

# *Nivedini*

A Journal on Gender Studies

Single  
Women's Sexuality  
and its Cultural Versions

Coping  
Mechanisms of Single Women

The Murder in Marriage

Avenging  
Women in Indian Cinema

Her Dilemma

Statements

Vol. 5 No.1

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WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND RESEARCH CENTRE

## Our Objectives

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

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

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

To strengthen the women's network locally and internationally.

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

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

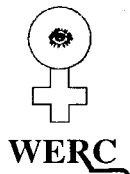
What does 'Nivedini' mean?

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

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**Women's Education and Research Centre**



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**Board of Directors** : Ms. Anberiya Haniffa  
Dr. Kumari Jayawardena  
Ms. Bernadeen Silva  
Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy  
Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran

**Editor** : Selvy Thiruchandran

**Typeset and Cover design** : Carmen Niranjala Peiris

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## From the Editor

**F**rom the long editorial on Growing Pains, I wrote for the last issue of Nivedini ( December 1996 ) I want to deviate, a deviation from an essay to a precis and stress only one issue, the question of a stubborn ignorance, the refusal to comprehend the reality of truth. Truth I argue here is not subjective, neither is it shrouded in mystic social factors conditioned and conditioning social reality. Having deconstructed the so called mystic social factors the truth has been made self evident. The truth being the gender contradictions.

Those who are sleeping can be woken up but to those who are feigning to be asleep - words uttered loud and clear and articulated well are a waste. There are today many who want to make us believe that they are ignorant of social conflicts.

There are who would like to believe that there is no ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. There are others who would like to believe that the caste system has disappeared both from the civil society - Sinhala and Tamil and from the sangha the Buddhist clergy. There are a few who think that the caste system is a problem only with the Tamil society and that Buddhism has eradicated the caste system from the Sinhalese society. Anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists have taken academic trouble to empirically prove otherwise. But there are many who refuse to see the contradictions in our society. Contradictions where the situation allows the satisfaction of one end only at the cost of another. The discovery of gender contradictions are chronologically later than the discovery of class, caste and racist contradictions. On contradictions there are ethnic and racist or nationalist versions which claim that ours is better than the other Asian cultures. Often we have heard it being said that, Sinhala

Buddhist or Tamil culture or the religion of Christianity and Islam have offered gender equality and that the problem is elsewhere in the Western society or in the rest of South Asia. That the patriarchal order is universal and that it takes many faces and diverse patterns grounding it in the multiple and complex socio economic and political conditions is the realisation of feminist scholars. That it is a process embedded in the fabric of society and that its co existence in the different social institutions is continuously deconstructed is their claim.

Gender sufferings are many and many faceted. Gender across caste, class, ethnicity and race, gender within the ideological state apparatuses and the repressive state apparatus are constantly deconstructed as a process of knowledge and epistemology. Krishanthies are followed by Koneswaries and the laws are found to be inadequate (See section on statements). Feminist scholarship continues to theorise the complex social reality and the new emerging social reality.

Paradoxical it may sound but there are people amidst us who say that women have no problems. This was said in the TV discussions and radio talks for over a period. It was emphasised that the women in our country are respected, cared for and looked after by Asian or Eastern or Hindu or Buddhist value systems. Two weeks ago (21-6-97) there was a short article in the Virakesari (a Tamil Daily). The author is indeed puzzled and confused as to what the problem is with women in this country. Why are they talking of feminism? Is there a need for it? Are they working towards a female dominated system under the pretext of laying claims to feminism? The article was titled '*Women's atrocities in the name of Rights*'. We are not the only ones who were perturbed by at this irrationality! A man has intervened to say all we would have said on 28-6-97. This is a silver lining though numerically such interventions are small. Let us hope the number will increase.

This issue of Nivedini carries four long articles, a poem and statements. Three papers are based on original empirical research. One is on the politics of representation and gender on the Indian cinema. The State, Women's sexuality and the exercise of avenge through rape have been analysed, theorised amidst a complexity of scenes and plots, by Lalitha Gopalan.

Another paper deals with the post war single women. The single women affected by the war in the Eastern province are subjected to continued unpleasant experiences. Their 'widowhood' is compounded to a ceaseless terrain of

suffering within a cultural pattern. This paper is a part of a study on *Women in Female-headed Households*, the post terror victims.

The paper looks at the multiple identities of the widows. Their ethnic belonging and their gender belonging have compounded their experiences both within the family and outside of it, in social and non-social activities.

The same subject extended to the identification of trauma levels among the women and the coping mechanisms they adopt is yet another empirical study projected in this issue by Gameela Samarasinghe. This paper is based on the findings in the South. Women in the East and the South have almost the same problems at the level of their gender belonging and at the level of their class belonging. This is an example of the embeddedness that coexists in the social process.

The article titled "Her Dilemma" projects the dilemma of the woman who is constantly policed, required to conform, fit in and adjust according to social norms handed down by patriarchy. It also focuses on two factors in feminist resistance, one being the desire to celebrate all that is "female" and the other which rejects the secondary status allotted to the "female" and the "femine."

The next issue of the 'Nivedini' December 1997/ January 98 will have a South Asian focus. Those who want to make contributions are expected to send in their papers before October 1997.

*Selvy Thiruchandran*

## Single Women's Sexuality and its Cultural Versions

Selvy Thiruchandran \*\*

### The Vulnerable Female Sexuality

One of the 'functions' that the sociologists identified within the family is the socialisation of the children. As the first step towards this function procreation was also implicitly assigned to the family. The regulation of sexuality with the ultimate notion of procreation takes place within the family. The system of monogamous marriage was regulated both by the state and religion. Rituals of all religions insisted that the man takes ownership of the woman/wife's sexuality within the wed lock and become the one who possesses her body. Any violation of this is punished both socially and by the law. With the violent removal of the man -the "owner"- from the scene by the war the woman/wife becomes vulnerable. Her sexuality becomes a topic of open discussion. Implicitly the knowledge that she is unprotected (because the one who "possessed" her is no more) spreads to all nooks and corners of the village. Her singleness is easily interpreted as being "available". The same singleness

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*\*This paper is part of a study on Female Headed Household - the victims of war in Trincomalee. The study has included 100 women in all.*

has not been interpreted as being available for remarriage or companionship! But the availability for pleasure has received publicity. During peace times or normal times, the single women are protected socially by the extended family and by the immediate family and perhaps by the elderly kindly neighbours. This protection acted as a barrier to any unwanted advances made by males. Under the present situation this barrier is no more there. The women are left severely alone. Relative and others who consider them a financial burden have distanced themselves.

The single women both at home and at the work place have to face many physical advances from men young and old, married and unmarried. In our interviews these women found it difficult to discuss these sexual advances. They thought the less talked about these the better. They also found that they would be misunderstood as having been collaborators. Such collaborations are viewed very severely and those women are severely ostracized, and they lose their means of livelihood. Hence they resisted the incorporation of such personal/private matters into a rationalistic social world of research. There were five women who were willing to share their experiences, but there were many (about 30) who did not want to discuss this. They felt that these were too shameful to be disclosed.

There were others who had undergone such "shameful" (*Mariyataiketta*) experiences and have avoided them by being "careful and being prepared".

I was constantly harassed, when I went to work, to the shop and even when I was alone at home. Now I avoid being alone or going alone. He gave my children presents when they were returning home from school. There were biscuits and sweets. They ate them up before I returned from work. I could only get into a fury and shout. If I had money I would have returned them all to that good-for-nothing man. But money I did not have. I cried the whole day - did not cook, shouted at the children. The next day I went up to his sister and cried and shouted. I threatened to kill my children and commit suicide. This worked. He stopped harassing me after that. But I know this is not the end. He may come again. Others will come. We are wretched people (*Palpatta nankal*) who have to suffer with these rowdies (*kavaliyal and kalusaroyal*.)



I was constantly harassed. Now I go and sleep at other houses. This man is an alcoholic and wants women only when he is drunk. He comes only in the night. By not staying at home in the nights, I avoid him.

### **Being Single and Unprotected is Interpreted as Being Available.**

Men came in the nights, drunk and call out for me. They think I am starved of sex and may easily welcome them. I shout and chase them away, but they do come. I live near a 'kasippu joint' (where they brew illicit liquor (kasippu)). Hence I have constructed this special gate.

She too was not very willing to discuss her experiences, but we noticed a gate which was peculiar, when we entered the house. I asked her why she had a funny gate. She did not answer but smiled. The gate was built with wood, with barbed iron wire protruding. A very unconventional structure. She explained later in detail.

The top portion of the gate with iron wires protruding out is to bring the drunkard and rowdies to their senses. They come drunk and try to open the gate and try to walk past it and the iron barbed wire kept in suspension there causes injury on the faces. They have to go back bleeding, and when they shout, I am alerted and so are the neighbours.

### **The Experience of Another Woman Revealed Yet Another Dimension.**

When I go to work or shopping he follows me and tries to talk. I ignore him because it irritates me and my reaction is silence. One day I got angry and shouted at him. Following this incident he entered my house in the night. I woke up, I shouted. Others in the neighbourhood also woke up. I had to conceal his identity from them. I pretended that he was a complete stranger. Their speculations about his identity, which they could not discover because it was dark and he ran away, was met with a silence from me, a silence which was tactical. I feared social ostracism "ur vai", in her own words (the mouth of the village). They will "construct stories" about me- that I have invited him home.

These incident are examples of the manner in which gender regime is operationalised. Power lies with the masculinity even in incidence of overt violations of human ethos, while femininity is subdued and subordinated to make it powerless even when justice and reason are on its side and with it.

In the case of Leela (fictitious name) it is different. Her singleness was used and exploited by an unscrupulous man. Since she did not relate her story in sequence, and the incidents were not related fully, we had to gather bits and pieces and the story that was reconstructed is given below.

When her husband disappeared Leela was in a state of shock with two little children and a two and a half year old. Her parents too were dislocated in the 1990 massacre and had gone to India by boat to escape the wrath of the army. Her older sister has gone abroad. Her husband's friend trying to be a good Samaritan introduced some one who said he knew all the police men and could trace her husband. But he laid one condition that she should come to Colombo to identify her husband. Off she went to Colombo with her children. He kept her in a lodge, got her jewels, sold them and all her money was spent. Then he removed her to Batticaloa and kept her in a house. In fact she was imprisoned there. He used to lock her in the house when he went out. She was physically and psychologically ill treated. She attempted suicide twice, but did not succeed. She informed one of her neighbours of her plight who did not take her seriously. When she took the matter seriously she informed a Member of parliament, minister or the Grama Sevaka (She was not clear on this). The matter was handed over to the police. The member of parliament or whoever who was in power, was able to trace the sister in Trincomalee who had by now returned. After she was rescued by her sister she wrote to the parents in India and they too returned.

There are a few gaps in her story. The woman was visibly mentally disturbed and was not coherent. We did not want to probe into areas that she did not want to speak about. She wanted to say some things, but obviously did not want to reveal some. She insisted that she was being duped and deceived.

Leela in our opinion needs psychiatric treatment/ counselling. Judgement passed on her by the society was that she was being foolish and rash, to believe and trust a man who wanted to help her. They felt that to give one's jewels and money was even more foolish. This may be the moral of the story. The gendered dimensions have also to be brought into the surface. That this is the story of the

young, vulnerable, single woman, Leela, is another significant moral of the story. That Leela still believes her husband is alive should also become an important part of the story as it was this anxiety to get him back that made her get into this unfortunate misadventure.

There are a few cases of mild harassment which ceased when the women threatened. However, many of the cases of sexual harassment were concealed from us. We did not think it proper to probe into their privacy and did not want to transgress the ethical standards we have set for us. The women at the refugee camp said there was a case at the camp, but she does not want to break somebody's trust and we too respected the confidentiality. Such cases remain private and personal and not brought under the arena of social research which should only take note of the phenomenon without the details.

However, the question that begs an answer is whether these women chased away the good men also, who would have become companions and marriage partners for them, by being unduly suspicious and obsessed with the rowdiness and alcoholism of men.

The women especially the single women are subjected to a repressive socialisation that sex becomes taboo or socially not desirable. Sex for the sake of pleasure is an idea very much alien to their day to day dialogue and is treated as a hidden subject discussed only in whispers.

Sinfulness of sex is an idea that has become part of the growing up of these women. But sex regulated within the system of marriage also has been a part of their socialisation. There is a great difference between these notions. One is a taboo and other a duty of the wife to the husband - sexual service as it is known. Without the husband it becomes sinful, with another man who can become another husband is also sinful for many women.

### **Social Constructions and Meanings of Remarriage**

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of 'natural given' which power tries to hold in check... It is a name that is given to a historical construct" ( Michael Foucault - 1978)

Female sexuality has been the subject in feminist scholarship, for long, both as a critique of Freud and other psychoanalytic discussions and as a subject

of empirical and theoretical analysis which has taken note of contributors to the subject such as Foucault (1978) Weeks (1981)

Feminist analysis has dwelt at length on two inter related matrix - that of the social construction (historical) as well as the meanings that assign gender roles over a period of time and the manner in which sexuality generally creates gender inequality between the sexes. (Connel 1987; Mackinnon 1987; Rich 1980; Barret 1991; Morgan 1990). The women in the female headed household though basically falling into the two intersecting issues mentioned above, have offered an interesting process of de-construction, adding a certain new phenomena into the problematic of feminine sexuality.

The age of the widows under this study range from 18 to 50 years of age, though the majority of them are within the age group of 40 years. The youngest widows are eighteen and nineteen years old and those below thirty are twenty six in number. Thirty eight widows are between the age of 31 - 40 years and thirty six widows are between forty and fifty. Hence a total of sixty four are under forty years old.

The women look underfed, malnourished and display disinterestedness in their personal, physical self and in their mental attitudes. A life negating principle, close to the ideas of renunciation where personal satisfaction, personal enjoyment and personal care have been pushed into the margins, was continually projected by them sometimes intentionally and sometimes quite unknowingly. Except a mere five the women were totally against the idea of remarriage; the fifteen women whose husbands had deserted them or committed suicide had great reasons to continue to remain single. They articulated fears that history may repeat itself or that it could be 'from the frying pan to the fire'. The bitter experiences of violence, indifference and the final departure of their husbands have created various levels of intense hatred towards married life. But the rest of them want to comply within a cultural pattern which has been constructed by them and for them. Remarriage in the Tamil cultural milieu is not prohibited. Even socially or legally there are no conventions or laws prohibiting widow remarriage. But those who remained within the "re-marrigable" age group 18 - 40 said that they had no intention of getting married. Ten women said that their mothers had asked them to marry again but they had refused. They blamed the refusal on the children saying that the new husband would not accept their children and if they got "new children" her children would be discriminated against. This was their common sense wisdom, not grounded in any social rationality.

Though this was reasoned out as a secondary process the women had another major reason for not wanting another man in their life. They argued that it was not possible for them "to think of another husband or live with another man. There is only one man in my life. My life with him is enough" were the statements we heard very often.

These women are governed by the idea of Tamil chastity that a woman should have only one husband and that to marry another man is becoming unchaste. Codes of chastity are argued for both implicitly by the less articulate and more expressively by the more articulate ones. Apart from announcing their ideas to us they were also conveying their message to the society.

The Tamil concept of a household *Illaram* is more to do with Dharma - *Aram* - than with a this-worldly concept of household. This *aram* is more operative within a concept of femininity than with masculinity within the household. Violation of the *aram* concept by men are often accepted forgiven and trivialised but within femininity, violations are constantly watched ostracized, gossiped about and even punished.

The women felt it was necessary for them to remain within the code of *aram*. It is more important than their personal satisfaction. However, there were five women who said that no one asked them to remarry. No one was willing to originate the process of initiating a second marriage. It sounded more like a complaint and not an innocent statement. Euphemism was employed often to convey meanings.

Most women it would appear, are practising a kind of renunciation, denial of their life chances, denial of enjoyment. Romila Thapar argues that the way renunciation and the household have been placed as of a binary opposition by Dumont (1960) - is debatable in the Indian context, within the four fold *asrama* system (Thapar 1981:274). Though the Brahmanical *asrama* system is alien to the Tamil social formation in Sri Lanka whether in the East or North, the manner in which femininity is constructed has its similarities to the renunciatory goals in certain spheres.

It is assumed that the renouncer has to follow strict codes of conduct where pleasures of life are denied to them but within the household too the wife has to follow certain codes that negate enjoyment and pleasure. Thus the renunciation of women within the household and codes of renunciation for the

widows and in their discourse the renunciatory codes of chastity are valued as the *aram* of women. The discourse revealed a strong imposition of a gender order, violations of which will cause chaos within the "family" and the household order will be disrupted. The women have internalized certain cultural values and are trying to act accordingly in real life. Physical gestures, dramatization of speech and the manner of expression have clearly shown their levels of the internalized subjectivity. Cultural factors have limited their thinking.

Remarriage was construed by the women as reordering their life purely and merely on demands of sex, the idea of companionship at an age where they are alone and deprived, is alien to their thoughts. Hence the question of remarriage is implicitly linked purely to a life of sex and sex is generally conceived as sinful. Sanctions against sexuality and its regulations within marriage have helped create these notions of sex with remarriage. Forbidden sex and permitted sex are dictated to by power relations which is gendered here. In such a context female desire is not only silenced but also is construed as forbidden and sinful. Remarriage of widows placed within these social parameters became a non-issue and remained so.

Contrary to our assumptions that in a rural unsophisticated un-Brahminical society women are free to remarry with sexual freedom and the right to choose their mates, the picture presented to us in this study are of a repressive society. "There should be no other man in my life. I can't think of another man again" are sentiments usually expressed by heroines of South Indian Tamil films. It appears that these mores are internalized by the women in rural Trincomalee too.

Patriarchy needs a two-fold definition according to McDonough and Harrison, the first being the control of women's fertility and sexuality in a monogamous marriage and the economic subordination of women through the sexual division of labour being the second. (1978 :11) However, even after the partner in the monogamous marriage is removed from the scene the women continue to subscribe to the patterns of monogamous marriage whereby they control their sexuality, sacrificing it on the altar of a patriarchal ideology- that women are the sexual property of men and that it is chastewomanhood that has to be valued and celebrated. This construction of femininity within patriarchy has even further implications for feminist theory. Engel's arguments that the material base of the proletarian marriage was different in that the absence of property has significantly removed the idea of an oppressive monogamous



marriage and where a sense of non patriarchal equality prevailed between husband and wife have also to be contested. Women at all levels of class are anyway subjected to patriarchal ideology. A way of understanding this phenomenon is to apply the concept of sanskritisation whereby women here have ascribed for the social status of the high caste, high class propertied women through a process of internalisation of such values of culture.

This discussion should take us to the general climate of repression and to be argued on a cultural mode of thinking. Foucault's attempts to relate sexuality and repression to the mechanisms of dominant power which utilises and harnesses it to its advantage has relevance to our discussion of the types and levels of repression the widows are undergoing. Foucault's argument that sexuality is given to historical construct (1978 : 152) is relevant in this connection. The mode of discourse of the women basing their arguments on claims of chastity "one man in our life" - and on the motherhood ideology clearly are constructions made historically by the chaste epic women like Sita and Kannaki. Besides these constructs, there are others. Within patriarchy, passivity is also a construct of a sexless woman whose sexual desire and drive are perceived as dormant and one that has to be controlled. This therefore assumes that the need for gratification is not there in a woman.

