself and her community. It is this quest for an integrated self as Dalit, Christian and woman, that shapes the book and its polemical stance.

It is by no means a conventional autobiography. 'Bama', as I pointed out earlier, is a pen name. It is sculpted out of her Tamil Catholic name, Bathima (from Fatima) creating a new self. Many Tamil authors, both men and women, use the convention of writing under a pseudonym. In this case, though, this convention adds to the work's strange paradox of reticence and familiarity. Many personal details which one might look for in an autobiography are left out. The protagonist is never named. The events of Bama's life are not arranged according to a simple, linear or

chronological order, as with most autobiographies, but rather, the same events are reflected upon in different ways, repeated from different perspectives, grouped under different themes, for example, Work, Games and Recreation, Education, Belief, etc.

The argument (or plot) of the book is to do with the narrator's gradual restatement of her belief, and, parallel to this, a socio political self-education that takes off from the revelatory moment when she first understands what untouchability means. It is this double perspective that enables her to understand the deep rift between Christian beliefs and practice. Bama's rereading and interpretation of the Christian Scriptures as an adult enables her to carve out a social vision, and a message of hope. She distinguishes between two kinds of Christian doctrine, one which insists on equality and justice, another which insists on obedience and submission. She realizes how the latter teaching has been manipulated in order to muzzle the oppressed:

They taught us only that God is loving, kind, that he forgives sinners, is patient, gentle, humble, obedient. Nobody insisted that God is just, righteous, is angered by injustices, opposes falsehood, and never countenances inequality. There is a great deal of difference between such a Jesus and the Jesus who is actually made known to us in our everyday ritual. The oppressed are not taught about him but rather, are taught in an empty and meaningless way about humility, obedience, patience and gentleness. (Bama 1992:85)

Bama joins a religious order in the stubborn hope that she will have a chance to serve the oppressed, to help to bring about a change, a better and more just future for them. What she realises is the impossibility of achieving this as a teaching nun. *Karukku* is the story of that conflict and its painful resolution.

The book ends with Bama's personal religious frustration, but also with a recognition of change, not in the practice of the church, but in the awareness among Dalits of the manner of their oppression:

> They have understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this. They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. They are filled with a new strength to reclaim that likeness which has been repressed, ruined and obliterated, and to begin to live with honour and respect and love of all humankind. To my mind, that alone is true devotion. (Bama 1992:89)

Clearly she understands that her own experience is part of a larger movement among Dalits. Yet, it is notable that she appears to come to this awareness of her own accord. The influence of her elder brother is acknowledged in the early part of the book. As a young child, she learns her first lessons about the social stigma of untouchability from him; it is he who urges her to study and make good. But he disappears after the first few chapters. The struggle to make sense of Christian belief and practice appears to be her own. (Although he is not named in the book, Bama's brother is the Dalit ideologue, Raj Gauthaman.) She does not, for example seem to have access to liberation theologians (as does Vidivelli, in a parallel autobiography, *Kalakkal,* 1994). She refers neither to Ambedkar (as she certainly does, a couple of year later, in *Sangati*) nor to Periyaar, who not only attacked the caste system, but whose remarkable speeches and writings against the oppression of women were published in 1942 under the title *Pen Yeen Adimaiaanaal?* (Why did woman become enslaved? reprinted, Periyaar 1987). Nor indeed does Bama in this book, as she does later in *Sangati,* make a connection between caste and gender oppressions. She does not refer to feminist literatures. In *Karukku,* Bama is concerned with the single issue of caste oppression within the Catholic church and its institutions, and presents her life as a process of lonely self discovery.

There is one set of stories in the book, of women who have worked hard all their lives, from the moment they are able to help with the care of younger siblings, or with chores about the house, or outside, gathering firewood, grass or dried dung. Women are presented as wage earners as much as men are, yet men often spend their earnings on themselves, on

drink and gambling; hence the financial burden of running the family is seen to fall to the women. The economic precariousness leads to a culture of violence, and this is a theme that threads through the book: the terrible violence and abuse of women by their fathers and husbands, and sometimes too by brothers; but also violent domestic quarrels which are carried on publicly, in the street, when women fight back. In spite of women's wage earning capacity, the power still rests with men; caste courts and churches are male-led, and rules for sexual behaviour very different for men and women. Over and above all this, Dalit women are vulnerable to sexual abuse by upper caste men.

The story of Mariamma exemplifies many of these themes. She is the cousin of the narrator, Fatima, i.e. the daughter of her aunt, who herself died, flogged to death by her husband, Samudrakanni. Mariamma grows up, looking after her two younger sisters, overworked, anaemic and not menstruating even at the age of fourteen until she is given medication at the free hospital. As soon as she is able, she works at a building site where she has a terrible accident that disables her for several months. When at last she recovers sufficiently, she starts to work in the fields on a daily hire basis. One day, on her way home from cutting grass, she rests by a well which is equipped with a pump set. Here she is grabbed by the landlord, Kumaraswami. Terrified, she escapes somehow, and runs home. Kumaraswami pre empts any complaint that she might make, by going to the caste headmen (naataamai) with the accusation that he saw Mariamma 'behaving indecently' with Manikkam, on his land. The headmen summon all the men of the community to a meeting that evening. Women are not allowed to speak or to intervene. Despite the denial of the young people, and the grumbling by the women present, Kumaraswami's story is given credence. Mariamma is fined Rs 200, and made to kneel and to plead forgiveness for her behaviour. Manikkam is fined Rs 100; no apology is required from him.

But set against these stories of hardship, there are others. These tell of rites of passage: a coming of age ceremony, a betrothal where gifts are made by the prospective groom to the bride, a group wedding of

five couples at church; also of possession and exorcism. And there are also everyday happenings: of women working together, preparing and eating food, celebrating and singing, bathing and swimming. In this way, a positive picture is built up too, of certain freedoms which Dalit women possess: no dowry is required of them, for example, and widows re marry as a matter of course. There is also a very strong sense of a Dalit woman's relationship to her body in terms of diet, health and safety, as well as sexuality.

Sangati deals with several generations of women: the older women belonging to the narrator's grandmother Velliamma Kizhavi's generation downward to the narrator's own, and the generation coming after her as she grows up. The conversations between the generations point to changing perspectives and aspirations as well as to gains and losses over the years. The more educated tend to move away, seeking different lives. With growing industries, child labour is recruited from the village. *Sangati* examines the differences between women, their different needs, the different ways in which they are subject to oppression, and their coping strategies. In the end it is Bama's admiration for the women of her community, from the little girl Maikkanni who supports her mother and her family by working in a match box factory, to the old woman Sammuga Kizhavi who finds ways of ridiculing the upper-caste landlord that shines through the book. And the ideals Bama admires and applauds in Dalit women are not the traditional Tamil 'feminine' ideals of accham (fear), naanam (shyness), madam (simplicity, innocence), payirppu (modesty), but rather, courage, fearlessness, independence and self-esteem.

Kisumbukaaran is a collection of ten stories, all written between 1993 and 1996; three of them published for the first time. In a departure from both *Karukku* and *Sangati*, Bama eschews the autobiographical mode in her short fiction, letting the stories and characters speak for themselves without the framing comment of the author. There is a greater confidence in fictionalizing; in the presentation of fictitious characters and their speech styles. Bama also develops further, an easy, vivid,

dramatic narrative style inspired by an oral story telling or performance model. Its reference points are not written texts.

It is significant that the title story of the collection is 'Kisumbukaaran', Prankster, calling attention to its main thrust. For, although the exploitation of the Dalits by wealthy landowning castes, either in the aandai adimai (landowner and bonded slave) relationship, or in its modern version of master/mistress and domestic servant, is a theme throughout the collection, there are only two or three are stories where Dalits are portrayed as suffering victims. On the contrary, most of the stories point to a number of positive features of Dalit culture, for example, a closeness to the external world, an understanding of animals, birds, insects, fish, snakes; and above all, a lively sense of humour, and a gift for lampooning authority figures. And this last becomes a fine tool of subversion in Dalit hands.

Two further points need to be made about *Kisumbukaaran.* First, in this collection, the women equally share the Dalit gift for kisumbu/ kindal/ pagadi. This is brought out particularly in the story 'Molagaapodi' where a group of labouring women led by the indomitable Pacchayamma play a game of continuing defiance against the landowner Gangamma, (a woman, unusually), finally outwitting the police who round them up and try to fine them Rs 10 each. Secondly, the pagadi is often directed at other Dalits too. The violence by men towards women within Dalit communities, which was very strongly critiqued in *Sangati*, is also the theme of one of the stories here, 'Ponnuthaayi', first published in the Tamil *India Today*'s special annual issue on women's writing in 1996.

The nature of Dalit humour or pagadi as subversion is best brought out in one of the finest stories in the collection, 'Annaachchi'. The story plays on the terms of respect that Dalits are expected to use towards their elders and masters, and terms of address which are forbidden them. Ammasi, the protagonist, is generally considered too big for his boots; he turns up to help water the fields in spotless white veshti and an immaculately ironed shirt. What is more, he addresses his employer as

'annaachchi', elder brother, deliberately avoiding the term 'ayya'. 'Ayya' contains an ambiguity, it is equally 'father' and 'master', where the former 'aandai' or 'yejamaan' are clearly feudal terms of submission and respect. 'Annaachchi', meaning elder brother is also a term of respect towards an older man, but of equal social status. Ammaasi's employer Jayashankar Naicker is furious at being addressed as annaachchi, he considers that Ammaasi is being impertinent, claiming kin, and promptly reports him to the caste naataamai. The older and younger naattaamai summon Ammaasi to a kind of trial. No Paraiya uses a term of kinship when addressing a Naicker, he is told; he must admit his wrong and apologise. Not at all, says Ammaasi in reply, I did not claim kinship; for example, I did not address him as father in law, I used an ordinary term of respect as between a younger and an older man. Besides, he says, did you not castigate me just the other day for being excessively respectful towards scavenger Irulappan the other day, when I called him annaachchi? The point about equality of regard and human respect is made very neatly and wittily, challenging the perspectives of both landowners and service-providers. Ammasi's complete confidence in his own self worth is notable; it makes a striking contrast with the anguish of the young Bama portrayed in *Karukku* when she first becomes aware of untouchability. Such a contrast also marks the distance that Bama the writer has travelled.

From Puurvatamizhar to Dalit: the context

Recent studies in modern Tamil history and literature have teased out different strands of the struggle against caste hierarchy and caste consciousness which have been seen in Tamil-Nadu since the second half of the nineteenth century, and the writings that have been associated with such a struggle. For example, V. Geetha and S. Rajadurai (1993) bring out the existence of 'a distinct dalit sensibility' which, they claim, 'predates (other and better known) political expressions of non Brahminism' of this time. They refer to the highly significant work of Ayotidas Panditar, which appeared well before the formation of the Justice Party, or the Self Respect movement. Ayotidas Panditar was from the

Paraiya community; well before Ambedkar he became a Buddhist, and founded the Chakya Buddhist Sangam in 1898. But before this, in 1881 he founded the Dravida Mahajana, whose charter of demands began by asking that the depressed classes (by whom he means chiefly the Paraiyas) should henceforth be called puurvatamizhar, the ancient Tamils. Ayotidas's main thesis in the tract *Indirar Desa Charitram* (A History of the country of Indira, 1912) was that the present day Paraiyar were the original inhabitants of Tamil Nadu; that their religion was the egalitarian, compassionate and rational creed of the Buddha; and that they had been put down and viciously denigrated by the conquering Aryans. It was important – even necessary – for Ayotidas to construct a history and a glorious past that explained the current down trodden condition of the Paraiyas, justified them, and condemned Hinduism at the same time. Ayotidas's reconstruction of the past is very different from modern Dalit affirmation and pride in a present community. But, all the same, his message of social emancipation, rationalism and anti-Brahminism chimes in with the emergence of a new sense of a Tamil Dravidian identity. And the trajectory from 'puurvatamizhar' to 'Dalit' suggests at least some aspects of the debates which have informed a developing modern Dalit literature in Tamil, and have led to such work as Bama's.

Ayotidas's writing is a world away from the novels which appeared at the turn of the century, *Prataaba Mudaliar Charitram* (Vedanayagam Pillai 1897), *Kamalambaal Charitram* (Rajam Iyer 1896) and *Padmaavati Charitram* (Madhavaiah 1898), all of them family histories of the upper castes) which quickly became the classics of modern Tamil. Later still, mainstream modern writing in Tamil, particularly short fiction from the 1930s bears the stamp of the Manikkodi writers, named after the seminal journal of their time. The Manikkodi writers very deliberately set out to create a new literature, a renaissance. (The term they used is marumalarchi, re-flowering, a term coined by V.V. S. Aiyar, who has the distinction of being the first short story writer of repute, in Tamil) They looked to European models, chiefly French and Russian, and are often linked with a rising urban middle class. Although *Manikkodi* began in a

spirit of national fervour, with a distinct namaskaram towards the nationalist poet, Subramania Bharati, under the editorship of B.S. Ramaiah, its agenda soon became a literary rather than a social or political one. All the famous Manikkodi writers were Brahmins except for 'Pudumaipittan' (or Cho. Vridachalam 1906 1948), and Pudumaipittan alone among them had an acute sensitivity to social and political change, which he treats with a cool, ironic gaze in his short stories. He critiques certain aspects of contemporary society: the soullessness and mechanization which accompany urban development, and the poverty and indifference towards the poor which is characteristic of modern Madras. Both themes are apparent in his story, 'Mahamasanam' ('The great cremation-ground': Pudumaipittan 1973). His satire is biting, but without any particular ideological thrust. In 'Pudu Nandan' ('A new Nandan', also in Pudumaipittan 1973), for example, the misplaced idealism of Gandhi's Harijan uplift movement, and the so called radicalism of the Self-Respecters are equally lampooned, as elsewhere he lampoons both the ruling British, and the pro British Justice Party, as well as the opposing Indian National Congress. Pudumaipittan, that is, does not identify with any particular ideology or political party. However, he does set the stage and provide certain literary tools – a fine observation of contemporary society, irony and satire, and the ability to use a wide range of regional dialects – for the socially committed, left wing 'Progressive Writers' of the 40s and 50s.

The Progressive Writers movement (murpooku iyakkam) looked to Indian and national models, Premchand's *Godaan* (in Hindi) being the one work most frequently cited. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and *Coolie* (both written in English) and Sivasankaran Pillai's *Thotiyude makan* (in Malayalam) reflect the mood and ethos of the time. In Tamil, Jeyakantan and Raghunadan are usually cited as part of this national literary movement, particularly Raghunadan's *Panjum Pasiyum* (Cotton and Famine). *Panjum Pasiyum* (1953) is a novel about the cotton trade in Tamil Nadu, its economic threat to the livelihood of the weavers, and their need for trade union activity. The novel certainly shares with other

works of the Progressive movement, a focus on the lives of the oppressed, a vocabulary of anger and compassion, and an agenda for change through the solidarity and unionization of workers. The Progressive writers, though, approach the issues of poverty and discrimination through an analysis of class rather than caste, whereas Dalit writing comes to them the other way around, or rather attempts to tease out the complex relationship between caste and class in disempowering the marginalized. The Progressive writers too were mainly middle class and upper caste writers; their perspective is from that of the empathizing spectator; often they view their protagonist as victims leading lives of unrelieved horror. *Thotiyude makan* is a prime example of this. Dalits on the other hand, were to present the lives of their protagonist not only with anger and pain, but also with humour, and with the insider's understanding of the minutiae informing everyday life.

Now, parallel to the esoteric and inward turning work of the Manikkodi writers, there also developed the anti Brahman, Tamil Nadu centred, often populist writing of the Dravida Iyakkam, the Dravidian movement. This too has several strands: particularly the purist and Saivite strand of Maraimalai Adigal, the rational and anti caste Self Respect movement of E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (Periyaar), and later still, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam which broke away from the anti caste, anti religious stance of Periyaar, but all the same, (theoretically at least) insisted upon a non Sanskritized, 'pure' Tamil as well as a moral and ethical basis whose framework comes from Tamil classical texts such as Tirukkural.

Periyaar (1878 – 1973) was, until recently, the great role model for Tamil Dalit ideologues, though he himself was a Naicker, from a landowning caste. His anticaste speeches of the 1920s and 30s are still quoted today as are his amazingly progressive writings about women, collected in *Pen Yeen Admaiaanaal.* He is admired for his uncompromising stand:

> So long as we address each other by caste names, we will always be saddled with a sense of difference between those who are above and those who are below. In order to end this sense of hierarchy, we must rid ourselves of caste names and of caste consciousness.... If in our struggle to end caste hierarchy, we lose the religion that sanctions it, then so be it. We don't need such a religion. (From an address given in Tiruchi, 1929, quoted in Ravikumar 1996:308).

Periyaar spoke about all oppressed castes and classes together as taazhtappattor, those who have been put down or humiliated. The term was made popular by the poet of the Self Respect movement, Bharatidasan, in his poem, 'Taazhtappattor sammattuva paattu', song of equality of the oppressed. Taazhtappattor, or odukkappattor are terms which are still in use today; the use of 'Dalit' in their place is significant one.

With the rise of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Periyaar lost much of his following. And in the 50s Mu Varadarajan's novels best reflect the mood of the mid century Dravida Movement, Mu Va himself both product and promoter of the Dravida ethos of his time. His novels are largely set in Madras and its environs; his characters from a lower to middle caste and class background; his themes are to do with social and moral reform. In fact there is an overall moralizing tone and gravitas about them, and their reference points are a re reading of Sangam poetry, Silappadikaram, and above all, Tirukkural.

The socially committed realistic writing of the Progressive writers on the one hand, and the populist, Tamil identity seeking Dravida literature on the other, paved the way for a variety of novels which began to appear from the late sixties onwards, which told the stories of individuals and communities, and at last, by some writers who were themselves from these communities. Poomani (*Piragu* [Later], 1978, and several collections of short stories) is outstanding amongst these. Although Poomani does not describe himself as a 'Dalit' writer, even the most stringent of Dalit critics such as A. Marx and Raj Gauthaman find his work inspirational.

Poomani shares with later, self styled Dalit writers a deep understanding of caste oppression 'from within', particularly the experience of leather workers (as in *Piragu*); of changing life styles which make the older crafts and services redundant, and therefore scatter the old communities ('Norungal' [Fragments], the title story in Poomani, 1990: 84-107) ; of unemployment and the humiliation of hiring oneself out as a coolie ('Elam' [Auction], ibid: 66-76); and of police brutality towards the poor ('Naakku' [Tongue], ibid: 129-144). Poomani also initiates a break through in his use of the speech style of his protagonists (in this case, of Dalits, and therefore totally different from accepted middle-class speech styles) as the language of narration, leading the way in what was to become an important approach to language in Dalit writing.

The Sri Lankan, K. Daniel (1927-1986) is the other writer who is hailed as a forerunner of Dalit writing. Daniel's work is not only about poor and oppressed communities such as fisher folk, but also about other marginalized peoples such as the disabled, or prostitutes and pimps. Having grown up in a Christian community, he also writes about power structures and prejudice within the Church (*Sirukkadaigal*, 'Short stories', 1995b, originally 1963 and 1974; *Adimaigal,* 'Slaves', 1995a, originally 1983; *Poraligal Kaartirukindranar*, 'The warriors are waiting, 1995, originally 1975). Unlike Poomani, he makes his literary aims explicit, stating that the goals of a writer should be 'to understand the joys and sorrows of the crore upon crore who have been cast outside the boundaries of propriety and tradition; to realize fully the human emotions that flash and disappear like lightning does in the battlefield of their lives; and at the same time, to rip away the mask of the leisured classes who have thrust them into such a state.' (from the introduction to *Sirukkadaigal*, 1963, reprinted by Vilimbu Trust, Kovai, 1995.) It is this clearly stated purpose by Daniel, and his authorial stance of identification with the marginalized that declare him so completely the forerunner of Dalit writing, although he does not use the term 'Dalit' to identify his work, nor was he himself from a 'scheduled caste'.

Although the word 'Dalit' (oppressed) was first used by Ambedkar in preference to his own earlier term, 'Scheduled castes', it only gained

common currency following what might be called the second wave of the Marathi Dalit movement, that is to say, with the founding of the Dalit Panthers in 1972. In Tamil Nadu, the term had been used intermittently along with taazhtappattor during the 80s, but it is only, in the 1990s, that it has been used widely, not only by Tamil Dalit writers and ideologues in order to identify themselves, but also by mainstream critics. Unjairajan (1996:41), editor of *Manusanga* claims that it was in his journal, in 1990, that certain works were given prominence as 'Dalit Literature', and that thenceforth the concept became accepted and widely used. ('Arangai vittu ambalam vandadu' – left the small stage or battlefront and arrived at a public forum). In 1993, the year before the Ambedkar centenary, a festival of Dalit arts was held in Pondicherry at which several critical papers were read, including Raj Gauthaman's two seminal contributions, later published together as *Dalit Panpaadu*. In November 1994 *Nirapirikai* produced a special Dalit issue, with translations from Marathi and Black American poets as well as original work by Tamil Dalits, and articles by critics such as A. Marx and Ravi Kumar. Thus the critical writing and comment has gone side by side with new writing by self styled Dalit writers such as Idayavendan, Abhimani, Unjairajan, Vidivelli, Marku, Bama, etc. It is equally striking that within a few years, mainstream critics began to acknowledge this writing as radically new and different. For example, N.S. Jagannathan (1994) gives it serious consideration in his overview of Tamil Literature in Sahitya Akademi's *Indian Literature*. (Venkat Swaminathan, a Brahman, was invited to edit the Sept.-Oct. 1999 number of the same journal, focusing on Dalit writing — a tactless move, much resented by Dalit writers.)

The word 'Dalit' being from Marathi, and meaning 'oppressed' or 'ground down', is not without problems in Tamil Nadu, but it has been appropriated for particular reasons : it does away with reference to caste, and points to a different kind of nation-wide constituency; specifically it signals towards the militancy of the Dalit Panthers, to their broad definition of 'Dalit', and to their professed hope of solidarity with all oppressed groups ('Who are Dalits? All scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, neo Buddhists, labourers, landless and destitute peasants, women, and all

those who have been exploited politically and economically and in the name of religion are Dalits.' From the 1972 Manifesto of the Dalit Panthers, quoted in Tamil in Omvedt 1994:3).

At the same time, Dalit ideologues such as Gauthaman and Unjairajan would claim for Tamils, not only Marathi and Kannada precedents, but also a particular Tamil history.

> During the past sixty years the force of Periyaar's rationalist thought, the spread of the Dravidian Movement's ideas, and the introduction of Marxist political and economic philosophy have provided a much more fruitful context in Tamil Nadu. Here, the Dalit uprising is not confined only to the expression of Dalit literature. On the contrary, Dalit literature came about as part and parcel of anti-caste struggles, agitation for reserved places in the interests of social justice, and political protests for economic equality. (Gauthaman 1995:96)

What is Dalit writing? Raj Gauthaman sees it as essentially subversive in character, bringing both content and forms which challenge received literary norms. First of all, in terms of content, it should set out to outrage, by choosing as subject matter, the life-styles of Dalits, who by definition, stand outside caste-proprieties, and by offering a totally different world view to Tamil readers. 'Dalit literature describes the world differently, from a Dalit perspective. Therefore it should outrage and even repel the guardians of caste and class. It should provoke them into asking if this is indeed literature'. (Gauthaman, 1993: 98)

Gauthaman puts his argument most forcefully in regard to the use of language by Dalits. He claims that it is the stated design of Dalit writing to disrupt received modern (upper caste) language proprieties, and to 'expose and discredit the existing language, its grammar, its refinements and its falsifying order as symbols of dominance.'(ibid) He adds, 'for it is according to these measures that the language of Dalits is marginalized as a vulgar and obscene language, the language of slums.' (ibid)

Here it is important to stress that traditionally and from earliest times, Tamil grammarians have distinguished between 'sen-Tamil' (the literary) and kodun-Tamil (the colloquial). In modern times, the gap between the spoken and the written has been bridged to some extent. Yet the standard set by Subramanya Bharati(1882-1921), normally considered the founder of modern Tamil prose, and by the writers of fiction of the 1930s, has been based on the spoken language of an educated middle-class, upper-caste elite. This still remains largely the literary norm, in spite of the populist agenda of journalists and speakers such as C.N. Annadurai, and the increasing importance given to local language forms, particularly in reported conversation, in recent Tamil fiction. Dalit writing makes a striking departure from this norm. It goes much further in its dialectal approach. It brings into Tamil literature subject matter hitherto considered inappropriate; it uses a language hitherto considered unprintable.

