

thin veils

in the shadow of the gun & the wicked witch
(performing act/ivism)



sumathy

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Sumathy



International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo

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To
Nirmala

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there is only a thin veil
between me and my sister,
wrote annamma to her brother
by law, newly widowed.
we dream of nesamma, bleeding
at childbirth as her face, magical
in its adorned beauty,
framed by countless memories
of disputed land, house, property,
confronts us across the years,
from the wall on the back verandah.
he married thangaratnam, diamond,
who brought up nine children,
five not her own, one
my mother.

Introduction

Thin Veils: performing land and woman

In the preface to *Games for Actors and Non-actors*, the dramatist and theorist of 'theatre of the oppressed,' Augusto Boal writes of a Chinese myth about the female origins of theatre. According to him, the myth has it that the pre-human female, Xua-Xua, discovered theatre when she suddenly found herself separate from her son who had left her for the man—Li Peng—she was with. As Boal writes:

When Xua-Xua awoke and looked for her small body and could not find it, she was unhappy. She cried and cried—because she had lost part of herself. . . . Xua-Xua had to accept that the small body, even though it has been inside her—it was she—was also somebody else, with his own needs and desires. . . . This recognition forced her to identify herself: Who was she? Who was her child? Who was Li-Peng? Would she stay the same? What would happen tomorrow? Xua-Xua looked for answers by looking at herself, emptied of part of herself. At that moment she was at one and the same time Actor and Spectator. She was spect-actor.¹

She recognizes herself there. A subject in action. (Postcolonial) Lacan in reverse. This theatrical mythology triggers memories in my own theorizing, my own act of performance. My critical autobiographical practice, triggered by Boal's narration of this myth, is my point of entry into feminist practice. It is like that one position, downstage corner, where the audience and actors converge in the spatial structure of the 'theatre-in-the-round,' and where the entire ensemble of actors and audience is opened unto the actor positioned therein. Simultaneously, this position exposes her, the actor as well, to everyone around. It is a theatre of risk. This critical autobiography

¹ Augusto Boal in *Games for Actors and Non-actors*. Trans. Adrian Jackson. London: Routledge, 1997. ¹. xxix-xxx.

is such a moment of marginal-centrality. It takes on the dominance of staged-structures; pushes the limits of space and time. Stretches the memory of history to unforeseen dreams. It relocates space as stage and as territory. Territory is place, temporal and historical.

History is a fraught place for many of us. When we were small we did not see ourselves figured emphatically in any history, in the Vijaya-Kuveni story. We occupied a negative space. Living and growing up in Jaffna in the '60s as a child, I was not easily assailed by any traumatizing experience of ethnic boundaries. Even a Tamil consciousness was slight and hazy. I always did well in the history class, when I had bothered to read up the stories. But they were generally distant, as distant as Colombo was then and now to me.

But history was also taking shape in the home, amidst gossip and remembered snatches of insignificant conversation. One of my earliest memories of ethnicity is one of my earliest recollections of self as well. Growing up in a conservative household that was nevertheless politically conscious, conscious of the independence struggle, I too very early developed a sense of place and time, of body and consciousness; I was dimly conscious of the happenings of the world. But nothing even remotely had prepared me for that time when I was jolted into an awareness of the Sinhala in our middle class living room through a chance remark my mother made. My thoroughly anti-nationalist mother (anti-Tamil nationalist), fiddled with the radio, trying to tune into a channel. She at that time could get only the Sinhala band through the cackle. In mild exasperation, she half muttered under her breath, "It's their kingdom now."

When the body remembers history it remembers event, speech, location. It is an autobiographical practice remembered, stored away, created and negotiated with. It recalls place. Remembering is critical practice. Remembering performs place in multiple ways. Body and place come together. The body acts out place, the remembered action of a moment that keeps playing again and again in the time of history. I too get born again and again.

In all of my work I perform history, the history of Tamils in this country, of Jaffna, of its birth, the history of women, of the body.

In all of my work, theatre, the body of the woman haunts my practice, like a spectre; it is memory, myth and history. In my story too, memories will give birth to other stories, other bodies, other memories. This spectre of the Tamil, the figure of my mother, who is also woman, wife, daughter (in-law), Tamil, has dogged all play with history in my reenactment of the Tamil identity. Yet, I cannot speak of Tamil without calling up woman, all the inherited stories of mother, grandmother, sister, aunt, licit and illicit. Even as I was growing up, the amorphousness of identity, one that tediously moved between home and school and mechanically took in the hoot of the mail train thundering past in the early hours of the morning, dramatically changed. Jaffna was turned into a centre, the "heartland" of cultural nationalism. People moved out, migrated, no jobs, no university admissions; others, poorer, sometimes posher moved in; riots, security, nationalism, nation, education, land. The university, newly set up in 1975, became a centre of intellectual and protest activity. Intellectuals, rebels and revolutionaries, Tamil nationalists, activists debated all kinds of things, ideas, discussed self-determination, caste, class, women. A multiplicity of militant movements were born, PLOTE, EPRLF, EROS, TELO and countless others; also LTTE, which would gain military dominance and have us all in a stranglehold, stranger than fact or fiction. Woman within nationalism will rear its head too, hydra like.

Women were born not only for and about dowry, doctors and land. They were born militantly. The rise of Tamil nationalism, the rise of militancy and militarism, the chequered career of women's movements within the Tamil people, the Tamil speaking people, all of which have paralleled my life, are dynamic entities. They have dogged the heels of activism, the activity of women. Women are a difficult category to work with, to perform within where I grew up. It is a heavily invoked figure. Tamil nationalism has called the woman several names. It, nationalism, has had to veer its way through femininity, the female, sexuality and their ties with the dominant economy of Jaffna Tamils and their middle class predilections. It is a task of my performance too.

1989. It is a moment of history when my own theatrical practice was taking a particular direction. Jaffna at that time was a place of contradiction, of many different occupations and preoccupations. The Indian Peace Keeping Forces had control of the land at that time. EPRLF and ENDLF, Tamil militant groups that had decided to move into semi-civil administration and collaborated with the peace keeping forces. LTTE on the other hand was trenchantly opposed to any effort toward peace making; violations of life, speech, movement, mobility, gender, caste were committed by all groups and factions. There was no consolidated movement for peace, justice and democracy among the Tamils of the north.