The socially and historically constructed meanings which have persuasive powers and the ideological cultural legitimisation pave the way for particular behaviours- The "sexual script" (Simon and Gagnon 1973) created for the women was acted out according to rules of the play, the play being femininity. Rejection of sex, refraining from re-marriage, finding motherhood as a scape goat are different scenes/frames of the play.

The end result is the repression that the women are subjected to, but finds no mention in their social and personal existence. The total silence of the women on their sexual needs hid much of the reality and a discussion of the subject was a near taboo. The total inability of the women to initiate the process of a marriage contract on their own has its part to play in the socio-cultural scenario. In their cultural milieu except for the four women who have had the choice of mate selection the others were subjected to a contract of arranged marriage where the elders, marriage brokers and the astrologers had played the decisive roles and this determined their future. A re-enactment of the same scenario, under the circumstances of widowhood and with the responsibility of children was not possible. Any attempts by the women on their own would be construed within an ideology of an oversexed woman's shameful act.

However, there were other types of confessions expressed covertly not through the young research assistants but directly to me when I met them. The eighteen year old widow said that she would like to marry but had many reservations. The most important being the uncertainty pertaining to the present war time.

I am afraid, in fact even frightened that my second husband may also be killed by the army, as they go for the young men.

Another young widow said that she likes to marry but no one asked her. And as a woman and that too a widow she cannot tell anyone that she wants to marry, as that would be culturally a taboo nay a piece of "disgraceful behaviour".

Only one woman said that her mother was keen to get her married but she was not keen. Eight women were approached by men directly but they could not decide for fear of public opinion and because their family did not support them. They were rejected on grounds of being incompatible where age, status, caste, family and character were concerned.

The attitudes to remarriage were characterised by an ambivalence which was partly based on a common sense wisdom and partly subjected to repressive notions governed by cultural conditioning and an ideology of motherhood which became handy to a process of self legitimisation. The way they expressed themselves and the manner of the dialogue could be called intimate and looked like they were questioning their own cultural conditioning and trying to find answers for their constructions.

My husband was good, of course he drank too much, he used to beat me, but if I marry again the public will view it negatively. "Ur Vayayai muda mudiyatu", You see, we can't tell the village to shut their mouths. I will become the subject of gossip. Besides, my children will be under the step-father, who can ill-treat them if I get children by him. They will then say because our mother married this man, we are suffering. I may be wrong, after all I too must have my own aspirations in life.....

She was thoughtful.

Similar views, though argued differently, were expressed by another young widow.

The new husband will beat my children and discriminate against them when I get children by him. Who can predict the future? More over, he will consider me as "tasted fruit", she was somebody's wife, she has a body and mind and feelings which were enjoyed by him. It may be a case of from the frying pan to the fire. If you can guarantee me that these things will not happen I am prepared to marry.

She smiled and looked down avoiding contact with my eyes.

In the final analysis we feel that for these helpless women it was a case of confounded ambivalence.

The attitudes towards remarriage should be viewed within the structures of power as well and then linked to particular discourses of truth and knowledge which are so constructed that they become disadvantageous to the less powerful (Foucault 1980). The construction of femininity grounded in hegemonic cultural ideology has laid out the so-called consensual norms and rules of behaviour for women. The control of female sexuality is the result of such a process of the discourse, the hegemonic reality and the consensus acquired for it. The unequal partnership of marriage whereby the man does not speak of "one woman in my life" but marries another, a second time and a third time with ease is the state of being powerful and that is seen as natural and given, based on the so called "truth" that the male sexuality is in need of constant gratification because of its virility. To gain social acceptance the women engage in an exercise of emphasised (and exaggerated) femininity (Connell 1987: 187), to emphasise the virtue of chastity and to create visions of a real woman.

### **Cultural Conditioning as Being Different**

The six Sinhalese women in the sample more or less subscribed to a similar ideology in the final analysis, but there was a difference in the reasons given out. There was no rationalisation on an argument of chastity or for a view "only one man in a woman's life." Even the non-speech acts such as gestures and expressions did not convey an overt rejection or aversion to the idea of remarriage.

The age of widows may also have an impact on the construction of their attitudes. 40,49,42,40,27,29- four of them simply rejected the idea of remarriage and said their children's welfare is their primary concern and that remarriage

is not in their vision and agenda. The 5th widow aged 40, was willing to elaborate on the subject. "I got married to him after having a long affair for five years. I lived happily for eleven years. There was love between us and we respected each other. Now I do not feel like getting married again."

The abject poverty in which she is placed and the levels of her frustration may have also caused the feelings of indifference in her.

However, the number of five respondents is too small a sample to arrive at a decision as peculiar to a community which has anyway the same cultural milieu in many aspects. The absence of Brahmanical influence on both the cultural and social construction of femininity is indeed a major cause for this differential attitude.

### **Widow Syndrome, and Social Deprivations**

The female heads have deprivations in the economic and social life where being deprived of the partner and the breadwinner, they suffer in various ways. But a different type of deprivation - social isolation which leads to cultural deprivations of partaking in rituals and festivals has a further dimension to their existence. It is a twin process of socially inflicted norms and practices by others, of isolating the widows and the self-inflicted seclusion on themselves.

The ideology of renunciation - the dharma of femininity constructed on codes of withdrawal, negation and deprivation come into play in the widow syndrome that was identified in the study.

I do not go for festivals and functions. I send my mother." - the mother though old has the social sanction to participate in such functions because of her "wholesomeness" which is attached to the man.

I do not go to "good functions" (Nalla kaariyam) because others seclude me saying I have no husband. So I must seclude myself" (othunkal) "I am unhappy about this." This is a case of becoming wise after a bad experience but she is unhappy, the agent of the unhappiness is the society as they call it.

To auspicious events I go, but I go later after the moment of auspiciousness has passed, so that people won't see me then.

Moments of auspiciousness are those connected with rituals such as tying the tali and the ritual baths of the bride and the young girl who has attained age.

I do not go on the same day for auspicious events since I have no husband. I should not "go and stand in front". Having lost the tali I can't go and stand in front of the people of the village. (uraar) - meaning the people in general will not allow it. I feel terribly unhappy.

I avoid auspicious functions and moments. I go late" "I totally avoid auspicious events - I have heard what they said to my widowed sister, when she went for such an occasion.

Widows are considered bad omen, unlucky and thought to bring about unhappiness for others because of their single status. The Tamils have divided the phenomena into good and bad, auspicious and inauspicious. House warming, age-attaining ceremony and weddings are auspicious events. To this is now added birthday parties. The sight of widows at these functions are considered inauspicious and bad as they are supposed to bring ill-luck to the protagonists of the events. Hence the widows are avoided tactically and they too avoid attending these events. In the final analysis, being sexually inactive has cast upon them the spell of inauspiciousness. Paradoxically becoming sexually active again is taboo socially and women have their own construction based on chastity and fidelity. The twosome of the man and the woman is considered whole but the man minus the woman is not cast into the same mould of inauspiciousness.

The widows are cast into a stereotypical mould. They have to renounce sex and other pleasures in life and should also appear renounced which is conveyed through the behaviour, dress, speech and socialisation patterns. Being deprived of a sex life she is suspect of "immorality" and "illicit" love life. So her behaviour is constantly under scrutiny.

At a time when social interaction is minimal due to the double and triple burden that these women have taken upon themselves the experience of seclusion has led to further deprivations covering psychological problems.

The psychological problems that I refer to here are all from conclusions drawn from keen observations of their manner of speech, gestures, expressions

with sighs and sad faces and in fact the moments of silence which implied powerful messages. It is often a realisation that they felt that the victims are blamed for tragedy in their lives but this is not to deny the fact that they readily conform to further victimisation by their own seeking and perhaps due to social pressure.

The manner of their expressions and reasoning fall into very neat categories of similar consciousness patterns that one is astounded at the sameness of the words and phrases used to explain their experiences and the perceived notions of the society- a term they used often as "samuthayam".

Auspiciousness and inauspiciousness are the terms frequently used by the women but their experiences fall into four categories. Except two women who defied their inauspiciousness and ten women who did not talk about it others clearly articulated their feelings.

Since a woman whose husband is dead, if seen around in "auspicious events" is supposed to bring inauspiciousness to those who are the primary participants of the ritual- the bride, groom, the occupants of a house in housewarming rites and the girl who has attained age, customarily the ritualists and the others in the household seek auspicious women with tali, pottu and flower, i.e. those whose husbands are alive "to stand in front" - as they are considered good omen which will bring the luck of longevity, marital happiness of the protagonists of the rituals. - this "gift" is denied to the women who have lost their husbands and are sometimes tacitly and sometimes more obviously asked to stand out or stay away. Religiously and socially they are cast into a mould which compel the women to repeat the phrase "Standing in front" and also compelled them to avoid moments of auspiciousness. One woman even said, "I have to hide myself and sit in the last row habitually. The word otungul signifies self imposed and self inflicted seclusion before others tell you to do so. According to them this is wisdom that they have acquired usually after the incident.

Verbal abuse has also been reported by these women. Their singleness is explained as being the result of her ill luck, bad qualities and character. The widowhood becomes a subject of comment into all forms of quarrels and gossip when others are angry with the widows.

My neighbor told me, I was suffering widowhood because I was proud and competitive." "They refer to me openly as vithavai (widow) arutali (one whose tali is broken) purusanai tintane ( you who have eaten your husband)

This was related to us by an eighteen year old widow, the youngest in the sample. The words used here are heavy with abusive implications colloquially and in fact they do blame the woman, the victim as solely responsible for her present status.

Another such woman did not want to mention the above words for she thought it was not polite or that it was socially deviant to use those words with us. She simply said they talk to hurt her feelings and did not want to elaborate. But her face betrayed her intense feelings of hurt and her silence was even more eloquent. Another widow was told "because of your ill luck your husband died. Because of your character your husband disappeared, committed suicide, deserted you."

Once an old man asked someone loudly, so that I too could hear "why is "that thing" standing there in front?" (en munnalai poi nitkutu?).

The widow is thus progressively reduced to an inanimate object in the manner in which the man has chosen the third person neuter gender verbal ending. ( The ending tu is used to refer to non-human beings/ animals/ birds and objects along with the pronoun atu which belongs to the neuter gender.) When used on human beings it degrades them to the extent of treating them as an object, a thing where person-hood is denied to them. Such impolite usage will be better comprehended if we know that even on social inferiors constructed on people's belonging to lower caste and class categories such usages are not common. There are other non-polite verb endings that denote such social inferiors.

With words and behaviour they isolate me, keep me away, they discard me like an "unwanted object" (ventata porul) Though they invite me I do not go. I know I am not welcome there. I feel unhappy after I go. Both their words and their behaviour are harsh."

Widows are also restricted within the code of dress. The "triple code of ethics that is constructed for the Tamil personhood falls within three major

concepts such as natai, utai, pavanai They are behaviour, dress and the way you treat others and the way others treat you, i.e. social interaction. This code of ethics severely restricts women and in fact the construction of femininity draws heavily from this triple concept of personhood. A widow is further conditioned and restricted within this code. A total denial and negation of life chances are imposed on her where even a particular dress code is stipulated for her.

The women had this to say:

Other women are dressed well in colours. How can I go anywhere like this.

I have no pottu, tali or flowers  
I am not allowed to dress well  
I feel very unhappy about this

I don't dress well though I like to, Now I go about like a ghost-peykkolam.

In the use of the phrase "ghost like form" she registered an inverted protest - a protest against societal restrictions. A message is given here "perhaps you are happy now to see my peykkolam.

Restrictions inflicted on the behaviour are also manifold. Their behaviour has become an intense preoccupation with the others who have taken it upon themselves the social duty of preventing chaos" in the society. Thus the widows' behaviour, socialisation patterns are under severe scrutiny. A code of renunciation with regard to this personal and social behaviour is inflicted upon them and gossip is the means by which the society controls them. The women confided rather hopelessly about the situation with feelings of dejection.

I have to lead a life of seclusion for fear of gossip

I do not like to socialise with anyone particularly with men young or old.

I have to guard my honour ( peyar-name) against possible scandals. I fear, gossip and public opinion.

Questions are thrown to others about the widow so that she can hear.

Does she look like a widow? See how she is dressed up?

See how she is going about instead of being in the corner of a room.

The widow is constantly reminded of the dress code and the spacial movement "assigned" to them. The message is conveyed to her indirectly but in her presence. The conversation is carried with a third party so loudly that it is impossible for her not to hear.

They see a motive in my socialisation with men. This hurts me.  
I cry inside my house and within me.

I want to live as one man's wife but people gossip about me.

My behaviour is watched.

A man comes to help at times, when I have a problem. There was so much of gossip. I told him not to come. This is the plight of widows. Now I have no one to help me.

More often the societal control is conveyed to her through gossip channels. She is finally conveyed the message that she has deviated from and crossed the boundary lines marked for her. The four types of experiences, the manner of physical seclusion, the verbal abuse, strict codes of dress and behaviour, the mechanism of social control exercised through gossip deployed very strong feelings of dejection among the women. Widowhood experiences under normal circumstances is mitigated by the supportive network of the family members of the joint and extended families and to a lesser extent by the kin group. The war situation has destroyed such supportive network and women are left severely alone to cope with this additional problem of widowhood.

Indeed there were exceptions to the rule. Two women were defiant and violated the rules laid for them by others and refused to impose rules on themselves. One of them said "I don't feel inferior, because I am a woman. In my own house I participate in all auspicious rituals of my children and "I stood in front".

Another woman dismissed the gossip proverbially- "If the dogs bark at the moon, what does the moon care?"

I have six children. A boy and five girls. I went to Kuwait and earned money. I left the children with my mother. I am determined to work hard and am prepared to accept challenges in life. I have land and a well. I can cultivate my land and be on my own.

Let us hope that there will be more moons and the dogs will stop barking!



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### Glossary

Kavaliyal/Kalusaraiyal	Rowdies, good for nothing people
Mariyatai ketta	Shameful
Palpatta Nankal	We, the wretched
Pottu	A decorative mark worn by girls and married women on the forehead as a symbol of auspiciousness
	A ritual ornament, a symbol of marriage for women

## Coping Mechanisms of Single Women

*Gameela Samarasinghe \**

“People fear and tend to avoid threatening situations they believe exceed their coping skills whereas they get involved in activities and behave assuredly when they judge themselves capable of handling situations that would otherwise be intimidating”

Bandura, 1969

**S**he is 35, with ten dependents comprising 8 children and her parents. Her primary source of income is temporary manual work. She started out enthusiastically participating in the interview, but when the question of her spouse's death was raised, she became silent. He had disappeared in 1989 after being in police custody, and was assumed murdered - though she does not know for what reason. He also had no steady employment, depending on temporary manual work and she received no compensation for his disappearance. The only significant assistance she gets is a little financial aid from his relatives. The neighbours also give her a little help occasionally (non financial, work etc.). Her greatest difficulty is educating her four younger children. However, when asked about their schooling, she says that her children are physically abused in school by their teachers, primarily because of their inability to afford school materials.

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\* *Ms.Samarasinghe is a lecturer in psychology, university of Colombo.*

When she did speak about her spouse's death, she expressed great sadness and a mixture of disillusionment and disgust with life because hers is fraught with difficulties since his disappearance. She gets emotional support from her children, and speaks with them in detail about their father's disappearance. She says that it is a good outlet for her emotions and that it gives her relief. She says that the behaviour of her children has not been affected by the loss of their father.

The Sri Lankan family unit has experienced many changes in the past two decades due to phenomena such as Middle East migration, the development of the Free Trade Zone and in particular the violence prevailing in the country caused by the ethnic war and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurrection.

The roles of family members, intra-family relationships and the care and management of the children have been affected as a result. However, in addition, the ethnic war in Sri Lanka and the JVP uprising, like most extreme situations, involve a sense of danger, helplessness, disruption, and often also destruction and loss. They can be followed by displacement, migration, unemployment, and poverty. The sudden disruption of the "normal" life cycle, living under conditions of chronic, intermittent and unpredictable violence, is in itself the source of several stresses. The tension provoked by this type of situation makes it an added stressful experience for the family and requires different coping mechanisms to those needed when other types of phenomena, such as Middle East migration, contribute towards social disorganisation.

Like the conflict in the North East, the JVP insurrection in the South has led to an imbalance in the home environment. One common change that has been observed as a consequence of this phenomenon is the disappearance or the death of the main income earner. As a result, thousands of widows have had to bring up young children, support them economically alone, after having suffered the trauma of losing their husbands.

Needless to say, situations of this nature, even though they occurred in the late 1980s, and being exposed to continuous ongoing stress ever since, can even now not only have a psychological effect on female heads of households but on their children too (Bowlby, 1984; Kakar, 1982).

The objective of the study, which was undertaken in the East, North-West and South of Sri Lanka from end 1995 until 3 months ago, is to highlight how in Sri Lanka, extreme situations can indeed disrupt intra-family

relationships and thus motivate female heads of households to identify new coping mechanisms to deal with the situation they suddenly find themselves projected in.

The disappearance or death of her spouse, children, friends or relatives can make the woman extremely vulnerable. In addition to having to cope with the grief of either losing the loved one and breadwinner of the family or with the anxiety of not having received news from their husband, she has to face a number of other problems such as socio-economic, health, legal issues, obtaining compensation and parenting, to mention only a few. Often, the only way their grief is brought to light is when they somatise their psychological problems and complain of headaches, giddiness, aches and pains, which affect their health, day to day activities, and in particular the relationship with their children.

This article is based on information gathered from field work carried out in Hambantota for a research study focusing specifically on the coping mechanisms of female heads of households who have been exposed to violence.

It will be argued that changes have indeed occurred in the coping mechanisms of female heads of household in Hambantota as a result of social disorganisation caused by extreme situations and it will be assumed that the breakdown of the family unit due to the death or the disappearance of the main income earner causes changes in the role of family members, in intra-family relationships and in the care and management of the well-being of the children.

### *Some symptoms of stress in an extreme situation*

According to medical and psychological records, the majority of survivors of trauma present similar symptoms. The symptoms generally observed on survivors of traumatic events are the following: (1) dissociative symptoms. For example, a subjective sense of numbing was indicated in the reports of five soldiers in the Namibia ambush (Feinstein, 1989); anxiety symptoms such as sleep disturbances, irritability (a very common symptom that decreases concentration); re-experiencing the traumatic event, avoiding reminders of the traumatic event such as avoidance of thoughts, conversations, persons, activities or situations that stimulate memories or feelings about the traumatic event. (2) Impairment or difficulty in functioning: a breakdown of normal patterns of social interaction in which there seems to be increased dependency on other persons to activate them. Though subjects said that talking was at times helpful,

they reported that after a week other people were tired of hearing about their problems unless they had also been present. Difficulties in interpersonal relationships were also a common occurrence.

### **Some causes of stress in an extreme situation**

In addition to these observable symptoms, uncertainty makes the situation more stressful. The disappearance of family members or friends, or husbands reported missing in action, intermittent and chronic shelling and bombardments cause unresolved grief and constant anxiety. These naturally effectively prevent individuals from adjusting or even getting on with living. In such unpredictable situations, they need to find new coping mechanisms to deal with crises by tapping into previously unrealized resources which will enable them to continue living with uncertainty.

Uncertainty, like any chronic stressor, unfortunately can remain for years and its duration can wear a person out psychologically and physically. Duration has indeed been found to be one of the most important parameters of stressful situations. However, there are cases when the individual becomes "used" to the enduring source of stress. For example, some individuals in the North and East have eventually had to consider shelling and bombing as regular events in order to carry on with their lives. However, the physical and psychological aftermath of these stressors, if not observed today, can be extended over a long period of time and affect generations of survivors as well.