More recently, in his introduction to Dalit writing in the *India Today Annual* of 1995, Gauthaman puts his case in a less abrasive, more positive and universal manner. He begins with an analysis of the achievements of Dalit literature in recent years, and it is notable that Gauthaman's critique here is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Firstly, he says, Dalit literature has begun to bring about a change; to enable non Dalits to deconstruct a traditional mind set which made them perceive Dalits as lower than themselves; and instead to see Dalits as equals rather than pitiful victims; 'to awaken the Dalit who lies asleep within the conscience of all people of all castes.' Secondly, he says, it has put forward a new and subversive ethic which not only awakens the conscience of non-Dalits, but which also fills Dalits themselves with confidence and pride. Thus, it shares its aims with other marginalized and subaltern groups world wide; 'it is a Tamil and Indian reflection of the global literature of the oppressed whose politics must be an active one that fights for human rights, social justice and equality.'

Dalit literature is presented by these critics as a reflection in literary and linguistic terms of a 'politics of liberation'. But it is also presented as

a proud reflection of what the same critics such as Gauthaman, A. Marx, Ravi Kumar and Unjairajan have called 'Dalit culture'. Just as Gauthaman makes a forceful plea for reclaiming and reinforcing a special Dalit Tamil usage, the playwright and critic Gunasekaran (1996) makes a strong plea for reclaiming all Dalit art forms. He distinguishes between sevviyal (classical arts) and naattupuraiyal (folklore). He claims that naattupuraiyal ought properly to be divided into Dalit and non Dalit art forms. Dalit art forms, he goes on to say, do not depend on mainstream Hinduism, nor on the Sanskritic gods, the puranic stories, nor the Sanskrit epics. They depend rather on local gods and heroes; they are closely linked to the performers' mode of employment (tozhil), and production of goods (urpatti porul). The agenda he sets for Dalit writers is to reclaim and to develop these art forms, retaining sharply and without compromising to mainstream tastes, particular Dalit features of spectacle, mask, gesture and language. This concept of Dalit culture sets up an alternate classicism for Dalit writers, a different poetics based on oral traditions.

Who then are Dalit writers? Both Unjairajan (1996) and Raj Gauthaman (1995) answer this question broadly:

> Who has the right to write about Dalits? Of course, one who is born a Dalit has that birthright. But it is also possible for Dalits to become so attuned to upper class attitudes that they have lost their sense of themselves and may even write as enemies of Dalits. By the same token, it is possible for those who were not born as Dalits to write about Dalits if they truly perceive themselves as Dalit. (Gauthaman 1995:98).

Both Unjairajan and Gauthaman would include among such writers Imayam (*Koveru Kazhudaigal*, 1994), Marku (*Yaatirai*, 1993), the playwright Gunasekaran, the critic A. Marx and others who are not themselves from Dalit families. But it is also notable that such writers are all from what are known as Other Backward Castes.

Finally. Raj Gauthaman also stresses that there are no models for Dalit writing. Sequence, chronology, perceptions of time, form and

language must all be reconstructed in Dalit writing as it evolves. His primary examples of such reconstruction to date are Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati*.

Bama and Contemporary Tamil Dalit Writing

Bama is one of a very small group women writers from Tamil Nadu and elsewhere, who describe themselves as Dalit, and she holds a unique position among them. There are two other important Dalit women writing in Tamil, Vidivelli and Sivakami. Vidivelli has published one autobiography, *Kalakkal* (Turmoil, 1994), which has close parallels with *Karukku,* and was influenced by it. Vidivelli comes from a comparatively privileged, urban family with a history of Dalit leadership; she becomes a nun with considerable responsibility in her order before she chooses to leave the religious life and to take up developmental work among Dalits. What she has to say about caste and gender oppressions is very much within the framework of the Catholic Church in South India and its institutions. In this she is very different from Bama. Bama shares and participates in the day to day community life of the Paraiyas whom she describes whereas Vidivelli is distanced from such a group because of her middle-class and professional status. Hence Bama, unlike Vidivelli, can construct a Dalit-feminist perspective in wide-ranging terms, both within and outside her experience of Catholic institutions.

Sivakami is much better known than Vidivelli, and has published three novels to date, *Pazhayana Kazhidalum* ('The passing of old things', 1989), *Aanandaayi* (1992), and *Pa Ka Aa Ku* (1997), as well as several short stories and articles. Sivakami is a sophisticated and sensitive writer. Her first novel begins with the rape of a Paraiya woman by an Udaiyaar landlord, and is a study of how caste and gender issues are intimately connected, and how these issues are used and manipulated by small-town politicians for their own ends. But Sivakami's anxieties about her critique of Dalit leaders is apparent in her third novel, which is in effect an extensive comment on the first, exploring the relationship between the 'real' characters and communities that inspired the novel, and how

and why they are altered by the imagination. She is torn between the responsibilities of the novelist and the responsibilities of the political self and in the end she downplays the gender struggle in the interests of the Dalit struggle as a whole. In comparison, Bama is more coherent in seeking out and developing a self-reflective and critical perspective that is both Dalit and woman-centred. She is not afraid to criticize women of other communities, or men of her own community.

Bama is uniquely placed in contributing both to the Dalit movement and to women's movement. The contributors to *Dalit Penniyam* (Dalit Feminism, eds. Anbukkarasi & Mohan Larbeer, 1997) – who include Bama, among others - point out repeatedly that the Dalit struggle has tended to forget a gender perspective. On the other side, recent Gender Studies in India have pointed out the diversity of women's experience, questioning the usefulness, therefore, in any kind of critical or nuanced writing, of a single category, 'woman'. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, for example, points to the instability of the notion of women's identity, and to the power imbalances which exist between different groups of woman, under the blanket notion of gender (introduction to *Signposts*, 1999). Taking this further, the Dalit feminist critic, Sharmila Rege writes:

> The Dalit Feminist Standpoint is about historically locating how all our identities are not equally powerful, and about reviewing how in different historical practices similarities between women have been ignored in an effort to underline caste-class identities, or at other times differences ignored for 'the feminist cause'. ('"Real feminism" and Dalit women').

In *Sangati* this is precisely one of the areas Bama is exploring, as she formulates a 'Dalit feminism' which redefines 'woman' from the socio-political perspective of a Dalit, and examines caste and gender oppressions together.

Like all Dalit writing, Bama's work is not only breaking a mainstream aesthetic, but also proposing a new one which is integral to her politics. In Bama's case, this grows out of her own personal experience as Dalit,

Christian, woman, equally. In the first part of this paper I have tried to show how it is this very exploration the self that gives shape to and structures her work, generating new forms of autobiography and fiction. But Bama's particular contribution is her recovery of a particular language.

Firstly, Bama uses the colloquial more consistently and easily than many of her contemporaries; both for narration, and even argument and comment, not simply for reported speech. Besides overturning received notions of decorum and propriety, she bridges spoken and written styles consistently. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout her work, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of reading in Tamil. In a conversation with me, she said that the style in which *Karukku* came out was completely spontaneous; it was only after it was written that she chose to leave it as it is, realizing that she had found her own voice and style.

In *Sangati,* though, Bama has made a further linguistic leap in reclaiming the language particular to the women of her community. If *Karukku* is told in Bama's own speaking voice, *Sangati* is in the voices of many women speaking to and addressing one another as they share the incidents of their daily lives. These voices, sometimes raised in anger or in pain as they lash out at each other, or against their oppressors, is reported exactly. Such a language is full of expletives, quite often with explicit sexual references. Bama suggests several reasons for the violence of this language, and its sexual nature. Sometimes a sharp tongue and obscene words are a woman's only way of shaming men and escaping extreme physical violence. At other times, Bama reflects, such language may grow out of a frustrating lack of pleasurable experience. Or it might be the result of the internalizing of a patriarchy based on sexual dominance and power.

But the other aspect of this language of women is its vigour, and its closeness to proverbs, folksongs and folklore. Velliamma Kizhavi's re-telling of the stories of Esakki who becomes a pey, a spirit who possesses young women, and of the Ayyangaachi troupe are wonderful set-pieces

in the book. A special characteristic of this language is its closeness to songs and chants. Bama writes, 'From birth to death, there are special songs and dances. And it is only the women who perform them. Roraaattu (lullaby) to Oppaari (dirge), it is only the women who will sing them.' Bama records a number of these. A song sung at a girl's coming of age, with a chorus of ululation at the end of every four lines begins:

> On a Friday morning, at earliest dawn
> she became a *pushpavati*, so the elders said –
> her mother was delighted, her father too,
> the uncles arrived, all in a row –
> (chorus of *kulavai*, ululation)

Bama also gives several examples of rhymes and verses made up at the spur of the moment to fit an occasion. A woman playing a dice game watches a girl grinding masala while her cross-cousin (macchaan) walks past. Immediately she makes up a song to tease her. Another makes up a song for her husband who is angry with her over some trifling matter :

> We dug a water-spring in the river-bed
> we cleaned our teeth together, he and I -
> Is it because I spluttered water over him
> he hasn't spoken to me for eight days?

Finally, and most importantly, Bama recognizes and applauds the ability of certain women in her community to undermine authority figures by ridiculing them, or playing tricks on them. In her most recent work, the collection of stories called *Kisumbukaaran*, she has developed this aspect of Dalit language even further. *Kisumbu* or *kusumbu* means pranks, making mischief. Other key words in Bama's stories are *kindal panradu* or *pagadi panradu*, to ridicule or lampoon, and *nattanaitanam* or *natnatanam*, buffoonery, but also rashness or recklessness. Between them these words cover a range of meanings: teasing or leg pulling

between comrades and friends, a sending up or ridiculing of authority figures within the community, and then by extension, invective in defiance of upper caste landowners. Raj Gauthaman says in his foreword to the collection 'Their customary habit of joking and lampooning gives Dalits the strength to stand up courageously against caste oppression. Dalit jokes and banter (*pagadi*) lead the way to the language of insurrection (*kalaga mozhi*), and so, finally, to insurrection (*kalagam*). But the stories say this, not overtly, but very naturally and easily, with their own rhetoric'.

Dalit Writing in India Today: a Postscript

Dalit writing caught the attention of an all-India readership in the 1990s, possibly with the publication first of all, of *An anthology of Dalit Literature,* Dalit poetry in English translation, edited by Eleanor Elliott and Mulk Raj Anand, and in the same year, *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Marathi Dalit Literature.* A decade later, we are seeing not only more diverse Dalit writing in Indian languages, but also, with translation into English, greater interest by publishers and academics nationally. (Internationally too: at the international conference at Vancouver organized by NRI Dalits inaugurated by former president K.R. Narayan, one of the resolutions adopted was that 'Dalit studies must be included in Indian and international educational and research institutions, especially in America done Europe'.)

This situation causes unease among some Dalits as well as non-Dalits, and for different reasons. On the one hand, there is the question about what happens to literature of protest and resistance, once it becomes part of a literary canon. Ravi Kumar, Tamil Dalit ideologue and critic from Pondicherry, is extremely sceptical about the number of life-histories in particular that have been translated and published recently. Both he and Anand Tetumble claim that Dalit writers and non-Dalit publishers are actually colluding to 'commodify the pain and misery of dalit masses'; that far from raising awareness in the form of shame and guilt, this kind of writing only provides a kind of voyeuristic entertainment

for non-Dalits. (*Touchable Tales: publishing and reading dalit literature* edited by S.Anand, Navayana, 2003, p. 39). S. Anand, editor of *Touchable Tales,* asks why it is that non-Dalit readers who enjoy reading autobiographic narratives of pain and suffering do not engage politically with the issue of discrimination. (ibid., p.4)

More importantly, Anand Tetumble suggests that Marathi Dalit writers are no longer closely linked with the movement, that Marathi Dalit writing is no longer the expression of a new awakening among Dalits. In the same vein, Thirumaavalavan leader of the Tamil activists Viduthalai Chiruttaigal (Liberation Panthers) points to the number of atrocities against Dalits which have happened very recently in Tamil Nadu, and asks why the literary world takes no notice. (Thirumaavalavan, *Talisman,* p.xi). Anand's criticism goes further. When Dalit writings are given the patronage of the state and the literary establishment – in the shape of awards, grants, acceptance into the literary canon and so on – the Dalit rebellion once manifest in Dalit literature becomes fully contained and tamed. (*Touchable Tales*, p.39)

So much for the fears of the activists. Literary critics on the other hand, are not at all sure how to read Dalit Literature, once it enters the canon. Dalit Studies courses are still very few and designed variously. K. Satyanarayana of the CIEFL, Hyderabad uses the polemical texts of Dalit critics and ideologues as well as the life-stories and fiction by Dalits, which enable him, he says, to read the usual canonical texts from a new perspective, and against the grain. (ibid., p.15) Alok Prabha Mukherjee and Arun Mukherjee of York University, Toronto, who claim to be among a handful of teachers who include Dalit texts in their courses on postcolonial literature, say they do so because they want to question notions of what constitutes 'good' or even 'great ' literature; by what criteria one decides what kind of literature has 'universal' meaning; and also, to examine the role of literature in social justice.

M. Kannan and François Gros take an altogether different position. In their article 'Tamil Dalits in search of a literature', they claim that one of the factors that challenge the very idea of Dalit literature is 'the ideological, anthropological, or political trap that keeps literature out of most political writing'. According to them, Dalit writing has tended to consist of testimonies rather than works of the imagination, chronicles rather than artistically conceived texts, lived experiences rather than poetic experimentation, and, finally, a call for action rather than the conversion of life into art. For these reasons, they claim, Dalit writing simply cannot be called 'literature'. Gros and Kannan work from a polarization of 'life ' and 'art', and from value judgements based on certain assumptions about what literature should be. Their authorities are French: Pierre Bourdieu, for example, or Henri Michaux.

It is just such polarizations and assumptions that Bama's work has challenged, and shown to be irrelevant, however. Most Dalit writing in Tamil has tended to be fiction or poetry. Bama is among the few who bridge autobiography, fiction, polemics and also a call for action. She has done so deliberately and boldly, moving easily between these different elements, and bringing them together with a vivid and lively, inventive style. But there is also in her work, a powerful sense of engagement with history, of change, of changing notions of identity and belonging. Bama, in addition, brings to such a perspective a uniquely woman centred critique which seeks change both in the world outside and within the community itself. She captures a moment that contains a paradox: she seeks an identity, but also calls for a change which means an end to that identity at least in caste terms. it is also the paradox at the heart of Dalit writing.

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The Disrobing of Draupadi: Women, Violence and Human Rights

Radhika Coomaraswamy*

The Story of Draupadi

For some south Asian women, and especially for a Hindu woman such as myself, the disrobing of Draupadi in the epic *Mahabarata* is one of our first encounters with ideas of violence against women. Many of you will know the story. Draupadi was the wife of all five Pandava brothers who waged a battle against the evil Kauravas with the help of Lord Krishna. The famous *Bhagavad Gita* was recounted during this epic war between good and evil. In the early stages of the story, the Kauravas cheat the heroes, the Pandavas out of their kingdom by playing a game with loaded dice. The Pandavas lose everything. The eldest Pandava, Yudhisthra, wages all the brothers into slavery and finally him self. When all else is lost, the evil cousins ask Yudhisthra to wage Draupadi, the much loved common wife. He does so and loses.

The evil cousins then go to Draupadi's private chambers where is in seclusion because she is menstruating. One of them drag her out half robed, with hair, and bring her into the chamber of kings. They inform her that Yudhisthra has sold her to the evil Kauravas and that all the kings gathered in the Assembly are witnesses to her fate. Draupadi's first

*A lecture delivered for the Centenary Anniversary of ladies College, Colombo, August 2003

response is a legal one: she asks how Yudhisthra could have waged her in the game when he had already waged himself into slavery, and slaves have no rights. This point is ignored and the evil cousins then begin the process of disrobing her in front of all the assembled Kings and her mortified five husbands. As she appeals to each one of them in turn, her husband squirm but the Kings ignore her pleas. Finally she calls out to Lord Krishna. A miracle occurs and her robes become endless. The sari cloth goes on and on until her tormentors collapse in a tired heap. Her body remains covered. Alarmed by these developments, the Kings call off the game of dice. Draupadi swears vengeance. She says she will not tie her hair up until it is soaked in the blood of those who tried to disrobe her. One of the reasons that the Pandavas go to war is to avenge her honor.

Very often when I reflect about women's rights, I feel that the story of Draupadi is really a metaphor for the condition of women. The injustice that women face is not recent. In fact, as French feminist have suggested, there appears to be two universal norms. The first is the universal commonality, the norm of human rights that all human beings are equal and are endowed with equal rights. The second norm is a norm of difference. The difference between men and women is the one universal difference in all cultures throughout history. This universal difference has been used in the past to justify the oppression of women as being past of the natural order. On the other hand, for most of us, the difference points to the special measures, above and beyond equality, that has to be taken to ensure that human rights become meaningful for the vast majority of women.

The Social Construction of Family

Let us take the story of Draupadi. It tells us lot about our assumptions about woman and their role in society. The first is the position of women in the family. The international standard today is that of the nuclear family, one man and one wife. Various UN conventions written since the 1960s have underscored this point. And yet, Draupadi had five husbands,

a reality that took place when the Pandava brother Arjuna who had won her at a contest brings her home and his mother asks that he share whatever it is with his brothers. This story has been repeated to generations of Hindu women with no defensive explanation. This casual retelling only goes to show that much of what we take for family is socially constructed and depends on culture and history. The family varies from culture to culture, from region to region; from the harems of Northern Africa to the joint family system of India, to the single mother families, especially in war torn countries, and now even to gay and lesbian marriages in certain parts of the west. Article 16 of the convention on the elimination of Violence Against women (CEDAW for short) and other related legislations takes the nuclear family for granted as the inevitable norm. The Cairo declaration and instruments of social policy have been more discerning, realizing that a large percentage of women do not live in the ideal world of CEDAW Article 16. The need to go beyond Article 16, to recognize other form of marriage and family which also provide a space for nurture and community, is one of the possible avenues for women's rights of the future

In addtion we must remember that until recently, women in most legal systems were treated as subordinate to their husbands, who are automatically treated as the head of the family. CEDAW article 16 recognises two conditions for the family: full and free consent of the spouses and equality in rights and duties between he partners. Neither consent nor equality was the basis of marriage in the vast array of legal systems present in the wold. Women are seen as subordinate to men and recognized as the lesser partner. It is interesting that Draupadi did not ask Yudhisthra the question, what right did he have to wage her away when she was his equal and as a human being did not belong to anyone. She never questions his power to wage her away as her husband. She accepts her subordination and his authority over her, his right to do with her as he pleases. She only questions his right to wage her while he was a slave. Having lost his civic rights, she argues like Shakespeare's Portia, he had no right to give her away.

The difference in the family structure around the world poses major dilemmas. There are over a hundred different systems of law in the world today, and the rights of women vary not only from country to country but within countries as well. Women are not equal in this country. Our rights in the family depend on whether we are born to be Sinhalese, Tamil or Muslims. Though the leaders of these communities violently contest each other in the public sphere, they are all agreed that private life should be left to the various laws, rituals and practices of each community. The private sphere of family is where women are most active. In fact if we think back, it is the women of the community who preserve its rituals, customs and practices. It is they who wear the ethnic markings, the clothes and finery of ethnic community. It is they who cook the food: it is they who are most intimately behind the festivals and daily rituals. And, it is their lives that are most affected by these personal laws. Partha Chatterjee in his important work on women and nationalism argues that in the struggle with colonialism, the public spaces were abdicated. Modern economic practices and political structures condition public life. Men wear suits, learn English and go to work. Culture and identity are increasingly relegated to the private sphere and are seen as the business of women. Women become the custodian of ethnicity and the standard bearers of ethnic identity. This is the reason why men of different ethnic groups are united in their resistance to a reform of the personal law. To liberate women would be, in their eyes, to begin the process of destroying their culture.

Women activists around the world are deeply divided on how to deal with the pluralism of our family livers. On the one hand we want to preserve the rich diversity of world history and the precious cultural identities that go with it. On the other hand, we want all women to enjoy human rights, to feel free and equal to every other human being. In Sri Lanka, in practical terms, this has led to a debate on whether as women we should strive a uniform civil code where all women are treated equally in family life. In India, where this debate continues afresh, they have suggested that three options exist. The first is the uniform civil code, where uniformity and homogeneity are imposed on all women, based on

our international obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination of Women. All women under this system would have the same rights, regardless of ethnic origin. The Convention set out in its provisions the essential guidelines for such a code. The second option is to preserve pluralism and their different personal and ethnic laws, and to give couples the choice on their wedding day whether to opt in or opt out of their personal law system. In other words, they can choose whether to be guided by the general law, as set out by CEDAW and other international instruments, or by their own personal ethnic law. This element of choice then allows couples to choose the type of marriage they want, and women then have the possibility of insisting on their rights as guaranteed by international human right law. The third option is, of course, for the State to choose some rights as core rights ands insist on minimum standards with regard to rights of women in the family in all the personal laws: perhaps the prohibition on polygamy, the elimination of unilateral divorce and giving women the same legal capacity as men.

In Sri Lanka we have not even begun to talk about these options and strategies. We have generally left personal laws alone. If it enacted, the new constitution will set up a commission to study existing laws and to see whether any of them violate fundamental rights and freedoms. It may be important to discuss these matters and resolve a strategy on our own that will help us to meet policy makers with a common position. The need to bring our private laws in conformity with international standards reamins a pressing issue of the future. How we do that, while respecting diversity and pluralism, will be our biggest challenge in the next centaur.

Changing Attitudes and Customs.

When Draupadi is disturbed in this famous story, she is cloistered in the back room of the house because she is menstruating. She is separated from the rest of the household and treated as if she is polluted. To drag a woman from her cloistered place to the centre of the assembly of kings was a complete disgrace. For many of us in Hindu Society, this part is read without too much thought. This idea, that menstruated woman

is polluted, dangerous and irrational, is in many of the Hindu texts and law books. It is only recently that Hindu women have been allowed in to the house in this state. The denigration of women's bodies and bodily functions is central to many ancient cultures. Menstruating Hindu Women are not allowed to temples and are not allowed to touch others in case they pollute those around them. This contempt for the female body has been analyzed by Indian, who in some cases has argued that the Hindu Buddhist world view sees women as irrational, polluting substances that stand in the way of men's salvation. Therefore the true sage or constructs masculinity by taking the wow of celibacy and seclusion from women. Celibacy ensures that he is not polluted or stained, the worse type of fall from grace envisioned by the religions of ancient India.