Critical practice in theatre underlies what I must do. The actor becomes a spect-actor: she must act and be an activist. Rajani Thiranagama, K. Sritharan, Rajan Hoole and Daya Somasundaram had already brought out the first draft of the *Broken Palmyrah*, a document that would be widely cited as the cause of Rajani's death at the hands of the LTTE later on. It was circulated in manuscript form for several months. The IPKF raided her house; they walked through our house in Nallur in polite friendliness, the captain of the army camp next door said he wanted books to read in his leisure. He went away with *Anna Karenina*, but not *Broken Palmyrah*. We were being hemmed in from all quarters. I wrote 'An Old Wives' Tale' in 1989 for the 'Women's Study Circle,' a women's organization comprising of women from and around the university in Jaffna. But they were not happy with it, objecting to its content on two counts. First, that the mention of marital abuse and sexuality in the play was too over powering for the times, too radical. Second, that the criticism leveled at the "boys" (Tamil militants), slight but sharp, was too dangerous. Instead of deleting those references and modifying the text, I decided to pull the production out. Rajani, who was part of the 'Women's Study Circle,' and who also played the role of a traumatized woman in the play supported my decision. We looked for other means of sponsorship.

University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR-J) which recorded all violations of human rights committed by all political quarters had just come into being at that time. Rajan, Sritharan and

Rajani were three of the key players there. There were others too, Vasantha, Rajmohan and several others. I requested UTHR to sponsor the production and they agreed to do so. In the sparse conditions of Jaffna University we performed 'An Old Wives' Tale' attesting to the stamina and courage of the woman, as she debated the conditions of war and the society of those days.

The Wicked Witch too is born out of that moment of anxious productivity. While rehearsing 'An Old Wives' Tale,' I was looking for another item to supplement the play, something lighter but thematically along the same lines. Lalitha Brodie, who played one of the roles in 'An Old Wives' Tale' gave me a hand written book of her poetry. There were so many poems, on a variety of themes, but the poem that caught my eye was one that was almost lost among the high ideals and morality of the other poems. She told me that she wrote this poem, a three stanza children's rhyme on a woman, a witch, 'Ketta Sooniyakkari' for her grand daughter. Its immense dramatic possibilities, simplicity, and astutely feminist theme opened up a whole new generic and conceptual sphere for me at that time. Adding just another stanza to it, I turned it into a 10-minute dance drama for young actors. 'An Old Wives' Tale' and 'Ketta Sooniyakkari' are part of a momentous happening; they will not be recorded in the history of the peace process; nor in the history of the women's movement. But it is of and by women who dared and will dare again and again to recast the contours of the nation, redraw the borders and fight hard for the space of the everyday within the masters of narratology, history, nation, mass and movement. Today, Rajani, Selvi and Sivaramani, all three who had been involved in the production, two of them as actors, are dead. Rajani was shot in the head on her way home from work, Selvi detained in an LTTE camp in the years between '90-'95 disappeared. Sivaramani committed suicide in the harsh conditions of 1990 in between regime changes. They may not perform again. All others have gone far away from Jaffna, living in far flung parts of the world, among the diaspora. They are all part of the originary moment of *In the Shadow of the Gun* and *The Wicked Witch*, part of performing woman and performing Tamil woman. It is the best of times and the worst of times.

I have been involved in other productions of 'An Old Wives' Tale.' Both in Tamil and English, but not in Jaffna. The Women's Studies Programme of Hamilton University, Canada produced 'An Old Wives' Tale for two consecutive years in '95 and '96. Subsequently I was involved with a Sri Lankan group that performed a bilingual version of the play for *Desh Pardesh*, the South Asian Festival in Toronto, in 1997, directed by Sheila James, an Indian Canadian woman. Rajmohan and Regini David two of my friends and fellow activists from Jaffna collaborated with me on this. But I had already by that time begun to move in different directions. In 1996, when I was visiting Pathi in Melbourne I was invited to perform at 'La Mama.' I rewrote 'An Old Wives' Tale' and developed it in other directions, working the character of Savithiri, skeletally modeled on Rajani, into the narrative. *The Wicked Witch* too takes shape in altered conditions. But I hold on to 1989, when we were torn apart, sister from sister, place from other places, movement from the masses as that moment of self hood and performance. Both *In the shadow of the Gun* and *The Wicked Witch* are moments of that recuperation.

Performing identity, playing with the figure of the woman, is a dangerous past time. But it has helped me continue, continue with the dialogue with women, children, places. It has helped me and others invent and recreate our days and nights in momentous and irreverent ways. Xua-Xua, the mythical woman has to travel a long long way, in history. And one lonely day, she stood in front of me, voicing silence. In my own longing, in my efforts to reconnect with the moments of autobiography I clutched at her as my own figuration, my only hope and the woman-Tamil-I can invent, hold and destroy. *In the Shadow* and *The Wicked Witch* are continued negotiations with Xua-Xua, the mythical woman, the allegorical woman, mother, wife, girl, land, place and body—"where the blood does not run dry" as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says.² It has helped me see myself and others as women, women who have stories to tell, sing, criticize, act

² In "Acting bits/identity talk." *Identities*. Ed. Came Anthony Apia. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. 795.

upon—women who may live only in these stories I tell, but who cannot be contained by any myth or tale. Here I offer Xua-Xua in ways that are special and historical to me. She haunts my tales, performances and acts with her reconvened presence of the mother, woman and self.

she stood silent, unknowing
black as the
dead earth
hair streaming, caked in mud and water,
in the blood of her
children.

draupadi crying for her children
oh fame, shame
howling, hooting, she
dragged her feet
round and round, painful
leg with a chain off.
it pulled her down.

one day,
in the beginning of time
a woman stood by herself
all lone, separate
she saw marks in the sand
footprints. the noise
inside her head, echoes of a war
still unheard.

footsteps led her far
into the desert sands
sparse palmyrah trees
lined the horizon
the noise grew insistent
and there was no singing, wailing,
funeral dirge, or temple colours

only a loud putter of gun shots
splattering the ploughed
land, deep furrows
line her face, women's hands
dipped deep in the mud of
dark brown clay
soil. red.

the slogans went rioting down
mother earth
mother land
mother tongue
the drums roll on, dense,
laughing and low, jungle fatigued.

she saw marks in the sand
footprints of a trekking line
of fire eaters and sword throwers
the noise inside her head, sounds
of a new dawned land

the slogans went rioting down
mother earth
mother land
mother tongue
the drums roll on, dense
laughing and low, jungle fatigued.

the woman forgot all about the footprints. she felt alone and scared.
don't leave me behind! i am mother courage. i am here only for you,
for you, for you. the plains chanted back in return. she went mish
mash in the sand—mother earth, mother land, mother tongue.