### **Coping in an extreme situation**

The political violence in the south which caused and is still causing many hardships for large numbers of families can be included in the specific category defined by Lazarus and Folkman in "Stress, Appraisal and Coping", (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) as "major changes often cataclysmic and affecting large numbers of persons". According to the authors, these stressors are generally considered universally stressful and outside anyone's control.

Coping is the term used to describe the manner in which individuals adjust to difficult situations. Lazarus et al define Coping as "the process through which the individual manages the demands of the person-environment relationship that are appraised as stressful and the emotions they generate."

Therefore, one can say that to cope suggests to handle, tolerate or decrease the impact of a threatening situation on the physical and psychological well-being. These strategies can include an activity or thought processes.

However, one must be aware that when the individual has to cope with the occurrence of a major intrusive stress experience, it is possible that added stressful experiences (i.e financial burdens, education of children etc.) may generate further distress.

It has been shown however that, the individual does not stay passive vis-à-vis what is happening to him/her. He/She tries to deal with it (Schweitzer & Dantzer, 1993).

What is known is that people have a concept of the "normal" life cycle and any alteration "too early" of the cycle can deprive a person of a chance to prepare for a new role. In the case of Sri Lankan mothers having lost their husbands and their homes all of a sudden, the "normal" cycle has been brutally disrupted and roles of family members have to be adjusted to and re-defined for the novel situation. In extreme situations for example, mothers, in addition to having to cope emotionally with the loss of the loved one, often have to look for employment and start work if they have never before.

When many preoccupations appear at the same time, for example when a mother has to find resources to financially support her family, deal with the grief of having lost her husband, bring up the children in a secure environment and adjust to an unfamiliar environment all at once, a diversity of coping strategies are needed. These coping strategies also keep changing and are influenced by the context of the situation. A person might expect and be able to control one aspect of a situation but not another.

Some studies however showed that the experience of an event outside the range of usual human experience such as the emergence of political violence, can be distressful for some survivors whereas for others no evidence of a disorder may be observed. Indeed, some people find ways to distance themselves psychologically from the event as it is occurring, or deny the impact of the event in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event, whereas others relive the trauma, with little awareness or even amnesia (Koopman et al, 1995). A delayed reaction can be observed as well, long after the event has occurred in which there can be a delayed symptomatology, including depression and suicide.

These reactions have been studied considerably with Vietnam veterans in the United States of America. Most of the literature does in fact testify to the severity and durability of symptoms often experienced by those exposed to violence. It was found that many remained highly distressed almost three years after the disaster.

Beliefs are part of life in Sri Lanka. They have helped the Sri Lankan mother at times of intense stress by creating the necessary motivation to carry on with living. Beliefs are defined as personally formed or culturally shared cognitive configurations (Wrubel et al, 1981). Existential beliefs such as faith in a God, are also used by some to cope in certain stressful situations. Further, religion is now viewed more as an aid to people than as an illusion (Goleman, 1991).

When routines are drastically undermined or shattered, as in the concentration and death camps, the individual feels himself thrown into an overwhelming, disorganized, extreme situation. Paul Marcus and Alan Rosenberg (1995) in their article on "The value of religion in sustaining the self in extreme situations" show that in extreme situations as in the concentration camp, religion helped certain individuals to accept and tolerate intensely painful experiences. They also confirm that religion strengthens the individual in an extreme situation in which his/her selfhood and humanity are violently assaulted.

Unlike avoidance, denial of stressful situations and beliefs, which in a sense drive attention away from the actual problem, vigilance is considered a coping strategy that focuses attention on dealing directly with the problem. It can reduce emotional distress and control the situation: having more information on the nature of the problem can help to plan the future though it can also increase anxiety if the information is disappointing. However, it is not a strategy that can be utilised if one is not emotionally stable to deal with a situation.

Victor Frankl (1963), following his experience in Auswitz, posited the need for meaning as a fundamental human motivation. He maintained that, in order to survive, individuals had to see a meaning and purpose in their suffering. However, the results indicate that survivors reported strong positive changes in their outlook on life. Most agreed that they no longer take life for granted, value their relationships more, value other people more, feel more experienced about life, and no longer take things or people for granted. A large number also indicated that now, they try to live everyday to the full, are more understanding

and tolerant, and look upon each day as a bonus. Nobody in the sample agreed that life had no meaning now. There are strong positive existential changes in values and views about life and other people. What was interesting was the large number of survivors endorsing positive response items. (Joseph et al, 1993).

Often, in the case of women exposed to armed conflict, the belief of personal control is strong. Feeling confident of their power through the mastery over the environment and their dependents help persons cope with its uncertainty and novelty. In addition to the "conscious" motivation, this belief helps individuals to find the necessary coping resources and options and implement the needed coping strategies.

Some studies have indeed suggested that response to disaster can consist of both "negative" AND "positive" reactions (Joseph et al, 1993).

For example, in their study on Families under war, Lavee and Ben-David found that most respondents referred to the effect of the family's shared experience of the event and to the forced togetherness imposed on them by the circumstances. Some felt that the imposed closeness had a positive effect on family cohesiveness in the short-run, but they did not believe that the experience would have any significant long-term effect. Other respondents thought that the imposed togetherness had no real significance to their families, because they are used to spending much time together anyway.

To recapitulate, many studies and various theories suggest ways of decreasing anxiety provoked by a traumatic event. Denial, isolation and intellectualization are strategies used when one considers coping like a defence in order to re-establish emotional stability. Reducing the tension provoked by the situation, or attempting to solve the problem caused by the event are primary concerns of and a possible goal to strive for by individuals exposed to violence.

### *Methodology*

Before presenting the analysed data, it is important to say a few words on how the information was collected. In Hambantota, two female researchers were selected from the area to undertake the field work. They received a day's training on how to administer the questionnaire as the questions, particularly those relating to the loss, could have repercussions on the respondent. Training



on how to listen to and observe the women while they are relating their experiences was also given. After completion of each interview, the researchers had to write down their observations and personal reactions as well. It is indeed a very painful experience these women are asked to speak about, some of them after a period of 10 years and this too to a total stranger. The researchers were made aware of how this kind of situation could revive very aching thoughts and experiences. They were asked to record the interviews if the women agreed to be taped and replay the tape if the women wished to delete some of the information. Precautions to protect the privacy of the women were taken, and with their approval only, are these data brought to light. Altogether 51 women were interviewed in Hambantota.

### *Ethical considerations*

When undertaking this kind of research, where the objective is to collect data related to the psychological well-being of women who have experienced violence, one must be aware that reminding them of an experience that has been devastating, can have further serious psychological effects. It is therefore imperative that researchers receive adequate training on how to question these women to prevent any problem from occurring. There is also the question of whether it is ethical to raise these issues once again when they have been coping with their problems as well as possible ever since the incident. While visiting a person one does not know or is not familiar with and asking them questions, may bring about problems (i.e breakdown, crying...) immediately or at a later stage which the researcher is not equipped to deal with ..... Further, if problems do not occur immediately during the interview they may do so some time later. The women may not feel the effects of the interview immediately but later, when no support is available.

Where the researchers are concerned too, gathering such data can be extremely trying as they become engaged in the conversation, and the lives of the women they are studying. For example, throughout an interview, a woman may breakdown and cry, describe horrifying events that have taken place in her life. After intensely listening to four or five consecutive stories filled with violent experiences, the researcher can find herself psychologically affected. There is therefore a need to prepare the interviewer to expect the consequences of such interactions. It can come to the researcher as a shock. The duration of one interview can also wear the interviewer out. The researcher has to find ways of coping to listen to such stories without herself being emotionally affected. She must be able to distance herself.

It was hoped however that the study would eventually help the women and not revive painful experiences needing psychological support as this could be more damaging to the women.

### **Analysis**

Since all the data that was collected was qualitative, it was necessary to first code the responses.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first, on general questions on the family members living in the household, the second on the incident and the third dealt with coping. All questions were open and allowed the woman to speak as freely as she wanted to. In the case of such studies, it is important that the respondent expresses her fears and anxieties when she wants to. A period of time is needed during which she gains confidence in the interviewer before she can convey her emotions sincerely.

Since respondents were permitted to take their time, some interviews lasted more than three hours. It was more a conversation between respondent and interviewer, generating a very wide range of responses. This, as can be expected, made coding and analysis of data more difficult.

However, a sophisticated coding system (see annex) was adopted to identify the problems expressed by the women and what they did to deal with them.

This brings the discussion to the main concerns of this article. Has the psychological well-being of women living in Hambantota been affected by the political situation in the past two decades? And if it has, how have they coped?

### **The Impact of Political Violence on the Psychological Well-Being of Female Headed Households in Hambantota**

As mentioned earlier, eventhough her own emotional well-being may be affected as a result of social disorganisation, this paper hypothesizes that the Sri Lankan woman would find strategies to cope in order to meet the needs of her family.

**Case Studies**

The case studies that follow were chosen among approximately twenty that were collected. These particular stories were selected because they contain the different problems identified and expressed by the women and how they said they dealt with each of them.

She is 35 years old and has four children dependent upon her. Apart from her eldest daughter (15), her other children are still in school. Her primary source of income is temporary manual work. In 1988, a group of unknown persons entered her house at night and stabbed her husband dead. They had also then looted the house. Since her husband had worked as a labourer, she was unable to receive any compensation. She receives assistance from neither her relatives, his relatives, neighbours, nor the government.

Since the death of her husband, the respondent's 9 year old daughter began to experience seizures regularly. At the time of the interview, her daughter had temporarily abandoned going to school. Because of financial strains, they are unable to seek treatment for her.

The respondent was increasingly distressed as the interview progressed. Speaking about the loss of her spouse, she kept her children close to her. Speaking about her 9 year old's problems and the fact that her eldest daughter, who is 15 years old, is gradually losing her eye-sight, she finally broke down.

On the positive side, the children's teachers are quite supportive, but the youngest child cannot go to school because of her seizures. The respondent's greatest expectation is that her two daughters might receive treatment.

She has begun to discuss her husband with her children because they now question her about him. However, she does not seem to discuss the details surrounding his death.

The respondent is 50 years old and the mother of 4 children, who are still dependent on her. She also looks after a sickly mother. Her two younger children are still in school. Her primary source of income is temporary manual work, as had been her husband's although this does not provide the family with a steady income.

She states that her husband disappeared 8 years ago, though she cannot recall the month or the date. As the interview progressed, it was understood that her husband had left home one day and had never returned. She has not heard from or of him since. While she spoke about this, she had a vacant expression and kept (absent-mindedly) putting her finger in her mouth.

The small hut that her family lives in is badly in need of repair and provides poor shelter during the rains. She does not have the money to mend it, however. The financial situation she is in is desperate, she said. She received no compensation for the loss of her husband, and there is no assistance from his relatives who are too poor to be able to help her. Her own father is dead, and her mother is sickly and dependent upon her. Her neighbours are the only persons who offer her some assistance (unspecified, probably financial).

Her children receive encouragement from their school teachers, who have provided assistance and support in a number of ways (probably materially). The children's performance at school is very strong but it is a strain to continue schooling because of their poverty.

The children are aware of the details of the loss of their father and they discuss this with their mother. She believes that this helps her to cope emotionally with her predicament.

She is 34 years old with 3 children below the age of 10. Her mother is also dependent upon her. Her husband, a farmer, had disappeared 7 years ago after leaving home to visit his brother. The respondent seemed cautious in her replies, and she had a finger in her mouth throughout the conversation.

Her greatest concern is to find money for medical treatment of her daughter who has an injured arm, and one of her sons, whose lower limbs offer no support. This boy is unable to attend school because it is located 5 miles from their home, and he cannot travel that distance. The respondent's main aim is to continue to be able to care for her children. She has considered re-marriage, but is afraid that her children may be abused by their step-father.

She does not talk about her husband's absence with her children, because she feels that it will cause them unnecessary pain and damage. This prompts her to deceive them when they ask questions about their father. She implored the interviewer to procure for her some financial assistance.

**Concerns of the female heads of households who were interviewed in Hambantota**

Three main concerns were voiced in all the interviews: the loss of the spouse caused a wide range of mixed feelings and reactions, the material difficulties which had to be dealt with all of a sudden after the loss of the main income earner, and as could be expected the impact of the loss on the children. It is important to note however that these concerns are interlinked. For example, economic stresses cannot be solved if the woman is not able to come to terms with the loss of her spouse. Similarly, children's education cannot be attended to if economic stability cannot be ensured and so on. Therefore, it is not possible to identify distinct coping mechanisms for each of the concerns expressed by the women, as all are somewhat linked.

**The loss of the spouse**

There were numerous expressions used by the women to describe their feelings (see diagram 1). In most cases however, words such as hopelessness, despair and sorrowfulness were chosen and repeated to indicate what the women feel today. Very few optimistic answers about the future were given. Only two women said that they maintained hope for the future. Most of the others were resigned to their situation or fate. Three women still conveyed anger towards the perpetrators.

All in all, it seemed as though the majority of the feelings expressed were filled with unhappiness and worries.

**What do the women do to cope with these feelings**

The majority of the women dealt with their feelings of hopelessness by concentrating all their efforts towards bringing up their children in a safe and stable environment. It was for their children that they would continue to live, for them that they would find employment, for them that they would seek help from others. Children in every family were the reason for the single mother to carry on.

Only two women said that emotional support was sought from relatives and relieved from feelings of aloneness. In-laws and neighbours offered support in a similar way by alleviating the burden of the loss more significantly by

offering the head of household financial and material assistance in raising the children, providing shelter, and being available in the case of emergencies.

Although most of the women who had been interviewed claimed that they did receive comfort from others (children, relatives, in-laws and neighbours), there was however one woman who still hoped that her spouse would return to help ease the situation.

A small number of women also hoped to remarry some day. They were women whose husbands had died and were still quite young.

When women sought relief through religion it was generally soon after the loss. However, due to the high cost of religious ceremonies and disappointments following the outcome of these, women often did not maintain these activities

Children too helped their mother to cope with the feeling of loneliness and hopelessness. Apart from providing emotional relief, some children (those who were old enough) were able to assist financially. The financial assistance from dependent children lessened the strain of the loss. Mothers therefore could focus on the need to bring children up well and ensure their education. Financial stresses and worries cannot be separated.

**Material difficulties**

The sudden loss of the spouse caused to the large majority of women interviewed in Hambantota, a complete breakdown in the income generation in the household (see diagram 2).

In most homes, the spouse was the main and only income earner. His daily wage supported the entire family. As a result, there were no savings to provide support for a period of time during which the woman would be able to come to terms with the loss. So, immediately after the traumatic event, the woman had to seek ways to overcome the financial difficulties. There was no time or room for emotions. The large majority of women in the sample said that when they suddenly became the head of the household, their main concerns were to raise their children and find the necessary resources to educate them. Education was the primary concern, although feeding the family was also mentioned. As a result of the loss of the spouse, five women said that they had lost or may lose their property.

**How do the women overcome these material difficulties**

Most women in Hambantota sought income generating activities. For example, temporary labour work was the option chosen by the majority of the women who were interviewed. Others relied on farming and a small number on trade (see table 3). This unanticipated change in the routine of the household can in fact have an impact on the intra-family relationships. Young children who received attention from their mother at all times of the day, have to all of a sudden wait for the return of their mother from work. Moreover, if a child is unwell, the mother would not leave for work, if she does not get any support from the extended family or neighbours. The household income is then affected. These income generating activities are therefore very unstable and cannot be depended upon. In some families however, children left school to earn for the family to help the mother with the financial difficulties.

Financial assistance was mentioned by a large number of female heads of households: the majority of the women received financial assistance from the government welfare scheme or Samurdhi, a few women received assistance from relatives, in-laws and neighbours. More than financial assistance, shelter, clothing and books for the children were offered by the family members. Non Governmental Organizations also provided financial assistance.

However, eight women felt that if they remarried these economic stresses could be alleviated and hoped that some day they would find a partner.

**The impact of the loss on the children**

The women were interviewed for the purpose of the survey and the responses that are analysed here are theirs and not those of the children.

The responses of the women regarding the impact of the loss on the children, could be separated into two categories: the education of the children according to the mothers has been shattered (see diagram 3). The performance of some children had dropped, others as mentioned earlier had abandoned school due to poverty. The opinions on attitudes of teachers towards the children were divided. The majority of the mothers said that teachers had been extremely supportive and helped the children emotionally and materially. However, some respondents claimed that their children had been persecuted by their teacher for having no father (the teachers being unaware of the circumstances of the

death or disappearance and the psychological impact of the loss on the children), and for not having the required books and school materials when coming to class.

Some mothers had noticed that their children's mood and behaviour had indeed changed after the loss of their father. Most children had become much more responsible, undertaking tasks they did not before whereas others behaved in a more irresponsible fashion. No real changes had been reported on the whole apart from two reports of depression and of expression of anger towards the perpetrators. What the children truly felt after the loss and today was not collected in the survey. The impressions of the mother were reported.

**How do the mothers deal with the changes observed in the children**

The majority of the mothers who were interviewed said that they did not tell the children the details of the loss. The children knew that their father had either died or disappeared but the circumstances of the loss were not spoken about in the home. Mothers thought that this was a good way for them as well as for the children to cope with the loss. The reasons they gave for not speaking about the incident was that they thought that it would be too painful for them (the women), that there was no point in bringing up these issues again, some of them thought the children were too young to be told the truth because this may affect them too much. So, in general, mothers chose to avoid speaking about the details of the loss.

Often though the mothers had to speak to the children about their father, whether they wished to or not when they asked about him. The mothers however admitted that they in fact obtained relief from the children when talking to them, when emotional support was needed.

Nevertheless there were times when support from the children was not enough and women looked to relatives or neighbours for comfort.

**What the mothers say on how the children cope with the loss**

According to the mothers, the large majority of the children avoided talking about the loss. One of the children had mentioned that he hoped that his father would return some day and one young child had voiced that he would search for his father when he grows up.

The older children sought employment to help their mothers cope with the loss.

### **Discussion**

This paper suggests that the Sri Lankan woman attempts to explore new ways to transmit feelings of trust and confidence to the child and maintain cohesiveness within the family unit by consciously assessing the situation and deciding that her duty is to provide her dependents with financial and emotional security. This "conscious" motivation enables her to find a new meaning to survive and protect her family.

This study did confirm the above. However, though the objectives of the study did not intend to identify possible symptoms associated with the traumatic event, the reactions of some of the women during the interviews suggest that they might suffer from dissociative symptoms or difficulties in functioning at times. Therefore, it is important to highlight that the emotional well-being of the women as well as added stressful experiences may prevent coping mechanisms from being achieved. Indeed, although many women expressed that talking either to their children, relatives or neighbours was a relief to them, they also realised how stressful this could be for the listener. In addition, the ongoing stress caused by the prolonged uncertainty has evidently not distanced them from the problem. It seemed impossible for these women to deny the impact of the trauma. Rather, to handle or reduce the impact of the difficult situation, through a thought process, they dealt directly with the problem and controlled the situation as best as they could. In a sense, they seemed to have found a meaning for their living, a purpose for their suffering, all centered around bringing up the children and educating them.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The experiences of the women in Hambantota describe the stress they underwent or continue to have to deal with today as well.

The conscious motivation of the mother as well as her beliefs are coping mechanisms she adopts to transmit feelings of trust and confidence to the child.