Hinduism is not the only religion that has these strange practices that relegate women into disempowered second class citizens. Most religions and cultures have these attitudes. The international community has recognized this bias and has taken measures to combat this value system. CEDAW has a famous but controversial article 5, which proclaims that all states should take all possible steps to eradicate attitudes, customs and rituals that make women subordinate human beings. However, it does not outline what these strategies should be After all, we are speaking of the realm of speech, thought and belief, an area that should be free from state intervention. Do we really want the state to tell us how to behave, hat to believe, and how we should practice our beliefs? This is after all the most protected realm, the freedom of thought and belie. How do we reconcile our desire to protect the fundamental freedom with our commitment to radically transform social ideology on the position of women? Perhaps, Benedict Anderson can give us some guidance. His argument that the social bases of an imagined community are the education system, the printing presses and the media gives us the sense as to what levers we have to use to influence behaviors and thought. We have to actively intervene in the making of education and media policy. But we have to do so with some hesitation. The need to work out a strategy for changing attitudes also means engaging in a conversation about what role we want the state to play in this transfor-

mation. Nivedita Menon has written extensively in this area. She argues that the women's movement relies too much on law and on the state to achieve its goals. In this regard, when we speak of transforming thought patterns ands modifying social behavior, other strategies may prove to be more successful and far less dangerous than the state as Big Brother or Big Sister.

Sexual Violence

The story of Draupadi is perhaps most important because it raises the spectra of sexual violence. Disrobing is the first act of sexual violence, especially in South Asia. Many of us remember the scene Shekar Kapoor's movie The Bandit Queen when Phoolan Devi is paraded naked thought the village – the experience that made a seek revenge of the most bloody kind. It was about thirty years ago that the Kataragama Beauty Queen was paraded naked during the first JVP insurrection. Disrobing the Asian Cultural context is perhaps the worst form of sexual violence because it maximizes your shame in a culture where shame is an important component of honour, and honour and important ingredient of human dignity.

As United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, I have spoken to many women around the world who have been victims of this type of sexual violence. As can be imagined, the worst kind of sexual violence against women occurs during he time of armed conflict. The stories coming out of Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia and the East Timor shock the conscience of the world. During the war time in many contexts, women are gang-raped and humiliated in countless ways, often by men young enough to be their sons. In former Yugoslavia, this took a bizarre turn with incidents of what is now termed forced pregnancy. Women were detained in camps and repeatedly raped until they became pregnant. They were then freed so that they would have "Serb" children. In Rwanda the situation was even worse. Tutsi women were considered to be beautiful and seductive. In calling people out to commit genocide, the Interhamwe put out Ten Commandments for Hutu men:

the first of those Ten Commandments was that they should not be seduced by Tutsi women. In Rwanda, hatred and venom centered on the image of the Tutsi women. The sexual violence that the Tutsi women were subject to is beyond description. Very few survived unscathed. Nevertheless it happened, and the world despite countless warning by NGO's, peacekeepers and special rapporteur, stood by and let it happen. Like the Kings of Draupadi's assembly, they did nothing.

Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, however, stirred the conscience of the world after the deeds were done. Women have been subjected to sexual violence during wartime for countless centuries, and yet in the twentieth century, the rules of war did not expressly deal with the topic. The chivalry codes of the ancient and medieval times were more protective women than the Hague convention. At San Francisco, after Worlds War 11 , the allies pushed Japan to pay compensation for ill treatment of male prisoners of war, but they did nothing for the hundreds of comfort women in Asia, abducted by the Japanese military and made into sex slaves during the entirety of the war period. Even the Geneva Conventions, the bible of humanitarian law, does not expressly consider rape or sexual violence to be a "grave breach", that term of art that triggers individual criminal liability and universal jurisdiction. After Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia this was no longer acceptable. The new statute setting up an international criminal court expressly makes rape, sexual violence and humiliation, forced pregnancy, sexual slavery and other such acts international war crimes and crimes against humanity. It is the frame works both external wars as well as internal armed conflict. This incredible leap in the law took place in the 1990s because of the activism of women's groups. In addtion, the international criminal tribunal of the former Yugoslavia at The Hague has held that rape in situations of armed conflict was a form of torture entitled to the highest protection of international law. The international criminal tribunal for Rwanda held that in times of armed conflict consent cannot be a defense. If a woman is sexually violated under coercive circumstances, it was still a war crime. She does not have to prove absence of consent. All these radical developments are less than a decade old. Women's rights have

become the cutting edge of international humanitarian law, pushing the frontiers and forcing a day of reckoning. If Draupadi lived today in a situation of armed conflict, and if India signed the ICC- something that is unfortunately not very likely –she would see her tormenters bought forth before a court of law, indicted by the world subjected to its scrutinity. The Kings are not so silent today because there are now women among them.

Sexual violence does not only occur during armed conflict. Every few seconds a women is raped somewhere in the world. In Sri Lanka, the IGP in a public interview said that in the early eighties the number of reported rapes was a round hundred eighty a year. Today, he said the figure has sky rocketed to over nine hundred. Sexual violence in every day life is something that has troubled women activist for a long time. Over the last two decades rape laws around the world have been transformed and modernised to give women a sense of injustice. In Sri Lanka, the Penal Code was reformed in 1995, and today it is easier to prove rape and sexual violence and to get judges to past stricter sentences. However, evidentiary process is still a problem in certain cases. In the standards set for evidence rape cases the International Criminal Tribunals, a woman's past sexual history cannot be brought in to evidence and her personal testimony need not be a collaborated to get a conviction of rape. In Sri Lanka, we have yet to have these principals clearly articulated in the ordinary rape case. this is another area that requires our earnest attention.

It is not only sexual violence but also the fear of sexual violence that effects rights of women. Fear of Sexual violence forces societies to adapt strict modes of dress that completely cover the woman if she goes out in public. Y0ou often hear the remark that women in the Free Trade Zone ask for sexual harassment because of the way they dress. Dress codes that completely clothe a woman's body are a norm in large parts of the wold. Research in to the use of the bourqua in Afghanistan, has pointed to health condition that result from this excessive coverage. Asthmatic women and women who have high blood pressure should not wear bourqua because it will worsen their condition. All women have their peripheral vision completely cut off by such clothing. Fear of violence also robs women of their freedom of movement. In most parts of the world, women would not go out alone at night without a male companion. In some parts of the world, the male companion is required by law at any time of the day. If you ask the authorities about these restrictions, they will say that it is for the women's own protection. The Taliban of Afghanistan so protect their women for sexual violence that they require them to be covered from head to foot, require that they have a male relative as a escort, stop women from going to school, from working, gathering in numbers larger than five and from going to hotels and restaurant even with a male companion. Along with men they are prevented from laughing loudly, enjoying music, playing with pigeon, watching films, T.V to Video....the list is endless. It is therefore not surprising that Afghanistan has one of the worst female suicide rates in the world and the worst rate of female depression. Men will got o great lengths to protect women from sexual violence but they will not do what is really necessary, to stop the violence. They continue to believe that if women are raped sexually harassed or sexually humiliated, the women must have asked for it. If women cannot control themselves it is often said to be a women's fault. Attitudes are changing, but the beliefs that the women are complicate in her own violation still haunts many legal systems.

Sexual violence is also problematic because it is linked to a society's concept of hour. The Pandavas went to war to vindicate Draupadi's honour. Helen of Troy launched a thousand ships when Paris abducted her. Women's honour is no trifling matter in many societies. Kamala Bhasin and Ritu Menon in their study of riots during the partition of India and Pakistan bring this out clearly. Their argument is that for many south Asian communities, the honour of the community lies in the body of their women. During Partition women were not only raped by men of the other side but they were killed by their own fathers and brothers. To prevent their honour from being defiled, their male relatives stabbed them, poisoned them, and sometimes even burned them alive. Death was preferable to begin sexually violated. Women's bodies not only belonged to their husbands but also to the nation. After partition, the Indian state went about recovering the abducted women from Hindu families, and the

Pakistani state went about recovering women from Muslim families. In many cases, the women had made peace with their captors and given birth to children. But they were not consulted in there own repatriation. If they were found, they were forced to leave their husbands and newborn children and come back to their motherland. In India, when they came back many of them were turned away by their families because they felt that the women had been defiled. As a result, the Indian State had to set up special homes for these women so that they would have a place to live. The link between women, ethnicity and the state is clearly brought out in this powerful study where the concept of women's honour results in terrible abuses. Today despite changes in attitudes, honour killings continue in certain parts of the world sanctioned by the state. In Pakistan recently, a young woman sought divorce from her husband who was battering her. She left him and lived in a shelter because her parents felt that divorce was a slur on the family honour. She then developed a relationship with an army officer. Finally her parents said that they would agree to the divorce. The mother and uncle agreed to meet her at the lawyer's chambers. The young girl came ahead, but when her mother arrived they brought a third person. Before anything could be said the third person pulled out a gun and shot the young women in the head. The father later said that the family honour had been vindicated. To this day, despite the evidence and witnesses, the police had nothing about the case. This type of behavior is not only a west Asian custom, but in Latin America the law also sanctions what is called an honour defense. If a man thinks that his wife is unfaithful, he can kill her and get away scot-free since he is vindicating his honour, an aspect of what is seen to be self-defense. Of course, the reverse is not true. If a woman kills her errant husband for the same reason, she would get a life sentence or event he death penalty. It is women's bodies that are the subject of honour, not male sexual behavior. Recently, due to pressure from women's groups there have been some changes in countries like Brazil, but whatever changes jurist will not convict men if infidelity involved. In fact, they never convict if there is a question of custom and honour. In Rajasthan, in the case of the prosecution of Roop Kanwar's Sati, despite pictures and a large number of witnesses, the jury aluitted the

perpetrators despite clear and stringent anti-sati laws. In Brazil, despite judges warning that a man's honour cannot be defense for killing his wife in cold blood, the jurist continued to acquit men who killed their wives.

The feeling of shame is the other side of honour. It is said that shame as a custom and practice is a great determining factor in women's lives. The five Pandava brothers lost their lives to slavery, but at no time did one think of disrobing them. It was the wife, Draupadi, who was disrobed. She would be the one to suffer shame and humiliation if she were to stand without clothes. Shame of the exposure of the female body is seen as a fate worse than death in many societies. Shame of their bodies makes women around the world cover themselves completely, if they are victimizes of sexual violence they are so deeply traumatized by shame that they will not report the crime and suffer severe psychological damage. The physical damage of sexual violence is not the ultimate goal of the perpetrator. It the feeling of shame and humiliation on the part of the women that gives him satisfaction. In a recent play by Manjula Pathmanathan had won awards the world over she addresses this question. In the play a woman is gang raped at an Indian police station and suffers extensive injuries. The response is to refuse to put on her clothes or go to the doctor. She resists all attempts to cover or heal her body. As a result her body stops being a sight of shame but becomes a symbol of police brutality. By reversing the semiotics, she shames the policemen instead and ignites the community to action. This case is a spin- off of a real case in India, the case of Madhura an untouchable girl in Maharashtra who was raped by the police when she went to make a complaint. As a result, of this case and agitation around it, the Indian parliament passed a Penal code reformed that introduced the concept of custodial rape. If a woman alleges that she is raped in an Indian state institution, the presumption shifts, and it is the state that must prove that the rape did not take place. In addition, the sentences are more sever by those who are guilty of such offences. This reversal of the evidentiary process is an expression of the belief that the state institutions must be above suspicion, and the public should be safe and comfortable in these public spaces.

The Female Body

The female body is then the site for the concept of honour and the feeling of shame. Michel Foucault in his work has analyzed how the female body has been constructed throughout the ages. The female body and the female sexuality are seen as dangerous, powerful forces that require control and direction. This leads to the Hindu belief, for example, that Shakti without Shiva is out of control. To regulate and control the female body and sexuality, dress code and limitations on freedom of movement are introduced. In some societies such as Iran and Afghanistan women cannot wear make-up or colourful clothing in public. They cannot beautify themselves because it self is seen as dangerous and destructive.

The female body is at the same time the site for commercial exploitation and objectification. There has been a dramatic increase in trafficking the world over, and enormous international attention with regard to the problem. When I was in Poland recently I met with many victims of trafficking from East Europe to the West for forced prostitution. The case of Anna illustrates this problem. Anna was born to a poor family in Poland and she was seventeen years old. She saw a poster asking for domestic workers and responded. She was accepted, and for a few months worked as a domestic worker. She was then introduced to a couple from Germany where she was offered domestic work in Germany at a higher wage. She accepted. She was sneaked across the border without necessary papers. On the day she arrived, she was asked to dress up for a party. She was driven to an apartment and informed that from now on she would be a prostitute. She was forcibly dragged into a room with a drunk, sixty-five year old man. The door was locked behind her. After that she tried to resist, but was severely beaten and finally sold to a brothel. There her papers were taken away from her, she was subject to twenty-four hour surveillance and she had to serve at least ten clients a day. Most of her pay was taken by the owner to ay back debt bondage, a term of art used to mean that she must pay back what it costs the owner to purchase her in the first place even if the purchase was against

her will. She carried on for a few months and then managed to escape through an open window. She called the man she had initially met putting up posters, and he sent he a taxi to come home. She was terrified to go to her parents since she was ashamed of what had happened to her. Anna's story is one of many cases in the world today. The trafficking routes from all parts of the third world to Europe, from Nepal and Bangladesh to Bombay, from Burma to Thailand all present a picture of deception and violence exacerbated by immigration policies and police corruption. There is now a concerted international attempt to do something about this rapidly increasing phenomenon, but it is bogged down on questions of legal definitions, immigration policy and enforcement. The international community is paralyzed in its attempt to deal with trafficking because of different perspectives, different ways of looking at the female body and female desire. For those of us who are feminists of an earlier era, any type of commercial exploitation of the female body was seen as anathema. We were against any form of prostitution, we were opposed to beauty contests, phonograph, suggestive ads, the beauty myth and all other types of exploitation that we felt were imposed on the female body by male desire. We wanted them banned and the women rescued regardless of t the women who participated in these activities felt. We were their saviours, they were the victims.

Today's more active feminists contest his position of "ban it all" as being that of feminist Puritanism that denies agency and humanity to the victim. In their writing during the 1990sthey have argued that the solution to commercial exploitation should not be to repress the female body and female sexuality. They argue that we should celebrate female desire as a counterpoise to male desire. This point of view has found great resonance in the west. There is now a lucrative industry of pornography for the female consumer. *Vogue* magazine just ran a huge story on women who have become billionaires creating pornography for female audience. A recent exhibition in Sri Lanka by a female artist held at Gallery 706 also took up this position: the male body, as opposed to the female body, as an object of desire. These feminists are not for trafficking: they are vehemently opposed t anything that does not involve free

and full consent on the part of the woman, but they are against draconian systems of law that regulate morality and sexuality. Coercion, deception and violence should be prohibited, not the moral or sexual behavior of individuals. I am still not entirely comfortable with these perspectives. The question of consent, desire or agency does not for vast majority of women who are trafficked, especially in Asia: However, even if we do not accept the conceptual directions of these arguments there is some strength in the suggestion that some context we see some of these practices as women's chosen profession and therefore regulate these activities as employment with all its entitlements. Of course I cannot see the Sri Lanka of today adopting such a perspective, but perhaps it is something we should talk about and openly discuss. Jody Miller's research in to Sri Lankan sex workers tell a horrific tale of violence and deception, made all the more possible by the fact that sex work is illegal and debased.

State Accountability

If I may go back to the story of Draupadi, the kings of Draupadi's assembly did nothing as they watched Draupadi's humiliation. They were all men, many of them children of the Gods. In Peter Brook's powerful film on the *Mahabharatha*, all the kings sit in silence, some of them looking down some of them looking intently. All of them remain silent. The complicity of the state in the violation of women's rights in another universal norm that emerges from the recounting of a woman's history. A recent study on Brazil, for example, by human rights watch clearly shows how states just do not prosecute cases of violence against women. If a man is a victim of violence, the police and the prosecutors are far more likely to act than if it is a woman. This has been proven in many countries where the police statistics are available. In my work I have met police from all the regions of the world, and there is no doubt in my mind that until recently they felt that domestic violence, rape and trafficking were not high priorities. Times were not investigated, and if they were the prosecutors they were not particularly interested and if they were, the judiciary, often displayed extremely misogynist views. Against

the belief that women victims are complicit in the violations against them was foremost in the minds if those who were custodians of the law.

In the 1980s, women's groups around the world came together in common cause. They rallied together to make violence against women a major international human rights Issue. They succeeded in their efforts, and in 1993 the United Nations General Assembly unanimously passed the elimination of Violence Against Women. The Declaration claimed that individual states must use due diligence to prevent, prosecute and punish those who commit violence against women. States had an affirmative duty to protect women from violence. For a few years this remained just words in paper, and everyone wondered what due diligence meant anyway in everyday life. Suddenly two years ago a case came before an international court from Trinidad and Tobago alleging that the Trinidadian police had violated the human rights of the plaintiff by not using the due diligence to protect her interest.

Pamella Ramjattan was a woman from a poorer part of Trinidad. She was married and had four children. Her husband battered her constantly, and she was often taken to hospital. She complained to the police, but they refused to do anything since they were his personal friends. Finally she enough, so she left home with her four children and went to the house of a childhood friend. He husband followed her and brought her back. She was knocked unconscious, and then the children were asked whether he should shoot her. When she regained consciousness she called her friend to come and get her. He came with a friend and they got into a scuffle with the husband. During the fight the friend killed her husband. In the court case that followed the evidence of domestic violence was disallowed for the mitigation of sentence. According to the strict law in Trinidad and Tobago, she was given the death penalty. She then appealed to the international tribunal, the Inter- American court for relei, claiming that the refusal to admit the evidence of domestic violence violated her human rights. The court decided to hear her case. The furor over her death penalty was so great and there was enormous international pressure from women's groups and human rights

groups. Before the inter American court heard the case, the Government of Trinidad moved to give her a pardon. The Court of appeal mitigated her sentence, and she was asked to serve only5 years in prison. Though there is no international decision on this matter, the action of the inter American court made it clear that state inaction with regard to domestic violence could constitute the deprivation of a women's fundamental rights.
Draupadi will be happy to know that the kings of today
Can be challenged for their silence.

International Standards

Given all these cases of the violation of women's human rights, what has the world community done with regard to vindicating the position of women? There have been basically three phases in the international response to women's rights. The first phase was in the 1960s and the 1970s, and culminated in the Convention on the elimination of all Forms of discrimination of Women, or CEDAW as it is called. This convention concentrated on the equality of women in political, social and family life. With emphasis on the right to health, education and equality in the family, it was a document for non-discrimination against women. The second phase took place in the1980's and culminated in 1993 with the general assembly passing the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against women. In this document there was a call to states to carry out their affirmative obligation to eliminate violence against women in the family, in the community and by the state itself in included issues such as wife battery, female genital multination, trafficking, rape, social harassment etc., among other factors. The third place took place last year with the passing of the optional Protocol to CEDAW. This Protocol allows individual and groups to bring cases of women's rights, violations before an International Committee. The committee can also move its own if it receives credible information that women's rights are being systematically violated in any country. However, for the committee to have jurisdiction the country must have signed the protocol.

These international documents that together constitute the international regime on women's rights speaks to substantive equality for women: in other words, according to CEDAW it is not only intention but the effect of government policy that will be analyzed to see if equality has been reached. In addition to equality, the documents envision special measures that the states should take to protect maternity and to prevent violence against women. Finally, CEDAW is extremely radical in content and the famous article 5 calls on states to take steps to eliminate attitude, prejudices and stereo types with regard to women" role in society. These transformative steps are welcomed as part of an ideological campaign to entrench women" rights as human rights.

Sri Lanka, Women's rights, War and Peace

What of Sri Lanka? How have fared? With regard to substantive equality, the statistics reveal a somewhat optimistic picture in some areas. In terms of base-line statistics on life expectancy, health and education we can be proud of our achievements. However, the main problem is what is termed the glass ceiling. Women are having equal access to education even in medicine and law, but in the workplace they fall behind. They are less than 5% of top management in private companies, less than 5 % of parliament and local government, there are at the moment no women secretaries of ministries, and there is only one woman Supreme Court Justice. These appalling statistics reveal that the fight for equality must now move from the law schools and the medical schools to the corporate boardrooms and places of public decision-making.
As for special measures, the maternity laws of this county are upto international standard, but the problem of violence against women remains a serious problem. Rape statistics and domestic violence statistics are on the rise, though this may be more to do with the fact that women are now reporting the cases. In addition we are faced with an intractable armed conflict. Women are victims of armed conflict in different way. Firstly, they are direct victims. They are, killed, raped or tortured by the armed forces of the other side. There are countless examples of these, whether it has to do with security forces or the LTTE

attacks on the border villages. In addition to being direct victims, they are also refugees. International statistics point to the fact that women and children are eighty percent of refugees. The same is true for Sri Lanka. They not only have to eke out a living but also are subject to grater domestic violence and sexual harassment than they would have to face in peacetime. However, women and resilient. Studies done by Malathi de Alwis and Darini Rajasingham show that some women refugee, taken out of normal patriarchal structures, actually become empowered and take control of their lives and lives of their children. According to Valentine Daniel, who has studies women victims of violence in Sri Lanka, violence is a decisive moment. Some women are completely destroyed by it. Others emerge strong and empowered, ready to challenge the perpetrators and the state.

The third way women are affected by violence is as widows. Many studies have been done. Many studies have been done on JVP widows of the south and women of the eastern province. There has also been some research into the experience of army widows. Sasanka Perera, Gameela Samarasinghe, Selvy Tiruchandran, and Sepali Kottegoda are some of the scholars who have written extensively on this subject. They paint a very sad picture. Widows undergo a dramatic loss of status and income. They are subject to sexual harassment and are constantly tied up in bureaucratic knots. However, they too can be resilient. Gameela Samarasinghe's research into their psychology clearly points to the fact that they are driven by their love for their children, and that they bear every hardship to give their children a fighting chance.

So, in this context and this reality, what does the women's movement have to say about armed conflict. I earlier described the international legal framework for the conduct of war and its effect on women. But legal frameworks do not take into account the suffering and the pain. With women fighting in the LTTE in large numbers and with more women joining the security forces, are all distinctions between men and women going to be wiped out? For many of us, especially for many of us who belong to the Women's coalition of Peace, struggling for women's rights

is not only about fighting for equality. It is also about fighting for a different vision of the world. Psychologists like Carol Gillian and others point to the fact the women are socialised differently than men. Masculinity as constructed socially implies a certain view of the world privileging the aggressive and the adversarial, including resort to the use of force. Femininity as socially constructed implies not only docility, but also a certain empathetic caring and nurturing approach to life. War privileges the masculine, peace allow the feminine to blossom. Gilligan's research and the writings of others point to the fact that women are socialized to be non-violent, non-adversarial and to rely on community networks. This does not mean that all women fall into this category. Margaret Thacher and Indira Gandhi were anything but feminine when they marched into the Falklands and Bangladesh respectively.

In the past, feminist of older generations dismissed feminity as weak since their standard of action was equality with men. Today perspectives are changing. What we need is a world where feminine values are also represented and valued as highly as masculine values of aggression and war. Fighting for women's rights is not only to use men as your yardstick. It also means fighting for a different world where non-violence, nurture and caring become important values. Fighting for a feminist vision means caring for the direct victims of war and violence, the refugees, the widows, and other vulnerable groups made destitute by war. It also means struggling for peace by bringing enormous pressure on those who are responsible for the fighting. It means asking for constitutional and political processes of accountability that insist on truth and reconciliation, provisions that force the perpetrators of crimes to accept responsibility, to repress remorse, and, if necessary, receive pardon or punishment.