Sivamohan Sumathy
Peradeniya
April, 2003

In the Shadow of the Gun

first performed at *La Mama* Melbourne Australia,
August 1996

duration 50-60 minutes

Script from the August, 1998

performance at Vibhavi, Centre for Alternative Culture
sponsored by Women and Media and Vibhavi.

Tabla: Manobandhu

Lighting: Vasantha Kumara

Music and Singing: Vasuki and Sumathy

Foreword

Within the Tamil national liberation movement, the figure of the 'woman' and her strengths have been actively deployed to mobilize people. However, in turn, Tamil women have been further marginalized by the rhetoric and violence of the liberation struggle. *In the Shadow of the Gun* is a one woman-performance designed to recover some of the voices of the women figures from the war torn north of Sri Lanka. Its central character, Savithiri, 'an activist, academic and doctor' is very loosely modelled on the figure of Rajani Thiranagama who was killed by Tamil militants in September 1989. The dramatisation presented here viz-a-viz Savithiri is purely fictional.

In the Shadow is a dynamic portrayal of women and their negotiation with nationalism and with the structures of hierarchy around them, situated in the conditions of war, militancy, the military, everyday strategies of survival, hope and hopelessness. As an enactment of my own negotiation with nationalism and women's movement, I see this as an interventionist project.

In the Shadow was first performed at La Mama, Melbourne, Australia in August 1996. Since then I have performed it in Toronto, the USA, London, Delhi and Sri Lanka. It is my wish now to adapt it to the Tamil and Sinhala theatre as a continuing activist project. I take this opportunity to thank Vibhavi; centre for alternative culture, Colombo and the Women and Media Collective for sponsoring the first of the performances in Sri Lanka in 1998 at the Vibhavi Cultural Centre on Pagoda Road.

In the Shadow of the Gun

A note to the Reader/Producer

Since this is a one woman performance-script I feel I should indicate some of the conventions of writing I have developed for the sake of clarity and vividness of its dramatic action. Much of the time the performer speaks to the audience; in that sense the audience too are part of the characterisation demanded by the script. Six different women characters are enacted on stage, including that of the narrator. But the script also creates different invisible characters with whom the visible character of the moment will be in dialogue. In order to render this clear on the page, I have used paragraph divisions to indicate the dramatic "pause" in which the character/performer assumes the poise of listening to the other voices. Paragraph divisions are also used to indicate change in the direction of the dialogue, change of mood, pauses in the train of thought of the character.

To indicate scene changes and character changes I used circular and semi-circular movements on stage. These movements can be accompanied by music/tabla wherever appropriate. Tabla and music should be sparingly used as the bare stage and the lone figure on stage should create the poignancy and drama of the moment. Acting can be an admixture of realism and stylisation.

[Stage: Bare. Props: elegant high heeled shoes and a few sheets of paper by the side of the stage. The shoes are worn by Savithiri; thus whenever the performer takes on the role of Savithiri for a sustained duration of time, she is expected to wear the shoes. The performer wears a simple shalwar kameez or harparchee-like dress, with a bright coloured shawl adding contrast and shade to the figure. The shawl can be used in various ways to denote change of character sometimes and change of mood or of dramatic intensity at other times. It can be used imaginatively]

Opening:

[Enters performer in a dance to the accompaniment of tabla and vocal rhythms]

Narrator:

Hey, hey!

Can you hear? Can you hear me speak?

Can you hear the woman? Can you hear the woman speak

above the noise of the bulldozer?

Can you hear her driving it across the fields making her life?

Can you hear her scrape the bottom of the pot for the last grain of rice?

Can you hear the guns poised against the silence of the night?

Can you hear the woman cry hold, hold, hold

Hold that thought rolled up in a ball

like a perfect globe in the space of your hand.

Can you hear her explode in a laughter of love into tiny smithereens of atom, the suicide bomber.

My daughter, where are you?

can you hear me? my stories,

women's stories?

I will do a few presentations of women's stories;

They are war time stories of struggle, of pain, brought together by Savithiri, an activist, academic, a doctor who goes around collecting them. Before I plunge into the body of the stories I would like to give an idea of how I formulate the performance.

[Alternate text]:

I don't know how much you know about Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka itself I would begin this quite differently, plunging straight into the body of the woman. But I shall give a brief background here.

It will be brief. You may have questions, suggestions. After the show we could talk about them. We could discuss any aspect of the stories. **[Improvise here]**

The island of Sri Lanka was a colony for 450 years. Different people, different kinds of people, people who were tall, people who were short; those who wore hats and those who did not wear shoes; people who spoke Portuguese, Dutch, Double Dutch and dirty English, Indo-European; they all came from that land far away, lodged between Asia, Africa and the Atlantic. It is said that they came with the gun one and the Bible in the other. Well, we still have both. We still have the Bible looking for answers, excuses for the gun.

The last of the colonizers came from a little island in the north sea of Europe. They were a petty tribe of sea-farers and sea robbers and had their tribal chiefs called the king, queen, baron, count, squire. They apparently didn't believe in the constructions of nature and thought they could out do the sun. But the sun finally set which any of us here would have known but the English didn't.

So when the British finally left Sri Lanka, this pearl of the Indian ocean, land of breath taking beauty, as tourist brochures say, was left with different groups, different ethnicities, classes and castes, scrambling for the crumbs, the roads and the English language left behind by British rule. The frictions were many. But out of that arose a major bone of contention called the "National question of the Tamil people of Sri Lanka," or the "Ethnic Conflict."

This is the barest of detail. The struggle of the Tamils intensified, escalated and is led by Tamil militants, the boys, armed to the teeth, fighting the Sri Lankan state,

the Indian Peace Keeping forces, and fighting among themselves. This is called the National Liberation Struggle, the Big word, the Buzz word, the F—word and the Holy word!

War and strife have been going on for more than a decade now. The people in the north, of all communities, live under the shadow of the gun, beyond sorrow's limit. This is our threadbare existence. Just living from day to day, reaching fever pitch when a death occurs and then droning on about this and that. This is the woman's life too. The life that is glorified or is not talked about; the stories that go unheeded and questions unanswered.

Women are many they say! Then if that is so; why is she one?

Because she is a she?
S in front of *he*, soft and sensuous.
F in front of male asking the world to F--off.
And W in front of man,
Woe to you all,
Work that out yourselves!

You fool there!
The time has not come you say.
You want to leave. But one day
her voice will slowly rise from
behind that door,
with all her rage cracking the earth-shattering
the silence of those hidden in the dark.