Nevertheless, one must not omit to mention programmes that have been developed in the recent years to support and assist women and youths to deal

with bereavement and the changes that have occurred in their lives. For example, the Social Services Department is implementing a youth and rehabilitation programme for persons who had been involved in JVP activities. Torture survivors are assisted economically, motivated and helped to find employment, receive training in various skills etc. Many non governmental organisations and Women's movements as well have helped women and mothers to organise themselves into groups within their communities to share their grief and experiences so that they can unite their strengths to identify coping mechanisms. Though more persons should be trained in the fields of psychology and social work to deal with specific symptoms and problems, these support systems contribute towards strengthening the emotional well-being of those affected by armed conflict and living in extreme situations. In Hambantota, one might have expected consequences in terms of the emotional well-being of children to have been far more damaging, if not for the quality of care they received as young children and the support systems available to them and their families.



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**Annex**

Coding of qualitative data

Item	Terms of response rating
<b>Section 1</b>	
1 Age of HOH	Numerical
2 Village/District	
3 No of children	Numerical
Male children	Numerical
Female children	Numerical
Age groups	A = 0-2 B = 3-7 C = 8-12 D = 13-17 E = 18+
4 Dependents Relationship	Numerical (M)other (F)ather (U)ncl e (A)unt (S)ister (B)rother (K)niece (N)ephew co(U)sin (G)randmother gran(D)parent (P)father-in-law s(T)epchildren

5 Children in Ed Children not in Ed (who are eligible to be) Level of schooling	(L) S-I-L (P) father in law Numerical Numerical Numerical
6 Primary income	(L)abour (F)arming (T)rading (S)amurdhi (J)anasaviya (W)elfare = Pin Padi (H)usband's salary (G)overnment compensation (O)ther = Field worker, seamstress, community health worker (N)o
7 Adequate	Y/N
8 Religion	(B)uddhism (H)induism (I)slam (C)atholicism (P)rotestantism

Section 2

1	Time since loss	Years upto Sept '96
2	Details of loss	(M)urder (S)uicide (D)ivorce se(P)aration a(B)andonment (V)disappeared (A)ccident (N)atural causes (J)ail (O)ther
	Apparent distress	Y/N/not (s)tated
	Reason for loss	(F)act (U)nkown (G)uess
	Suspects	(J)VP (P)olice (A)rmy (L)TTE (O)ther (U)nkown
3	Occupation of X	(L)abour (F)arming (G)overnment work (T)rade (I)llegal activities

		(B)lue collar private sector (S)killed worker F(U)ll time (P)art time (A)rmed forces (P)oliceman (N) (Govt.) (Emp) (Rs.(S)alary (N) (+) (-)
4	Compensation	
5	Change in In-laws	
	Assistance	(N) (EM)otional (FI)nancial (P)roperty (C)hildren (W)ork Info(R)mation (H)elp to search for X (O)ther
	Problems	Y/N no (C)ontact
	Reasons	(R)emarriage (P)roperty (C)hildren (S)exual harassment Malicious (G)ossip physical (T)hreats (V)iolence over property ispute (O)ther
6	Help from relatives	(N) (EM)otional (FI)nancial (C)hildren (W)ork info(R)mation (S)ignificant (I)nsignificant ma(T)erial

		(H)ousing children (O)ther Y/N
6	Problems	
	Reasons	(P)roperty (C)hildren (S)exual harassment (FI)nancial dispute (O)ther
7	Neighbour's help	(N) (EM)otional (FI)nancial (C)hildren (W)ork info(R)mation (P)roperty (S)ignificant (I)nsignificant (H)ealth (O)ther Y/N
	Problems	
	Reasons	(P)roperty (C)hildren (S)exual harassment Malicious (G)ossip (L)ooted (O)ther (N) (EM)otional (FI)nancial (P)roperty (C)hildren (Education, scholarship) (M)aterials for building house (O)ther Y/N
8	Govt. agencies	
	Problems	
	Reasons	(P)roperty

		(S)exual harassment (C)orruption (O)ther
9	NGOs	(N) (EM)otional (FI)nancial (P)roperty (W)ork (C)hildren's education (T)raining info(R)mation (O)ther Y/N (S)exual harassment (O)ther
	Problems	
	Reasons	
10	Greatest difficulty	(FI)nances (P)roperty bringing up (C)hildren personal (S)ecurity (N)o real difficulty foo(D)

Section 3

1	Change in attitude to Ed	(N) (+) (-) FI (Affected by finances performance)
	teacher's attitude	(N) (+) (-) FI (N) (+) (-) (A)bandoned schooling
2	Religious relief /other	(Y) (N) (S)ome (T)ried but no effect still (H)opeful too (E)xpensive (O)ther
3	Expectations	re(M)arriage (E)mployment children's e(D)ucation (P)roperty (F)inancial security (X)'s fate X's (R)eturn Children's (W)ell-being (N)othing special
4	Feelings	(A)nger (S)orrowfulness (C)onfusion

		(D)espair (H)opeful had (E)nough of life co(N)fidence (K)alakirima (P)lain (W)orry about survival de(T)ermination (R)esignation to fate
5	Coping strategy Coped	Y/N (W)ell (B)arely
6	Support f/ children  Form of support	Y/N (T)oo young too (W)eak emotionally (E)Motional (F)inancial (W)ork (O)ther
7	Discuss loss  Why/why not	Y/N (W)ith some of the children explai(N) the current situation (P)ainful (A)ffect them too much avoid thoughts of (R)evenge (T)oo young (Q)uestions (E)motional solace/relief (U)seless/no point
8	Do children know  Description	(Y) (N) (S)ome (D)on't know (L)ie (S)ame (D)ifferent (N)o description = don't talk about it



9 Change in kids  
Change

Y/N  
can't say (T)oo young at time  
(R)esponsible  
(A)nger towards informer/perpetraor  
(I)rresponsible  
(G)et into trouble  
neglecting (E)ducation  
(S)uicide  
Good (M)anners/behaviour  
(D)epressed  
(F)ear and nightmares

10 Relocated

(N)  
probs w/ (I)n-laws  
neigh(B)ours  
(P)olitical situation  
for (S)upport  
(V)iolence  
(G)rant from govt  
(O)ther

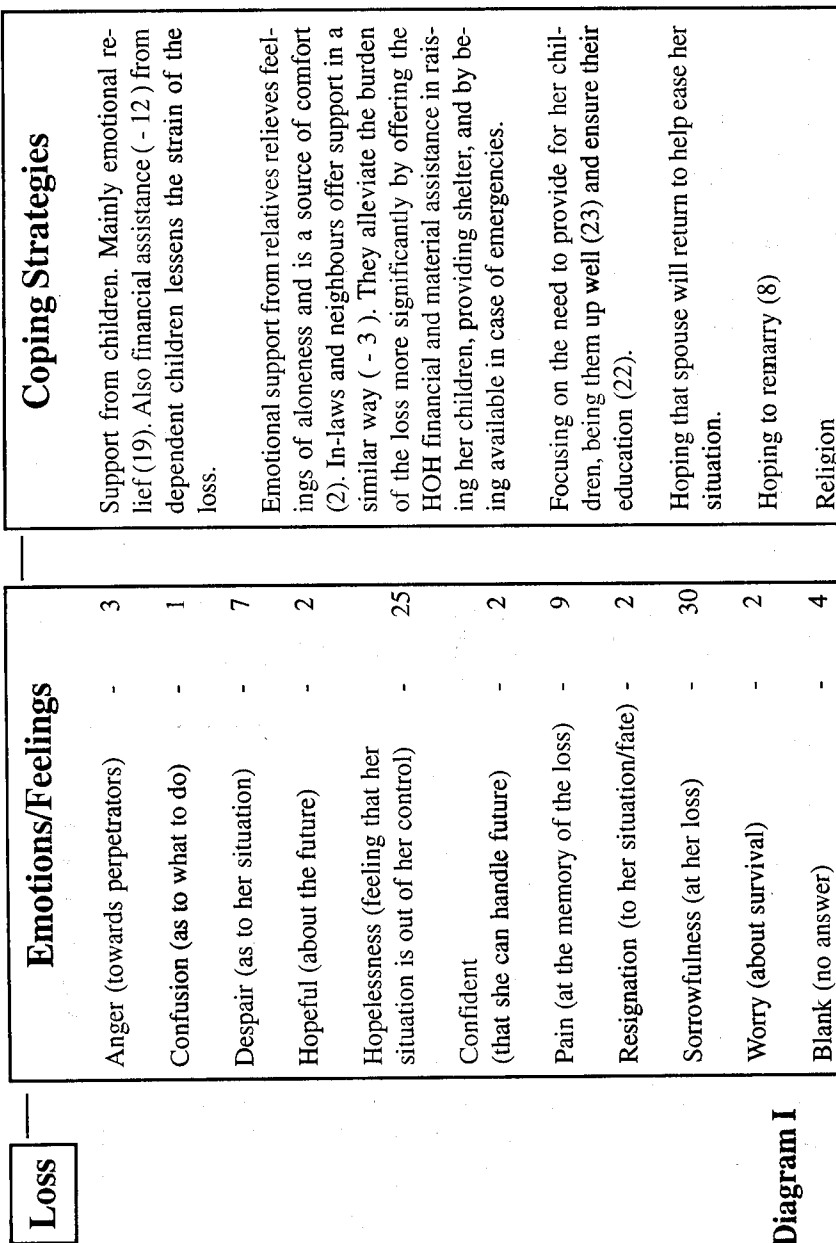


Diagram I

## Loss

### Material Difficulties

Financial Difficulties  
general - 45  
in raising children  
(incl education) - 45  
in feeding family - 2  
Property (loss/threat of loss) - 5

### Coping Strategies

Income generation by HOH  
Temporary labouring work - 30  
Farming - 13  
Trade - 2  
Receive financial assistance from  
government welfare schemes or  
Samurdhi (34).  
Receive compensation from government  
(1 was successful)  
Receiving assistance from relatives  
(financial - 5)  
(shelter/gifts of property - 2)  
(clothing/books for children - 4)  
(free labour for farming/repairs - 2)  
Receiving assistance from in-laws  
(financial - 3)  
(shelter - 1)  
(clothing/books for children - 1)  
Hoping to remarry (8) to  
alleviate economic distress  
Children leaving school  
to earn for the  
family (- 4)  
Receiving assistance from  
neighbours  
(free labour for  
farming/repairs - 5)  
(financial - 1)  
Receiving assistance from  
NGOs  
(financial - 4)  
(clothing/books for  
children - 1)

## Diagram II

54

## Loss

### Impact on Children

**Education**  
drop in performance (6)  
abandoned because of poverty (6)  
abandoned for other reasons (2)  
persecution by teachers  
(for having no father/for not  
having school materials/etc) (7)  
support from teachers  
(emotional/material) (26)  
**Behavioural/Mood Change** (18)  
more responsible (11)  
depressed (5)  
expression of anger towards perpetra-  
tors (2)  
more irresponsible (4)

### Coping Strategies

**Children's coping strategies**  
don't talk about loss (22)  
expect that father will return (1)  
intend to search for father when grown up (1)  
seek employment  
Mother's coping strategies  
do not tell the children how they lost their father (9)  
tell children details of loss (38)  
don't discuss with children because:  
it is too painful for them (2)  
they are too young (2)  
it may affect them too much (8)  
discuss with children because:  
they ask questions (8)  
need to explain their situation (17)  
she needs emotional support from them (6)  
look to relatives/neighbours for assistance

## Diagram III



## **The Murder in Marriage**

*Atiya Dawood*

Brandishing religion like a sword  
Riding the blind horse of desire  
You trampled over my heart.  
You condemned my faith in you to the gallows  
And you married for a second time,

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Each and every moment spent with you  
I wore over my flesh like skin,  
Tying my "aanchal" to you  
I left the court-yard of my father.  
In the mould that you brought  
I located my self.  
What is love, I don't know,  
But your home covered me with its shade like the "bath" tree,

It saved me from evil eyes  
From the arrows coming in my pursuit.  
To live in this mould  
I kept on trimming, clipping myself.  
A drop of your blood came alive in my flesh  
But even children could not be a bond between us.  
What are relationships, I don't know.  
I was taught only this single lesson:  
Your home is the last refuge for me.  
So many times have I seen  
Divorced women  
Condemned by time's eye  
To death by stoning.  
That is why

Like a cat afraid of rain  
I sat content and quiet  
in a corner of the house  
on the use of your name.

What is heaven, what is hell -- I don't know  
But this much I believe:  
Heaven is not higher than faith  
Hell not more difficult to bear  
than the laughter of the Second Wife.  
No "Pul Surat" more difficult to cross  
Than having to put up with any body's taunts,  
everybody's pity.  
Sometimes I found the Second Wife's face  
to be like mine.

I have seen lack of trust  
Adding wrinkles to her forehead.  
Whenever she looks at me  
Happiness flutters in her chest  
Like a pigeon caught between two hands.

I cannot fight it  
You are a part of it,  
I cannot fight against you.

Religion, law and society are on your side,  
Traditions are weapons in your hands.  
I want to tear off from the book of life  
That chapter  
Which you have penned  
To serve your interest  
In my destiny.

### **Murder in Marriage**

"Pul Sarat" is the narrow bridge, as fine as a hair and as sharp as sword, in the after-life which devout Muslims will be able to cross on their way to Paradise.

## **Avenging Women in Indian Cinema<sup>1</sup>**

*Lalitha Gopalan \**

### **Violence and Films**

That there has been an escalation of violence in contemporary Indian cinema is now a well worn cliché. The Illustrated Weekly of India cashed in on this truism and published a round table discussion among filmmakers, critics, and stars on the "correlation between violence in films and violence in society and the various implications of the nexus."<sup>2</sup> The discussants attentively dwell on film as a mass cultural product, but fail to offer any specific link between a particular film or genre and its effects on society. In a series on the first eighty years of Indian cinema also published in the Illustrated Weekly of India, Firoze Rangoonwala definitively dates the decade between 1981-1992 "The Age of Violence"<sup>3</sup> Assembling Hindi films from both "parallel" cinema - Govind Nigalani's Ardh Sattya (Half Truth) -- and the commercial industry, with its vigilante films like Shiva, he offers a cinephile's view of changes in film narratives, but shies away from commenting on the social impact of these films.

Limiting the line of inquiry to either "society" or narratives falls short of understanding the hegemonic hold of these films. In other words, we have to address how these narratives replete with heroes as gangsters, brutal police force, and vigilante closures have such a tremendous draw at the box-office. There is no doubt that these films produced in the 1980s, feed off the crises of

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*\* Lalitha Gopalan is attached to the school of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Washington D.C.*

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legitimacy of the Indian state, crises that precipitated most visibly after the state of emergency between 1975 and 1977 and unleashed an open display of states coercive powers. Even if it is debatable that the state of emergency is the origin for the crisis of legitimacy of the Indian state, at the very least we can speculate that it set into motion contestations between power *and* authority and has pressed upon a more thorough exploration of the working of hegemony, citizenship, community, nationalism, and democracy in India.<sup>4</sup> Located within discussions of legitimacy and hegemony, we can read these films as staging some of the most volatile struggles over representations that shape our public and private fantasies of national, communal, regional, and sexual identities.

Among all the writing on violence in South Asia, *Mirrors of Violence* provides the most thoughtful elaboration of hegemony.<sup>5</sup> While critiques of the state and communal violence are the major concerns of the volume, its simultaneous focus on riot survivor testimonies and narratives provides an invaluable lesson on the specific extent and hold of hegemonic communal ideologies in everyday practices and at times, even witness practices that resist communalism and reshape traditional configurations of family and community.

Taking the cue from Das, this paper turns to particular cinematic representations of rape and revenge to explore how in spite of their visual and narrative goriness there is an attempt to reconfigure the relationship between femininity and violence. This paper also draws from feminist film theory that has argued for formal textual analysis as a means to grasp the articulation of sexual difference in cinema.<sup>6</sup> Although feminist film theory tends to focus heavily on Hollywood productions, I use it at least for two reasons: first, deploying it for an analysis of Indian cinema by interrogates a monolithic conception of national cinema and implicitly opens the possibility of exploring points of contact with international film making practices; secondly, its nuanced theorisation of scopophilia and spectatorship hold up extremely well for Indian films and I will explicitly elaborate on this later in the paper. Despite a general move to place Indian cinema within international filmmaking practices, I want to argue provisionally at this point that any Indian we attributed to these cinemas lies in the location of the state at the register of cinematic materiality; forcing us to acknowledge and theorise the presence of the state when discussing the relationship between films and spectators.<sup>7</sup>

## Rape and Revenge Genre

Attention to cinematic materiality allows one to address the conscious and unconscious codes structuring Indian cinema, but a cursory look at prevailing critiques on violence in cinema reveals an overuse of “formula.” For instance, in his general lament about the escalation of violence in the films produced in the eighties, Rangoonwala notes how “popular cinema has succumbed to a hackneyed formula” and lists a number of repetitive features in these films. Dismissing popular cinema for depending on formulas, however hackneyed they may be, he unwittingly acknowledges processes of standardisation of cinematic codes and narratives and in turn, exorcises a widely held view that Indian cinema randomly picks up story lines only to finally deliver a masala film. A less disparaging report on the workings of the film industry, in the eighties, is offered by M.Rahman who spots the workings and consolidation of a new “formula” in Hindi cinema inaugurated by N.Chandra’s film Pratighat (1986) and soon followed by Sherini, Khoon Bhari Mang, Khoon Bahaa Ganga Mein, Commando, Bhrashtachar, and Kali Ganga. The common theme in these films, according to Rahman, is their portrayal of women as “hardened, cynical, vengeful creatures.”<sup>8</sup> Interviewing director N.Chandra and prominent actresses like Hema Malini, Dimple, and Rekha, who all have played these avenging women roles, Rahman provides us with alternative viewpoints from within the film industry. While director N.Chandra suggest that these violent films are generated in response to the voracious viewing habits of an audience that wishes to see something different from the stock male “action” film, the actresses argue that screenplays with dominant and powerful women are a welcome break from stereotypical roles as submissive and dutiful mothers and wives.

Maithili Rao too identifies an emerging trend in the industry, set off once again by N.Chandra’s Pratighat, a trend that she calls the “lady avengers.”<sup>9</sup> Rao focuses on narratives of these films, arguing that they “reflect the cultural schizophrenia in our society” and demolishes these films on the grounds that they are “hostile to female sexuality” and are nothing more than “victimisation masquerading as female power.” Rao’s feminist critique embodies a resistant spectator position which does not surface in Rahman’s interviews with directors and actresses, and it is worth nothing that her critique does not address the tremendous box office success of these films -- however perverse they may be.

These contradictory and diverse readings of this new “formula” and trends openly acknowledge the presence of obvious cinematic codes and the various inter-textual relationship between films. But for my purposes here, I find it more pertinent to place their different subjects -- industry and spectator -- stereophonically: industry’s suggestion that these films are different from male action juxtaposed alongside critical evaluation which may condemn these films for cunningly representing female victims as vigilantes.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, “formula” is too industry-cantered and fails to account for account for spectator’s responses hence, we have to call on the more theoretically viable “genre.”<sup>11</sup> It is only through genre that we can simultaneously address the industry’s investment in standardised narratives for commercial success on the one hand, and the spectator’s pleasure in genre films with its stock narratives structured around repetition and difference on the other. While culling out production details from the industry to verify the spawning of genres is a legitimate line of inquiry, this paper turns to cinematic materiality of different films to unravel the structuring of repetition and difference to make a case for the working of a genre.