South Africa had such a process and it was extremely important for the healing of the nation. Fighting for a woman's voice means painting the streets where possible where senseless violence has taken place as mark of respect for those who have lost their lives. To insist on remembering them in death so that their lives would not have been in vain. It

means being the custodians of s society's humanity and respecting what the late Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam called the sanctity of life. In the Sri Lanka of today, this alternative vision is, perhaps, far more of an urgent task than the historical struggle for women's equality with men.

Draupadi was not pacifist. She insisted on war and vindicating her honour. When the time came and her enemies were slain, she dipped her hair in their blood to keep her vow, but then was overcome by despair and grief. So many, people she knew and valued had been killed. So much tragedy. And she wept, her hatred melted away. She covered the bodies of her tormentors and insisted that they be given a royal burial. It is her compassion and forgiveness that finally allowed the Pandavas to return to their kingdom and usher in a golden were, as golden as possible in a patriarchal monarchy.

Intersection of Labour Power, Female Sexuality and Notions of Nation State: The Cumulative Oppressive Process, The Case of Sri Lankan Migrant Housemaids

Selvy Thiruchandran*

This paper seeks to critically analyse the various ramifications of the socio-political and socio-economic conditions that have in practice led to some of the problems of Sri Lanka migrant women workers. The factors that determine their lives in a foreign country can be multifaceted. Seen as maids, they are working women, and under economic classification they belong to the working class. Within the nation's construction, they are one of the highest foreign-exchange earners – providing much needed hard currency for an economically unstable and deteriorating Sri Lankan state. In this role, they are praised and celebrated in national platforms and by the State, Ministers, and Bureaus including the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Women's Bureau. Being migrant and belonging to two nations or countries, they are simultaneously compelled to subscribe to two different sets of cultural patterns, laws, rules and regulations. Their citizenship becomes ambivalently unstable

* Paper presented at the International Conference on Women and Migration in Asia at the University of Delhi, India on December 10-13, 2003

in particular situations when confronted with problems. When both countries fail to take ownership in terms of redressing their grievances they sometimes belong to no country.

Being women, their sexuality is vulnerable at all times, but being migrant and being housemaids presents a further double vulnerability. Unsupported, alone and trapped within household bondage within an internal space of the structure of the house, their sexuality constructs specific oppressive patterns. Having left their own shores often as an escape from "domestic bondage," to enter into a remunerative process of earning much needed money, these women are thrown into different kinds of suffering but within the same kind of work, yet within different labour relationships. This paper makes an attempt to view from case studies the prevailing working conditions and sexual violence inflicted on them and the implication of the nation's boast that Sri Lankan housemaids bring in the largest foreign-exchange earnings to our treasury next to tea.

The Sri Lankan state encourages these women to take up employment as housemaids by providing a series of infrastructural incentives such as Migrant Service Centres, the Bureau of Foreign Employment, and Migrant Desks at foreign missions. How far they fall short of the actual alleviating functions and how insensitive they are to the housemaids' needs need to be areas that are examined.

This paper argues that, though migrants around the globe have both specific and common experiences, women migrants due to their sex, have vulnerabilities in terms of their bodies and sexuality by the nature of their labour and how it is defined (household or domestic labour). While class membership is the major factor for migrating, the stage of their life cycle can also be a contributory factor for the specific cases, since there are age limits within which they can apply for the jobs. They not only act, but are acted upon (B. Caroline, 1997) in relation to their social, cultural, economic and gendered location (Brettol, - 2000). Women's presumed 'natural' ability for domestic labour – to go work as migrant

domestic aides, takes us back into the anthropological dichotomy of culture versus nature.

We argue that women taking to domestic labour is socially constructed. However, women here are found to be negotiating and exploiting these so-called natural abilities for economic improvement and class mobility, while remaining in the same position or working relationship in the gender ladder. This paper thus examines the multi-layer and complex relationships – refined by empirical and experiential evidence as to what actually takes place and how, for those women who want to climb up the economic ladder, within a gendered relationship.

While not engaging in series of binary opposites, the paper makes attempts toward a unity of theory and empiricism – the empirical data taken or treated as evidence of the theory, in its failure or success. Knowledge production, we feel is through a process of the interplay of theory and empirical experience. One makes sense through the other and makes it holistic, which makes conceptualization easier.

In analysing the 'personal' in the lives of the women, we make an attempt at arriving at the political. The social process, economic process and the dynamics of the subjectivity of the women contribute to a holistic pattern of conceptualizing migrant women workers as they stand within the politics of the state(s). The phenomenon of migrant women workers comprise dynamics that are linked to gender, location, sexuality, state policy, labour laws, international and national standards of labour law, and capitalist relations of production.

The study of migrants and migrant labour falls into many disciplines and subdisciplines such as sociology, history and economies, and of late also into political science and international relations. Cost-benefit analysis or networks and trans-nationalism as analytical concepts are used in economics, sociology and anthropology. However, a study from the standpoint of women involving gender relations, as far as women migrant workers are concerned, has to be done from different points of

analysis which may lead to different results. If women are moving out of their countries, leaving their families, children, communities and habitats, which is difficult enough for men to do, there must really be compelling reasons. Women become assertive and independent to make such choices in life. Their decision to leave their families, country and its life factors can be referred to as a type of agency, a concept which has become fashionable now in feminist and social theory. 'Agency' has special reference in oral history, life stories and narratives of the self (Chamberlayne 2000), especially Women's Studies, Ethnic and Migrant studies, which have valorised the voices and experiences of specific non-dominant groups. However, in the case of the migrant women 'agency' has been activated by a series of push factors. This has certain relevance to how McNay links women's agency with modern economic and social structures (McNay 2000). Agency as such has become a bit ambivalent in that it is made ineffective and meaningless in particular or rather in very many instances due to the specific structures that govern employment patterns. This is a sad situation as is the case with many women's other experiences in other fields. Some of the stories such as those we listened to at a seminar conducted by the Women's Education and Research Centre in Colombo on the 8th of March 2002, testify to this.

The draw of earning more money, living in big stable houses, dressing and feeding their children them better, educating in better schools are the real motivations of the women. The fact that for the first time their labour power has been viewed to be economically more productive than their own men's labour power, has indeed been something to be considered and made use of. That it is seen as good and profitable both economically and socially to take the risk of leaving their families, children and community has occurred to them. They have become instrumental in making their own decisions. Women opting out of being only a 'social animal'- even believing dreams could come true – was also infectious. They saw beneath their dreams the many success stories of women who had returned and are living well in good houses, owning refrigerators, 'sofa sets', and dressing fashionably.

Economical migrants' as they are called, these migrant women workers have moved out of their countries and residences to their place of work mainly for two reasons:

1. The economical opportunities provided for their selected skills;
2. The poverty and the lack of opportunities that they face in their own country, low wages and unemployment, coupled with the incentives given out by the state to encourage workers to migrate — which cannot, however, be isolated as separate issues – they are interlinked.

There are, however, other reasons as well, but secondary or subsidiary to the main reasons. Apart from the economic imperative, there are social reasons - the term 'housemaids' in Sri Lanka is a recent innovation as a job description. Usually referred as servants, the women of this category of employment connoted a menial role, akin to slaves. Coming from the ancient times, this feudalistic ideology has very clearly deprived them of any workers' rights, in terms of remuneration, working hours and job description. The stigma attached to a 'servant' is filled with cultural and social prejudices, which take away the prestige of the dignity of labour dictum. Combined with all such inferiority of local circumstances and conditions, there are also the exterior inducements. Some women and men who returned with 'bags of money' and all the attractive 'goodies' purchased at the duty free shops, along with substantial bank balances, were indeed seen as good a reason as not to try out their own chances.

There are still other inducements. Higher wages, paid holidays, 'nice' and wealthy foreign countries to go and to work in, hope for a compassionate employer, the use of high technology in the kitchens that would make the drudgery of the domestic labour less labour intensive and indeed even pleasant, and a higher socio-economic status are some of the ideas attached to foreign employment. At least these were some of benefits listed by the job agencies. If these were the pull factors the push factors, were the socio-economic deprivations they suffered in their own countries.

However, I would argue that the economic imperative is the predominant and the most compelling reason. Unemployment of husbands, the dire deprivation that the family including children suffered, and with the high cost of living, often only one meal a day, the feelings of hopelessness, without hope for a better future (Fernando 1989 14). The women come out to try their personal potential, when opportunities are provided.

The receiving countries have also their incentives – skills in household labour are offered to the citizens of the oil-rich countries as very cheap labour. In both countries, women somehow become the pivotal exchange factor – women's labour for women housewives. The governments necessarily intervene, as the chief negotiators of benefits to its treasury in one country, and of social and economic benefits to its citizens in the other country. The women workers who migrate, however, are not fully aware of the disguised designs of the sending state, as to why it is encouraging them to go, by providing the infrastructural needs. Here is a case in point where economic and social forces are at play and migration takes place with the active cooperation and collaboration of both the sending country and the receiving country. Hence, it is different from the case of refugees and political asylum seekers, which is often beyond the control of the states. Implicit in this comparison is the contention that the onus of protecting and safeguarding the migrant woman worker lies with both the governments, which encourage the process. Hence, the women migrate to the 'unknown' with 'fear of the other and to those who are different' with the hope and promise of protection (Strauss 1952).

In 1974 a mere 4% of migrant workers went abroad in search of domestic labour. With the liberalisation of the Sri Lankan economy, the percentage increased from 47% in 1979 to 51% in 1981 then to 66% in the 1990s and 79% in 1994. It is estimated that there are more than 500,000 women who have migrated for employment and about 20 - 15% of Sri Lankans are dependent on overseas employment.

Migrant workers earned Rs. 478 billion during the last 5 years (Rs. 120 billion in 2002) - boasts the Chairman of the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), according to *Daily News* of 29 April 2003. Thus the country's biggest foreign exchange earner is the expatriate worker.

Significantly, this migration does not involve the brain drain that the economists often speak of when there is migration – as in the hemorrhaging of scarce human capital. These women have very low levels of education and are unemployable in other categories of jobs, seen as possessing low levels of human capital. The state obviously is not going to miss the drain of this human capital, which is economically devalued. There is a contradiction in how these are perceived, both by the state and by men and their families. The woman – the devalued self, the other half to the powerful man, the head of the household, the breadwinner – is suddenly seen differently. This is a shift in perspective - the woman is now seen as the gold mine, the panacea of all the familial evils. She goes abroad and sends money for security, for dressing the children well, eating well and enjoying life – for a moment the patriarchal order is revised: she becomes the breadwinner, she is encouraged by her husband and father-in-law to move out of the home - to travel abroad alone to earn money. And, is it strange that the patriarchal state could send these women away from home, families, husbands and children of all ages? This is also typically a revelation of the ideology of a capitalist state. The state had to choose. Often we have been told – even in terms of state ideology – how familial relationships should be not disturbed, how motherhood is glorious and the primary vocation of woman, and that a woman should be at home – a good homemaker, housewife and mother. The rather ambivalent and the hypocritical or opportunistic views of the state are captured in the occasional press reporting of the speeches made by ministers of the state. At one level women are praised for their earning capacity in the form of foreign exchange, and at another level as mothers they are blamed – both by the society and the state – for being 'bad women' and 'bad mothers' for having abandoned their families and children.

For women, a different code is defined. Domestic labour though it may still be, it is now in someone else's household and in some other country. It therefore raises questions of time, space, place and location. Domestic labour is paid with a significant variation – and for women of this class, performing domestic labour with new and modern labour – saving appliances is a novel experience. These women become linked to various consumer items without necessarily owning them, but only having the right of use. They also enter the modern commodity economy by starting to wear readymade clothing.

Migrant women workers are not of a homogeneous character. They are different in age, marital status, religion, ethnicity and caste. They are also identified in terms of their life experiences and their subjectivities. But these internal differences are certainly not reasons for abandoning the category – the category of women and the series of commonalities related to being a woman – sexuality being a fundamental commonality.

The capitalist state endeavours to maximize the state's capital, and while doing so, it fulfills a few ancillary and subsidiary deeds simultaneously bending backwards in various efforts. Sending a segment the Sri Lankan labour force abroad minimizes the number of those who are unemployed, thereby giving the impression that the problem of unemployment, which is a common problem in third world liberal democracies, is being solved. Hence, the state seeks alliances and increasingly builds up mechanisms towards stability. The receiving countries, employment agencies, the ministries, departments, and offices such as the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment(SLBFE), make up alliances and draw up programmes, which give out messages of welfarism and protective legislation. Economic liberation with a human face has many faces, and the policies and programmes of the Sri Lankan state, despite its vested interests, present a protective approach to the migrant women workers. Essentially they fall within a regulatory framework. Provision of information and skills training in the use of domestic appliances, elementary skills in English language, provided by the state, were seen as benefits for migrant women workers. The training also

included a component to provide the women with the necessary mechanism to cope with a new socio-political environment.

However, migrant women workers have been presented in a very negative light in Sri Lankan media. The Sri Lankan state viewed the media reporting seriously. In order not to discourage women from going abroad, it came up with new and improved mechanisms for their protection.

However, the situation of migrant women workers has got worse, with horrendous stories repeatedly appearing in the media. Women workers were tortured, sexually and physically abused and harassed by the employers and their children. In 1995 2268 women had complained of harassment and 16 women of mutilation. Deaths and suicides have also been common. The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment recorded that 750 women had reported sexual and physical abuse (Kottegoda, 1998).

Service Jobs

What is considered the 'natural' ability of women often decides job requirements, especially when the women are not educated and qualified. Women's roles in the traditional societies are now being transferred into job requirements. Falling under the category of a motherhood ideology, women are required, in addition to cooking, cleaning and household labour, to do nursing and caring of children including differently abled children, the elderly and the sick.

The above categories of jobs, which require different skills and specialization and different remuneration, are all bundled up under one job category, as 'domestic labour' by the employer, for various reasons. The most important reason is justifying depressed wages – since, as women, it is expected that their work which homemakers and mothers also do, could appropriately be performed under one job title: domestic labour. The consequences of such overloading of responsibilities are many. There was no regulation of working hours. Often overworked, the housemaids suffered.

Socio-Familial Disruptions and Their Impact

The women are affected in other ways, when suddenly usual patriarchal relations within the family become eroded – with the withdrawing of household labour, care of the old and infirm, childcare needs, including the underlying emotional care that is extended particularly by mothers who previously had stayed home with their children most of the time. Then there is also the situation of suffering and neglected children. This has resulted in many social deviations. There are innumerable cases of child abuse by the fathers, close relatives or neighbours. Young daughters were reported pregnant, sometimes carrying their own father's child. Husbands have taken up with other women, and on their return, some migrant women workers found a family with a new wife and invariably new children, while their children had been driven out of their homes to their mothers' relatives. In such cases, children were the worst affected. Their education had suffered and their health had deteriorated. Mothers were not informed when the children fell ill, the husband or the mother/ mother-in-law did not want the woman to return and cancel her contract. Some children dropped out of school and were found to be loafing in the neighbourhood during daytime. Emotional deprivation has also led to a syndrome of stammering in children or cases of sullenness, silence and rejection of the material things brought by the mothers are also commonly reported. The children were found to be insolent, disobedient, or 'deviant'. The worst affected were those who were under five when the mother left, while many of those children who were in school fared very badly, scoring very low marks after the mothers had left, They lost interest in studies. (Fernando. 1989: 29-32).

Motherhood as an Ideology and Practice

Motherhood and its extensive ideology, in its various dimensions of care, nurturance emotions and feelings of love and affection, are at play in the way one sees the realities of deprivations for the children – the absence of the mother is not sufficiently or not at all compensated. No one has taken on that role. Do we see this as a heavy burden on the

mothers and do we also accept the notion that mothers cannot be replaced? Or have patriarchal social relations and socialization socially constructed these images which have created these peculiar and particular situations? Fathers are not socialized to care and nurture from the day a child is born. Would children have accepted the father in the mother's role, even if he was used to handling those responsibilities? Would the father then have replaced the mother? While these questions are significant for a feminist discourse, the fact remains that migrant-worker mothers have often created disastrous consequences for the children.

Economically too, the statistics are disappointing.

As Dr. A. J. Weeramunda of the Department of Sociology, University of Colombo, says : "It appears that most returnees are back to square one upon their return as is reflected in the fact that many who are members of Migrant Worker Associations seek micro credit for self-employment projects such as sewing, making handicrafts, petty trade and other economic activities and markets for their products."

Following are some extracts of than article titled "**Foreign migrant domestic workers in the Arab countries - Overview of trends and patterns" (*Daily News* 14/09/2002)**:

> The sending countries don't provide sufficient support for its citizens in the conditions of the contracts, nor do they monitor the employment agencies. On the other hand, the existing labour laws in all the receiving countries don't support this labour force in addition to the existing sponsorship system that is applied.
>
> The labour laws and legislations applied in the Arab countries provide a number of legal guarantees for the migrant labour. However, these labour laws don't apply on the domestic workers. Since their status depends largely on the terms of their work contracts that usually implies that they get very low wages than that defined in the labour laws.

The six Gulf States apply the sponsorship system that has been largely criticized. It implies that the sponsor exercises control over the migrant workers. The insufficiency of legal guarantees to protect domestic workers in the receiving countries leads to gross violation of human rights. That is manifested through the delay in paying their salaries, working over the maximum working hours with no vacations, physically punishing them in inhuman ways by beating them, detention, deprivation of food, in addition to sexual harassment. Reports indicate that thousands of house servants have run away from their employers from Saudi Arabia in the year 1999 due to these violations.

Many workers were surprised when they arrived in Saudi Arabia to be greeted with pressure on them to sign new contracts that decreased their wages and allowances from what they had already agreed on in their former contracts. Labour laws in Arab countries require the employers to provide health and safety insurance for migrant workers. Unfortunately, it does not also included several categories of workers, and most importantly not domestic workers (Fernando 1989: 27).

That migrant workers earned Rs. 478 billion foreign exchange during the last five years (as stated by the Chairman of the SLBFE - *Daily News* - 29/04/2003), is perhaps the only incentive for the State of Sri Lanka to send the women abroad. With this view, the state has provided welfare facilities for the labour force for the invaluable service rendered by them (*Daily News* - 29/04/2003). The facilities among others include medical and insurance policies, bank loans, and scholarship for their children. This is an appeasement strategy that is within the power of the state, which has embarked on a patronising mission. It is paradoxical that even after bringing in or earning this 478 billion rupees, they are still having get loans from their banks to build houses. What has gone wrong?

Domestic aides are seen as vulnerable and have been subjected to various external and internal impediments. Before going, most of them have either sold or mortgaged their house or land and taken loans from the recruitment agents at high interest. They have not been encouraged

to accumulate their own savings. Often, family members have used up their savings before they return, or the husband has spent it on alcohol and settled some perceived loans. This should not, however, obliterate the positive impact of migration of these housemaids, for other families it has brought, economic mobility and better standard of living.

Violence: Sexual and Non-Sexual, a Few Case Studies

Women's labour, as much as it is conceptualised up on the so-called natural capacity of women to cook, nurse and care, also has been conceptualised as the providing bodily service, either with or without their consent. The use and abuse of women's bodies by employers speak not only of the relations of power of an employer vis à vis employee, but also of the politics of location, as Adrienne Rich tells us. In the household of a (powerful) foreign employer, the outside women who do not speak the language, who do not know the laws of the land nor the procedure of reporting of such crimes, and who do not know their rights, find themselves in situations of abject vulnerability of various types. Apart from the factor of body politics sexual vulnerability and the embodiment of power relations of an employee/employer, her location in time and space provides an additional dimension for her vulnerability and for the exploitation she suffers.

A 20 year-old Sri Lankan domestic worker in the Gulf was followed by her employer into the room which she was cleaning, and was raped. She was subsequently thrown down the balcony several floors below. The young woman was admitted with broken ankles to the hospital (*Sunday Island* - **03/09/2003).**

A typical example of the services women are often expected to provide is sexual service to the male employer. These men's wives and mothers do not want to know, as they are often happier that their men are at home being satisfied sexually rather than wandering out for such service for money, possible getting infected with AIDS.

> I cannot go home like this. My husband will kill me. It will also be the end of our family life", sighs heavily pregnant 24 year old Latha now in a haven run by the Salvation Army in Colombo. "I was raped by the 18 year old son of my master when he came back from campus, in the house where I worked. Otherwise everything was okay. The Mama (mistress) and Baba (master) treated me well. I did all the work. They gave me to eat," says pretty Latha, who had gone to Saudi Arabia as a maid in August 2002. She rejected the overtures of the son, but one day she was alone with him when the others went to dinner. "My room door did not have a lock". That was the night it happened after he assaulted her. She could not tell the family her plight because they would not have believed her, but fled from the house, sans a salary, to the embassy and begged the officials to send her back. Fortunately, there was help at the end of her plane ride back. A counter for people like her, set up by the Bureau of Foreign Employment, directed her to Sahana Piyasa close by where a hot meal and a comfortable bed awaited her (*The Sunday Times* 18/05/2003).

To deal with problems arising out of such 'service needs' of the employers, which are outside the labour contract given either willingly or forced into it violently, thus violating the women's dignity, the Sri Lankan state has set up Sahana Piyasa, which is a welfare centre and literally means 'shade of peace' Salvation Army is also running such a centre. Not in a position to prevent such violations or to get the doers-wrong punished in a legal manner, the state has been found to be engaging in containment strategies. The Sri Lankan state in a few cases has even become collaborative in this exercise of sexual violence. Sri Lankan authorities in certain diplomatic missions have subjected some maids to multiple victimization in the safe houses provided for them in the receiving countries (as revealed by personal communication of maids at a seminar conducted by Women's Education and Research Centre on the 8th of March 2002).

There are other women who have given birth and are awaiting good homes for legal adoption of their children. The problems are many – women who are pregnant and others who are psychologically traumatised

or disabled. The pregnant women do not want to go home or they want to get rid of their babies and then go home. Shame, scandal, gossip, plight of the other children and assault by their husbands – these are a series of reasons why they do not want to return to their homes.

Non-sexual violence ranges from burning to beating and mutilation. 35–year-old Nandawathie, who returned, ironically on May Day, from Saudi Arabia with burn injuries, was taken to the hospital direct from the airport (*Island* 11/05/2003). Another 77 were flown back to Sri Lanka from detention camps where they had sought refuge in Lebanon (*Daily News* 10/07/2003). Forty women abandoned in Oman were brought back by the Ministry of Foreign Employment. Deaths of housemaids, in the countries to which they went seeking employment, have also been reported. Often the cause of death is not known. Mystery surrounds these deaths. There were reported cases of suicide too (*Island* 15/01/2003). In many cases, after much delay, the bodies were received by the relatives. In a few cases, women have died in prison and relatives are informed that the remains are being sent (*Daily News* 29/04/2003).

Alienation in new cultural surroundings, loneliness, ineffective means of labour control – being in a kind of trapped labour where passports are held by employers and governed by rules of written labour contract – women are victimised in more than one way (ibid). The embassy reported a daily average of 4-5 runaway female domestic workers. While 18-20 hours of work per day is reported, there are also forms of punishment, varying from being brutalized or raped, to beatings, physical assault, non-payment of wages, unplugging of telephones confinement by being locked in their rooms.