[Song in Tamil adapted from a poem by the Zairean poet
Mweya Tol' Ande set to music by Vasuki Walker]

The sky is overcast
not with rain clouds
but with the shelling of cannon balls.

[The performer puts on shoes to take on Savithiri's persona]

Savithiri:

I ask you, could you write straight
When people die in lots?
When you find them
dead like flies, not one two
Left by the roadside
in Kopai, in town
in Kokuvil Rasaveethi, Urumpirai.
in there, over here,
left on the hospital corridors to the elements?
for the birds and dogs to scavenge?
When you certify death and
bury your neighbors in their own gardens?
When people-thousands and thousands
always more than ten thousand are
herded into kovils, churches and schools
for almost a month.
When the beautiful sandy precincts of the temple
become nothing but one whole shit dump.

Night after night, you lie under the table
with the children -immobile
listening to the sound of boots
Marching up and down.
Not even a candle you light
for a shadow could kill us all.¹

¹ These lines are from Rajani Thiranagama's "Letter from Jaffna."
Rajani Thiranagama Commemoration Volume, 1989.

I ask you my father,
What do you want me to do? I have to go amidst these raging
bullets. My father, why did you tell me that time when I
asked for glass bangles at the temple fair, that frilly dresses
and candy bars were for silly little girls and I have to grow
strong to look after you in your old age? Why do you say
now I am only a mother of daughters and my duty lies in
protecting them.

You say I am leaving them cowering under the old makeshift
cover stacking card upon card. My father, in your old age,
I forsake you alone in this unlit house to look for my sisters
and brothers, fleeing terror. I am the mother of the nation!
Do not stop me.

Narrator:

Thus steps Savithiri out with her notebook and medical aid.
[takes off shoes]

Fear! Now we know of rape.

[dance to indicate scene change]

Lower middle class woman [working]:

What do you say? Women's group? Not like those long
ago? What a time we had those days when missionary
women in white saris showed us cake making with icing on
top. soup kitchen. What a lot of fun that was getting out of
the house for a few minutes. Now they talk of oppression,
women's liberation!

Yes, you are right. Let them talk anything. As long as they
don't

[mimes the act of shooting oneself in the head]

Yesterday, the boys², they went from house to house,

² A euphemism for militants.

collecting money. How many sons do you have in
Switzerland? How many in London, Toronto, Melbourne?
When I got wind of what they were up to I took all my
jewellery from the bank and stitched it up in the old
mattress. I told them, I have three daughters-where will I
go for dowry? The mill is not doing well-with diesel at
this price?

I don't know what is happening to us. Look at our women
now? Poor woman, poor woman you say. Of course! Aren't
we all poor women after all? I don't like what happened
to her. She is also a woman, a Tamil woman like us. But
our girls are also a lot to blame. Do they have to dress like
this? If only one lived in fear and modesty . . .

You know, the root evil of all this is money. Money, money,
money. It has become the yardstick for everything. There
are so many things much more important. Family, children,
breeding, charity. It is the woman who preserves and
nurtures these values. Now, what do you want us to do?
Shed all our garments and stand stark naked? Or like some
of them get into trousers and throw our womanliness to the
winds?

They are also men with feelings. Soldiers or no soldiers..
When there are women stepping about shamelessly in the
streets such things are bound to happen. We as women
should be careful and cherish our inner strength.

Where is my inner strength? The run of the mill life itself
is so tedious. Have to plan for every small detail.. Don't
know from which corner will shoot out whose bomb and
battle cry. Just listen to this. Only the other day, the army
men down our area walked off with a whole box full of fish
at the market. The fisherman ran down the road after them
crying, Mahathaya mahathaya, [half laughing narrates this

in a mixture of Tamil and English] please give something, don't ruin us. Now I have to walk to the top of the junction for fish practically everyday. Not a single fisherman will come near our corner.

Yes, I have to look deep down inside me for my inner strength. This army it is nothing new to us is, it? Our father, he mauled us for the slightest sound that came out of our mouths. My husband? He doesn't even need a reason. beating and kicking. You know what my greatest virtue is? Every night opening wide my legs to let him ingritting my teeth- putting up with-aiyo god only know what. That's the dowry I brought along.

[Pointing at some invisible figure]

Now look, what did I tell you? - a woman all alone-in the dark-

[Scene change, indicated by dance, music or some kind of movement]

Narrator/Savithiri:

What is this? Whoever did this to you?
Who are you wretched unhappy woman?---- Savithiri asks.

[A woman-"Prostitute"-lying by the roadside shot and wounded by Tamil militants; This detail will not come to light until much later]

Woman:

Madam! Doctor lady! Come over here! I hear you are going around collecting stories of all women? Take down my story too. I know plenty of women like this. Their husbands and sons come to me.
[contemplatively]

Women and war

[suddenly]

What do you know of war, what will your stories do? Don't turn away making faces like that. They shot me through the belly-the womb that gave birth to the sons of this soil. I carry the seeds of this nation here. The murderer too was born out of this gaping wound. And you stare horrified at it. How much more horrifying would my tale be for your tacky little notebook, pretty lady.

You want to give me life?

Wait, let me tell you a story first; about war; war and soldiers; soldiers and women; and death.

A soldier with broad young shoulders came to the land of the enemy. And he fell in love with me. Under the trees and in the shade we enjoyed life in springtime. Oh how heavenly was my love even though people mocked me. The scent of spring lasts long. But then the leaves started falling, and winter rushed in. The men with the broad young shoulders lined up along the trees and raised their arms in salute. And lo, here I am.

[wraps the shawl around the head like a turban]

[Song in Tamil adapted from the song of the prostitute in Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* set to music by Sumathy]

So they didn't come back. The young men who went to war. They go away in hordes; or the army comes to take them or they go away to the white man's land to sweep the streets or keep watch at petrol stations. And you ask me about my inner strength amidst all this chaos.

It was when I was carrying my second child. It was so hot inside that August night. Water poured down my body. My man and I slept on the verandah. They said there was a cease-fire. We don't know what happened. The eldest cried

and I went in. It was shelling from the sea that took my man away! My karumam, karumam [My karma]. Soon after I moved in with my mother; there was a huge army camp right next door. I started cooking for them. But was that enough? Tell me was that enough? I had to keep the children safe and happy.

They dragged me here, the men who came on bicycles and rang the bell. They told me I was an informant! Said I didn't belong; that my woman's name is not my own.

Lady,

You see poems in those bullets
garland those guns,
they'll feed your kith and kin
as long as they last.