Pruning Rahman’s loose cluster of films around the figure of the “dominant woman” where *Sherni (The Lioness)* -- a film closer to the bandit genre -- and *Zakmi Aurat (Wounded Women)* -- a film closer to the police genre -- are grouped together, we can isolate a genre of films we will call, following Maithili Rao, “avenging women.” A standard narrative obtains in the following manner: Films open around family settings which appear “happy” and “normal” according to Hindi film conventions, but with a difference: there is a marked absence of dominant paternal figures. The female protagonist is always a working woman with a strong presence on screen. These initial conditions are upset when the female protagonist is raped. The raped woman files charges against her perpetrator, who is easily identifiable. Court rooms play a significant role in these films, if only to demonstrate the state’s inability to convict the rapist on the one hand and to precipitate a narrative crisis on the other. This miscarriage of justice constitutes a turning point in the film -- allowing for the passage of the protagonist from a sexual and judicial victim to an avenging woman.

The general features of this narrative and the production of horror in rape scenes point to its close similarity to rape-revenge narratives of Hollywood B films, especially horror films.<sup>12</sup> Critical writing on Hollywood rape-revenge films, particularly Carol Clover’s work, suggests that the marginal status of these films, in contrast to mainstream Hollywood, permits them to

address some of the unresolved and knotty problems on gender and spectatorship that are carefully regulated and managed by the mainstream. Clover turns to the sadistic and masochistic pleasures evoke by these horror films to suggest that B films are the “return of the repressed” in mainstream Hollywood. Focussing on B horror films, where low production values couple with sex and violence, Clover argues that these films displace the woman as the sole site of scopophilia pleasure and opens possibilities of cross-gender identification through the sadomasochistic pleasures encouraged by these films. The most provocative aspect of this work from my discussion is the classification of these rape-revenge films within the larger rubric of horror films, a move that retains the sadistic and masochistic pleasure -- prerequisites for watching a standard horror film -- staged in these rape-revenge narratives. Clover concludes in the following fashion:

I have argued that the centre of gravity of these films lies more in the reaction (the revenge) than the act (the rape), but to the extent that the revenge fantasy derives its force from *some* degree of imaginary participation in the act itself, the victim position, these films are predicated on cross-gender identification of the most extreme, corporeal sort.

Instead of privileging the revenge narrative as Rahman does or on the rape scenes as Rao, it is more pertinent to explore how the narrative nuances of this genre are predicated on a cinematic logic that draws these two parts together. Rape scenes are not unusual in Indian cinema. They are, however, frequently subject to censorship rulings on the grounds both of their irrelevance to the main narrative and the unseemly pleasure they evoke.<sup>13</sup> Yet rape scenes in avenging women films are indispensable to their narrative, repeatedly evoked as evidence in a court room sequence or repeated as a traumatic event experienced by the victim. In other words, the centrality of the rape scenes increase through their intimate relationship to the subsequent revenge plot where once again it is a replay of the negotiations between sex and violence.

### Avenging Women

While N.Chandra’s *Pratighat* is frequently cited as a first in this avenging women genre, the combination of rape and revenge was already secured in B.R. Chopra’s *Insaaf Ka Tarazu (Scales of Justice)* produced in 1980.<sup>14</sup> The latter’s initial box-office success can be partly attributed to the heroine of the film: Zeenat Aman. *The Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* describes the conditions of reception that shaped this film.

This notorious rape movie followed in the wake of growing feminist activism in India in the 70s after the Mathura and Maya Tyagi rape cases, the amendment to the Rape Law and the impact of, the Forum Against Rape which offered legal assistance to rape victims.<sup>15</sup>

Implicit references to the feminist movement is obviously one of the determining features strutting the reception of this film, but its notoriety points towards a different route of analysis where we have to consider how this film relies on our knowledge of these rape cases as a point of entry into fantastical stagings of our anxieties about women, sexuality, and law, anxieties that in turn, are set into motion, but not resolved, by anti-rape campaigns.<sup>16</sup> Re-evaluated through generic details identifiable in later avenging women genre films, Insaaf Ka Tarazu unquestionably stands out as one of the early experiments in rape-revenge narratives.

Insaaf Ka Tarazu opens with a rape scene. A colour sequence showing us a medium shot of a screaming woman in a sari rapidly changes into a black and white shadow play. The silhouette of a man first chases and then disrobes this woman. Another male figure enters the scene and a fight begins between them. The film returns to full colour when the potential rapist is fatally stabbed. The following credit sequence is a montage of stills from various religious and tourist sites in India with the sound track playing the title song of the film. These two sequences juxtapose rape against representations of India and this association with India is further played out in the film by naming the female protagonist Bharati -- the feminine name in Hindi for India. These first scenes lend the suggestion of considering female rape as an allegory for the state of the nation, a suggestion that ceases to be developed further in the film.

The second rape sequence in the film is distinguished from the opening sequence by the continuing use of colour footage and the absence of a male saviour. Using a calendar art print of a woman in bondage in the victim's (Arti's) bedroom as a reference point, the sequence provides glimpses of a rape scene that includes both coercion and bondage. Furthermore, the scene offers us another point of identification through the victim's younger sister, Nita, who accidentally walks into Arti's bedroom during the rape. Arti files charges against the rapist, Gupta. A number of social encounters between Gupta and Arti preceding the rape, combined with Nita's confused testimony, are employed in the court room to suggest that Arti was not raped but consented to have sex with Gupta. The court finds Gupta not guilty of rape.

The court's verdict in Arti's rape case comes as no surprise to the spectators, for the film mobilises this doubt throughout the scene. For instance, Nita's testimony is crucial to this case but the defence lawyer convincingly argues her inability to tell the difference between coerced and consenting sexual relationships. The film frames Nita very much in the mold of a horrified voyeur witnessing a primal scene, thus infusing the scene with both fear and pleasure of sexual knowledge -- instead of recognising it as sexual violation pure and simple. The sadistic-voyeuristic pleasure also surfaces here pointedly through the poster on the bedroom wall. The viewer might expect the poster's subject to be identified with the aggressor, a traditional strategy. Instead, the poster shores up a confusion between representations of rape and rape itself -- thus eroticising the scene of violation and escalating our masochistic identification with this scene. Privileging Nita's relationship to the scene, the film also exposes and depends on our inability as spectators to tell the cinematic difference between a scene of sexual consent and rape.

Notwithstanding the relationship between Nita's credibility as a witness and the court's verdict, Nita's ambivalence presses upon another aspect of the film's narrative -- the unfolding of the revenge plot. Keeping pace with the ambivalence around the charge of rape in Arti's case, the film delays and reserves the revenge scenario until it can represent an unambiguous rape scene. It is only after Gupta proceeds to rape the virginal Nita in his office that Arti's revenge is allowed to unfold. In the film's climax Arti shoots Gupta, circumventing a judicial verdict on Nita's case. The film closes with another court scene where this time the judge abdicated his office for failing to deliver justice in earlier rape cases. Closing the rape-revenge narrative around a court scene or a figure of the state is now a standard feature of this genre and stands in sharp contrast to the male vigilante genre where the figure of the state is repeatedly undermined. Although Insaaf Ka Tarazu did not have spin-offs for another seven years, the film established some of the basic conventions that squarely locate it as a proper predecessor to the avenging woman genre.

N. Chandra's film Pratighat (1987) is retroactively a classic in this genre because of the manner in which it consolidates some basic strains of the rape-revenge narrative.<sup>17</sup> The film revolves around corrupt politicians and the ongoing crisis over law and order in a town. The female protagonist is a college teacher -- Lakshmi -- who lives with her lawyer husband and his parents. The film opens with several scenes of hooliganism orchestrated by Kali -- a youth leader -- in Lakshmi's town. These scenes are also strung together to lead us

through Lakshmi's conversion from an ordinary, disinterested citizen to an active intervenor against Kali's reign of terror. Her complete conversion to an avenging woman hinges on a crucial scene when she openly confronts Kali by filing a criminal suit against him and refuses to withdraw it even when he threatens to harm her. As the stakes continue to rise in their confrontation, Kali finally resorts to a gendered resolution: he disrobes Lakshmi on the street in front her house, with all her neighbours and family watching in silence. This violation establishes the primary conditions for Lakshmi's revenge against Kali and his gang and at the same time seals her estrangement from her husband. Lakshmi is rescued from this scene of public humiliation by Durga whose own life is scarred by Kali's violence -- she was gang raped by Kali's men and her husband tortured to death. Nevertheless, Durga continues to galvanise support against Kali. Lakshmi moves into Durga's home she both recovers and receives support for her revenge plan.

Pratighat displaces the conventional representation of rape by reconfiguring the rape scene as a disrobing sequence at both the visual narrative registers. Ironically, while Kali declares that disrobing is a part of the Hindu tradition beginning with the epic Mahabharata, cinematically the film disengages with all the conventional representations of rape. The entire disrobing scene is spliced as a medium-length shot, and in the final moment of complete nudity, the film converts to colour negative conveying the full extent of this violation through its unrepresentativeness. Moving away from the standard representations of a rape scene, Pratighat draws our attention to the visual proximity between scenes of rape and disrobing in Hindi cinema, and interrogates the ethics of a "full view" circumscribing such scenes.

The scene of revenge where Lakshmi confronts Kali is also framed with narrative references to Hindu mythology and filmic gestures suggesting crossovers with mythological films from the Madras film industry and television series one the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Clad in a red sari, Lakshmi garlands and anoints Kali at a public meeting and then repeatedly strikes him with an axe originally intended as a gift to him. The final killing scene is edited by juxtaposing shots of Kali's larger than life cardboard cut-out against the on-stage altercation between Lakshmi and Kali, fight scenes between Kali's men and Lakshmi's students, and colour negative stills from the original disrobing scene. The cardboard cut-out evokes an inter-textual relay from the poster in Insaaf ka Tarazu, playing on the unrepresentativeness of rape in the former and suggesting that Lakshmi's aggressive attack in Pratighat is equally horrific.

Moving the narrative focus away from a single killing scene to a general murderous chaos replays the film's own pet themes where rape is located alongside other social crimes like hooliganism and corruption.

Two contradictions must be noted. Even as the film is critical of rape, those scenes figure periodically in the narrative, signalling in each instance the consolidation of criminality and vigilantism with an increasing displacement of the state's law and order role. Similarly, criminalizing rape, the conceit employed in this film, appears to identify with a progressive legal position, but we find it cannot respond to the sadistic-voyeuristic pleasure prompted in the cinematic representations of rape. Kali's death may bear a formal resemblance to the disrobing scene, but is not subject to the same censorship regulations that underscore sexual representations in Indian cinema. Pratighat nevertheless, provokes us with the limits and possibilities of equating rape and revenge scenes and it is this provocation that coaxes us to reconsider the masochistic underpinning of the rape scenes in this genre. The film relies on our masochistic identification as spectators in the rape scene to fully play out the horror of the scene, the sadistic dimensions in this very scene propel the revenge plot and reminds us retroactively that the ensemble of elements in the rape scene is always a volatile marriage between sex and violence.

### The (Anti) Climax: Zakmi Aurat

There are several reasons for Pratighat's success, but its ability to summon horror in the revenge sequences is one of them and appears to have opened the gates for other permutations and combinations. The full import of prompting horror in revenge scenes is further developed in Avatar Bhogal's Zakmi Aurat (Wounds of Women) released in 1988.<sup>18</sup> Retaining the rule of targeting "modern" women as victims, e.g., a fashion model in Insaaf Ka Tarazu and a college teacher in Pratighat, Zakmi Aurat picks a policewoman as its protagonist. With the rape scene occurring early in the narrative, the pivotal turning point emerges when the judicial system refuses to convict the rapists, in spite of policewoman Kiran Dutt's own testimony. Abandoning legal recourse, Kiran Dutt now joins forces with other rape victims in the city. Together, the women come up with a fitting avenge plan: to snare the rapists and castrate them.

Kiran's gang rape is edited as fight sequence that closes around a conventional representation of rape. The rape scene returns to the bedroom familiar from Insaaf Ka Tarazu, but with a twist. Refusing to linger on Inspector Kiran Dutt's body as the rapists strip her, the film instead focusses on the



rapists as they tear down her jeans and fling them on the ceiling fan. The unrepresentativeness of the actual sexual act in this rape scene climaxes through a series of shot-reverse-shots of fetishized objects -- the ceiling fan and a medium close-up Kiran's screaming face.

The shot sequence employed in the gang rape of the female police officer creates the basic template for the castration revenge scenes. Again, details on the edge, like the doctor's operating gown, her mask, and the overhead lamp are excessively in focus and fetishised. The camera cuts off the entire abdominal region of the man, refusing to zoom in on a cloaked genital area. Rapid freeze shots of men's faces, and ninety degree shots of the overhead lamp in the operating theatre signal the ongoing process of castration. The equivalence between the gang rape and castration scenes spliced by repeating shot-reverse-shots of a face and an overhead object cinematically attempts to balance rape and revenge.

Critics have lambasted this film for offering an improbable resolution to rape however, such a reading assumes that films have an indexical signification to political reality instead of examining how their narratives repeatedly stage various fantastical possibilities of these very same realities for the spectator.<sup>19</sup> One of the crucial constitutive features of this genre are its vociferous staging of "reality" through familiar references: shots of real newspapers, photographs of Gandhi on courtroom walls, footage of the Indian flag etc.. Zakmi Aurat relies more extensively on these elements than other films. The opening sequence shows us actual newspaper reports of various rape cases in India while the film draws an obvious link between the Kiran Dutt character and Kiran-Bedi -- the well known woman police officer in Delhi. Proliferating throughout the films, these authenticating details are the primary conditions which are strategically placed to heighten our viewing pleasure of the unravelling horror plot. These films reel the spectator into a scene of escalating horror that culminates precisely at the very juncture when the film pulls off its resemblance to extra-cinematic universes. These narratives may not directly respond to or satisfy demands of justice in particular rape cases, but they do unleash scenes of resolution and even expose spectatorial complicity inflecting rape narratives.

Defending the spectatorial pleasures ensuing from I Spit on Your Grave -- a film that bears an intimate relationship to Zakim Aurat -- Carol Clover writes: "what disturbs about I Spit on Your Grave is its perverse simplicity, the way it closes all the interlectual doors and windows and leaves us staring at

the *lex talionis* unadorned. (151)." Clover's comment is aimed at up market films like The Accused, where the legal process takes over the narrative leaving little space for the rape victim to articulate her torment and substantially closes off the possibility of direct vigilante action. Her defence bears my own reading of Zakmi Aurat, where, despite the film's narrative it is possible to consider how it significantly precipitates the problem attending the visual representation of revenge in these films. As we have seen, films in this genre rely on convincingly meting out "non-state" revenge that must equal or even surpass, the horror or rape. While this equation produces ongoing narrative tensions, visual representations of rape in Indian cinema also remind us of the authority of censorship regulations and suggest the possibility of sado-masochistic structuring these rape scenes.

I have argued elsewhere that despite overt protests over film censorship, the Indian film industry is crucially dependent on the presence of the state at the register of cinematic materiality for generating sado-masochistic pleasure.<sup>20</sup> The female body is always the object in focus, and is repeatedly subject to a withdrawing camera that banks on an intimate relationship between the psychic law ruling taboos and the state overseeing censorship. The rape scenes in the avenging woman genre are not far from this formulation, where the narrative informs us that the horror of rape is in part motivated by the absence of the state, but attention to cinematic materiality suggests that the state, as censorship authority, is very much present as one of the crucial negotiating sites. Until the arrival of the revenge plot in these movies, rape scenes appear to be mere substitutes for sex, relentlessly eroticising violence. It is no surprise that the criticism levelled against these films is sparked by a suspicion that violent sex is being flaunted as rape, a suspicion that also guides censorship regulations.

To mitigate and ward off such criticism, revenge scenes in these films have to be equally horrific in order to allow us to read the scenes of violent sex as rape retroactively. The narrative and visual machinations of this genre thus revolve around the problem of balancing rape and revenge: Pratighat settles rape by evoking figures of Hindu shakti goddesses and killing the rapist, whereas Zakmi Aurat resorts to an anatomical equation by suggesting castration as an act of revenge and escalates the horror of rape by visually locating the castrated male body in an analogous position to the raped female body. Settling rape through castration resonates with a feminist utopia, where at least momentarily, the easy economic equation between the penis and phallus resolves the



issue of gender and power that is constantly complicated by and subjected to the symbolic difference between the penis and the phallus. The question is, while revenge narratives in this genre seek continuously to “match” the horror of the rape, can they ever succeed?

*Zakmi Aurat* brings to a head the entire problem of visually and narratively matching rape with revenge through its absurd logic of five rapes to fifteen castrations, a logic that heralds a moratorium on this genre in its current configuration. Undoubtedly, *Zakmi Aurat* also opened the gate of this genre and subsequent productions films like *Aaj Ki Aurat (Today's Woman)* and *Damini* which drove a wedge between the raped woman and the avenger while other films chose to return to violent rape senses and exhaust its possibilities of pleasure.<sup>21</sup> Even as revenge narratives, as Rahman informs us, provide the female stars with more dominant roles, because women's access to avenging power in these films is intimately predicated on rape as a violent test of gender identity rape scenes are never so neatly cordoned off from Indian cinema's extensive use of the woman's body as a stand-in for sex, as a crucial site of scopophilic pleasure. Faced with these contradictory demands, the avenging woman genre surfaces as a giddy masculine concoction: the rape scenes provide the narrative ruse for the revenge plan while also providing the spectator a conventional regime of scopophilic pleasure. Revenge allows the female stars to dominate the screen, but the genre demands that a violent assertion of masculine power in the form of rape is the price to exact for such power. Clearly, in the outreaches of this genre where the interlocking narratives of rape and revenge are less than minimally finessed, gratuitously deploying rape does not sufficiently dislodge or displace conventional representations of women in Indian cinema or appease Rao's suspicions.

### Avenging Women and Sado-Masochism

Located within the larger rubric of other violent action films produced in the same period, the more taunting feminine aspects of the rape-revenge films are most apparent in their narrative closures. Here the avenging woman's unhindered access to power is always limited by the arrival of the police; this final differs markedly from the more assertive vigilante resolutions of the masculine genres like the gangster and bandit films. Couple with the prolonged judicial sequences revolving around rape cases, the appeal of these rape-revenge narratives, it appears, rests on their ability to fantastically stage all the anxious points that attend the relationship between patriarchy and the state. If

the social imaginary promotes a unity between symbolic law and the state, rape cases inject a dissonance between these sites of authority to remind us that “issues” of honour and shame are only provisionally resolved through legal proceedings. For the victim, the state's betrayal in rape cases is equally accompanied by patriarchal abandonment and together they consolidate as the precipitating moment in the narrative that allows it to shift towards the revenge narrative. Faced with an orderless universe, the avenging woman narrative proceeds on a transgressive vigilante path, incites masculine anxiety about the phallic female, and opens the representational circuit for women on the Indian screen but, this unfettered power is undercut by finally reeling in the authority of the state and revealing the avenging woman's own overwhelming investment in the restoration of the social imaginary. Casting women as embodying and sustaining tradition recycles an old stereotype from Indian films, however, the forced closure in this genre only provisionally irons out the anxieties between patriarchy and the state.