How do we see the overall implications of the situation of migrant women workers? How is the situation different from that of the male migrant workers? Being women, their sexuality can impinge heavily on gender relations. Their labour, being household or domestic, can fall into patterns of extended working hours and comprehensive patterns of labour of an inclusive nature, from cooking to washing to care of the

children, the old and the infirm and differently abled. Being women perceived as being passive, physically weak and gullible, they are also subjected to verbal and physical assault and violence. Apart from gender-specific experiences, there are other equally significant factors. With the introduction of the open economy policy, movement of labour across national borders became possible. Its results were both positive and negative. The assumed upward social mobility was more a minor factor rather than the norm. The negative factors seem to outweigh the positive factors viewing migration from one country to another as economic globalisation also presents has other dimensions. Globalisation, whether economic technical or political, has eroded human rights values. It has diminished the ability and capacity of the states to protect the rights of its citizens both abroad and at home. The state is not in a position to determine its own priorities, but has to fall in line with an agenda of other economically more powerful states which dictate unequal terms. The economic imperatives of sending states means taking risks, risking and bargaining the human dignity of its citizens. This is a new type of economic imperialism, where citizens move physically into other states to suffer exploitation and oppression, and women worse suffer the most.

The negative factors, which have been sensationally highlighted in the media are heard loud and clear. The violations are seen as violations of women's rights, human rights and workers' rights. Neither government ministers nor the civil-society groups could turn a blind eye to scenario of the increasing oppression in the problem of migrant women workers. Interestingly, neither the state nor civil-society organisations, despite the UN Convention on migrant workers, have been able to alleviate the problems faced by the women in the countries to which they migrated. Some of the measures undertaken by the present Sri Lankan Ministry of Employment and Labour are typical of these lapses.

It was reported that in a bid to protect Sri Lankan migrant workers from unscrupulous job agencies and employers, and to maintain a complete database of such workers with personal and precise information, a digital data card system will be implemented (*Sunday Observer* 12/1/

2003). Another such scheme implemented by the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment is to obtain services of lawyers from this year on. This again is supposed to protect those workers facing employment irregularities due to unscrupulous employers. The SLBFE's proposal to start up a bank for migrant workers has both open and hidden motives (*Sunday Observer* 04/05/2003). While the bank is supposed to provide easy banking facilities, it has also stated that the initiatives will bring in additional 300-400 million US Dollars as foreign exchange, that otherwise would end up in exchange centres.

It would seem that the state is primarily interested in increasing foreign-exchange earnings, while at the same time it cannot turn a blind eye to employment irregularities of migrant workers. To choose between these two is very easy for the state. However, the migrant woman worker is more of a problem for other reasons as well. Recently the Ministry of Employment and Labour has struck upon another scheme, which has various gender dimensions and needs to be profoundly deconstructed.

Resurgent Patriarchy and the Complicity of the State: family and motherhood revalorised

The Minister of Labour has announced that the number of Sri Lankan housemaids to foreign countries, especially to the Middle East, will be gradually reduced. This step will prevent family break up and children neglect (*Island*, 23/07/2003). The SLBFE and the Minister of Labour and Employment have become the guardians of the family and children: "Middle East housemaids jobs to be reduced for the good of the family," says the caption of one announcement. The state, which has been powerless to take action for the good of migrant women workers to protect their rights and dignity, somehow by preventing them from going, feels that the family and children can be made (good) again.

Presently, the migrant work-force of Sri Lanka is around one million, of which 70% are women. In deciding on this very honourable project to reduce the number of migrant women workers, the state is embarking on

another project of supplying the demand for male workers to become professionally trained personnel. A professional training centre will be set up at a cost of 50 million rupees to train men in occupations such as construction and reconstruction engineering; while training in welding, electronics, woodwork, automobile repairs, etc., will be undertaken in four more centres to train men for labour migration. Interestingly, the centres will be set up by the governments of Saudi Arabia, Singapore and South Korea, under Sri Lankan Board of Investment (BOI) projects.

The state has found ways and means to deal with the problem of women's sexual vulnerability and other socio-economic vulnerabilities by advocating them out of employment, and by trying to replace the housemaids with male workers, whereby the much needed foreign-exchange balance will remain undisturbed.

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The statistics provide in this paper are from - the Statistical Hand Book on Migration publish by the Research Division , Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment.

The Socialist Feminist Project

*Nancy Holmstrom**

Some would say socialist feminism is an artifact of the 1970s. It flowered with the women's liberation movement, as a theoretical response to what many in the movement saw as the inadequacies of Marxism, liberalism, and radical feminism, but since then it has been defunct, both theoretically and politically. I think this view is mistaken.

Socialist feminism should be seen as an ongoing project. It is alive and well today and it existed before the women's liberation movement as well—though both now and then, not necessarily in that name. It has sometimes been called Marxism, sometimes socialist feminism, sometimes womanism, sometimes materialist feminism, or feminist materialism, and sometimes is implicit in work that bears no theoretical labels. Though the term "socialist feminist" can be used more narrowly, as I will explain, I am going to characterize as a socialist feminist anyone trying to understand women's subordination in a coherent and systematic way that integrates class and sex, as well as other aspects of identity such as race/ethnicity or sexual orientation, with the aim of using this analysis

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to help liberate women) As Barbara Ehrenreich said in 1975 the term socialist feminism "is much too short for what is, after all, really socialist, internationalist, antiracist, antiheterosexist feminism."

Today the socialist feminist project is more pressing than ever. "[T]he need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe...transforming the world in its own image," was the *Communist Manifesto's* prescient description of what is now referred to as "globalisation." "The Battle of Seattle" against the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the demonstrations that have followed in Davos, Quebec City, Genoa, and wherever world economic leaders meet, express peoples' growing awareness of and protest against capitalism as a global force beyond democratic control. The brutal economic realities of globalisation impact everyone across the globe-but women are affected disproportionately. Displaced by rapid economic changes, women bear a greater burden of labour - throughout the world as social services have been cut, whether in response to structural adjustment plans in the third world or to so- called welfare reform in the United States. Women have been forced to migrate, are subject to trafficking, and are the proletarians of the newly industrializing countries. On top of all this they continue to be subject to sexual violence and in much of the world are not allowed to control their own processes of reproduction. How should we understand these phenomena and, more importantly, how do we go about changing them? Feminist theory that is lost in theoretical abstractions or that depreciates economic realities will be useless for this purpose. Feminism that speaks of women's oppression and its injustice but fails to address capitalism will be of little help in ending women's oppression. Marxism's analysis of history, of capitalism, and of social change is certainly relevant to understanding these economic changes, but if its categories of analysis are understood in a gender- or race-neutral way it will be unable to do justice to them. Socialist feminism is the approach with the greatest capacity to illuminate the exploitation and oppression of most of the women of the world.

The broad characterization of socialist feminism I am using allows for a range of views regarding the relationship among the many facets of our identities. Some of us would make class fundamental from an explanatory point of view, while others would refuse to give a general primacy to anyone factor over others. Despite these differences in our perspectives, in the broad sense of "socialist feminism" that I am using here, all socialist feminists see class as central to women's lives, yet at the same time none would reduce sex or race oppression to economic exploitation: And all of us see these aspects of our lives as inseparably and systematically related; in other words, class is always gendered and raced. We should promote conversation, dialogue, and debate among these different perspectives, but it is important to see that the conversation takes place within a common project that underlies the differences. The project has a long history.

What we now call feminism came to public attention in the eighteenth century, most notably in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), where she argued for equal opportunity for women based on a rational capacity common to both sexes, expressing "the wild wish to see the sex distinction confounded in society." Her feminist aspirations came together with socialistic aims in the thinking of a number of utopian socialists, whose visions of socialism included not only sexual equality in the family and society at large but the end of the sexual division of labour- Wollstonecraft's "wild wish" which is radical even today. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels shared these aspirations and deepened the critique of naturalistic justifications of all social hierarchies. But Marx and Engels were impatient with blueprints for a good society and focused instead on developing a theory of history, society, and social change which would be the basis for the realization of these ideals. It is worth pausing briefly to consider what Marx and Engels said, since Marxism has had a great influence on feminism, whether it has been appropriated, rejected, or transformed.

To summarize many volumes in a paragraph: according to Marxism's historical materialist approach, history is a succession of modes of

production like feudalism and capitalism, each constituted by distinctive relations between the direct producers and the owners of the means of production who live off the labour of the producers. History, says the opening lines of the *Communist Manifesto,* is the history of class struggles...freeman and slave...lord and serf...in a word, oppressor and oppressed." But, although oppression and exploitation are common to all class societies, the relations between oppressor and oppressed have varied; in other words, exactly how each ruling class manages to live off the labour of the producers differs from one mode of production to another and each must be understood in its own terms.

> The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers, determines the relations of rulers and ruled It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers...which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it...the corresponding specific form of the state.'

Not only the state, but the family, art, philosophy, and religion-even human nature-all take different forms in different modes of production. Marx goes on to say that what is basically the same economic basis can show "infinite variations and gradations in appearance," depending on specific historical conditions, which have to be studied in detail. In other words, within capitalism different forms of government and art and family are possible because capitalism is not the only influence. Nevertheless, the relations of production have an explanatory primacy within Marxist theory because they constitute the framework within which other influences occur. And this is because the relations of production provide the "laws of motion" distinctive to each given mode of production. Thus capitalism, the mode of production most studied by Marx, is understood to be a unique historical form aimed at the maximization of profit in a competitive market system. This forces capitalists to strive continually to develop the productivity of labour and technology; for, according to Marx's theory, profit has its origin in wage labour. Though, unlike in slavery or serfdom, labour is legally free in capitalism, workers in capitalism are also free of any means of subsistence of their I own; this forces them to

work for capitalists and produce the profit that drives the system. Given these essential characteristics of all capitalist societies, while different and changing forms of government are possible, the constraints of capitalism rule out possibilities such as a true monarchy or a workers' government. Just what forms of family are possible within capitalism has been a matter of some debate.

Given the concepts' centrality in their theory, Marx and Engels focused on the oppression and exploitation inherent in the relationship between wage labourers and capitalists. They paid less attention to other forms of labour-for example, the labour of peasants or of women in the family-and to other kinds of oppression simply because they were not as central to their project of understanding capitalism and overturning it. Marx and Engels believed that if they could understand how capital- ism worked and help make workers' conscious of their oppression they could contribute to workers' self-emancipation. They believed that the self-emancipation of the working class-men and women, of all nations races, and creeds-would be the basis for the end of all other forms of oppression. With the establishment of the first real democracy, the rule of the immense majority-that is, socialism-class oppression and antagonism would be replaced by "an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." As to how such a society would be organized, they pointed to the Paris Commune of 1870 as "what a workers' government would look like," but otherwise said very little.

Tragically, the first successful socialist revolution took place in Russia-a country that lacked the large working class and the material development that Marx saw as necessary for socialism-and no successful revolutions followed in Western Europe where these necessary conditions did exist. In the early years of the revolution when Alexandra Kollontai was in the government and women were organized independently within the Communist Party, remarkable gains were made for women, from the end of legal restrictions on sexual behavior including homosexuality and abortion, to preventing women's jobs being given to returning soldiers (they were allocated on the basis of need rather than sex) to the provision

of communal restaurants, laundries, and childcare. However most of these gains were eliminated later on and women were certainly not emancipated in the Soviet Union. But this does not show, as many commentators would have it, that "socialism failed women." Men were not liberated either. This was far from the socialism-from- below that the classical Marxists had envisioned. Whatever the inadequacies of Marxist theories on what they called the "woman question," there was no opportunity to correct them, for, as Marx had predicted in *The German Ideology,* without the necessary conditions for socialism, "all the old crap"-exploitation and oppression-would return. And indeed it did, in the form of Stalin's dictatorship, which expropriated the name of Marxism, established a mode of production Marx had never foreseen and destroyed the vision of socialism for millions of people.

In the mid-1970s many women within the women's liberation movement found themselves dissatisfied with the prevailing analyses of women's oppression. Liberalism was not radical enough, and radical feminism ignored economic realities. But Marxism was tainted, as Adrienne Rich describes, "by the fear that class would erase gender once again, when gender was just beginning to be understood as a political category.'" Seeking to combine the best of Marxism and radical feminism, these women developed a theory they called socialist feminism. When socialist feminism is intended in this way-as differentiated from Marxism-"Marxist feminism" is then understood as a perspective which gives primacy to class oppression as opposed to other forms of oppression-or going further, that reduces sex oppression to class oppression. (Radical feminism asserts the reverse relationship.) While the terms "Marxist feminism" and "socialist feminism" can be used in these narrower senses, the distinctions are to some extent verbal. As Rosemarie Tong concedes in *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction,* not everyone will agree with her classification of feminists into "Marxist" or "socialist.'" For Tong, "[a]lthough it is possible to distinguish between Marxist and socialist-feminist thought, it is quite difficult to do so." While there are theoretical differences among socialists' and feminists on various issues, which in some contexts are important, *the terms* "Marxist" or "socialist"

or "materialist" do not necessarily denote different perspectives. In *Feminist Politics and Human Nature,* Alison Jaggar suggests that socialist feminism may be a more consistent Marxism.' Which term a feminist chooses to describe herself reflects her particular understanding of Marxism and her theoretical and political milieu, and perhaps her personal experience, as much as it does the sub- stance of her position. For example, Margaret Benston's classic 1969 article "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation" is described as a Marxist feminist analysis of household labour because she used Marxist categories and clearly saw herself as writing within a Marxist theoretical framework.' In fact Benston modified Marxist categories in ways that other feminists would say showed that Marxism was inadequate and needed a distinctive socialist feminist theory." Her article stimulated quite a debate regarding how to understand household labour within Marxist/socialist feminist terms-the so-called domestic labour debate.

In the 1990s the term "materialist feminism" gained currency, coined by feminists who wanted to give some grounding in social realities to postmodernist theory. However, materialist feminism is "a rather problematic and elusive concept," in Martha Gimenez's apt characterization, in that sometimes it is used more or less as a synonym *for* "Marxist" or "socialist feminist" combined with discourse analysis (as in the work of Rosemary Hennessy), while it is also used by cultural feminists who ~ want nothing to do with Marxism.[7] Yet another term that does not necessarily signal a distinct theoretical perspective regarding the relation- ship among class, sex, and race is "womanist," a term preferred by some women of colour who feel that "feminist" is too one-dimensional and who want to indicate solidarity with men of colour as well as with women. Similarly, those who call themselves "multicultural" or "global" feminists would be socialist feminists in my broad sense. Feminists use a particular term to situate themselves within particular debates.

It is "socialist feminism" in the narrower sense that has declined. Developed by feminists who accepted Marxism's critique of capitalism but rejected the view that women's oppression was reducible to class

oppression-which is how they understood the Marxist analysis-they argued that women's position in today's society was a function of both the economic system (capitalism) and the sex-gender system, which they called patriarchy. Some socialist feminists preferred to speak of one system they called capitalist patriarchy. But whether they preferred one system or two, the key claim was that the mode of production had no greater primacy than sex-gender relations in explaining women's subordination. Many saw the Marxist emphasis on wage labour rather than on all kinds of labour, especially mothering, and on the relations of production rather than on the relations they called "the relations of reproduction," (sexuality and parenting), as sexist. Convinced that "the personal is political" they wanted to give theoretical and political attention to issues of sex, sexuality, and relations in the family which some utopian socialists had addressed but which most Marxists ignored.

This distinctively anti-Marxist version of socialist feminism declined I believe, for both internal and external reasons. Socialist feminists of the 1970s had criticized liberal and Marxist writers for using categories that were "gender-blind": "the individual" in liberalism, "the working class" in Marxism. Such categories ignore sex differences among individuals and workers, feminists argued, and hence neither liberalism nor Marxism could explain women's oppression. But women of colour could and did make the same criticism of feminism, including socialist feminism, for using race-blind categories: "working class women," or simply "women." To accommodate race oppression (and heterosexism and other forms of oppression), there seemed to be two choices. If we need to posit "a system of social relations" to explain sexism as they argued, then to explain racism (and other forms of oppression) we would have to posit systems beyond capitalism and patriarchy. This option raised a number of questions including: What exactly constitutes a "system"? How many is enough? How are they related? How does the resulting perspective differ from simple pluralism? The other option was to go back to a theory like Marxism which aims to be all-inclusive. Since socialist feminists had distinguished themselves from Marxists because they were unclear how to integrate different forms of oppression without reducing one to the

other, this did not seem an attractive option, but neither did the multiplication of systems. Hence there was and remains a lack of clarity, and disagreement as to exactly how different forms of oppression are related.

Socialist feminism as a theoretical position distinct from Marxism also declined for external reasons, both intellectual and political. On the intellectual front, it would be difficult to overemphasize the influence post modernism has had in the academic world. Starting from valid critiques of many theories' over generalisations and neglect of historical and political context, postmodernists ended up arguing from very anti-theoretical positions. Their emphasis on the local and particular, their attack on what they call "totalising narratives" and on the very notion of truth and causality, were deeply discouraging to feminists trying to develop a coherent and systematic theory of women's oppression. The insight associated with postmodernism (though actually it was not new) that social and political power influence science, led many to scepticism. Also despite the inconsistency, it led many to claim that everything is socially constructed thereby eliminating the distinction between sex and gender that had been so central to feminist critiques of gender relations. But if the body disappears in significations, what is the basis for arguing for reproductive rights? Given that some of postmodernism builds on insights associated with feminism and presents itself as radical, its effect was disorienting to say the least.

Turning to political causes, the decline of women's liberation and other social movements had a profound impact. The explosion of writing by feminists of all persuasions (indeed the creation of these "per suasions") was a product of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Consider the fact that a number of very influential articles of this period began as position statements for activist groups (the Redstockings' Manifesto, the Combahee River Collective's Statement), or as collective papers (Heidi Hartmann's and Gayle Rubin's-two of the most influential of this period). New movements stimulated new theorizing; for example, the gay and lesbian movements gave rise to the academic field Queer Studies. With the move of many activists into social policy and service

work for women, into academia, and into families and middle age this essential active stimulation was lost. It is not coincidental that the hottest feminist theorizing of the last decade was of a highly academic sort-postmodernism-while the dominant politics have been the most local and particularistic form of identity politics. Moreover, of course, we have to appreciate the context in which all this has taken place, namely, the general rightward political drift throughout the world during the 1980s and much of the 1990s.

My own opinion is that critiques of Marxism as sexist for focusing on relations of production and for ignoring labour- in the family are misguided given the primary aim of Marxist theory, as explained above. It was not sexism that led Marx to say that in capitalism women's household labour was unproductive for he said the same thing about a carpenter working for the government. Although both are obviously productive in a general sense, Marx was seeking to understand what is productive from the point of view of capitalism-that only labour produces surplus value. Moreover, to understand how various aspects of society including different forms of oppression, interrelate-and, more important, how to change them-we need a theory that addresses these questions. That is precisely what historical materialism aims to do both in its sociological aspect and in its account of historical change. Hence it remains vitally important. Though any theory developed over a century ago needs some revision, in my opinion Marxism's basic theory does not need significant revision in order to take better account of women's oppression. However, I do believe that the theory needs to be supplemented. Feminists are justified in wanting a social theory that gives a fuller picture of production and reproduction than Marx's political economic theory does, one that extends questions of democracy not only to the economy but to personal relations. They are also justified in wanting to pay attention to the emotional dimensions of our lives, both to understand how oppression manifests itself in the most intimate aspects of our lives and also, most importantly, to give a more complete vision of human emancipation. The potential is there in Marxism. Marx's subtle understanding of how economic relations penetrate into our very being make him "a great geographer of the human

condition," in Adrienne Rich's characterization. But these insights were under- developed. Furthermore, Marx's and Engels's commitment to a genuinely democratic socialism led them to ignore questions of what socialism would look like, saying they did not want to "write recipe books for the cooks of the future." But what economic democracy would look like is an extraordinarily complicated question and explorations would have been helpful. Moreover, this omission made it easier to equate socialism with what existed in the Soviet bloc or in the social-welfarist capitalism of Western Europe. Today we need these prefigurative visions of social- ism more than ever and feminists have much to contribute to them.

Socialist feminist theorizing (in the broad sense) is flourishing, particularly in empirical work by historians and other social scientists. This work has been influential, showing that feminist theory is still a collective enterprise, as its practitioners always stress. What is now called "intersectionality"-that is, the recognition that a woman's position is always a function of her class, ethnicity, and so on, as well as her sex- is paid at least lip service by most feminists. Often, however, this recognition is expressed simply as a list of "isms," of which "classism" is given least attention or else is conflated with racism so that white is invariably coupled with middle class and black with poor. It is only in the work that I am calling socialist feminist in the broad sense that these aspects are integrated coherently and systematically. A socialist feminist perspective also informs what activism there is, including most significantly, labour activism. While this is probably due more to the fact that the workforce of the United States is increasingly female and minority than to the influence of socialist feminist theory, nevertheless it is significant. Even NOW (the National Organization of Women) is considerably more class and race conscious than it was in its early days when it focused on the ERA (Equal Rights Amendment) and the legalization of abortion while virtually ignoring the Hyde Amendment which denied the use of Medicaid funds for abortion.

I believe the time is right for a positive reappraisal of the socialist feminist perspective. The brutal economic realities of globalisation make

it impossible to ignore class, and feminists are now asking on a global level the kinds of big questions they asked on a societal level in the 1970s. A number of developments in the United States are also significant in this regard. Most important is the fact that the increasingly female and minority composition of the workforce makes it more apparent that sharp splits between class oppression and sex or race oppression, or between workplace and community issues are untenable practically and theoretically. The commitment of the new leadership of the AFLCIO to organizing has raised peoples' interest and their hopes. Students across the country have become active around the issue of sweatshops and have linked up with labour groups around the world. A conference was held at Harvard a few years back on Students and Labour. This was followed by a long and successful Campaign for a Living Wage, at Harvard, in the spring of 2001. Two conferences on Academics and Labour have taken place. The academic focus on cultural issues to the J exclusion of politics is beginning to seem one-sided, even self-indulgent, to more and more people. I believe the grip of postmodernism and identify politics is loosening as attacks have increased from all quarters. Even within identify politics there is some indirect attention to class, as for example in "white trash" literature. However, we must not leave these criticisms to the right (and to those on the left such as Todd Gitlin). It is essential to retain the insights of the 1960s. Socialist theory and practice that failed to give serious attention to issues of gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality would have little credibility today. And so, in addition to criticism, it is important to offer positive examples of analyses that integrate class with those other aspects of identify. It is also important to pursue theoretical discussion within the broad socialist feminist perspective regarding the relationship between class and other aspects of identify and the meaning of "material" and "economic." The recent internal critiques of postmodernism by feminists who have tried to take it in a more realist and materialist direction have broadened this discussion. With economic questions once again central to many feminists' agendas, and with the apparent decline of postmodernism, this is an opportune time to reconsider how Marxism can help us comprehend the global reality of women's oppression and how Marxism itself needs to be revised or supplemented.

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From Murder to Violence Against Women: The Beginnings of a Feminist Debate in Sri Lanka[1]

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Often feminists in Sri Lanka and elsewhere have asserted the claim that "for many centuries violence against women was not only unrecognized: it was quite often legitimizes in some way of the other. Cultural practices, religious beliefs, and state laws are a few instances that have imposed violent practices or acts upon women."[2] The assertion here is that violence against women has been "shrouded in darkness" until recently and it is feminists that have created social consciousness over this issue. In such assertions culture, religion and law act upon a biologically constituted woman, and the linear history of feminism tells a story of increased awareness bringing into society concern regarding women and violence. While it has often been a feminist consciousness that has emphasised the importance of the issue of women and violence, such perceptions often seem to suggest a stableness of the category of violence against women. For example, Radhika Coomaraswamy states "in Sri Lanka, until the late 1980s, violence against women was seen as a taboo subject. Women who raised these issues were dismissed as family-wreckers and trouble makers. At independence in 1948, the problem was completely invisible. A review of the literature of the period,

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even among women's groups and organisations, shows a thrust on economic and social developments with no thrust on violence against women."[3] Hence, here is an affirmation that violence against women is an issue that is shrouded in patriarchal forms of oppression, and that feminists uncover what was hidden, but always there. These analyses do not for example, take into account the notion that what constitutes violence against women may be conditioned by various factors, maybe a creative act. It does not look at how violence against women may emerge at a certain moment in history because of a certain set of political, structural shifts in a given society at a given time.