But listen,

Under that silk and the vermillion
on your crescent-like forehead
I see the curves of your body
same as mine.

I AM THE SHADOW BEAST
AND I'LL STALK THIS LAND'S DESTINY
LIKE A WOMAN'S CURSE

What do you offer me? Water. Give me some water. Those fucking wretches denied me that too.

[reacting to the other's offer to attend to her]

So you'll heal me?

[With a mixture of gratitude, irony and bitterness]

Preserve my body and save my soul. I will go out into the world and stare into those hungry eyes once more.

[she sees Savithiri's shoes and wears one of them]

Ooo! I longed for a pair just like this. So that I could swing my hips more aptly. No, no, no. You keep them. I have no use for them now. And who knows, you may need them one day.

[takes off shawl from head and puts on the shoes to take on Savithiri's persona]

[Scene change with lighting and music: Total darkness; if possible have slivers of light slash the darkness, increasing the suspense of the moment]

Savithiri:

Kautha?

[Who? in Sinhala]

Sollu **[Speak! in Tamil]**

Who is there? Tell me now! Sneaking and slinking in the dark. I am no Rajput queen immolating herself to ward off the conquering army. But I will fight to the marrow to protect my body from the plundering hands of aliens.

[She shrieks when startled by a sudden movement near her]

Oh, it is you!! I thought it was the soldiers. What can an unarmed woman do in the valley of death?

Yes? You came in search of me?

[Suspiciously]

Truly? but why? I am a lone woman trying to serve my sisters and brothers in the struggle.

[Appealing]

My brothers! I am with you.

Oh you admire my courage? You don't know about my yearnings. When I see the spirit of the oppressed moving you all toward national glory martyrdom and death, I am moved too. I want to do my bit for the land and my people.

WHAT?

[Her face shows fear; she looks around at the men surrounding her]

What did you say?

[Laughs]

You want me to carry the gun and join you all? You all must be joking. You are asking me? I am clueless. I don't know anything.

[With force and meaning]

I don't know to carry out orders and welcome death.

[song adapted from the song of the drunken soldier in *Mother Courage* set to music by Sumathy]

[After first and second verse]

With desire in your eyes seek out the beautiful. Fill your heart with hatred. Wear the cyanide near you heart and die with the nation's oath on you lips. Sing the praises of the leader and ask for blessings from the priest.

[song -third verse]

So my brothers! Fellow freedom lovers! You are in haste. But no, NO... I cannot give you my stories. They are mine. They are women's stories; given in confidence. About their persons.. Little details about everyday life.

[Savithiri backs away from the men trying to corner her]

You want to give me the gun -the mighty symbol of power and take my stories away from me? But that is not what I want to do. I heal-Yes, Heal. Women's wounds. Those gaping wounds of violation.

I set out to find out why women cry when their children go to war; to know why they walk miles, alone in the dark, when even dogs have gone to sleep!

[picks up papers from the floor and pointing at them]

Look at that! Just once! And then you will know why you cannot steal these away from me!

LEAVE ME ALONE!

[The papers scatter apart. The narrator picks up the shoes, turns them over and places them back on stage upside down.

This is done slowly with deliberation to the accompaniment of voice, a humming which should evoke shock and pathos]

[Scene change: the following two events are supposed to be among the stories collected by Savithiri. One could use lighting imaginatively particularly in the first story to create a dream like sequence]

A middle-class woman in her mid-late thirties:

It will always be like yesterday. All that happened to me. Exposing my womanhood to the world-my shame, my shame. My mother could talk only of Kannaki and Arunthathi³. No one told me what happened to mortal women of flesh and blood. Even in buses how nauseating it is to be plastered tight together with beefy sweaty men. Just imagine, I let them plunder my innermost secret.

I had no inner strength to keep off the prying hands of those dogs. I am weak, a weak and fallen woman. Some other time I would have kept it hugging to myself. I would not breathe even a word to my husband. He's all sympathetic and loving now. But who knows? Deep inside he might be smouldering every time he comes near.

I am alone in this. Everyone else is untouched and I have been raped. Yes, RAPE is the word. You can talk for all you are worth!.. Is that going to give me rice?

And the stench of their sweaty breath overcoming me. One two, thrice it happened. They come through the back door.

To be completely gorged by faceless lumps of flesh . . . those devouring eyes. Shh! they are at the back door. What shall I do? I won't open the door. You go and run my dear, my dear daughter, run and hide wherever be it, you innocent child.

³ Epic heroines hallowed for representing chastity in Tamil/Hindu mythology.

Aiyo, There they are!!
[With great feeling, force and challenge]
What is my strength against these SMG, AK47 and all.
ALL THE GODS DESERT ME AT THIS TERIFYING
HOUR AND I ACCEPT THEIR VERDICT. A DEMON
FLOOD'S WASHING OVER ME! AND I AM GOING
UNDER!
[Falls down]

[After a long pause she recovers a little and walks down
the stage and over to the audience and utters in a tired
tone of hope/hopelessness]

My husband, children please forgive me!

A young woman in her late teens-early twenties speaks
from the audience;
[if desired she can be characterised as working class]

Mattath ethema sidha una.

[Sinhala]

Enakkum ithu nadanthathu.

[Tamil]

It happened to me too.

It was dusk. I had gone for water to the well and just as I
was returning they caught me unawares at the doorstep.

You tell me, what I could have done. All eight or ten of
them, surrounding me. Leering and advancing. Like a
statue I'm simply rooted to the spot-won't something
happen?

Who will come and be groom for me tomorrow, I wonder.
Don't you know our men? Lying about with all and sundry
and later when it comes to marriage they want somebody
like a flower for the house.

It all took only an instant . . my body shivers all over. . . all
these thoughts fleet past me while I lie there, allowing the
unallowable to happen. They are brutes. But I am young

and tough.
Mary Matha!
[Mother Mary]
look down upon me!
[Screams at the top of her voice as if to raise the whole
neighbourhood]
Aiyo! There they are, Army karan! Army Karan! Soldier!
Inside the house! They have come for me!!

[The woman runs as though she is being chased by the
army toward the stage, runs across it to back stage. As
silence descends she looks around scared but curious and
sees the shoes left behind by Savithiri; realizes the death of
Savithiri; and picks them up. A feeling of exhaustion shows
on her face brought on both by her panic, running, and
then this sudden reversal. After a pause she sits down;
the role of the narrator takes over at this point]

Narrator:

When the woman confronts her face
in the murky waters she crosses,
in her sojourn from north to south and south to north,
from man to woman, woman to woman,
when she rips open the wounds of her sister's flesh, in anger
and in love,
in hatred, animosity and frustration
This is what she will say.
This is her prayer.
It is my play

When the curtain slowly falls,
when the walls close in upon one,
when one stands utterly, abjectly alone, I can only say,
there is the emptiness of my words as bare as this stage.
And I am your play.