Although both the narrative closure accompanied by the very conventional reintegration of the woman into the social order and the precarious necessity of rape in these films weigh down the radical potential of the revenge narrative, they cannot completely regulate the series of unstable desires and identities set in motion through the ongoing dynamics between rape and revenge. Finding anything subversive about rape-revenge narratives both at the register of the cinematic form and spectator's pleasure leads us to some tangled issues plaguing feminist film theory. Laura Mulvey's classic essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” argues that “Hollywood style at its best (and of all the cinema which fell within its sphere or influence)” offers pleasure by enacting a conventional heterosexual division of labour in its narrative structure between active/male and passive/female for the masculine spectator.<sup>22</sup> Because cinema is closely linked to and depends on scopophilia pleasure, this erotic investment in the image of the woman also evokes a castration anxiety for the spectator. Warding off this anxiety, Hollywood offers two avenues of protection -- voyeurism, particularly with a sadistic investment in the narrative, and fetishism, where the threatening figure of the woman is converted into a reassuring object. Identifying the contradictory paths of desire in Hollywood films, Mulvey's essay drew heavily on Freud's essay on “Fetishism” and reproduced some of the heterosexual Oedipal assumptions of that original essays.<sup>23</sup>

Subsequent feminist revisions continue to challenge this work on two fronts: one, but feminist interests in psychoanalysis that has moved the debate

from Freud's essay on "Fetishism" to "A Child is Being Beaten," reading that have frequently been motivated by interests in the genealogy of masochism. Among the feminist writing on the subversive potential of masochism, Parveen Adams's essay "Per Os (ciliation)" is exemplary because she argues that "it is not possible to determine sexual position through identification."<sup>24</sup> Returning to Freud's beating scenario in his "A Child is Being Beaten" Adams provokes us to consider a constant bisexual oscillation between activity and passivity, masculinity and femininity, at the psychical register, and cautions us that psychical reality inflects but does not simply match gender differences in social reality.<sup>25</sup> Other challenges to Mulvey's essay have been mounted by feminist film theorists as they move into other genres of Hollywood -- Mulvey's own interest in melodrama figures centrally in a later revision of her initial formulation -- particularly to B films that include horror, slasher, and pornographic elements. Focussing on the less-than-best cinematic styles of B films that are directed to and have a loyal female audience and incorporate a heady combination of sex and violence -- Carol Clover's work on slasher films and Linda Williams's on pornographic films -- feminist film theory has been forced to reconsider the dynamics between identification and pleasure, particularly sado-masochistic pleasure.<sup>26</sup> Arguing for the presence of sado-masochistic pleasure in violent pornographic films, Williams writes:

....it seems to me preferable to employ the term sadomasochistic when describing the perverse fantasies that inform these films. While still problematic, the term at least keeps in play the oscillation between active and passive and male and female subject positions, rather than fixing one pole or the other as the essence of the viewer's experience. At the same time, it does not allow us to forget, as some celebrations of masochism (e.g., Studlar or Samois) do forget, where ultimate power lies. (217)

Not dislodging completely Mulvey's formulation of classical Hollywood narrative or Hollywood style at its best, later revisions in feminist film theory at the very least complicate the circuits of pleasure and identification stages among different fences in cinema and explore the specific vicissitudes of scopophilia that governs all cinema.

Drawing on William's economic articulation of sado-masochism, it appears that the rape-revenge scenes in the avenging women genre similarly rely on the generation of sado-masochistic pleasure, a pleasure that unwittingly

challenges, however provisional it may be, the straightforward sadistic impulses of rape in Indian cinema. Because rape scenes are inextricably meshed with the revenge plot in this genre, the masochistic dimensions of the rape scene far outweigh its conventional sadistic associations while at the same time the unfolding revenge plot leans on provoking the spectator's sadistic investments in revenge and punishment. Interweaving sadism and masochism through different filmic moments, this genre upsets the normalising fetishistic economy with the fragmented woman's body as the central object but, complicating these generic pleasures is the ongoing tussle between every Indian film and the state over censorship. As a result it is precisely through overt submission to censorship regulations that the commercial film industry parodies the authority of the state, a relationship that is not unlike the masochist's relationship to patriarchal law; therefore, we may have to consider the possibility of the rape-revenge device as yet another ruse to circumvent censorship, resorting once again to the woman's body. At the same time, tightening the rape-revenge equation unwittingly opens possibilities for cross-gender identifications. Not resolving the gender imbalance prevalent in social power relations, the contradictory forces of Indian commercial cinema beg for a reconsideration of the other identifications available in this heady combination of sex and violence. Responding in part to the debates on violence in Indian cinema which cast these representations solely in terms of their regressive effects on society, I suggest instead that violent scenes circumscribed by cross-cutting genre features and pressures can in surprising ways challenge patriarchy's normalising overtones on the issue of gender and constitute one of the crucial axes of spectator's interest in these films.

Arguably rape-revenge narratives are not available as positive models for feminist utopias, but they do stage the aggressive and contradictory contours of sexual identity and pleasure that in turn throw up aggressive strands of feminism. I am not salvaging the film industry's regressive casting of female roles, but do want to suggest that cross-cutting pressures from both the female star system and feminist movement have colluded to stage some of our unacknowledged aggressiveness, both public and private, that also underscore our understanding and articulations of sexual identities.

### **Double or Nothing: Vijayshanti**

At the same time, as we look at other regional productions we evidence other aggressive roles for the top ranking female stars without the mandatory rape. This shift away from the stock rape-revenge narratives is most evident in

films where the lead role is played by Vijayshanti. Her accession to lead roles is amply supported by the success of her films at the box-office and reports from the industry suggest that she is one of the highest paid female stars. Commanding a wide range of roles that include among others a submissive wife, Vijayashanti is best known for her roles as an aggressive woman. Her own self-representation does not rest on emulating other heroines, but as she puts it: "I always have to kick and pound the villains to pulp. That's why I'm called the Amitabh Bachchan of Andhra Pradesh."<sup>27</sup> Vijayshanti too has had her share of rape-revenge narratives; N. Chandra's *Pratigat* is a remake of a Telugu film with Vijayshanti as the avenging woman.

In the earlier section, I steered away from considering influence of the female star economy on the rape-revenge narrative, choosing instead to focus on cinematic form. But, I'm beside myself when faced with Vijayshanti's film because despite different directors they are held together as if to constitute a genre and challenge my own marginalisation of the female star economy in my previous readings of the avenging women films. The dominant feature of her films, for example in N.Chandra's *Tejaswini* (1991), B.Gopal's *AutoRani* or *Rowdy Inspector* (1991), or *Superlady* (1991) is her dominance over the plot and an omnipotent screen presence; unlike the standard heroine who enhances or complements the hero Vijayshanti is the central figure who both commands and moves the plot. Systematically, in her more aggressive films Vijayshanti has grand entrances into the narrative that usually the preserve of male stars. These films also held themselves to a rich reading of regional and global cinematic issues. For instance, as Telugu films they are in constant dialogue with political dramas -- a forte of the Telugu film industry -- challenging the masculine rule of this genre. As female-centered action films, they recall Nadia's stand films from 1930s to the 1950s, and their agility reminds us of a slew of films and television shows from Suzie Wong to Charlie's Angels. In addition, as films initially made in Telugu and subsequently dubbed into Hindi and Tamil, they raise interesting issues about the new economics of dubbing that has gained national market for regional cinemas.

Each of her films upturns every conventional relationship between femininity and aggression and this trait is most acutely played out in Kodi Ramakrisnana's *Police Lock Up*.<sup>28</sup> The narrative takes the following route: Vijaya -- Vijayshanti -- is an upright CBI officer who arrives in town -- Vishakpatam -- to investigate a political assassination. She has to contend with corrupt policemen and a conniving and ambitious chief minister -- Panjaraja -

- who we know is responsible for the assassination. Panjaraja accuses her of being a terrorist and Vijaya is thrown into jail.

A second story line now unravels: Shanti -- Vijayashanti's double role - - is the wife of a zealous inspector -- Ashok -- who is frequently transferred because his honesty and incorruptibility. Shanti is obviously cast as Vijaya's alter ego: meek, clad in a sari, devoted to her husband, and pining for a child. It's precisely her lack of commonsense that lands her in jail on one curfew night. The police throw her into Vijaya's cell and the two see each other for the first time. Unlike stories of lost sisters and brothers that recur in Indian films, this scene does not drag in mothers and fathers to claim kinship between the two women. Instead, it moves quickly through the respective events that brought the two women to jail. The crucial detail that lends credibility to Vijaya's story of her capture is Shanti's encounter with a dying journalist who, mistaking Shanti for Vijaya passes on details of yet another assassination scheme. Shanti suggests that they switch places so that Vijaya can complete her investigation and arrest the corrupt chief minister. Vijaya reluctantly agrees, and the following morning leaves with Ashok disguised as his meek wife. The film now gallops along, revealing Vijaya's pursuit. We see her move effortlessly from a sari to jeans, from a submissive daughter-in-law to a string and masterful CBI official. Through various twists and turns that include the notorious international assassin John, the film ends in a temple courtyard with the villains being successively annihilated by Vijaya and Ashok. The wily politician is the last to go: Vijaya blows him up with his own bomb, sapped in a belt, reminding viewers of the way Rajiv Gandhi was killed. The film closes with Vijaya and Shanthi embracing.

Departing from both the rape-revenge narratives and male action films, *Police Lock Up* radically reconfigures the relationship among power, authority, and gender thus opening up a wide range of fantastical possibilities for feminist identifications. There are many scenes of positive identification secured in the film. For instance, the film opens with Vijaya as a CBI officer, thus clearly breaking away from the routine passage from victim to avenger in the rape-revenge genre. The film ungrudgingly celebrates her ability and success as a CBI officer by showing us elaborate details of her work: there are several fight scenes where both guns and kung-fu fighting styles are exhibited, and her acumen and confidence with technology occur more than once. My own favourite is when Vijaya, dressed as Shanti, uses a video camera to shoot an exchange among Panjaraja's hoodlums. She replays this scene in slow motion and decodes

their exchange among Panjaraja's hoodlums. She replays this scene slow motion and decodes their conversation through lip reading in order to discover where a kidnap victim is hidden. These scenes suggest the presence, possibility, and intervention of female control over modern sites of technology that are all too frequently represented as male prerogatives.

The cornerstone of this film's innovativeness, however, is the introduction of the double role in this story. Indian cinema typically depends on a star's cache at the box-office to pull off a double role. When female double roles surface, for example in Ramesh Sippy's *Sita aur Gita*, the narrative revolves around separate lives and identities of twins, and conventionally closes on family romance: lost siblings, cast as opposites, find each other, find their parents, etc.. In sharp contrast, *Police Lock Up* refuses to recuperate family reunions: Vijaya and Shanti are not lost and found twins and their resemblance is never resolved narratively in the film. Demonstrating that Vijaya and Shanti effectively and easily pass for the other -- Vijaya as the submissive wife and Shanti as an aggressive officer -- the film mobilises change in each woman and closes around a less polarised distinction between the two. I just want to suggest at this point that the blurred distinction between the two women draws this film dangerously close to the horror film genre on twins.<sup>29</sup>

Rejecting a narrative closure around biological kinship, this film wrings out the full effects of masquerade. Vijaya's competency is asserted through her ability to masquerade not only as Shanti, but also as a telephone line repair man and as the killer John, at various points in the film. Masquerade controls and mobilises this film's narrative.

### **Masquerade and its Possibilities**

Masquerade as a theoretical concept in feminist film theory arrives through Joan Riviere.<sup>30</sup> The oft-quoted passage from her essay reads in the following manner:

Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to kids the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it -- much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods. The reader may ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade.' My suggestion is

not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing. (38)

Mary Ann Doane initially employed this concept to theorise cross-gender identifications that attend the female spectator when viewing a masculine-ordered universe in Hollywood cinema.<sup>31</sup> Doane argues that while watching films that direct themselves to a masculine subject, where a female figure is repeatedly fetishized, female spectators masquerade as masculine subject thus generating a viewing pleasure that evokes sado-masochism. In a revised version of this essay, Doane picks on the radical and class fantasies that are embedded in Riviere's theorisation of the masquerading intellectual woman.<sup>32</sup> Both versions, nevertheless, are limited by an exclusive focus on the viewing subject's heterosexual desiring economy that tend to occlude other possible subject positions. John Fletcher's reworking of Riviere's masquerade not only presses on more radical reading of the essay but also returns to the signifying form of the film to elaborate on masquerade.<sup>33</sup> Fletcher writes:

Riviere's distinction comes down to one between the mask of femininity as reaction-formation, renouncing and reversing wishes, and the mask of femininity covering the refusal to renounce them. The importance of Riviere's conception of the masquerade is that it constitutes a transgressive doubleness, an inscription of alternative wishes. The potential for a critical distance from the mythemes of femininity (passivity, responsiveness, deference, fatery, etc) is lodged already within it and the narratives it might generate. (55)

Turning to Riviere's formula of masquerade as theft, Fletcher suggests, in a Lacanian twist, that this fantasy is a theft of the paternal phallus. Desiring the phallus inaugurates the subject into the economy of desire and simultaneously into the linguistic universe and in turn, this desiring and speaking subject recognises both the lack and plenitude encompassing the phallus. This Lacanian inflection on Riviere dislodges the possession of the phallus from a simple anatomical assignment of gender for the speaking and desiring subject. In other words, masquerade can be extended to both masculine and feminine subjects when there is an attempt to cover their refusal to be compliant. Fletcher deftly uses this reworking to undermine previous reading of *The Locket* (1946) and *Marnie* (1964), films that have been read exclusively as attempting to hold up a fetishized female figure for a masculine viewing subject. His analysis closes an extremely instructive note:



In these film Riviere's scenario of the masquerade generates narratives of the woman as an intransigently desiring and active subject, within the heterosexual economy of the phallus, whose key signifier she re-signifies and re-routes in her relay of alternative wishes and demands. (70)

Reconsidered for the films on hand, it can be said that masquerade functions at different levels in *Police Lock Up*. The film is clearly located within the male action film genre where restoration of law and order dominate the narrative and always close on a conventional rearrangement of law and order. Usurping the standard male hero's role, that is, masquerading as a CBI officer, Vijayashanti plays this role to its full extent and the film supports this masculinization completely, for instance, by holding off even song and dance sequences exclusively around Vijaya. Reeling Shanti into the narrative as an upright inspector's wife is a perfect foil for providing a feminine domestic space that both cushions and counterpoises Vijaya's aggressive public self, and together the roles demonstrate Vijayashanti's ability to perform across different and competing terrains.

Doubleness is further supported by naming the characters from parts of the star's full name thus "assuring" the masculine subject, as proposed by Riviere, that behind the mask lies this powerful phallic figure that unites both halves of polar screen personalities.

The double role in this film also actuates a different fantastical staging of desire. The lack of a parental origin as a reason for their resemblance unhinges the film from closing around a cozy sibling they switch places, the scope of this offer clearly extends to her spouse -- we see Vijaya effortlessly passing for Shanti in her home, even masquerading her love for Ashok. It is only later in the film that Ashok reveals that her suspected Vijaya wasn't Shanti when she rejected his sexual demands. Of course, the film suspends all knowledge on the exact moment of his discovery leaving open the possibility of a sexual iter action between Ashok and Vijaya. The switch thus opens the possibility of Ashok being exchanged as a sexual object between them.

We have seen the male version of this arrangement first proposed by Levi-Strauss and then ingeniously resurrected by Lacan and revised by feminist.<sup>34</sup> Eve Sedgwick's reformulation in *Between Men* shifts the exchange of women between men from a heterosexual matrix to homosexual.<sup>35</sup> Sedgwick proposes that women are exchanged between men to avert, ward off, and occlude the

articulation of homosexual desire for each other while simultaneously oppressing women and producing homophobia. These terms seem uncannily reversed in *Police Lock Up*, raising the possibility that Vijaya and Shanti's full scale switching is driven by a desire for the other, however narcissistic it may appear. This reading is further endorsed by the final moment of the film where we see them embracing, a closure that displaces and postpones heterosexual resolutions.

Although Vijaya has been the focus of most of the dramatic moments in the film, Shanti too provides enough dissonance in the plot despite her conventional representation of passive femininity: she not only initiates the idea of the switch but also remains extremely loyal to her role as Vijaya in spite of arduous conditions in the jail. But it is in a more eccentric detail that her location in the plot allows for displacements. The film elaborately informs us that Shanti's anxiety about having children has abused effects on her behaviour -- she daydreams about phantom children, upsets her husband's work routine by demanding his presence at various fertility rituals, and above all, she has a pathological attachment to her dog who she treats as her child.

I am reminded here of Edmund Leach's provocative essay "Animal Classification and verbal abuse," where he argues for an intimate relationship among human classification of animals, verbal abuse, and incest taboos. There is an unrelated, yet similar take on domestic pets by Avital Ronell in an interview where she expounds on the Bush family and pets after Millie's "autobiography" was published.<sup>36</sup> She comments:

I remember telling people, "Watch their rapport to the dog, because here is where they articulate things that are taboo, that are unconscious." (142)

Shanti's attachment to her dog, her attempts to humanise Caesar, cast aspersions on the fertility of this heterosexual unit, particularly on her husband and his ability to reproduce. Furthermore, her incapacity to differentiate between dog and child, a difference that conventionally marks so many sexual, dietary, and verbal taboos, throws asunder all normative images of a reproducing family and even anticipates the remarkable switch suggested and promoted by her. The film promotes her attempts to humanise Caesar by providing it on more than one occasion subjective point of view shots. Finally, it's Caesar who can tell the difference between Vijaya and Shanti and is smoothly exchanged between them without a bark. Together these details dismantle normative heterosexual



desire and even proposes an alternative configuration in a song and dance dream sequence spliced together from Shanti's point of view. Shanti finds out about her pregnancy from the jail doctor and a visit from Vijaya provokes a number of longings that she overcomes by lulling herself to sleep by singing a song. This sequence is set around a pregnancy ritual and she begins a duet with her husband, but soon substitutes him with Vijaya and song closes around their embrace. Like the final embrace of the film, here too the heterosexual convention of these songs in Indian films is subverted. In the absence of any clear performative declaration of a lesbian identity in the film that may allow for a straightforward reading of a lesbian desire plot, I propose that *Police Lock Up* approximates a female buddy film genre that allows and encourages a staging of lesbian fantasies. As a police narrative, the film shadows and masquerades the male action genre to a hilt while surreptitiously displacing conventional expectations and resolutions attending its masculine counterpart.

In sharp contrast to the avenging woman genre, where the inept law and order system allows for the avenging plot to unfold with a closure that reintegrates the woman into the social and civic order, *Police Lock Up* and other Vijayashanti films harbour a less antagonistic relationship to the law. Located directly within the law, most prominently played out in *Police Lock Up*, the female protagonist is constantly settling law and order problems produced by corrupt politicians and policemen, a relationship with the state that is unabashedly accommodational. Nevertheless, Vijayashanti films rouse some of the most knotty and unresolved problems attending representational struggle around femininity, violence, and the state.

### Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the South Asian Regional Studies, University of Pennsylvania and I have greatly benefited from all the thoughtful comments and challenging questions raised on that occasion. I wish to thank Robert Schumann who in the spirit of friendship read an earlier draft of this paper. Finally, thanks to Itty Abraham who has been there at every turn offering his critical eye and support.
2. "Imaging You," *The Illustrated Weekly of India* May 29-June 4, 1993: 23-37. The discussants included N.Chandra, Prakash Jha, Javed Akhtar, Meenakshi Seshadri, and Maithili Rao.
3. Firoze Rangoonwala, "The Age of Violence," *The Illustrated Weekly of India* Sep. 4-10, 1993: 27-29.
4. Achin Vinayak, *Painful Transition*
5. Veena Das, ed., *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).
6. See Constance Penley ed., *Feminist Film Theory* (New York, Routledge, 1987) for an elaboration of this position.
7. For example, gangster film genre surface in Hong Kong, Japan, American, and Indian film industries of the 1980s. Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) is an acknowledged remake of Hong Kong filmmaker Ringo Lam's *City on Fire*, an acknowledgment that complicates the processes of exchange among Hollywood and other commercial industries.