As Coomaraswamy has noted, it is only in the 1980s that the focus on violence against women comes into its own in feminist debates. There is no earlier work done on this issue in post-colonial Sri Lanka; rather feminists had previously looked into issues of health, equal pay, education, all of which I shall for convenience sake call issues related to gender and development heavily influenced by concerns of labour and class. What then motivated feminists in Sri Lanka to focus on the issue of women and violence only in the 1980s? What shifts took place within the feminist movement in Sri Lanka that enabled feminists to focus on the issue of the gendered body subjected to violence? This paper then hopes to do 3 things in relation to the above questions.

1. It will attempt to argue that feminists did not come to 'see' the violated woman simply because violence against women occurred as an objective act, grasped by feminists simply because it happens. Feminists do not see heterosexual forms of violence, simply because men violate women, because men rape women or harass them and humiliate them in various ways. Rather, this paper will argue that it is only in the 1980s that feminists had a set of analytical tools and vocabulary to comprehend the phenomenon of violence against women. To understand the emergence of this category of violence against women, I will use the figure of Adeline Vitharne. My argument in this instance will be that what was clearly a case of murder, that of Vitharne, becomes a case of violence against women in the 1980s

2. This paper will look at the nature of some of those debates and definitions of violence against women in the early 1980s.
3. This paper will also tease out some of the social and political changes that may have lead to the very emergence of the category and how this emergence may have configured the feminist subject, the woman and her body in a certain way.

I hope that this work will suggest to the reader the very contextual, political nature of the emergence of violence against women in Sri Lanka and its complex links to a variety of activities both within and outside the state.

Retelling and old story with a different twist.

In 1985, the *Voice of Women* special issue on Violence Against Women states:

> This issue of Voice of Women (Kantha Handa) is devoted to a theme with which women have been increasingly concerned in recent years- women and violence. Women are subjected to many forms of violence- from harassment in the streets and the workplace to domestic violence, rape and incest. Many cases of women victims of such violence have been highlighted recently in the national press.[4]

The special issue is one of the earliest attempts where feminists focus on violence against women in Sri Lanka, and includes in it "a number of papers presented at the February [1984] seminar on 'Women and Violence,' they give some account of the existing situation in Sri Lanka with regard to crimes against women. We also reproduce articles describing the situation in other countries where some form of organized resistance to violence against women has already emerged."[5] The conference referred to here, is also the first in Sri Lanka to focus on women and violence.

The cover page of this journal is for this paper as important as some of the contents in this issue. The cover page has a scene from one of the final shots of Vasantha Obeysekere's award winning film *Dadayama* (1982). The two visuals placed one below the other is of the heroine of the film, Ratmali Kekulawala, brandishing a pole moments before her death at her murderer who is placed above her in the cover page driving in the shattered vehicle that he uses to kill her. This cover page then opens up a space, or is emblematic of the topic to be discussed in the special issue of violence against women by feminists in Sri Lanka such as Kumari Jayawardena, Rohini Dep Weerasinghe, Manouri Muttetuwagama of whom at least some were part of Kantha Handa[6]. A discussion of the film occurs only in the Sinhala edition of the journal entitled "Sinhala Cinemave Nirupita Kanthave"; however, the cover opens up a general space for the discussion of violence against women.[7]

This film is interesting not only because of its cinematic excellence, but also because it is at least partially a re-depiction and a re-narrativization of a murder that occurred in 1959 in Sri Lanka in which Adeline Vitharne was murdered at the turn to the Wilpattu national park by her lover Jayalal Anandagoda. This incident which was a sensation at the time was documented in Judge A.C. Alles' well-known *The Wilpattu Murder case*[8] in 1975 and translated into Sinhala as *Wilpattu Sihiwatanaya* in 1976. The case's popularity is further testified in the multiple appearances it makes in newspaper reportage over the decades, even as late as 1991 when Alles sues director of film Obeyesekere over copyright issues.

What the first part of the paper hopes to do is to locate the shifts in discourse that took place by the 1980s over this event from those in the 1950s and 1970s. I use the figure of Vitharne to draw attention to the multiple ways an event can be understood. Hence, it is only when feminists start working on violence against women that Vitharne's murder emerges as an instance of violence against women. To trace the shifts in discourse, I will focus on what one may call part of the public domain: the print media such as newspapers and journal articles. This section does not attempt to be a film analysis, but rather hopes to look at

responses to the film made by a public that accepted and determined it as a re-depiction, at least in part, of the famous Vilpattu murder case. I hope then to locate some of the shifts in discourse through an analysis of responses to the film and to the Vitharne case. Here, I wish to suggest more than the fact that a feminist consciousness makes it possible for us to see the category of violence against women, rather I will argue that responses to the film is a creative act, a way of giving new meaning to an old act because political and social structures within the feminist movement had shifted by this time.

Adeline Vitharne[9]

Shanti Adeline Vitharne was born on June 10th 1937 in the village of Palletalawinne in the Kandy District to baker Abraham Vitharne and Punchimanike. She has an older sister named Agnes. Palletalawinne came to be the family's eventual residence and where Adeline would continue to live till her death in 1959.

While travelling on a train on 2nd November 1956, Adeline Vitharne met a young man named Jayalal Anandagoda (nee Gernel Anandagoda). She along with her father and grandmother had caught the train to Kandy from the Fort railway station. During this train journey he conversed with Adeline Vitharne and both of them planned to meet again in the near future. At this time and for some time to come Anandagoda had given his name as Lal Attapattu and had stated that he was an employer of the Bank of Ceylon.

For some time afterwards, Adeline Vitharne and Lal Attapattu (Anandagoda) continued as lovers and often met at the Kadugannawa Guest House. By December Adeline was pregnant with child and after discussions with Lal and Adeline's family, Lal had promised to marry Adeline once he had finished his exams. During the months of her first pregnancy Lal refrained from visiting Adeline and her telegrams and letter to an address in Panadura did not bring forth any information from Lal. Sometime during the last two months of Adeline's pregnancy, she and

her mother Punchimanike travelled to Panadura in search of Lal. At this point they met Anandagoda's friend Muttulingam who told them that he knew no one called Lal Attapattu. A few days later Adeline Vitharne had given birth to a child. Later Adeline would visit Muttulingam again and learn of Lal Attapattu's real name and that he was a teacher at the Nanodaya College, Kalutara.

In June 1958, Adeline finally traced her lover. At this time Adeline had been working in Colombo, but Anandagoda had renewed his promises of marriage to her and had convinced her to return home and give up her employment in Colombo. By this time Anandagoda had already become engaged to a young woman living in Kalutara of the same social standing as him. Hence, Adeline Vitharne would simply be an obstacle to his realizing his dreams. However, from this time onwards the two became lovers once more. By October 1958, Adeline was again pregnant with a second child.

Anandagoda was a teacher at the Nanodaya College in Kalutara, but was also a car dealer and ran a guest house in Moratuwa called The Park-view Guest House.

Adeline Vitharne by Alles' accounts and newspaper reports seemed to be determined to marry Anandagoda and rise above the scandal that was facing her in her home town. The continued threats, and payments that Anandagoda had made to her had no effect as she continued her demand that he marry her. He was becoming desperate to get rid of her.

It was at this point then that he set up a plan to intimidate and humiliate her further. In November 1958 Anandagoda arrived with two women who he claimed were his mother and sister. Adeline, Anandagoda, and these two women met at the Kandy railway station and travelled to Punchimenike's house. Here, Anandagoda's mother apologized to Punchimenike for the shameful treatment his son had put her and Adeline through. They claimed that they had come to take Adeline home with them and get both Adeline and Anandagoda married. (By this time Adeline's father

Abraham had abandoned the family and left for his native town Gongala because of Adeline's actions.) Adeline left her child behind, and travelled with the other three in Anandagod'a car and stayed at a house in the village of Walakuumbura close to Alawwa. Here Anandagoda left Adeline with the two women. It turns out that the woman who claimed to be Anandagoda's mother was actually a woman named Millie who ran a "house of ill fame"[10] there. Adeline stayed there for 12 days, and then returned home [11].

After this episode Adeline was determined to get Anandagoda to marry her. She had visited him again but he had been unmoved by her pleas. Her persistence was becoming a nuisance to him as he and his fiancé had fixed a date for their marriage in August 1959. If Anandagoda's fiancée were to find out about his affair with Adeline, the wedding would have been cancelled.

On the 2nd of March in 1959 Adeline stated that she would go to visit her father who had returned to his native town in Gonagala, but first would visit Anandagoda in Kalutara. Anandagoda with the help of Podisingho Perera housed Adeline for a week at Podisingho's brother Alo Singho's house in Kalawellawa in Kalutara.

On the 14th of March in 1959, Anandagoda picked Adeline up from Alo Singho's house on the pretext of finally marrying her. She left Alo Singho's house in Anadagoda's fiat car with Podi Singho accompanying both of them. He later picked up Sirisena, a well known chandiya, who worked as a security guard at Anandagoda's guesthouse in Moratuwa to accompany them on their journey.

By approximately 10 pm that night Anandagoda had stopped at a restaurant in Puttalam. There he and the others had dinner, and Anandagoda had drugged Adeline before they started their onward journey through the Puttala- Anuradhapura road. While driving towards the Wilpattu national park, Adeline had started perspiring and struggling against the drugs she had been given. According to Anandagoda's accomplices he had asked them to hit her on the head with a iron rod to quieten her

down. Sirisena hit her hard on the head with this the rod after which she had lain quietly for a while only struggling once with the use of her umbrella as defence. Later, the umbrella was found close to where her body lay.

Close to the small village of Timbiriwewa, they lowered Adeline's body close to the car and drove over her four times. After this Anandagoda returned to Kalutara in the early hours of the morning.

Adeline Vitharne's body was found the very next day by a truck driver, descriptions of the body were placed in the newspapers on the 16th and 17th of March. Her body was soon identified and Anandagoda, Podi Singho and Sirisena were tried at the Anuradhapura Assize a few months later. A.C. Alles was the acting solicitor general for the Anuradhapura jurisdiction at the time.

There then seem to be the 'basic facts' of the story, reported in the newspapers from when the body was found on the 15th March 1959, till the end of the court proceedings in 1960. Much of the details of the proceedings had been carefully collected and written down in later years by Alles. Why then in the eighties does Obeysekere's film on this age-old incident create a forum upon which feminists can re-discuss this issue in a very different light? What are the shifts in discourse on this incident in the 1985 *Voice of Women* special issue and in other commentaries? Let me attempts to answer the second question first by comparing the different kinds of vocabulary used at the three significant moments in this narrative while retaining my focus in the 1980s.

From Murder to Violence Against Women

The vocabulary that was used by the 1980s differs greatly from the older descriptions of Adeline and the incident of her murder. Some of these shifts I will look at are

1. The definition of what happened to Adeline Vitharne
2. Adeline Vitharne's sexual encounters with Jayalal Anandagoda
3. The figure of Millie[12]

While there are differences between the way the event is described in the 1959-1960 period and that of the 1975 Alles' publication and responses to it, for the purposes of this paper I will draw only on the marked differences between the earlier analyses of Adeline's Vitharne's death and the 1980s take on it. I hope through this to illustrate tentatively the fact that what becomes fact or real, of what we 'see' is conditioned by the questions posed and the dominant concerns of our time. Feminists do not encounter instances of violence against women simply because it is there objectively to be grasped, but because of certain conditions that constitute what the event may be and how we create meaning out of that event. Hence, what today to me, conditioned by over two decades of discourse on violence against women, working on a project on women and violence, appears 'obvious' forms of gendered violence do not appear so before the 1980s.

In the reports of the murder trial in the *Daily News* newspaper in 1959 and in Alles' book *The Vilpattu Murder Case* Adeline Vitharne's death is a murder case only. The accusations against Anandagoda and his two accomplices are only conspiracy to commit murder and the murder of Adeline Vitharne.[13] There is no real attention paid as to how she may have been treated by Anandagoda, as to whether there was abuse or intimidation except the statements that she had been 'ravished' and drugged and induced to have sexual intercourse with him. Both reports see Adeline Vitharne as an innocent victim of a heinous murder crime. It is her virtue and honour that are shamed because of her relationship with Anandagoda suggesting the importance of some form of sexual purity.[14] In the *Daily News* reports of the crime, the very nature of her 'seduction', of being drugged by him and then 'ravished' and the very nature of her death, again drugged, beaten by an iron rod, and then finally driven over while alive and in an advances stage of pregnancy do not in any way cause the public to suggest any form of gendered violence on Anandagoda's part. For example, in the reports that were written at the time of her death, there is really very little mention of any form of sexual activity between the two. Any overt discussion is stopped because of the very indecent nature of such a discussion. It is rather commented

that "Adeline was "an unsophisticated and pretty Kandyan girl a good student a sports woman, a simple village lass who had endeavoured to master something in life."[15] The comments seem ones of ideal village innocence, of a young girls struggle to 'make something of herself, to perhaps overcome her class position. Much of the energy of the prosecution was to establish her good nature and seriousness of intent. Despite the terms seduced and ravished being used during the trial, there are no suggestions that she may have been a victim to violence against women.

Let me quote an extract from Alles' book:

> She had an unblemished moral character and although she had fallen to the wiles and glib talk of a smooth-tongued young man from the South, she never stooped to becoming a common strumpet. After her seduction her one object was to use all means within her power to get her seducer to marry her honourably. In this venture she failed and paid for it dearly with her own life. When Anandagoda in later years took her away on the pretext of getting married and kept her at bawdy house, she returned home after a short time, indignant that she should have been treated like a common prostitute[16].

Alles too obviously sees Adeline as a victim of a manipulative man, but not a victim of gendered violence. Commentaries on Alles's publication do not differ greatly in their analysis of the Adeline Vitatherne case in this regard. It is obviously this that allows both the trial and Alles's book to see her case as a clear cut incident of murder.

In regards to her sexual relations with Anandagoda.

> According to her [Adeline's account of her sexual encounter with Anandagoda as stated to the police at the Wattegama police station during her first pregnancy]
> Anandagoda met her in the car and invited her to go to Colombo regarding a job. She refused as she had come without her parents' knowledge. He then took her to the Kadugannawa Rest House, where Anandagoda signed the book and invited her to come inside the room. At first she refused, but after some coaxing on Anandagoda's part, she entered the room. Anandagoda then gave her some aerated water.... He then closed the door and she felt herself lapsing into unconsciousness. When she recovered consciousness she realized she had been ravished.... If Adeline's account of her seduction represents the truth, *Anandagoda had committed a criminal offence behind the closed doors of a room at the Kadugannawa Rest House.* (emphasis mine)[17]

Notice the possibility of violence against Adeline arising in the horizon to be reduced to the term 'seduction' rather than rape. Alles' awareness that it is a possible rape case is suggested in the term criminal offence that he uses to describe the incident. He however does not name it but rather defines it as seduction and drops the subject entirely. This I would suggest in not simply because Alles is a man, or because women were not allowed the space to articulate issues of rape at the time, but rather because the issue of rape, though obviously in existence as a legal category did not present itself as an analytical problem to be grappled with by society at large.

Similarly, attitudes toward Adeline's stint at Millie's house are glossed over and ignored. In the 1960 reports on Adeline's stay with sex-worker Millie to whose house Adeline goes to under the belief that she is Anandagoda's mother these are some of the statements. "As Adeline went upto the car, she asked Anandagoda 'have you come to take me away again with these two prostitutes? Adeline then said that she had not told her mother that she was taken to a brothel."[18] In another instance when reporting the testimony of Chandra de Silva, the young woman who posed at Anandagoda' sister, the papers say "she [Chandra] had lived in Ragama and Pussellawa with Milly Fernando. From Waturugama they were compelled to leave as the neighbours were hostile to Milly Fernando. At this stage, Crown Counsel said that the witness had not been brought there as a paragon of virtue but there were certain standards of decency in cross-examination."[19]

In Alles' book the instances when Adeline stays with Millie and Millie herself are described with little reference to what may have happened to Adeline while she stayed there. Millie is treated conventionally as a woman of ill fame. Firstly, Millie is described as "a woman with a murky past" who "went on a man hunting spree" and ran "a house of ill fame."[20] She was "such a miserable specimen of womanhood that she had no qualms about making immoral arrangements for her own relations." At Millie's house Adeline had been "treated like a common prostitute."[21]

How Adeline may have been treated like a common prostitute is of no interest to Alles or to the reading public at the time. Alles' book comes out in 1975 and a Sinhala version of it in 1976, both of which do not gather much comment from feminists despite the text's rich insinuations.

While, one may argue that by 1960 the feminist movement in Sri Lanka had not organized itself sufficiently to demand the analysis of the case as an instance of violence against women, by 1975 feminists had organized far more to combat patriarchy, but we see that there is still no such response. While Alles may not have been savvy with feminist terminology, it becomes clear that to feminists violence against women had not arrived at the horizon of their inquiry. Surely, the 1970s was a time of rich feminist scholarship and activity? Feminists such as Kumari Jayawardena, Manouri Muttetuwagama, Selvy Thiruchandran, Mala Dasanayake, Hema Goonatileke were all part of the feminist movement in Sri Lanka. They had organized branches of Voice of Women throughout the country and spoke out vociferously on women and oppression. This gaze however had not yet seen violence against women as an analytical problem.

I do not refer here only to the lack of response to Alles' publication, but to the murder by the armed forces of Premawathie Manamperi during what is termed the 1971 JVP insurrection. Premawathie, a beauty queen from Kataragama was detained at the army camp in the area overnight, made to march naked and then killed by the armed forces. Feminists at the time did not see this as a moment of gendered oppression, but only

as a murder case.[22] Once the imprisoned JVP insurrectionaries were released from prison and the Manamperi case becomes a point of reflection, there is still no reference to her being anything other than murdered. It is only much later that this issue becomes mobilized and used by both feminists and the JVP for different purposes.

A careful look at H.A.I. Goonetileke's *A Bibliography of Ceylon (Sri Lanka[23])* which records published works until 1979 will confirm that the feminist gaze was elsewhere. A look at Leelangi Wanasundera's *Women of Sri Lanka: An annotated bibliograpgy[24]* will confirm this point further. While most feminists may suggest that violence against women is an age-old phenomenon, it is not an issue that has been the focus of feminist intervention in the pre-1980 period of feminist work in Sri Lanka.

By the 1980s, this has changed. From the '80s to date this issue has been one of the most important debates in Sri Lanka, assured of enormous feminist interrogation, donor funding and legal energy.

The special issue of *Voice of Women* on violence against women in 1985 foregrounds the film and through it the death of Adeline Vitharne very differently. I do not attempt here to suggest that the creative work of the film can parallel reality. Why I have chosen to look at commentaries of this film to discuss the case of Adeline Vitharne is because of the very realist mode in which the film is put forth. In addition, there is a general acceptance of the film as a re-depiction of the Adeline Vitharne incident not only by the general public, but also by the director himself. Obeysekera in the numerous interviews he gave after this film repeats his commitment to realist film that would reflect the true experiences of people.[25] Furthermore, according to Laleen Jayamanne's study on women in Sinhala cinema[26], the realist mode was the aspired form and a productive shift in films from the melodrama and generic films produced in our cinema history or as Reggie Siriwardena says of the film it turned "popular melodrama into serious and meaningful cinema.... [to] go to the heart of our social life."[27] When asked why Obeysekera chose to work on the film he admits that it is because the murder happened in his home town

and he wished to re-capture that incident.[28] Many of the commentaries cross from the film to the Adeline Vitharne case very easily.

In the article which translates as "Best Portrayal of a Woman in the Sinhala Cinema," the writer has this to say: "With a feminist revolution in mind, this film portrays a contemporary woman's ability to fight against oppression. Rathmalie (the character of Adeline Vitharne in the film) contains within her all the virtues of an Eastern woman. Her obeisance to Jayanath (the character of Anandagoda) reflects the one weakness in womanhood. She dies only when she destroys the life of her rapist. Rathmalie's character portrays the real struggles of today's women."[29]

Dadayama, then is a representation of real social issues, of a grave concern of the present time, a film that delves into feminist issues of rape and violence.

Let us look at some other commentaries. In 1983 Jagath Senaratne writes in the *Lanka Guardian* in an entitled "Dadayama: a fugue on the politics, resistance, passion and despair of woman" that the film "is based upon an actual event that took place in the 1950s." In it the heroine, an innocent young village woman who had fallen in love with an indifferent lover "begins to slough off her naiveté.... Her resistance is not merely that of violated motherhood.... It is violated motherhood that fights back, and hence deeply subversive of capitalist patriarchal ideology." Here the film is narrated as one of not simply violation, but double violation as it is coupled with the grosser crimes of violated motherhood subsumed in capitalist ideology. The use of the mother figure and the extremely serious nature of violating a pregnant woman become emotive symbols at this time. The suggestion is that capitalism and patriarchy go hand in hand to oppress women, and that to some extent women's oppression can be tied to class oppression. Later Senaratne comments on the final death scene as "the culmination of the sex-politics within their relationship, the metamorphosis from lover- violator to violator- killer."[30] In this article not only does the term violator come in but I believe there is an addition

made here to the earlier debates on the Adeline Vitharne case. In the past, this event was defined in terms of
Lover à killer = murderer
By the '80s as suggested by Senaratne an addition has been made to the equation
Lover a violater a killer= violence against women + murder

Adeline Vitharne's case is no longer an instance of only murder, it is an instance of rape, or violence against women. Sexual conduct and misconduct is opened up at this time for discussion. In later years when Alles sued Obeysekera over copywright issues, Obeysekera himself admits the insertion of an incident that had not been documented in Alles' book. He states "Rathmalie was raped by an outsider in the film .... By this rape incident Jayanath shows her that he was not interested in marrying a prostitute."[31] This incident in the brothel refigured in the film and discussed in the public domain suggests the shifts that had occurred by the early 1980s that enable a portrayal and a discussion of violence against women. Obeysekere's insistence that the rape scene in the brothel is new suggests the very creative manner in which we constitute an event. Similar readings of the brothel incident were not possible earlier because the analytical tools to understand the category had not come into existence.

Let me briefly comment on the film itself and place it within film history. Rape by this time was not a new incident in Sri Lankan cinema. Indeed according to Jayamanne of the 102 films she analyses generally "rape scenes are constructed on the basis of the conventions of the generic cinema. That is, they are heavily orchestrated with loud suspenseful music and unusual camera angles which create a sense of imminent threat. The narrative presents the poor woman as innocent, helpless victim who needs a good man to save her from the rapist.... The construction of rape as spectacle in Sri Lankan generic cinema incites prurient desires. While the violation of the poor female is condemned as being immoral class exploitation, it is at the same time presented for the viewer as spectacle to be gazed at pruriently" (255-

256). I wish to point out two things here. One is that Jayamanne's analysis of rape in films comes in 1981 only and that such work has not been done before in regard to cinema or any other genre in Sri Lanka. She can study violence against women in Sinhala cinema only at this time, and work before had not made such comments possible. Secondly, I wish to point to the fact that if rape was used before to resolve class tensions, *Dadayama* does not do this. There is no one to save the village lass from an upper class, urban immoral man. *Dadayama* becomes for a variety of reasons a way in which placing of rape within this larger matrix of class, and patriarchy, is broken.