The Wicked Witch

a parable in two acts

Foreword

Sometime ago, Shalini Jaywardene, a student at Ladies College, asked me whether I could find a play script in Tamil for their school to produce. I racked my brains to locate one; to think up of one. My thoughts circled again and again the words of a song -a children's rhyme by Lalitha Brodie called in Tamil "Ketta Sooniyakkari" - the "Wicked Witch- which I had turned into a 10 minute dance drama way back in 1989 in Jaffna. I thought I would expand on that dance drama, turning it into a 30-minute play for young actors. But as I continued to grapple with the material a completely different and original play emerged, both in terms of content and form. I surprised myself too. Here I wish to acknowledge my debt to Lalitha Brodie, whose three stanza children's rhyme triggered some of the wickedness in the play you will read. I am also indebted to those young actors of those days who enabled me to envision and project into the future the dramatic possibilities of the story.

On the other hand, I will also say that the play was born out of the long hours of the power cut which was in operation all year round in 2001, during when I was forced to idle and sit on the verandah overlooking the ugly concrete structures across the flat I inhabit in Nugegoda. As I sat in stark immobility, bats would flap about in the distance. I feared their mythical force. Two bandicoots, which lived with their pups on the top of our flat would nimbly scramble along the telephone line. In the distance search lights from the sea or from the Airforce airbase at Ratmalana would scour the skies for possible LTTE suicide bombers swooping down from above. While I began this during those nights of immobility, I completed the script months later when we enjoyed brighter nights. We had shorter power cuts then. And none at all as I wrote the bulk of the play. But I miss the wisdom of those long dark nights.

Also, thematically, this is the first time I have ventured to write a script that does not deal with the Tamil woman specifically.

I find this highly disconcerting; for my entire adult life has revolved around the impositions and constructions of a Tamil woman's identity. And at times I detect a certain distance between the location of the play and that of my own. I see this is as a mode of mediation between my own identity formation and what is acknowledged as the universally mythic. I hope to see a woman born out of this play who will be historical as well as mythic. This paradox shall lie at the heart of the play.

Note to the director/s and performers:

The cast for the play can be culled from people young and old, women, men and children. It can be done with four to five persons. For crowd scenes stagehands could join in. The audience could also be brought into those scenes effectively with a little prompting. The characters bear the letter names of A, B, C, D and E. I have tried to define the speaker as much as possible by identifying the speaker with a letter name. This is for the convenience of the director and the readers who may find it easier to follow a structured character line up. The director can play around with this, giving the lines attributed to B to C for instance. Towards the end of Act 1, Scene 1, A will assume the role of Narrator, unless otherwise stated. E will be Wicked Witch for the entire duration of Act I and II. D will assume the role of the Three Wheeler Driver in Act II. The Cobra, Fruit and other roles that appear only for a short length of time will be played by any of the players available. I have tried to maintain minimum character consistency so that the audience and readers can get into the plot easily. The production itself can be imagined in many different ways. It can be done with elaborate costume, music, song and dance emphasizing the spectacle over the narrative. However, the narrative is very important. Even if one wants to emphasize the spectacle, in order to hold on to the narrative, the story telling aspect and the elements of the parable should be clearly projected. Some of the stage directions used here, for example the opening line about the snakes is about promoting a certain kind of direction for the play. Video or slide projections can also be used to suggest expressionistic and or historical links. But such 'extra-diegetic' aspects have to be used, if at all, only minimally.

On the other hand, one could just go with the elements of the parable, using the cast as much as possible, composing the play as one would in improvisational theatre, only it is not improvisation. One will emphasize bareness here. Music, song and dance in such a production should concentrate less on the

“pretty” and the “spectacular” as on the story telling mode. Song can be recitative, with harmony kept to a minimum. Another alternative is to mix both these genres together, if genres they are. This perhaps will be the more challenging production to pull off. The director will have to have an uncanny intuitive understanding of what will work and what will not. One may even begin with the rehearsals and workshopping before trying to hammer down a certain linearity of thinking.

The play is divided into two acts. Originally, I thought of dividing it into three scenes, but somehow as the play developed the organic division appeared to tend toward Acts. I had very much wanted to stick to an episodic structure rather than a linear developmental one. Yet, I think an innovative director may still be able to wring out Three to Four scenes from the play instead of Two Acts. In my final concluding note, I would like to say that this is where the challenge of production will ultimately lie. Again, this is a play that can reach epic heights or be utterly ruined in production. Wish you all brave people out there willing to launch out into the unknown. The duration of the entire play is between 80-90 minutes.

ACT I

Scene 1

[Two snakes twine and raise their bodies together in the middle of the stage. This can be done on stage or through video/ slide projection.]

A woman comes out onto the stage and lies down. She holds a pack of cards spread out as though she was playing a card game. Her brows are furrowed in deep meditation as she contemplates her hand. She picks one out and holds it up for all to see. This can be the Narrator—N—played by A.]

B: What is it?

A: Death. Your death.

C: No life.

A: In days of yore, when people quarreled, they talked about it for a long long time.

C: You mean, they did not rush to get their forks and knives out.

A: They ate with them.

C: No kiddin

A: They gorged people's lives out of their bodies.

C: Cool! Like in a Rajni Kanth film!

B: They sat around and talked about it for a long time, smoked their peace pipes and

- C: You mean the Peace Process!!
- A: They walked all along the contours of their land, community, and on their way, slept around with men, women
- B: Devoured babies too.
- C: There were no hotels, Waldorf, Bellagio; not even a cheap crappy one like the Hilton!
- A: But they had a view, a view from the tallest mountain that held the world up and they could see all that went around for miles. When rivers flooded they knew where the fault was. When a man stole another's wife, they called them all up, tore the woman in two and threw the flesh into the river.
- The day after beautiful flowers would float down the river to the Sea bed, And people sang songs dripping syrupy oil. Who cared if her children were sad! Or the husband went to jail? They talked about the ways of the world, and tied charms around their necks so that the colour of human flesh would not affect their sight.
- The language of peace was a noisy affair and there were too many languages of peace too. Women, babies, street children, monkeys, apes and all others cried out for their rights and it was like the tower of babel.
- C: Who funded their projects?
- A: It was the underworld thrift society, sometimes called the World Bank. But leave that alone. One day a woman stole into the forest and took away the light they had saved up for days and days and days on end.