8. M.Rahman, "Women Strike Back," *India Today* 15 Jul., 1988: 80-82
9. Maithili Rao, "Victims in Vigilante Clothing," *Cinema in India* Oct. - Dec. 1988: 24-26.
10. I am borrowing Miriam Hansen's term initially used by her to simultaneously locate both Adorno and Walter Benjamin's conflicting and differing views on cinema. Reusing it in this context, it nicely provides an auditory register for a discussion on images. Miriam Hansen,"
11. For a succinct theorisation of genre in film theory, see Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: BFI, 1980).
12. See (i) Carol J. Clover, *Men Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princetown University Press, 1992); (ii) Peter Lehman, "'Don't blame this on a girl'. Female Rape-Revenge Films," *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (New York: Routledge, 1993).  
  
This explicit resemblance to Hollywood B movies throws up a new set of issues: it draws limits to "national" style of cinema forcing us to consider the exchange and appropriation of cinematic styles across national boundaries. Every "national" cinema has, of course, to content with Hollywood hegemony, but if the points of contact between India and Hollywood film are the much maligned, yet often experimental, B films, it raises a host of fascinating questions relating to taste and the distribution networks of B films in the Third World.
13. See Aruna Vasudev, *Liberty and License in Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978) on censorship regulations.
14. *Insaaf Ka Tarazu*, dir. B.R. Chopra, with Zeenat Aman, Padmini Kolhapura, Raj Babbar, and Deepak Parashar, B.R. Films, 1980.
15. Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995) 416.
16. For a useful discussion on the public discussion of rape and the women's movement see Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma, "Rape: A Campaign is Born," *Whose News?: The Media and Women's Issues*, eds. Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994) 43-50.
17. *Pratigat*, dir. N.Chandra, with Sujata Mehta, Arvind Kumar, Charan Raj, and Rohini Hattangady, Usha Kiron Movies, 1987.
18. *Zakmi Aurat*, dir. Avatar Bhogal, with Dimple Kapadia, 1988.
19. Farhad Malik, "Fact and Fiction," *Cinema in India* Aug. 1981: 5-8.
20. "Coitus Interruptus and the Love Story in Indian Cinema," *Gender and Art in India*, ed. Vidya Dehejia (New Delhi: Kali for Women) Forthcoming.
21. Other film productions include (*Serai*, *Prema Pasa*, and *Khoon Bhari Mang*).
22. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Panley (New York: Routledge, 1988) 57-68.
23. Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," trans. and ed. James ed. James Strachey, *On Sexuality* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986 (1927) 345-357.
24. Parveen Adams, "Per Os(cillation)," *Camera Obscura* 17 (1988): 7-30.
25. Sigmund Freud, "A Child is Being Beaten' (A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions)," trans. James Strachey, *On Psychopathology* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987 (1919)) 159-193).
26. Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
27. Interview with Vijayshanti. *Filmfare* July 1993.

28. Police Lock-Up, Kodi Ramakrishnan, with Vijayshanti, Kumar Films, 1992
29. Horror films on twins similarly don't possess the cushion of a family romance and play on all the horrific aspects of twin identities and the twinning reproductive itself. The most competent film in this genre is David Cronenberg's *Deadringers* that takes on both Peter Greenaway's avant garde film *Zed and Two Naughts* and Bette Davis's *Deadringer* to render a techno-horror film that borders on incest.
30. Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a masquerade," *Formations of Fantasy*, eds. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986) 35
31. Mary Ann Doane, "Film and Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," *Femmes Fatales* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
32. Mary Ann Doane, "Masquerade Reconsidered: Further Thoughts on the Female Spectator," *Femmes Fatales*.
33. John Fletcher, "Versions of masquerade," *Screen* 29.3 (1988): 43-70.
34. Claude Levi-Strauss, *Elementary Structures of Kinship*; For a pithy elaborations of Levi-Strauss and Lacan see Jane Gallop, *Seduction of the Daughter*
35. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
36. Avital Ronell, interview, *Re/Search #13* (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1991) 127.

## Her Dilemma

*Shiranee Mills*

The body of the woman through time has gained centrality in discussions, symposia and in day to day mundane conversations. The woman's body is highlighted in depictions such as the temptress, the seductress and the whore, as the carrier and guardian of culture, purity and religion and also as the glorified mother - a paragon of virtue and sacrifice. These contradictions and concepts of duality emerge from society, a society which feels compelled to extend yardsticks where the woman is concerned. Concepts and thinking which revolve round the woman are centred on her body - the body which is her natural identity. Yet one is compelled to argue that the body is not enough to define her as woman.

"There is no true living reality except as manifest by the conscious individual through activities and in the bosom of society."(de Beauvoir, 1983:69)

The individual is then an inextricable part of the society to which she/he belongs. As Simone de Beauvoir argues, a woman "becomes" a woman through a culturally defined identity together with a natural identity.

"The physical fact of a woman's body is "not enough" to define her essentially as a woman; rather such an identity is allotted to her within a continual process of acculturation that positions her in a restricting and defining set of cultural norms."(Watts, 1992:83)

This process of acculturation takes place in the lap of society - society which through time has handed down practices and modes of thinking to

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\* Ms. Mills is attached to the *Women's Education and Research Centre* as a Senior Project Director and is in charge of the research on electronic media

humanbeings. These practices which at the beginning were an interpretation of existent social norms, through time have got reinforced in society as practices which are natural and normal. These societal customs and practices seep into all facets of society even institutions such as religion and law and ironically later present themselves as practices symbolising religion and law. Often ideologies and ideological practices of a society under the guise of “traditions”, “symbols’ and “culture” work to the detriment of society and are internalised by both sexes of the society. To further explore this aspect we need to take a closer look at this mystic phenomenon termed “Ideology” which has shaped and moulded the thinking of generations and whole societies of people .

Ideology has been described as perhaps one of the most equivocal and elusive concepts one can find in the social sciences. (Larrain, 1979:13). Ideology is also described as mere “systems of thought”, “sets of ideas”, “systems of beliefs” and “symbolic practices”. These various interpretations have been termed by John B. Thompson as a “neutral conception” of ideology (Thompson,1978:4) which fails to give sufficient explanations to the practices and actions it evokes. Neutral conceptions of ideology detract from the negative implications ideology has on society and human beings.

Althusser in his marxist readings has sought to understand the term ideology as a means of seeing how dominant classes can propogate particular representations of material reality which work in their own interests. (Althusser,1971). Here ideology has been connected to people’s material ‘conditions of existence’. Thompson defines ideology as essentially linked to the process of sustaining asymmetrical relations of power. He specifically terms this as a “critical conception of ideology” as against the “neutral conception of ideology. (Thompson, 1978:4) He further states that to study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning serves to sustain the relations of domination. Therefore one may conclude that the term “power” and “domination” remain as two major components of ideology. Ideological practices therefore exert power and domination.

Caroline Ramazanoglu puts forward the word “knowledge” in contrast to “ideology” thus indicating that ideology mystifies, hides and in general does not reveal the reality of a situation.

Whereas ideology mystifies people’s understandings of the societies they live in, knowledge reveals the essential social, political and economic

structures and relationships which really constitute society.”  
(Ramazanoglu, 1989:146) .

She states that different ideologies would necessarily present themselves as “natural, normal, desirable and legitimate.”

Basing her argument on this thinking Ramazanoglu states that “Feminist knowledge” enables people to identify patriarchal ideas as patriarchal and to find out how patriarchal systems work and to whose advantage.

Therefore when ideologies are understood by society as “natural, normal and desirable”, such practices would be internalised in society and would be perpetuated through time. They cannot be dismissed merely as “sets of ideas” that people believe in for they are inextricably linked to the interests of those who wield power. Thus one may conclude that ideological practices of society, which appear to be normal, desirable and natural, in reality work towards the advancement and the benefit of those in power.

Hegel, for example, maintained that a woman’s sphere was marriage and that a woman “in the feeling of family piety realizes her ethical disposition” - Hegel understood family piety for women as the law of nature. (Agonito, 1977:166-67) This is an example of how the association of women with the family and family life stemmed, from the “biological fact that women reproduce.” The tasks of bearing, rearing and nurturing of children became the prime, natural task of women. This developed into an “ideological practice” which legitimised woman’s confinement to the house and to household tasks. Women are thus defined as belonging to the domestic sphere for most of their lives.

Ideological practices which focus on woman, focus on her body. Thus norms and rules arise in society promoting ideological images and symbols which relate women to fertility, sexuality and motherhood. Any society irrespective of its placement in the global frame relates woman first to her role as a sexual object and as a mother.

### **Woman and Fertility:**

Fertility in a woman is a must in most if not all societies. The woman is seen as an instrument through which children are produced. In the South Asian Region an infertile woman is considered inauspicious. In certain

communities of South Asia the ritualistic bathing of a young girl when she attains age is commenced by a woman who has sons, an act which represents the ideology and the hope that the girl who is now into womanhood should in time give birth primarily to sons. A woman without children is not given such a role for fear that the girl who has attained puberty may become infertile as a result of being bathed by an "infertile" woman. Thus the fertility of a woman and her ability to produce children raises her status in society and on the contrary an infertile condition in a woman is feared and despised. The ability to produce children is interpreted as a blessing and a sign of "prosperity". Such practices which are still in vogue in the region highlight the ideology that for a woman her adornment, her crown, is fertility. Thus in the issue of female fertility the body of the woman is highlighted. The body is focussed upon.

### **Woman and Sexuality:**

Woman is further considered to be a symbol of sexuality. Michel Foucault in his critique of modern society argues that the institutions of modern society under their guise of "political liberty" and sophisticated thinking instil hitherto unprecedented discipline against the body. In his analysis of the disciplinary practices adhered to by modern forms of the army, the school, the hospital, the prison and the manufactory Foucault says:

What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gesture, its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A "political anatomy", which was also a "mechanics of power" was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over other's bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, "Docile Bodies".

(Foucault, M. 1979:138)

Sandra Lee Bartky in her study of Foucault's theory says:

"More is required of the body now than mere political allegiance or the appropriation of the products of its labour: The new discipline invades the body and seeks to regulate its forces and operations, the economy and efficiency of its movements." (Bartky, 1990:63)

Thus to make bodies docile pressure has to be applied to activities of the body. Bartky in her study also takes Foucault's theory which looks at Jeremy Bentham's design for a model prison called "Panopticon". All the activities of the prisoners in this prison are monitored by a central tower. Foucault says that this is applicable to the whole society. Each inmate of the prison is in his cell but is constantly monitored by the central tower. The effect of this he terms as "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power." (Foucault, 1979:201)

Here it is observed that each prisoner becomes his own jailer. Bartky adopts this theory in feminist thinking and says that the female too is under the scrutiny of patriarchy, compelled to restrict, to change, to model herself according to the requirements of patriarchy. The present day bodily form expected of woman is being slender, taut and narrow-hipped. Bartky terms this as a "silhouette that seems more appropriate to an adolescent boy or a newly pubescent girl than to an adult woman." Since the average woman has normally quite different dimensions, they must of course diet in order to assume proportions required of them. They have to suffer in order to suit the requirement.

Society's requirement of a smooth face for a woman must then be achieved through non-expression of a face for "an expressive face lines and creases more readily than an inexpressive one." (Bartky, 1990:67)

In order to maintain her sexual appeal she has to restrict her movements, appear ladylike, and paint her face in order to fulfil that model of "prettiness" and "sexuality". Bartky also mentions still finer disciplines that the woman has to maintain in society. Feminine faces as well as bodies she says are trained to the expression of deference.

"Under male scrutiny, women will avert their eyes or cast them downwards; the female gaze is trained to abandon its claim to the sovereign status of the seer." (Bartky, 1990:68)

In films and romance novels, this particular gesture is thought to be "feminine" and appealing. Thus the woman must make herself appealing and be "object and prey" for the man and for society in general. Bartky sums it up thus: "Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other."



The norms of femininity suppress the body potential. We grow up learning that the feminine body is soft, not muscular, passive, incapable, vulnerable. Our parents, teachers and friends suppress our natural urges to run, jump, risk - by cries that we should not act so boldly and move so daringly..... Developing a sense of our bodies as beautiful objects to be gazed at and decorated requires suppressing a sense of our bodies as strong, active subjects, moving out to meet the world's risks and confront the resistances of matter and motion. (Young, 1979)

Woman's bodily parts, her lips, breasts, hips - these are parts of the female which are used in advertisements and commercials as sexual objects of a woman's body. Freud terms this as "sexual objectification". (Freud, 1957:104) He says that sexual objectification occurs when a woman's sexual parts or functions are separated out of her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her. Bartky argues that to be identified with the rest of the body which in religious and metaphysical systems have been valued as less than mind or personality, is a form of "fragmentation" and thus an "impoverishment of the objectified individual." (Bartky, 1990:36). Sexual objectification then does not recognise woman for capabilities other than of sex/sexual. When the woman's breasts, hips are used in advertisements, it highlights her sexuality and in the male world she is denied any other capacity.

In the sexual act too, as stated earlier, the woman is seen as a facilitator of pleasure and an instrument through which children are begotten. Femininity and the "norms of femininity" give her no part in the sexual other than the above. The satisfaction, the pleasure which the woman herself feels and seeks are ignored. This one sees as a result of the stereotype that woman is passive and docile.

### "Mother" and Mother and Child Image:

The physical ability of the woman to bear children has led many societies to construct motherhood as something which confines and restricts her to the domestic world. While the mother is allotted the task of nurturing the child in its early childhood, her participation in the child's adulthood gets limited. In certain communities the ritual of boys' initiation rites is carried out to "purge the defilement accrued from being around mother and other women mowt of the time." (Ortner, 1985) This practice defines a woman's place in the home as

merely a child-bearer and rearer, not giving her the prominence or any part in the upbringing of the child when the child enters the public sphere.

Women of most societies are brought up with the thought that the sole purpose and existence of women is for procreation. The child bearing role of the woman it is felt comes with nature. C.S.Lakshmi (1990:72) in her paper "Mother, Mother-Community and Mother politics in Tamil Nadu", quotes a popular film song:

"Can a tree be a burden to the earth  
Are the leaves a burden to the creeper?  
A child she has given birth to - can it  
be a burden to the mother."

- a film song which romanticises the concept of motherhood, echoing the popular concept that women are meant to be mothers and that the mother by nature is linked to the child which she bears and that she should not feel it burdensome.

"We were quite convinced that what the mother in the song felt all of us shared by virtue of being biologically women."

C.S.Lakshmi

The song is an echo of the concept that the need for bearing a child and the emotions which link the child to the mother are naturally lodged in the body of a woman.

As stated earlier, a woman is considered to be defective and inauspicious if she does not fulfill this biological requirement that society through the ages has impressed upon her. C.S.Lakshmi further sketches in her paper, two images with which girls of the Tamil culture grow up - that of the "exultant mother far removed from the physical world of pain, blood and excrement and the sorrowful barren woman caught up in the net of her own body". Thus these "truths" are understood as a universal reality which involves all women.

The mother image in Tamil culture is further linked to the woman's milk and the womb. Legends of the Tamil culture comprise instances which bring out the "the magical, mystic qualities" of the mother's milk and the womb. The womb described as being the source of brave and courageous sons and the saying "nothing quenches thirst like mothers milk" - all these further society's



understanding of the mother figure. Her breasts and her womb thus become "implementing tools". The mother is glorified and this glorification turns into a metaphor for all that is considered sacred and pure. Hence the phrases such as the "mother tongue" and "motherland". This further instils the ideology that man is the protector of "mother land" and "mother tongue" just as he is the protector of the mother, the woman. These terms also denote that the mother or the woman is weak and helpless in need of man's patronage all her life.

The relationship between mother and child which is given mystery and a magical quality - implies that the mother should be the rearer and the nurturer of the child always sacrificing, always caring, confined primarily to the home - an auspicious role which restricts her freedom. Household chores are looked upon as the woman's field. In institutions and clubs women are allotted the tasks of catering and serving (service roles which are an extension of household chores) and denied participation in the decision making processes of these institutions.

Another irony in the "mother phenomenon" is the fact that while the woman is alienated and ridiculed for infertile conditions, the mother who gives who gives birth to sons and mothers who give birth only to girls are considered different. A mother who gives birth to sons is considered blessed and happy whereas the mothers of girlchildren though esteemed in society for their ability to bear children are considered lower in status because of her "incapability" any longer to bear sons. These sentiments though unvoiced still remain in society embedded in the very fabric of society.

### **Virtues and Woman :**

By making woman the embodiment of chastity, purity, fertility, sacrifice and other "purest" values in the culture, society constantly polices her behaviour, her way of life. Woman is constantly required to adhere to these values which she is supposed to embody. Failure to abide by the norm brands woman as "unfeminine, unnatural, uncaring and brash." Looking at the above symbols, characteristics and images which portray the woman, we see that her body and its movements are limited spatially and emotionally. By holding a tight rein over her body, society prevents her from encroaching into fields where patriarchy reigns.

### **Religion and Woman:**

Reinforcing the restrictions placed upon woman is religion and religious practices which are very much a part of life in some regions. In societies where religion plays a major role and religious traditions are woven closely with people's way of life, the ideological practices that these religions contain, segregate women and thrust upon them subordinate gender roles in the social structure. Such gender roles are the most basic "building blocks" (Brown, 1994:189) of social organization. Religion thus could be considered an intergral component of these "building blocks" of social organization. Whole societies are fashioned through religious ideology. The close links these religious institutions have had with other social institutions influence the functioning and practices of these institutions.

Religious teachings which urge women to be dutiful wives and mothers, which forbid the use of contraception, forbid divorce, which preach and urge obedience to the male - all work towards confining the woman to the domestic sphere and the family, prioritising her body and laying restrictions on her body.

Clifford Geertz, in his paper titled, "Religion as a cultural system" (Geertz: 1973 p.87) says this about religion:

Religion is never merely metaphysics. For all peoples the forms, vehicles and objects of worship are suffused with an aura of deep moral seriousness... Never, merely metaphysics, religion is never merely ethics either. The source of its moral vitality is conceived to lie in the fidelity with which it expresses the fundamental nature of reality. The powerfully coercive "ought" is felt to grow out of a comprehensive factual "is" and in such a way religion grounds the most specific requirements of human action in the most general contexts of human experience.