Why then did the 1980s become an era in which violence against women could be championed by feminists? What were the conditions of its possibility and how did the feminist subject become configured? Let us then shift to the early eighties and the special issue on violence against women in *Voice of Women* to try to answer this question

Feminism and Violence Against Women: The beginnings of the debate

> What may have brought to the Sri Lankan feminist gaze questions of violence against women in this manner in the early 1980s? The conditions that I outline below are based on reading the work of organizations such as CENWOR, *Voice of Women* and the *Lanka Guardian* with more an intention of provoking discussion and making tentative claims than making finite statements.

To perhaps attempt to trace the conditions of such a possibility, will look at 2 essays of the time, and through it revisit the question of feminism and gendered violence.

In the *Lanka Guardian* 1985 issues 6 and 7 Kumari Jayawardena has two essays entitled "Feminism in Sri Lanka in the Decade, 1975-1985" and "Time to mobilise for women's liberation." Both are a continuation of a debate, or two parts of a whole. In these two essays, Jayawardena attempts to map some of the large national or economic

changes that have brought about changes to the feminist movement as such. I believe this essay has two very specific objects of being a historical document of mapping and writing/creating the progress and history of a movement within a country, and of inciting feminist activism to organize and think through its own conditions better. The titles of the two essays themselves suggest this mode of thinking. I believe these two essays can be useful to map the emergence of a feminist focus on women and violence in the early 1980s.

Transnational Networks[32]

Jayawardena states,

> 'The Year of the Woman' proclaimed in 1975 by the U. N. served to bring the issue to the forefront again. Almost all political parties, trade unions and non-governmental organizations celebrated the event. Feminists travelled around Sri Lanka speaking on the women's issue and meeting with a good response from all classes of women. Feminist literature from abroad also influenced many local women.... New organizations arose ranging from liberal to Marxist, which represented various shades of feminism (7).

It has become an established fact or part of the feminist common-sense to highlight the importance of the 1975 U. N. conference, the 1980 mid-decade meeting in Copenhagen, the 1985 conference in Nairobi and 1975-1985 Women's Decade for feminist politics in Sri Lanka. The conference to which state delegates went, to which Sri Lankan feminists played an active part has without doubt invigorated some of the debates in feminism here. It becomes very clear that this network of activity, these links played a direct role in the areas of work feminists engaged with in Sri Lanka. The Women's Bureau, the setting up of numerous women's organizations and increased funding for women's affairs are all foregrounded as resulting from the UN emphasis on women whether it be within development or other spheres. Hence, by the time violence against women was established as an important issue by 1985 in the international sphere, the importance of the UN was already in place in Sri Lanka among at least some branches of feminism.

For example, as Swarna Jayaweera states "the momentum in safeguarding women's rights has come chiefly from international pressures- the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1981 and the U. N. Convention on the Rights of the child in 1990, and the endorsement of the UN Declaration on Elimination of Violence Against Women in 1993" (18).

Furthermore, Jayawardena and de Alwis state "it is now an acknowledged fact that the increased presence and visibility of autonomous women's organizations in Sri Lanka primarily resulted from the significant attention paid to women and women's issues with the UN declaration of the 'Year of the Woman' in 1975 and the Decade of Women from 1976 to 1985. Foreign funders, also pressurized by feminist movements in their own countries, began to support local women's groups."[33]

It is interesting to note from 1975 onwards, a certain reconfiguring of time comes to play an important role in feminist politics. Jayawardena's article itself suggests this shift, or manner of marking time. Jayawardena's evaluation of time, of developments within Sri Lanka are very much part of the global debate. She marks the ten years of progress according to the UN decade. For example, many of CENWOR's publications tend to reflect development, progress and the matter of women's rights in terms of time marked by global agendas. Note that the publication *UN Decade for Women: Progress and Achievements of Women in Sri Lanka*[34] or *Facets of Change: Women in Sri Lanka 1986-1995*[35] organize the developments within Sri Lanka to be measured by a set of principles and time outlined else where. It is perhaps important to keep in mind that integration of the feminist agenda into the UN system through a "world Plan of Action" is a least partially part of maintaining "a global project... a new economic order"[36] or aligning the world according to a certain way of thinking. This is not to suggest that earlier forms of feminist activity were not influenced by international feminism, but rather to suggest that they become mainstream, part of a certain agenda that the UN itself represents.

In the special issue on violence against women in the *Voice of Women* journal of 1985 for example, the global nature of the violence against women debate becomes evident. For example, let me quickly outline some of the articles in the issue to point out the predominant position regarding violence against women at the time. The first is titled "Holy War of Women in Lahore" which is a comment on how young women who face violence and rape in Pakistan are further punished because of the requirement by law of four witnesses as proof. The article is written by a Japanese woman who feels that "I am surprised to find so much similarity between the Japanese view of women and the view of women in Islamic society, namely that 'Women should be in the home,' Women are incapable' and Women are the seducers'"[37]. The next is entitled "The Dark Side" and is a commentary by a Christopher Sur on the position of violence against women in the Republic of Korea. The subsequent articles are on the Mathura case in India, Women and Pornography and how it leads to media violence against women, the situation of violence against women in Malaysia and the violence against women in the US, especially at Harvard University.

Why I list these articles is to remark first on the position of violence against women in Sri Lanka. The papers on violence against women in Sri Lanka follow the earlier set mentioned above. Violence against women in Sri Lanka describes the state of affairs in the country, but does not attempt to look at what constitutes this category. It is significant that the issue contains articles from around the world, from Pakistan to Korea, to America to Malaysia, to Sri Lanka and that violence against women remains the same for women across the world. Violence against women then is a cross-cultural phenomena, that can be understood by feminists as similar around the world. Hence it is possible for a Japanese woman to visit Lahore and remark on the similarities in the violence against women that exist in both countries. The papers presented at the conference and republished in the issue echo this. For example, in Kumari Jayawardena's Essay "A Note Violence Against Women," her examples of oppression that is condoned span across cultures, furthermore, her use of Susan Brown Miller's well-known text *Against*

Our Will further suggests this impetus in her own analysis. To quote Jayawardena on Miller "She defined sexual assault as a conscious process of intimidation by which **all men keep all women** in a state of fear" (emphasis in original). Hence, the thrust of the argument suggests the universality of such an experience. Violence against women in Sri Lanka then is part of that package of global women's oppression. This I suggest is a very uncomplicated way of deploying the body, woman and gendered violence as stable, universal and natural. Violence against women is the same, because all women are the same, because their biologies are the same, because they experience violence in the same way. In these arguments biology is destiny and all over the world women experience a universal way in which they experience violence. What MacKinnon says of Brown Miller's work can be useful here: "this underlying approach, in some tension with her historical critique of rape, elevates social relations to eternal verities, undercutting any basis for challenging them or for recognising that they are as man made, historical and transitory as the ideas that justify them" (56).

The acceptance of a universal, biologically defined woman as the victim of violence is perhaps partially a result of the international movement that has influenced the debate in Sri Lanka. The importance of these large-scale networks on the debates on violence and women in Sri Lanka cannot to underestimated. For example, the trans-national networking of feminist groups lead to some of the key issues of violence and women being taken up at UN conferences. Furthermore, funding agencies that are hugely influenced by such large scale meetings began to fund certain kinds of initiatives and projects in the 1980s era. By 1963 itself the Teheran Human Rights Conference had discussed the issue of "the protection of women and children in armed conflict and emergencies."[38] Furthermore, the General Assembly resolution adopting the declaration on the protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict had been ratified by 1974 stating that "all the necessary steps shall be taken to ensure the prohibition of measures such as per section, torture, punitive measures, degrading treatment and violence, particularly against that part of the civilian population that consists of women and

children"[39]. The general thrust within feminism by 1985, in the special issue of *Voice of Women* and elsewhere suggest this international trend, this placing of violence against women within a general framework in which violence against women exists everywhere, in the same manner. This thrust is captured quite clearly when Kamalini Wijayatilaka states "the World Conference which reviewed and appraised the achievements of the UN decade for Women, by consensus adopted the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (FLS) in 1985. Sri Lanka was a party to this concurrence.... In order to achieve this objective, the governments were called upon to establish or strengthen initiatives or mechanisms which would serve to assist victims of violence"[40].

The emergence of violence against women as a focus of feminist debate and energy can then be partially placed in the context of the UN meetings. While the 1975 conference in Mexico city brought up briefly the issue of sex work in the term "specific legislative and other measures should be taken to combat prostitution and illicit traffic in women, especially young girls. Special programmes, including pilot projects, should be developed in cooperation with international bodies and non-governmental organizations to prevent such practices and rehabilitate victims," sex work was in no way seen as a gendered form of violence at this point. Rather, this conference focused much more on issues of development and integrating women into the development process. But after the conference, in "March 1976 [the] First International Tribune on Crimes against Women, held in Brussels, two thousand women from forty countries spoke out on family violence, wife beating, rape, prostitution, female genital mutilation, murder of women and persecution of lesbians" (175). It is at the 1980 mid-decade UN conference on women in Copenhagen that violence against women became a larger issue. As Keck and Sikkink state "the seeds of an international network on violence against women were planted in a series of meetings at the UN Women's Conference in Copenhagen in 1980. Charlotte Bunch, who had organized a set of panels on international feminist networking at the nongovernmental forum held parallel to the official conference, recalls: we observed in that two weeks of the forum that the workshops on issues related to

violence against women were the most successful... they were the workshops where women did not divide along north-south lines" (177).

By 1980, the CEDAW convention that had been adopted by the UN in 1979 was introduced to feminists who came for the meetings. By 1981 Sri Lanka had ratified it. By 1985 violence against women had gained greater impact in the UN and also in Sri Lanka. Hence, the emergence of Adeline Vitharne by 1985, and Kataragama beauty queen Premawathie Mannamperi can be placed in the context of transnational debates that placed their very specific, contextual cases within the parameters of a global violence against women context.

The decline of the Left and its consequences for the feminist movement in Sri Lanka

While the UN agendas play a large part on why violence against women became an important part of feminist debates in Sri Lanka, and on the very nature and structure of the debates, it is perhaps important to also look at some other factors that may have impacted on this shift to violence against women which gained its peak in the 1990s. I would argue that the shift into violence against women took place while simultaneously displacing some of the earlier feminist work on development issues. It is not to suggest in any way that development issues have completely stopped being the focus of feminist intervention, but rather to suggest that it took a back seat to the newer issue of gender based violence. Women and work as a specific category has lost its potency today. The decline of such issues to violence is deeply linked to the some of the political shifts that took place in Sri Lanka by the late 1970s, of the political leadership changing from an overtly Marxist based one to the electing of the UNP to power.

To look further at the shift that took place in the 1980s, it is important to also to mark the kind of work feminists had been involved in before this time. As Jayawardena states: "by 1975, women had already made important strides, not only in obtaining political rights, but also in

education, employment, literacy, life expectancy and health" (7). A further look at women's activist and written work in the earlier decades suggests strongly that the women and development agenda, issues of equal pay, have dominated the horizon marked strongly by strong left oriented Marxist debates where causes, consequences, changes in the welfare state and its impact on women were of overarching importance. Mary John's statement that in Indian feminism "it was important to emphasise the exclusion of the vast majority of women from the promises of progress, modernisation and development, than to focus on the gains made by a minority of highly visible relatively privileged women,"[41] and that the 1970s saw to the "proliferation of studies that emerged at the cross-roads of class and gender... and the special place of the debates on women's work within the nexus of intellectual and political engagement... [where lay] criticisms of the very concept of work itself" (110) can be true of the situation in Sri Lanka. For example the women's bureau set up in 1978 brought out studies "on general demographic characteristics, and on female employment, education, literacy, crimes and involvement in politics,"[42] and the "integration of women in national development plans and programmes."[43]

This focus on women and development while remaining important for some time to come, started losing some of its ground, or became less and less important in feminist work by the mid 1980s onwards. This may have its roots in some of the shifts that were taking place in left politics in Sri Lanka, and elsewhere as well. By 1977 the left parties had had a humiliating loss at national elections. The election of the UNP into power meant an unending 17 year rule of a party that has been known as an openly capitalist one. Sirimavo Bandaranaike's stint as prime-minister previously had meant in contrast a closed door economy and a claim to building up the national economy. The opening up of the economy to the global markets also lead to a deep crisis in many intellectual terrains. A look at the early issues of the *Lanka Guardian* for example would show this pre-occupation with the open economy, and nervousness with it. In terms of feminist thinking this brought two important simultaneous but different strains of thinking. *One is the*

realization that a Marxist reading or resolution of history could not provide full answers for feminism. Second is that the opening up of the economy also meant newer problems for women in the face of increased forms of capitalism and the decline of the welfare state. I will further suggest that shifting away from development or explicitly left based feminist issues also meant a new way of looking at women's bodies. While feminists at the time may have understood the body as natural and given, and may not have conceptualised it in terms of a new configuring of the gendered body, I will argue that the debate on violence against women is heavily linked to this

The realization by the 1980s of the shortcomings of socialist feminism is what prompts Jayawardena to state "one group would give primary emphases to achieving changes in the economic and social structures, believing that a socialist society would pave the way for women's liberation. The other would give more emphases to the struggle against patriarchy believing that unless continuously opposed, patriarchy is likely to survive even in a socialist mode of production" (16-17). This division even within left-feminists in their conceptual orientation I think is captured brilliantly by Jayawardena's statement which illustrates her shift from thinking Marxism could answer feminist issues to the realization that a more nuances, elaborate and sophisticated mode of analysis was needed for feminism to achieve its objectives. Hence she speaks of a "consciousness [that is] now emerging in contradistinction to both the traditional ideology of female subordination and the presently dominant school of women in development" (16).

Let me quote another section of Jayawardena's analysis to illustrate the shift she herself makes from development issues to violence against women:

> They [socialist feminists who go beyond Marxism] have shown that inspite of high achievements in education, literacy, health, life expectancy in Sri Lanka, women can yet be subordinate since patriarchy prevails. They have also raised the of issue violence against women, from harassment on the road and buses, to molestation, rape, incest and wife beating, and violence of all types" (17).

Notice the shift she makes from issues of development such as literacy, health etc. to the new area of violence. Furthermore, her statements that while "no one objects to women generating some income for themselves, the limitations of such projects are evident. First arises the question, **how much** income can actually be generated? Second, **who** benefits by the additional income? And third, **what changes does it make in the subordinate status of women?**" (Jayawardena, 7)

Here, she enunciated a crucial doubt in feminism as to whether a class analysis of gender will suffice. I believe with this shift also comes an awareness that women's bodies are not only part of 'work,' but also a sexual site where multiple forms of violation and force can be enacted upon.

Perhaps this move can be seen as defined by Michelle Barrett as "a radical new theorisation of politics, in which the iconic factor of class is dramatically shifted from its privileged position"[44] This shift from privileging Marxism or freeing feminist analysis from a class mould had come to feminist consciousness in Sri Lanka by this time. This can be attributed the general trend in international politics that saw left wing politics as only one ideology among many,[45] and to the change in the political governance in Sri Lanka with the establishment of the UNP and its policies.

While this realization may have become part of Sri Lankan feminist thinking, the opening of the economy also meant a weariness of new forms of oppression that capitalism may bring to Sri Lankan society. Such weariness can be seen in Jayawardena's statement that "the open economy has also had consequences in making the country equally open to cultural and ideological pressures from the advanced capitalist countries.... Women, in their roles as housewives and mothers, play a prominent part in these campaigns-from the woman who advertises her clean bathroom on TV to the *beauty queen* who extols the merits of a particular brand of milk powder. Women are also used as *sex symbols*-to advertise anything from a car to a eau-de cologne" (emphasis mine, 9). The feminist gaze moves, at least partially, or rather encompasses

the way in which the body is produced in media by the late 1970s. For example, the first issue of the *Voice of Women* looks at a packaging company that has placed a woman tied up, in a box, looking blissfully happy at her state of helplessness. There is a semantic shift from earlier modes thinking where the body is part of work, as part of the national development agenda, to being seen as sexualized and objectified. Jayawardena illustrates this through the example of woman's body being used as a commodity to advertise cars or perfumes. The whole distrust of beauty contests, where woman's body is objectifies and fetishized become part of feminist concern at the time. Criticisms of and weariness with the new economic order in Sri Lanka becomes quite clear for "with a consumerist culture encouraged by the open economy, advertisements began to occupy a major place.... There has emerged consequently the 'modern' woman-consummer par excellence who is in search for a packaged psyche in the form of new life styles and new fashions. At the same time, old established ideas of femininity and the role of the mother and homemaker have gained a new life although in a different form".[46] Hema Goonetileke's further analysis that this new open economy has led in a "proliferation of fashion shows and beauty contests" which signify "*embodiment*" illustrates this point neatly. Her note further that sex magazines are a result of "the liberalization of the economy" (188) reflects the belief that capitalism leads to the commodification of women. I believe this shift is what Katherine MacKinnon states as "sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism."[47] Her questions "what does it mean for class analysis if a social group is defined and exploited through means that seem largely independent of the organization of production, in forms appropriate to it? What does it mean for a sex-based analysis if capitalism might not be materially altered if it were fully sex integrated or even controlled by women?" I think are the questions that Jayawardena herself asks. It is this simultaneous move in feminist politics where lay the recognition that feminism needs to be loosened from class analysis while feminists need to also be weary of the entrance of advanced capitalism into the state that enables violence against women to become an important category of analysis.

The shortcomings of socialist feminism, the simultaneous fear of increased capitalism brought in by the UNP's policy of open economy shifts the feminist debate to look at its agenda in terms of issues rather than larger structures.[48] The issue of the hour becomes by the 1980s, the issue of women and violence. Hence, once the 1983 riots and ethnic violence had erupted in Sri Lanka, feminists in Sri Lanka had with them some of the conceptual tools with which to analyse gendered forms of violence.

Using the Law to resolve violence against women

I wish to end this chapter by perhaps focussing on one of the main areas of concern for feminist work in Sri Lanka in relation to violence against women. This is the issue of the law as one of the main transformative agents for feminist work in Sri Lanka. While a deeper analysis of violence against women and the law is to be seen in chapter 3 of this book, I wish to simply hint at some of the strand of thinking in relation to women and violence in the early 1980s.

It becomes noticeable that from the beginnings of the debate on violence against women, the law is seen as one of the most important and transformative tools to resolve the issue of violence against women. As Nivedita Menon has suggested, the law was used as a colonial tool to order the state and its subject. It was one of the main modes of organizing change in society. This obsession with law as a transformative agent has continued in many postcolonial states and finds its place in the centre of feminist debates on women and violence[49]. Furthermore, the agenda of organizations like the UN is to pressure the state to enforce certain regulations that the UN believes are important through revised state laws.

It is interesting to note in this context that *Dadayama* does not refer to the sensational court case at all, but end with the murder of Rathmalie (the woman who plays Adeline Vitharne). It is almost as if the film illustrated the problem of violence against women, and the text, *Voice of*

Women, provided an answer to that problem. The solution lay unambiguously in the text in the terrain of law. In this special issue and in many of the early feminist writings on violence against women, the law places a significant role as the space for transformation. There was at this juncture and even after very little that questioned the real transformative power of the law.

What becomes apparent in the journal, as I have discussed earlier in the essay, is also what seemed apparent to a strand of Sri Lankan feminism then: that violence against women is universal, and that it was commonly shared in *similar* ways by women all over the world. Hence, this issue contains articles on violence against women from Pakistan, India, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia and the United States of America. There is no real call in the papers to contextualize issues, to study cultural differences that may reveal different forms of violence in different contexts. The difference is not that violence against women itself may be different in different contexts, but that *the laws are different* in each and are also not sensitive enough to the issue of violence against women. It is this that needs to be rectified. Violence against women is not an enigma, or a trouble spot needing deeper understanding and careful rethinking. Violence against women is a horror, but is understood and transparent, it is rather the need to change the law to make the state behave that is perceived as important.

Hence, the editorial board is sure that "law enforcing agencies have not been very effective in combating such crimes against women, particularly rape.... We also need to step up agitation to change the laws concerning such crimes."[50] The law and the state are for feminists at the time the way to reduce violence against women, it is the "logical culmination of feminist intervention"[51] as the law is the apparent solution to the problem. The articles that discuss violence against women in Sri Lanka are on "laws relating to rape (Sec. 363-364) and abortion (Sections 303-309) ... covered by the Penal Code of 1883, and the second article being "Violence and the Law" by Manouri Muttetuwagama. Reflections

on many of these articles conform to a positivist way of viewing the world as articulated most aptly by Nivedita Menon in these words:

a) The belief that it is possible for the law to establish, where it is the case, the culpability of the accused and the violation of the victim. If this happens very rarely, it is because (from the feminist perspective) the law needs to be made more reflective of the reality of women's experience. Once this is achieved, the demonstration of the guilt of the accused and his punishment would deliver justice to the woman and strike at the dominant misogynist values of our culture.
b) The understanding that 'the body' is a natural and physical object and that 'sex' is a phenomenon that exists prior to all discourse, simply distinguishable from other kinds of human interaction.[52]

Questions relating to whether the law can be a useful instrument and whether the state can be forced to be 'more sensitive' considering what Carol Smart in her analysis of law says "that law is so deaf to the core concerns of feminism that feminists should be extremely cautious of how and whether they resort to the law" are conspicuously absent. Smart further suggests that "law should remain an important focus for feminist work, not in order to achieve law reforms... but to challenge such an important signifier of masculine power."[53] Here she refers to the black and white nature of the law which cannot understand the complex and ambiguous nature of sexuality. The biological woman is the subject of all these works as the body is naturalized and beyond question. Issues of what constitutes womanhood, matters of ethnicity, class, caste, do not enter into this debate.[54] The focus of this issue of *Voice of Women* and many of the issues in the 1980s is in accordance with what Malathi de Alwis has aptly termed the "retrieval- of women in the past as well as the present.... Many articles concentrated on analyzing the representation of women in the local media, literary texts and school textbooks, while others sought to highlight the hitherto hidden inequalities and forms of violence that existed within society." Hence the emphasis of the women's movement was "sexual difference rather than ethnic, religious, or class

difference and to highlight patriarchal structures that impinged on all women."[55] Thus when violence against women becomes part of the feminist debate in Sri Lanka, sexual difference and the universality of experience become important factors in the debates that ensued at the time.

The rest of this work will continue to raise some of the issues I have raised in this chapter already. In Chapter 2, Lisa Kois will look at the high point of transnational networking on women and violence in the 1990s. This work will look at the appointment of Radhika Coomaraswamy as UN special rapporteur on violence against women, and what this may have meant for the debates in the Sri Lankan landscape. This chapter will also look critically at the joining of violence against women into issues of human rights under the slogan, "women's rights are human rights." In chapter 3, Mangalika de Silva will critique what I have pointed to just above: the continuous use of the law as the dominant tool to transform gender inequality regarding to violence against women. She will look at what this engagement had meant to feminist politics in Sri Lanka. Finally, the last chapter will attempt to look at alternative modes of understanding the category of violence against women, vis a vis the law, and what this kind of politics may entail.

End Notes

1 This paper is a work in progress for an ongoing project on gender and violence carried out by *The International Centre for Ethnic Studies*. I am indebted to Pradeep Jeganathan's work for some of my thinking in this paper.