- B: Fire! They could not eat!
- C: Of course they could. Little animals and babies did not require much cooking.
- A: But
- B: But what?
- A: They were afraid of the dark.
- C: Dark? Jungle dwellers, afraid of the dark? Fine joke that is.
- A: Yes, they were. The hum of the air conditioning, do you hear it? Mmmmm ...
- B: Yes I know. I know all about it. When peace hums like the rickety air conditioning at ...
- C: The mighty swinging heart beat of city lights, the sweaty love beat of beat up fans, pining for love ... Bodies turned clammy ... And the light went out of eyes that had forgotten to put mascara on, to straighten faces, thoughtless puckers.
- B: Lights dim!!!!
- [Lights Dim. Another person D turns up stomping down the aisle]**
- D: Come on! Come on now. Come on everybody. Why are we here today? We came to do a play. **See, we are cheating them. But that's a national past time. You want me to change now?**

- A:** The jungle dwellers did not know what to do about dengue mosquitoes.
- C:** They had run out of morstein too, for they could not watch the morstein advert.
- D:** Where is the play?
- C:** You want to do a play in thin air? Without lights too?
- D:** We came to watch a play
- E (from the audience):** To do a play
- B:** Oh, so you want to do a play here? What is it about?
- C:** But we have no script my dear? What kind of play do you want to do then?
What is it? Without lights too?
- E:** Don't you have the sky, the stars and the moon for light? What more do you want you city dwellers?
- ALL or D:** No lights no play!! No air no play!! No money no play!!
- C:** It's so hot in here. Bring the fan in. Shucks! No electricity. God has switched off the mains.
- B:** No god. Say, goddess.
- D:** Shut up!! Who is there? I don't know how I'm going to see through these long hours in the dark. The power cut swoops down upon us without any warning.

- E:** It is so sudden too. Like bombs!
- D:** Bombs cause so much anguish; excitement. News. With the power cut we have no news even. Sometimes when the lights go off I take myself off to Majestic City; just to hang around and look at the clothes, the people around. But then they shut off the air condition.
- A:** The air is so heavy with the smoke rising from all the traffic. Look at the high walls, taller than the trees. It is to keep thieves out!
- E:** The house is like a prison with walls running all around.
- B:** I need the fan! Oh for some fresh air!
- D:** Come on shut up! You should be sent to the drought area. Then you will not complain like this.
- C:** The whole country is coming to such a pass; no water, no wind, and we cannot go on with what we had planned. We have no script even for the play.
- E:** Will this state of affairs ever change? They must stop cutting down trees.
Destroying the landscape? What God has created.
- B:** Then how are we to build houses, schools, shops and towers? How are we to live? What will happen to our marriages then?
- D:** There must be a way out
- C:** Can somebody suggest a way out of this hour of darkness please?

- A (Shouting):** Can't you listen to me? Discipline!
- C:** There goes the army commander.
- A:** Then the jungle dwellers decided that they needed a hero to save them from all of this misery. A Daniel, a David, a just man who would bring back peace to this land,
- B:** John Wayne. Tell us a story!
- C:** No, I tell you. A Jackie Chan one?
- D:** What about Shah Rukh Khan?
- B:** Noooo!
- N (A):** Silence. Can't you hear the story swinging through the hot air all around us? Once upon a time, one time,
 There lived
 among the stones and the weeds
 the rocks and the shells,
 In the bowels of the earth
 on air bubbles and the ripples of the rivers
 a hag beautiful as the devil,
 with eyes like stream fish,
 called the Wicked Witch.
- E:** Wicked Witch!!!
 So, not John Wayne, or Rajni Kanth.
- C:** Not even the Supremo!
- D:** Witci? And tell me, why is she wicked?
- C:** Who is the Wicked Witch? What does she do? Does she eat people, swallow whole buildings, rivers, gardens. You know, I think she is a politician.

- N:** She is a politician yes, but not as you think.
- D:** I don't like it. If she is a witch, then she cannot be good. I like to hear about only good women. Pure wholesome angels who do no sin. do no evil; hear no evil; see no evil.
- E:** Like the mother on the Lakspray advert, flat as the flat screen Television.
- B:** And see only white fluffy clouds on the horizon.
- C:** You cannot live in this world if you carry on like that. We have to then go around blindfolded.
- D:** I want no tale of any politician. Particularly if she is female, wicked. Why can't we hear about good women?
- C:** Good? You want to hear about the good witch then? That's a hoot!
- N:** Come on! Listen to this.

Song/Rhythmic Recitation

- This is the tale of the Wicked Witch.
 Yes, the Wicked Witch.
 See how she does, what she does.
 tall tales,
 You there unbelieving mortals and immor(t)als
 six yard stories of evil doers
 who fly away on looong sticks with dead brush at their ends.
 Tarring rain clouds with tales of the earth.
- ALL:** We will pull wool over those manning check points and immigration barricades.

You will then know about
the ways of this world.
Yes, this world, yes, this world,
world,
It is my word.

C: I know about good and evil. What are you trying to tell me? We learnt about all of that in class. We learnt all that in school. The principals were forever preaching about that. Student Union Presidents too. And also bank managers and other sundry characters. And these awe inspiring teledramas...Suffering women, wailing all the way to heaven. Glycerine flooding their tear ducts. What new story is this?

E: Hush! What is it? There is something moving about in the dark. A ghost!
Somebody's listening.

B: The ghost of the Wicked Witch!

D: You wish! It's your shadow.

C: Oh what is in my shadow!
Shadow, shadow! flickering in the dim light of the power cut.
Who are you?
Can you tell me who is the fairest of all?"

A VOICE: USE FAIRNESS CREAM!!!

ALL: [Repeat the last two lines of the stanza above.]
You will know about the ways of this world; yes this world.

B: Tell me, can we sing and dance about the wicked? I can't see through to the end! Maybe the wicked witch becomes an angel. She is purified. Maybe the good defeats her and she is thrown into prison. That'll make a good story for Sunday school.

A: That gives me an idea. Listen! Who will be the witch?

D: mmm ...

B: I can't!

C: You can be her sister then.

D: I'll be her brother! And I'll turn her into an angel pure. I'll spy upon her as she makes love at the back of the cinema hall, woman in the morning, and watchman at night.

E: I'll be the witch

[Raucous laughter greets this announcement]

C: You? You lamb? She who refuses to watch the News too. Too much sex and violence. She is better as the *Patachara*, with her hair flowing all over, running across the river with nothing on!