Geertz further suggests that religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific... metaphysic, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other.(Geertz,1973:90) Karen McCarthy Brown in her explanation of this concept says that we could conclude that religion is ultimately a "mutual readjustment between the "is" and "ought" - the "known" and the "felt". (Brown, 1994:184) She further states in her article, "Fundamentalism and the Control of Women" that the task of orienting us in the world compels religion towards

symbols rather than rational constructs . Only symbolic forms of expression - narratives, images, rituals - are condensed enough to tie up worlds in small bundles and flexible enough to sustain myriad interpretations, thus holding together diverse peoples and enduring over long periods of time through processes of continual change. Religious symbol systems can thus direct human history without determining it. And while religions can be said to have enduring truths and values, neither remain exactly the same.(Brown, 1994:184) Thus religious images, narratives and rituals play a central part in our lives . Geertz asserts that such symbol-making has come to play a “central role in the survival of our species.” (Geertz 1973:92)

Religious fundamentalism which is very much a part of the modern world is variously defined as “a form of militant religion”, “an extremist view of religion” and when people refer to fundamentalism it is mostly referred to as a negative concept, to describe the “other” and to describe the enemy. Different people in studies have sought to define and understand the term “fundamentalism”. Some see fundamentalism under the concept of militancy: To them fundamentalism is “fighting back”; “fighting for”; “fighting with; fighting against”; “fighting under” and to others it is a religious ideology which is modern, oppositional and unites a group of people who consider themselves as “the holy remnant of an idealized past and the van guard of a future yet to be revealed.(Marty & Appleby,1991,ppix-x .)

Most studies on religious fundamentalism refrain from mentioning that the gender issue is central to the fundamentalist ideology. Marting Riesebrodt in his comparative study of American Protestant fundamentalism in the 1910’s and 20’s and his study of the Shiite Iranian fundamentalism dated 1960 and 70’s clearly points out that the fundamentalists lament of fallen deteriorating morals are often spoken of in connection with fallen women. (Hawley & Proudfoot,1994:26) Women of fundamentalist society are considered as the “other” and they are considered the cause for the world’s movement away from the past (Hawley& Proudfoot,1994:27) and since men to a great extent seek this idealized past termed as the “mythical age that never quite was by Hawley and Proudfoot (in their introduction to the collection of essays titled *Fundamentalism and Gender*) they build into it notions of women who are self-sacrificing and generous, who yield before men to produce greater harmony.” The authors of the collection see it as a “nostalgia” which urges the fundamentalists to act in such a way - the nostalgia for a “tension free world in which the women are passive who have limited space in society.

The authors also identify the element of religious machismo in attitudes of the religious fundamentalist where the men need the presence of women who are in need of protection and care.

One finds that religions buttress patriarchy projecting as right and accepted patriarchal practices which perpetuate the discriminatory roles allotted to women through relegating to them the roles of carriers and guardians of religion. As seen above religion through time has limited the space it has given women to operate as free individuals in society. Religious doctrine is often misinterpreted to suit male power and dominion over women.

Feminists have argued that it is not merely cultural construction that makes the woman, but her choice to fit into the mould of the female gender. Thus she with “volitional set of acts” and as a matter of choice woman constructs herself to fit into society’s acceptance of the female gender.(Butler, 1987) Thus women are conditioned by patriarchal notions. Even the most acute desire for freedom, is guarded and voiced with duality. Even in their very struggle for a redefinition of their identity in society, within their families and within themselves -women unconsciously voice thoughts which reinforce patriarchy. These women can identify the causes and the sources of their oppression, in their struggle for freedom, but subconsciously express patriarchal notions because they are an intergral part of a patriarchal society. Carolyn Porter in her paper “Getting Gendered”, asks this question in relation to Foucault’s theory:

In the more current Foucaultian language - did the power of the gender system produce feminist resistance only in order to recontain it?... What is in any case clear is that we were deeply formed by the gender system we were trying to challenge and reform. Certainly the more we struggled against the limits imposed on women by the gender system, the more clearly we saw that we were still well within it and further that it is within us. Having rejected female roles we found we had been playing male-ones

It is to these discriminatory gender constructions and secondary status that feminism offers resistance, wanting to construct a society which does not curtail and monitor the woman’s movement and freedom. Feminist resistance contains two elements within it: that of affirming femininity, no longer looking at it with feelings of guilt and shame; and also that of being able to reject all that has been constructed for the woman by a patriarchal society - thus divesting oneself of discriminatory roles, traditions and ideological practices that are termed “feminine and female”.

“As Ann Snitow has recently reminded us, feminism could liberate you in two opposed ways. You could emerge from the revolution it effected in your perspective saying. Either “Thank God, I don’t have to be a woman” or “Thank God it’s all right to be a woman.” -This speaks to the contradictions within us.”(Porter, 1993:169)

In the expression of their female thoughts, actions and in the depiction of their emotions - anger, sarcasm, regret, bitterness, sadness -at being discriminated against and illegitimised because of their femaleness, women say “Thank God it’s all right to be a woman”, for they no longer opt to closet their femaleness; and in the celebration and affirmation of their femininity, they reject the role constructs and the limited “space” afforded to them by the patriarchal society and say “Thank God I don’t have to be a “woman””- a term which is loaded with socially constructed roles, implications and images. In the very act of feminist resistance the woman celebrates being herself.

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## Statements

### *Statement No 1 on Rape*

## Incidence of Rape in The Eastern Province \*

**W**e express our deep shock and outrage at the brutal rape and murder of Ms.Murugesupillai Koneswary, a 35 year old mother of four, in Ampara, on 17th May 1997.

She is alleged to have been raped and killed by a group of four policemen at about 9.30 p.m. at her residence, at the 11th Colony, Central Camp located on the 'border' of Batticaloa and Ampara district. It is reported that she was killed, subsequent to being raped, by a grenade which was exploded in the vagina. Her body was taken to the Kalmunai hospital but no examination was possible since it was badly damaged. The family was instructed, by the police, to conduct her burial without a postmortem inquest.

The rape and murder of Ms.Koneswary highlights once again the incidence of rape and sexual violence against women, in the Eastern Province, allegedly committed by personnel of the Security Forces and the Police since the beginning of this year. Some of these incidents have been reported in the areas. Others are known of, but not reported due to fear on the part of the women concerned. In several of the cases, members of the security forces have been arrested following identification by the victims at identification parades. These cases are reportedly before the Courts. However in a number of instances the women raped have not been able to get their statements recorded by the Police. In others, they have been threatened by the perpetrators and warned not to report the rape.

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*\*This is the statement issued by some of the women's NGOs to the President of Sri Lanka on Koneswary's Rape and others in the Eastern Province*

The cases of the rapes reported have occurred in operational areas and have been committed by the Police, STF or the military. Rape is a violation of the personal integrity of a woman and is a crime in terms of the Penal Code of Sri Lanka. The commission of rapes on non combatant civilians in conflict situations is a violation of the Geneva Conventions which establish principles governing the conduct of wars and internal conflict, in terms of human rights and humanitarian norms. It is also a violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights acceded to by the Sri Lankan Government.

We are particularly concerned about the high incidence of rapes committed in the Eastern Province by Security Forces Personnel and demand that each case be rigorously investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice without delay. We consider this essential to ensure that security forces personnel do not act above the law or consider themselves immune to punishment. We also consider clear and immediate action to be the only means of preventing the continuation of such crimes against women.

We also demand that strict control and discipline be maintained among security forces personnel so that crimes against women such as rape are not committed.

**17th May 1997: 11th Colony, Central Camp**

Murugesupillai Koneswary, a 35 year old mother of four was raped and killed at the 11th Colony, Central Camp located on the 'border' of Batticaloa and Ampara districts. She is alleged to have been raped and killed by the explosion of a grenade, by a group of 4 policeman at about 9.00 p.m. at her residence. Her husband made a complaint to the 11th Colony Police Post. Her body was taken to the Kalmunai hospital. No examination was possible since it was badly damaged. The family was instructed, by the police, to conduct her burial without a postmortem inquest.

**17th March 1997: Mylampaveli**

A 34 year old widow, Vellan Irasammah and her 28 year old sister, Nalliah Dharshini were reportedly raped by four soldiers at about 11.00 p.m. They were taken away from their home at the pretext of questioning and raped in scrub jungle. The women were warned against making a complaint.

Four soldiers were reportedly arrested by the Eravur Police in connection with this case. Only one suspect was identified at a parade held at the Batticaloa District Court. The women stated that the parade had upto about 150 persons lined up for identification.

One of the women attempted to commit suicide and was admitted to the Batticaloa hospital subsequently.

**09th January 1997: Thiyavettuvan, Valaichanai**

Three uniformed men are reported to have entered a house in the early hours of 9th January 1997, allegedly from the Valaichchanai Paper Factory Camp. They reportedly raped a mother, daughter and another woman staying in the house. They were admitted in the Valaichchenai Hospital and a complaint lodged at the Valachchenai police station. Two soldiers, Piyadasa and Samanatha Sanjeeva Perera were identified at an identification parade held on the 27th of January and remanded by the Additional Magistrate of Batticaloa. Another suspect Mudiyansele Thilagaratna was released on bail of Rs.20,000/=.



**31st December 1996: Mandur**

A woman taking lunch to her husband was allegedly raped by three STF policemen from the Tile Factory Camp in Mandur on the 31st of the December 1996. The Vellaveli police arrested 2 STF men immediately and another was detained subsequently. The woman was admitted to the Batticaloa hospital. The perpetrators were identified at an identification parade. The case is pending at the Batticaloa Magistrate Court.

We have also received a report of a rape committed by an ex-PLOTE cadre from the Prison Army Camp, Batticaloa. He is alleged to have abducted and raped a girl employed at a garment factory in Kalyankadu. He is reported to have held her for two days at Navatkudah and later to have displayed her underwear in public as evidence. No report of the incident has been made to the Police, for reasons of insecurity and fear.

In its article of 30th June 1997, the Daily News declared that the "Deceased was not a victim of sexual assault". The deceased to which the article refers is Murugesu Koneswary -- the 35-year-old mother of four who was allegedly raped and murdered on 17 May 1997 by police personnel from the Central Camp police post in Amparai District.

The article, however, misrepresents the results of the autopsy. According to L.D.D.C. Alwis, the JMO for Colombo who conducted the autopsy, the autopsy was inconclusive.

Although the article claims Mrs.Koneswary was not a victim of sexual assault, Dr.Alwis clarified that this is not necessarily so. According to Dr.Alwis, the body was in a highly decomposed state and, thus, there was no way to conclusively determine whether Mrs.Koneswary had or had not been raped. The level of decomposition was apparently to be expected since Mrs.Koneswary's body had not been embalmed before being buried more than one month ago.

The autopsy, which was undertaken solely to determine whether or not Mrs.Koneswary had been raped, did not address the cause of death -- which, according to Dr.Alwis, is not in dispute -- or attempt to identify responsible parties. Its sole purpose was to determine whether Mrs.Koneswary had been raped. Or, it seems, to prove that she had not been raped.

We question the integrity of the Daily News report as well as the motives behind the government inquiry.

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*This is the text from the statement released to the press by a few NGOs on the same case.*

Clearly, if Mrs.Koneswary was killed by a grenade detonated on her abdomen, there would be little to no evidence of rape. Since the cause of death is not disputed, we question what the government expected to find. Was this a good faith effort to establish the "truth" behind Mrs.Koneswary's death? Or was it merely a ploy to appease growing public pressure?

While we commend prompt government action, we condemn any and all attempts to mislead the public about an incident as serious as rape and murder.

We ask that the Daily News publish a correction of the article of 30.06.1997 (Deceased was not a victim of sexual assault", p.17.). Additionally, we call on the government to release the full results of the inquiry.

## Statements

### Statement No II on Political Empowerment

## Towards Political Empowerment of Women in Sri Lanka \*

### The Reality:

Sri Lanka over the years has displayed a lack of women's participation in politics. Women in present day politics are very few and their involvement in politics low. This is revealed by the given table.

Legislative Body (94)	Total	No. of women	%
Parliament	225	11	4.8
Municipal Council	209	6	2.8
Urban Council	297	7	2.3
Pradeshiya Sabha	2,882	34	1.1

( Elections Department )

In the year 1994 the total number of MP's in the parliament were 225 out of which women were a mere eleven in number (CENWOR, 1995). The Cat's Eye of the Island, 30/3/97 states that in the 1931 - 36 State Council there were 5% women and that the figure remains the same at all subsequent elections up to 1994.

Countries have adopted special policies to ensure fuller and greater participation of women in the country. Two broad mechanisms used to increase levels of female participation in politics are the system of **reserved seats** and **quota or target setting**.

\* A statement prepared by the Women's Education and Research Centre.

Quotas or targets are often established by political parties themselves. Under this policy a certain percentage of all candidates for a position or selection have to come from a certain group (in this study, women), either as minimum or as a range within which that group should fall.

The second mechanism of reservation or reserved seats are allocated for a particular group which is normally under represented. Only candidates belonging to this group can contest these seats. (UN Study, 1992) Where women have been under-represented countries such as **Pakistan** (20 of the 237 seats), the **United Republic of Tanzania** (15 of the 244 seats in the National Assembly) **Bangladesh** (30 of the 330 seats) and **Egypt** (31 of the 360 seats) have adopted the system of reserved seats to ensure leadership of women.

The Quota system is felt to be very effective in introducing, spurring women into politics. A UN study finds that the quota setting in Scandinavian countries has been very successful. While India's move in putting forward the consideration of a Bill reserving one third of seats in legislative bodies for women, is a source of encouragement, the shelving of a decision on the issue owing to protests by a few parliamentarians comes as a disappointment. The Quota system for women was initiated by the United Nations. In 1995, the UN Economic and Social Council endorsed a target of 30% for women at all levels of decision making. In the African National Congress (ANC) of **South Africa** there is 30% quota on nominations to the legislature. Sweden's target is a minimum of 40 percent of all posts to the "less represented gender." In U.K. the labour Party has set up a Working Committee on Parliamentary Selection which would have as its sole aim the development of measures to promote representation of women. The Quota system thus through its mode of ensuring seats for women in the legislature seeks to redress a situation where women's participation in politics remains low and stagnant through time.

### **Reasons for non-participation in Sri Lanka**

One of the main reasons for the lack of participation of women in politics is that Sri Lanka is very much a part of the South Asian culture and to a certain extent, world culture, which allots to woman the charge of the domestic sphere and with it the domestic chores and related concerns. This denies woman the space and time in the "public" world. Placed in the backdrop of this tradition - and - culture - conscious climate, women are reluctant to step into politics for lack of time, encouragement from relatives and society in general and for

fear of being branded as "unfeminine" and "odd" - in that they are deviant from the cultural, societal expectations.

Despite laws which give freedom to the woman to enter politics, she is prevented from doing so because support systems of the society in which she lives have not been developed by these countries. The Scandinavian countries are an exception.

Due to the absence of a supportive system consisting of child-care facilities and flexible working hours, it has been extremely difficult for a mother with small children to be a politician. Mothers are often not able to control the allocation of time, while the hours of a politician are often unpredictable. (UN Study 1992:37)

The difficulties faced by women who aspire to places in politics are the juggling of housewife and mother roles which she is expected to play with that of her role as a politician and a lack of societal adjustments as a support system. In a society which measures the woman's worth through "virtues" and "chastity" which she is expected to possess, politics can pose a threat to the woman, in that she can be subjected to character assassination. The woman is conditioned to prefer staying away from politics than be subjected to character assassination which forfeits her right to legitimate, "acceptable" full membership in society.

Another reason for the lack of women's participation in Sri Lankan politics is that politics in Sri Lanka has indeed become a dangerous game - so much so that with entry into politics there arises a constant, gripping fear for one's lives. Memories of thuggery amounting to murder and attempts at murder remain while the reality of political violence is fresh and bleeding in the Sri Lankan context.

Yet another cause for the lack of participation of women in politics is that Sri Lanka has very few examples of women who have actively involved themselves in politics, through its history. Political success stories of women are very few and far apart, so much so that political participation has still not attracted the women of Sri Lanka.

**The Need:**

Women's participation in politics is a must if the voice of half of the population in the country is to be heard. It is the woman's right.

Given the reality that politics has become contaminated and unclean, women's active involvement at decision making levels in the politics of the country may bring about a refreshing change and transformation of ways of working and political thinking. This is not to say that women are without faults and that all women practise clean politics but that ways of functioning and patterns of thinking would definitely change the political field-hitherto a male monopoly.

Vasanth and Kalpana Kannabiran in their article titled "From Social Action to Political Action: Women and the 81st Amendment (Economic and Political Weekly, February 1st, 1997) reveal this about India, where even the miniscule number of women in politics have been able to stride forward and "wrest a voice for themselves." The article also identifies the strength of the underprivileged masses of women who influence these women politicians and spur these women politicians to speak out.

masses of underprivileged women have a far more important political presence that overruns and refuses to be contained by the vote bank politics of mainstream parties..... These women, underprivileged women have actually been able to force accountability on women in politics irrespective of and a shorter time span than their male counterparts.

Two other historical facts can be gleaned from this article: that women politicians are more sensitive and receptive to the needs of the masses; that the redress of these needs gain priority for the women politicians, over party affiliations unlike their male counterparts.

Surveys and research in a number of countries have shown that men and women think and act differently; possess different opinions and attitudes. With the presence and active participation of women in politics, political thinking and deliberations may change for the better.

Nor are the differing values and perspectives confined to the

obvious sphere of women's rights. They extend to questions of peace and war, where women are frequently prominent in the support of peace, and of environmental and social service issues." (UN Study, 1992:107)

Further, validating women's access to the formal political sphere and to public decision making roles will transform her position in the community. Sri Latha Batliwala in her article, Empowering Women, India 1996 identifies this advantage in the reservation system:

Optimists argue that by ensuring women's direct access to formal political power and to resources for development, women's social position will be automatically transformed. By gaining status and decision-making power in the community their position within the household will also change for the better.

**Argument against:**

It has been argued that women who are culturally and socially conditioned to be secondary citizens, if introduced into politics would emerge as mere "puppets on strings" manipulated by the men in the game of politics.

It has also been argued that reservations for women becomes an artificially created participation, not based on their "innate belief in their equal rights but grounded in paternalism" which once again reinforces the women's image in the political arena as a "handicapped group" entitled for concessions.

Another reason put forward against reservations is that its implementation increases the number of relatives into the legislature, where mothers, sisters, wives and daughters figure in high proportions. But experience has taught that this is just an initial handicap and that with the second generation of politics it disappears.

**Recommendation:**

Since women's entry into politics would be definitely enriched and enhanced through their participation at the party level and local council levels - the reservation system should be initiated in a significant measure at party levels. It is only then that there will be wider participation of women from a

wider spectrum of society which would cut across division factors such as class. This would also provide the necessary experience and expertise to women which would gain for them higher positions in the political ladder at greater decision making levels.

Even while the world societies move towards greater participation of women in politics, one is compelled to wonder why just 30% - 40% percent seats are reserved for the women. Considering the fact that women and men constitute equal proportions in society, "why not 50%" is a legitimate question. While women may not initially display political acumen, owing to the disadvantaged positions they have held in society through the ages, experience will gradually teach them to participate at equal or better levels in politics.

The experience of the Scandinavian countries shows that women accent issues such as childcare, schooling and the organisation of leisure, according to a study done in a suburban area near Stockholm where women's participation increased dramatically in the 80's. Women it is said used simpler, more concrete language which made political debates more accessible to the general public. It also brought about acknowledgement by the male representatives of their family obligations. (UN Study, 1992:108)

Given the fact that the participation of women in politics needs to be full and equal, it is the obligation of political parties and rural governing bodies, which could be considered a rich source of recruitment and training, to give training and opportunities for women within the party which would provide them with training and resources for an active political career. In view of the international situation where affirmative action towards women's political participation is guaranteed constitutionally, we appeal that 40% of the seats in the local government bodies and in the legislature be reserved for women in Sri Lanka. As a first step towards this the political parties in Sri Lanka are urged to nominate 50% of women as their candidates for parliamentary election.

The promotion of this task/cause falls upon the broader network of women's groups in Sri Lanka.

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