2 Ameena Hussein, *Sometimes there is no Blood: Domestic Violence and Rape in Rural Sri Lanka*. (Colombo: ICES, 2000) 1.

3 Radhika Coomaraswamy, "Violence, Armed Conflict and the Community" in ed. Swarna Jayaweera, *Women in post independence Sri Lanka.*, 81.

4 *Voice of Women: A Sri Lankan Journal for Women's Liberation.* Vol II, 3. 1985. pg.1

5 Ibid.

6 Kantha Handa was a feminist organization that came into existence in 1977 and had branches in many places in the Island. Many of its founding members were socialist feminists.

7 While the *Voice if Women* Journal is published in all three languages I was unable to find the Tamil version of this issue. Inquiries made at the Voice of Women office confirmed that there was probably no Tamil version of this issue that came out.

8 Alles, A.C. *The Wilpattu Murder.* (Colombo: Wits Associates, 1999)

9 I am thankful to A. C. Alles' *The Wilpattu Murder Case* from which much of the carefully documented background information has been gathered. Some of the reports of the murder case that was consistently reported in the newspapers at the time differ from Alles' statements. As these two sources are main forms of documentation available on the case, I have tried to use only information that both these sources state as the same, and do not contest. These I think can be termed 'the facts' of the event. I think this itself already suggests the very shifting nature of Adeline Vitharne story.

10 Alles, 41.

11 Alles' book and newspaper reports do not actually venture into detailed discussions on this point.

12 In many of the discussions on the role of the sex worker in the Vitharne case, her name is spelt sometimes as Millie and at other times as Milly.

13 These are the official charges against the three accused in her case. The reporting of this in the newspapers do not open the case up for any further commentary. Alles' version too sticks to this line of thought as do responses to his work.

14 While there are numerous differences in the debated between the 1959-1960 reports in the papers and Alles' recounting of the incident, I do not at this time which to engage too deeply in these as it would digress to much from the focus of this paper.

15 Deputy Solicitor General 's statement quoted in the newspapers on 5th April 1960 *Daily News*, p.1.

16 Alles, 20.

17 Ibid., 29.

18 *The Daily News* . June 22 1960, 10.

19 Ibid., July 2, 1960.

20 Alles, 41

21 Alles, 20

22 Ironically, Alles comments on this incidents in 1976 in *Insurgency – 1971: An Account of the April Insurrection in Sri Lanka.* (Colombo: Trade Exchange (Ceylon) LTD, 1976)

23 Goonetileke, H.A.I. *A Bibliography of Ceylon (Sri Lanka): A systematic Guide to the Literature on the Land, people, History and Culture Published in Western Languages from the Sixteenth Century to the Present Day.* (Swizerland: Inter Documentation Company, 1983).

24 Leelangi Wanasundera, *Women of Sri Lank: An annotated bibliography* (Centre for Women's Research: Colmbo, 1986). Of the references to violence that she makes, only one reference, a paper written by Wimala de Silva to the *International Journal of Child abuse and Neglect* in 1981 which focuses on violence in the family is outside the special issue on violence against women in *Voice of Women.*

25 *The Island.* March 7th, 1982. *Sarasaviya.* August 23th 1984.

26 Laleen Jayamanne, Positions of Women in Sri Lankan Cinema 1947-1979. Unpublished doctoral thesis, (Faculty of Arts, New South Wales University, 1981)

27 Reggie Siriwardena "Obeyesekera's cinema: from 'Palangetiyo ' to 'Dhadayama'" in *Lanka Guardian*, 5 (8) Jan 15 1983: 6.

28 *Lankadeepa,* 10th December 1991. p. 9

29 Here, the term *dushanya* is used which in English translates as rape. *Voice of Women*, 1985 Sinhala version

30 Senaratne, Jagath. *Lanka Guardian* Vol 6. no 6 1983. p. 21-22.

31 Here, Obeysekere is talking about how Adeline is raped while she is staying at the brothel. There is a scene in which Rathmalie (Vitharne character in the film) is brutally raped by an outsider. There can be no doubt of the conscious depiction of what happened in the brothel that is not discussed in the 1950s or 1960s. *Lankadeepa*, November 19th 1991.

32 I use this term as used by Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink in *Activists Beyond Borders*, where they refer to this network as "transitional advocacy networks [which] must also be understood as political spaces, in which differently situated actors negotiate-formally or informally- the social, cultural and political meanings of their join enterprises." (3)

33 Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis, "The Contingent Politics of the Women's Movement in Sri Lanka after Independence" in ed. Swarna Jayaweera, *Women in Post-Independence Sri Lanka.* (New Delhi: Sage, 2002), 254.

34 SwarnaJayaweera (Colombo: CENWOR, 1985).

35 Swarna Jayaweera, *Facets of Change: Women in Sri Lanka 1986-1994.* (Colombo: CENWOR, 1995)

36 Document that emerged out of the 1975 world conference, in *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women* (177).

37 Ibid., 5.

38 The *United Nations and the Advancement of Women 1945-1995.* (New York: The United Nations, Department of Public Information, 1995), 32.

39 Ibid., 175-1760

40 In Jayaweera 1995, 290.

41 Mary E. John, Gender, Development and the Women's Movement, in ed. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan *Signposts: Gender Issues in Post -Independence India.* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999), 109.

42 Wanasundera, Leelangi, *Women of Sri Lanka An annotated bibliography*, 7.

43 Jayaweera, 1985. (1)

44 MicheleBarrett *The Politics of Truth: From Marx to Foucault.* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 68

45 For a deeper understanding of this shift from Marxist politics to 'new radical social movements' please read Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe *Hegemony and socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985)

46 Hema Goonetileke, "Women and the Media," in Jayawera 1985, 182.
47 Katherine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State.* (USA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 3.
48 My thanks to Radhika Coomaraswamy for pointing this out.
49 Nivedita Menon, *Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law.* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 1-25.
50 *Voice of Women.* 1.
51 Menon, Nivedita., 106.
52 Ibid., 107.
53 Carol Smart, *Feminism and the Power of Law.* (London: Routeledge, 1991) 2.
54 A deeper study of feminist focus on the law in issues of violence against women is part of this project and is currently being carried out by Mangalika de Silva.
55 De Alwis, Malathi. "Reflections on Gender and Ethnicity in Sri Lanka" in *Feminists Under Fire: Exchanges Across War Zones.* Eds. Wenonna Giles, Malathi de Alwis, Edith Klein and Neluka Silva. (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003)

Beyond Fears and Tears

Feminists Under Fire: Exchanges Across War Zones edited by Wenona Giles, Malathi de Alwis, Edith Klein, Neluka Silva (co-editors) with Maja Korac, Djurdja Knezevic, and Zarana Papic (advisory editors). Toronto, ON: Between the Lines, 2003, 238 pp., $24.95 paper.

Reviewed By Ayse *Gul Altinay*

THE INSPIRING FEMINIST DIALOGUE between various women's groups in post-Yugoslavia and Sri Lanka enabled by the Women in Conflict Zones Network *(WICZNET)* has turned into a joint declaration of hope and solidarity for all of us to read and learn from.

Similar to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the wars in the former Yugoslavia and the ongoing conflict in Sri Lanka have often been dismissed by such phrases as: "Oh, what's going on there is too complicated for me to understand." They have *also* been regarded as "ancient" conflicts, with hundreds of years of ethnic hatred in their background. It is precisely *this* blindness and *its* legitimation that prevent both empathy and action. If things are too complicated, *if* nobody is innocent, *if* conflicts are embedded in *long histories of "mutual bloodshed, " then how can we do anything about them, right?*

The 15 Woman authors of *this* stimulating and important book offer a very different view. Through their lucid overviews, engaging *stories,* and insightful analyses, even the *most* "complicated" conflicts start making

sense—political sense, historical sense, and, *most* importantly, feminist sense! But *this* book is not *just* about making sense of what is/was going on *in* these conflict zones, it is also about finding hope and the right *channels* to *do something about them.*

From rethinking sexual violence *in* wartime (and asking such provocative questions as "Did *this* really have to happen in Europe for *it* to be noticed and talked about?"), to developing feminist strategies for dealing with war trauma, to working against essentialist ideas about gender to finding creative channels of dialogue with Women of the "enemy camp," this collection offers a wide range of feminist debates and deliberations about two of the most troubled war zones of the 1990s.

The first thing that catches the eye on the cover *is* the long list of seven editors and advisory editors. Not *only* is it difficult to imagine, say, seven men co-editing a book, it is also *not* often that we see such projects of feminist solidarity in print. This, I believe, is what makes *this* book special—and different from many of the recent edited volumes on women and war: It is a collective work of feminist dialogue and shared activism through and through.

Once you are past the cover, you are confronted with maps of post-Yugoslavia and of Sri Lanka, then with 20 *essays* that provide vivid *feminist* mapping of these conflict zones. Beware if you consider yourself outside of these *maps.* The writers of *Feminists Under Fire* challenge the reader to face her own participation in these conflict zones and others. Do you remember *whose* planes were bombing Serbia and Kosova/o in the spring of 1999? *[Most* of the authors in *this* book prefer *this* usage, which *marks* a resistance to *choose* from the politically charged dichotomization between the Albanian usage (Kosova) and the Serbian usage (Kosovo).] And what you were doing then?

As I read the experiences of Serbian and Muslim women under fire, I remembered. It had been almost eight years since my Bosnian Muslim relatives escaped to take refuge in our home in Turkey and six years

since my nephew was smuggled out of a concentration camp. Like many other women in NATO countries, as I watched CNN in the last days of March1999, my vote was turning into bombs. One part of me felt relief that the Serbian atrocities in Kosova/o might be coming to an end. Yet, another part of me felt terrified by the militarization of international intervention and by the destruction of human life and livelihood. I knew that there was a sizeable group of daring feminist peace activists in Yugoslavia who had tried hard to stop the violence. Would the bombings hurt them? Empower them? *Feminists Under Fire* tells the story of their sustained efforts to, create spaces of feminist solidarity, even during the bombings.

As some of us watched the bombings on television, women ,in the former Yugoslavia were trapped in their homes, feeling more unsafe than ever. With bombs falling and the martial law declared by the Serbian government, "Fear had become a fact of life overnight." Zarana Papic tells us that activists of the ' Women's Center in Belgrade, unable to gather physically, found a solution in forming a Fear Counselling Team. Calling women across the country (including Kosova/o), they confronted fear, documented how women were feeling during the bombings, shared strategies for survival, or simply touched base. Some of the Albanian women whom they reached in Pristina in the first part of the bombings later called them from Macedonia, where they had fled as refugees, to let them know that "they were alive."

Similarly, women in Sri Lanka have been searching for ways to support each other across political and ethnic lines since the early 1980s, when the conflict between Tamil Tiger rebels in the Northeast and the Sinhala-dominated capital Colombo erupted. For instance, the Women's Action Committee in the south (of mostly Sinhala women) was quick to join their voices with Tamil women in the north when they decided to speak out against violence and to call on the state to "Stop the Rape of Women," saying "We live amidst fear and in tears."

AS WOMEN IN BOTH CONTEXTs crossed the armed boundaries of the ethnic divide, they became vulnerable to political pressures from all sides. Being criticized for "disloyalty" was not their only I difficulty, though. Lepa Mladjenovic's very interesting essay reveals the numerous tensions embedded in the feminist desires to create an antimilitarist political stance and the ethical dilemmas regarding the use of arms and military interventions. Mladjenovic presents a sophisticated reading of the two positions that, developed out of the questions "To shoot or not to shoot?" and "Military intervention: yes or no?":

> If we choose at all times to be on the pacifist *no shooting* side, and meet a friend who was saved in Bosnia or Kosova after the military intervention, we are embarrassed when facing - 1 her. ...We look into her eyes and end up with an ethical problem, because our position has -not included her reality. ...If we have a basic pacifist position of *no shooting* at any time, but in certain concrete situations we say *yes* to military intervention, we face our own pacifist '" politics and feel a moral embarrassment in siding with the military intervention. It pains me that patriarchy as manifested in a military system has placed us in positions m which our free if desire has no expression that can be recognized by the patriarchal reality. (p. 166)

Her pain-ridden conclusion is accompanied by an interesting suggestion:

> In the end, *To shoot or not to shoot?* becomes a multi-layered historical question. Do we have a friend who might have been saved if there had been a military intervention in Srebrenica? In Rwanda? (p.166)

What is significant about the women's groups in post-Yugoslavia and Sri Lanka is that such philosophical questions are turned into historical questions about their friends.

A quote from the Algerian writer Assia Djebar speaks for the shared effort in the various feminist projects that form the background to this volume: "Don't claim to 'speak for' or worse to 'speak on' other women"; our acts of solidarity should be based on "barely speaking next to, and if possible *very close to"* women who are different from us.

Of course, it is no easy task to speak "very close to" women of "the enemy" in times of conflict and fighting, but the feminists in Sri Lanka and post-Yugoslavia have gone out of their way to do so, facing all kinds of patriarchal and nationalist prejudices and pressures. Each one of their stories of feminist border-crossing reminds us once again that such solidarity is crucial both for activism and for working through the many dilemmas about war, violence, and peace that our increasingly militarized world forces us to confront. How different our political discussions would be if we formulated our ideas looking into the eyes of *friends* who were on the other side of the line!

A unique aspect of *Feminists Under Fire* is that it pays as much attention to post-war periods as to the difficult times of fighting and bombing. As the renowned feminist scholar and activist Kumari Jayawardena emphasizes:

> [I]t is in post-conflict times that we have to be really vigilant. In conflict situations and anti-colonial struggles, patriarchy breaks down a bit, sometimes quite a lot. Women are in battle dress, carrying bombs, and are even suicide bombers But [post-conflict] is a time for greater vigilance, since the patriarchs will now assert their authority and will tell you how to behave, what to wear and whom your daughter should marry. So you have to watch out for patriarchal backlash, and monitor the way in which it tries to come back into the lives of women and girls. (p. 208)

After almost 20 years of warfare that claimed the lives of more than 60,000 people, Sri Lanka is into its second year of ceasefire. Feminists there are finding new strategies to deal with "displaced women, women in the army, women and girl guerrillas, and war widows." Documenting their struggles and - analyses in a comparative perspective with post-Yugoslavia, *Feminists Under Fire* makes an exciting contribution to transnational feminist dialogue—one that left me with a sense of empowerment and heightened curiosity about feminist survival, struggle, and exchange across other (post) war zones: Rwanda, Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Sierra Leone, USA, Britain... unfortunately, the list goes on.

Celebrating Sri Lankan Women's English Writing: 1948-2000. Vol. 2.

With an essay by Lakshmi de Silva, Colombo: Women's Education & Research Centre, 2002, 451 pages, Rs. 850/-

Reviewed by Heike H. Harting, Universire de Montreal

Yasmine Gooneratne's *Celebrating Sri Lankan Women 's English Writing* is a pioneering and outstanding collection of critical biographies of Sri Lankan diasporic and non-diasporic women writers. While the first of the two volumes collects studies of colonial women writers of what was then Ceylon, the second volume is dedicated to the emergence and endurance of 75 contemporary established and new Sri Lankan women writers of fiction and poetry. Published by the Women's Education & Research Centre (WERC) in Colombo, this "historic volume," as Selvy Thiruchandran in her preface rightly calls Gooneratne's collection in her Preface, has a clearly circumscribed objective. Like the WERC, whose mandate it is to promote discussions of gender - issues and to facilitate research on women's issues in Sri Lanka, the collection seeks to "identify, collect, document and analyze the literary productions of 52 years" by Sri Lankan women writers and thus to try to secure them a "place in posterity" (iv). In scope and critical approach, the book is the first of its kind, for it gives voice and recognition to many authors who, in the past, suffered : from critical neglect, a lack of public understanding, and cultural marginalization. Like other former colonies of the British Empire, Sri Lanka used to value its own writers less than the British literary canon taught in its schools. The difficulties women writers encountered were compounded by a patriarchal establishment that, on the one hand, belittled women's writing as bound to themes of romance and domestic life and, on the other, fostered the education of obedient daughters, wives, and mothers. Gooneratne's collection not only counters such misconceived images of Sri Lankan \ women writers, but she also challenges the assumption that women writers who write in English necessarily belong to a small and privileged social class. On the contrary, Gooneratne emphasizes that "the literary biographies in this survey show that as a result of the profound social, political and t economic changes which have occurred in Sri Lanka since Independence, the 'group' of Sri Lankan women who write creatively is no longer subject to these particular limitations" (2). Indeed, as Carl Muller says in a different context, Sri Lanka's women writers have become the standard bearers of Sri Lankan writing in English" (cited in Gooneratne 2).

The organizing principles for the collection are both practical and critical. From a practical point of view, Gooneratne compiled her biographical entries according to the information she received through questionnaires distributed to the writers. This empirical approach to her enormous task allowed her to include women writers whose work is often published privately and whose publication record has remained sketchy and difficult to track on account of Sri Lanka's ailing, publication industry. Moreover, they enabled Gooneratne to "place each author in the context within which she was writing a particular work of poetry or fiction" (13) and to pay homage to teachers and mentors whose influence and work would have otherwise gone unnoticed. It is perhaps for this reason that the entire collection is dedicated to "The Facilitators: The Women Who Taught Us And The Men Who Believed In Us." Gooneratne's collection clearly situates itself in this tradition of facilitators. The book's grass roots approach to the collection of biographies is also reflected in its practice of providing contact addresses and separate bibliographies of the primary and critical works for each author, The meticulous research that went into the compilation of the critical materials, including a General Bibliography and an alphabetically organized "Index of Authors and Their

Books," makes this volume an indispensable research resource for anyone interested in or working on Sri Lankan women's writing.

As both an academic critic and one of Australia's foremost diasporic creative writers, Gooneratne applies critically astute and sensitive criteria to the selection of authors. "Quality and/or cultural importance" (18) have been her governing principles. In particular, she includes writers whose "writing is valuable in itself, revelatory of Sri Lanka's cultural context, or potentially valuable to the future development of Sri Lankan women's writing" (20). "Quality," however, remains a theoretically contentious selection criterion and tends to posit the author's "first-hand experience" (Gooneratne 12) of what she is writing about as the litmus test for good writing. While the notion of experience as a guarantor of truthful writing risks endorsing narratives of cultural authenticity and originality, in Gooneratne's collection this notion stands as a reminder that many diasporic writers who have been removed from Sri Lanka for years and have avoided becoming involved in Sri Lanka's war-torn present therefore cannot represent this present in their work.

Contemporary Sri Lankan women's writing, as this collection demonstrates, deals with the various ways in which women cope with the experience and trauma of war, yet it their writing cannot be reduced to representations of the such experience and trauma. Recurring themes of Sri Lankan women's writing include family, marriage, home, and the less traditional feminist issues, exile and displacement, and violence and spiritual healing. For example, the entry on Jean Arasanayagam traces both the development from her early, imagist poetry to poems addressing her present concerns with issues of violence, gender, and identity and the critical reception of her work. Her critical comments on her own work become paradigmatic for the work of many of the writers represented in this collection, that is, her emphasis on the need to engage critically and creatively with the ways in which "art and literature are documentations of the crisis of violence and despair" (30). What makes the entry extraordinary for its genre are its carefully selected quotations from the

writer's work and Gooneratne's critical suggestions, for example, to "re-design" Arasanayagam's latest publication, The *Outsider,* to make it "an excellent memoir" (35). Both strategies personalize the entry, provide it with critical depth and facilitate a potentially productive dialogue between writers. By the same token, Gooneratne's entries risk being intrusive and, at times, take too much liberty with the genre of the critical biographer.

Two particular strengths of the collection are, first, its attention to the historical development of a publication infrastructure for women of Sri Lankan origin and, second, its innovative and multi-generic practice of representation. Each bio-bibliographical entry not only contains biographical information and critical comments, but it also presents excerpts from both literary and non-literary texts by the author under discussion. In this way, Gooneratne's entries provide a clear sense of the multiple social and cultural contexts in which most women writers work. For example, the entry on the eminent scholar, poet, and translator Lakshmi de Silva, who also contributed a comprehensive and insightful essay on Yasmine Gooneratne's work to the collection, includes comments on de Silva's well-known translation of the Sinhalese play *Kuveni* and the risks involved in translating from Sinhala into English. The long entry on Chitra Fernando includes religiously inspired quotations from the author's journal to establish a meaningful relationship between her work and her strong belief in Buddhism. Entries on more widely known writers such as Rosalind Mendis, who published the first novel written in English by a Sri Lankan woman; Maureen Seneviratne, Anna Ranasinghe; and Punyakante Wijenaike, foreground the various achievements of Sri Lankan women writers. Other entries on writers such as the journalist and novelist Rita Sebastian and the lesbian writer Yasmin Tambiah discuss experimental forms of writing that bring together political comments and life-writing with cross-genre configurations of the prose poem as a formal and thematic engagement with the effects of ethnic civil war.

Gooneratne's collection, then, is a ground-breaking volume that makes a significant contribution to the genre of the bio-bibliographic

essay, a volume whose informational wealth, critical aptitude, {and political alertness designate it as an essential research tool in the field. While the collection encourages new research projects on the authors at hand, it also—often in a highly sensitive and self-reflective manner-raises questions about its necessary exclusions of authors and themes. Given its restrictions to fiction writers and poets, the collection excludes Sri Lankan women playwrights, "a source of [Gooneratne's own] great regret" (6). However, other omissions cannot -be fully justified by the intrinsic logic and limits of the collection. For example, such scholars as Neloufer de Mel, Radhika Coomaraswamy, and Kumudini Samuel argue that such tropes as motherhood, suicide, and the woman soldier have been radically changed and politicized by Sri Lanka's history of civil war and find their reflection in literature. For this reason, the inclusion of such poets as Thiyagarajah Selvanity and Sivaramani, (the former was allegedly killed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam and the latter committed suicide), would have been a welcome addition to the collection. Yet, as Gooneratne remarks at the beginning of the book, "there are omissions" that she hopes "others will fill in during the years to come" (1). The merits of the collection clearly outweigh its minor problems, including sloppy copy-editing, and mark the collection as a historical milestone in the field of Sri Lankan women's writing and literary criticism.

Work Cited

Muller, Carl. "The Standard Bearers of Sri Lankan Writing in English." *Saturday Magazine. The Island.* 4 August 2001: 11.

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South Asian Feminist Researcher's Association

South Asian Feminist Researcher's Association (SAFRA) was initiated by Women's Education & Research Centre after the South Asian Conference in Colombo in 2001. The participants of this conference ranging from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, jointly wished for such a forum, the first of its kind in the history of South Asia. Members represent the South Asian countries and the coordinating secretariat is housed at WERC. The broad objective of SAFRA is to disseminate feminist scholarship in the region through research publications, journals and conferences. Moreover it also serves as a resource and documentation centre in South Asia, while intending to become part of the network of Research and Study Centres working on women's issues in South Asia.

The need to link researchers and scholars in South Asia is an imperative that we have been looking for fulfilment. With this in mind we want to create a fellowship fund for South Asian scholars to enable them to come to Sri Lanka, and be here for two to three months, meeting scholars, exchanging views, and even to understand comparative research on a team basis. The said scholars would have the opportunity to deliver lectures, get acquainted with the NGO research forums, and University research teams for mutual benefit. We are anticipating two scholars per year. Food, accommodation and travelling will be either paid or subsidised. The membership is open to all scholars and researchers in the South Asian region. You can send your inquiries to womedre@sltnet.lk

Printed by Karunaratne & Sons

ISSN No. 1391-0027

Price Rs. 250/=

A Publication