A: She is our only taker, you know.

E: What does the witch do? What do I have to do? Where do I live? In a Koyil? In the cemetery? Or do I haunt wayward schoolgirls and abduct them?

N: Oh so many things. You live in the forest.
in a cave maybe. In the hollow of a tree?

a withered tree with the middle blown up in a land mine?
and she scrambles up its side
as the day crumbles. At night fall.

E: And wakes up at the crack of dawn
to make her magic.
when the world is still fast asleep,
drugged with the horror of the late night television movie.

She collects herbs, frogs' head, fish eye
sexy fruit and pounds them into pulp-fiction
boils it all,
in a cauldron of potent hope
gazing into the water frothing over
as stars quickly vanish in the heat.

N: How hungry is she, this holy lonely woman
As she wakes up from her slumber.

W: [calls out loud as echoes resound in the forest]
Oheeeee---

[The Witch sits under the hollow tree in thoughtful
meditation with her hands cupped under her chin. With
a glow in her eyes she mimes the action of making
rotti. The gestures should be bold and slightly stylized.]

W: Come over here, the hungry and the greedy! Come and
rejoice with me in everything I do. Friends, countrymen,
and jungle dwellers, Come over here, Hey you, why are
you standing there gaping into empty space. Listen to me.

[She hands over a few rottis as she makes them to
those around her. The other characters come up. She
may give some to those in the audience too. D nibbles
on a rottil]

D: Oh, I like rotti.

C: I don't. It is the poor man's food, no?

W: I am poor! There is no electricity where I dwell, No running
water. No refrigerators. And Moulinex Mixers.

[She may pull out an electric mixer from the pot and
throw it to one of those standing around her who catches
it quite agilely.]

I grind my food and eat it. See how I fill out? I call all
around, oh come and share with me what I do and do not
have!

[She bites into one rotti and makes a face]

f ----

[BCD and A can take the part of any of the characters
other than that of Witch. The characters will act as the
tree, fruit and any other object demanded by the script]

B: There is not enough salt in this rotti.

W: We do not live by the sea. Salt is costly. The rats and other
vermin bring the salt from the sea and they, they are so
dear. You must ask the crow family.
They are more accommodating. But they swallow half of it
even before they get here and then they want the rest of the
food after I have used it.

A: I manage without salt too. High blood pressure. But I add
A nice katta sambol mixed up with a pinch of dried snail
flesh and they make me really heady.

- D:** Yuk!
- B:** That's life! (Imperiously to Witch) May you never leave this place.
- W:** Why ever not? I don't want to be stuck in the forest forever? I want to go to school and learn.
- A:** You can go to school here in the forest. You know all about the ways of the forest. What more do you want?
- W:** Is that enough? Is it enough? I want to travel too. Tourists come with Glass beads, silver chains, and tip-i-tip. And now they come with foreign investment! And they don't half pack up the goodies and leave. And they pluck all the fruit from the forbidden tree here, leaving it tired and wizened, its proud head nodding like the breasts of an old hag. And they go away, leaving me gaping!
- B:** So, what are you going to do?

ACT I
Scene 2

[Witch goes centre stage and raises her hands high above her head in a stylized imitation of a magician in a magic show. But it should not be the gesture of a showman but rather resemble a choreographed dance movement. A slight change in atmosphere as the dramatic and spatial focus narrowly turns upon Witch. Witch moves toward a tree that has sprung up. The tree should be stylistically evoked with branches set in dance postures. It should suggest youthful glow and seduction. Lush fruit grow on the tree. Once again this can be formulated as a combination of

stage property and people. A slow rhythmic dance will add to the poetry of the scene. Again, video projection can enhance the spectacle and give an extra-diegetic dimension]

- N:** Wicked Witch watched over
the young tree she had planted,
tendered with love and hope,
even when the
venom of the earth lashed back
at all, when the drought
dried her to the bone
and the sun beat upon her turning
her black as the devil.
- N/D:** And the tree grew tall and sinewy,
limbering upto the sky
lovely and strong.
and what do you know!
Is it magic?
so heavy, juicy, soft
and of GOLD!!
Golden fruit
grew on the tree
bending the boughs
with their great thoughtful weight
- C:** Yeh, now she has her garden. Paradise Island.
- W:** What am I to do? Spin and weave. (Calls out in a mocking tone) Rise and shine! Wake up with the cracking dawn? Lords and Ladies, enter the museum of magicians!
- A:** What do you think she should do now? Come on, Witch. Too much waiting here.

W: Oh, leave me alone. I've had enough of you. Let me go. Where? To the end of the world.

D: World's End?

B: You are at World's End.

C: I want to fly!!!

D: On what?

W: On waves of wisdom. Maybe yoga. My lovely young tree, you have given me life, hope and fears and ambition. I am no witch without reason. My friends farewell, bears and deer, tigers and lions all bid me farewell. I am off on an epic journey and hurrah!

[A or any other character or a combination of actors can narrate the following]

Wicked Witch plucks golden apples from the tree
The golden apples, oranges, watakka, pavakka, call it what you will--

throws them all into her sili sili bag.

Hey, woman, look at the polythene free zone sign here. You have no sense?

I can do nothing. She is a witch after all. She wants to take it to the market in the city.

B and C (in wonder and awe): The city!

Fruit: Wicked Witch! Wicked Witch! Have you taken leave of your senses?

You astonish me. Why do you sell me away, down the river and the road and the railway track? You are selling away

the forbidden fruit of wisdom and the dark secret of the forest.

D: She is a goner now. This is the end. She'll be lost in the city.

The wicked witch has gone politic now, like everyone else.

C: What does it matter? What's your problem ah? She has to live. You want her to survive on leaves and roots for the rest of her life? She wants to see the wide wild world. Nothing wrong with that.

B: She is breaking the sacred taboo of the forest. That's why.

[As this scene progresses the atmosphere becomes thicker and more suggestive]

W: Where's my Bill of Rights?
What are these red-hot coals
lining my way;
My feet burn, yes,
but I will race you up
heaven's way.
Let me pass!

A: Let her pass!

W: Do not stop history's course
The will of a witch is no bloody joke.
And I am a woman on a quest too!

B: She is going to destroy us all!

N: Wicked Witch,
Swoosh! She is a bird of evil anger.

She'll snap you up like
nobody's business.
Her teeth are larger
than your grandmother's.
She has jaws like the shark
Oh watch out!
Her tongue, sharp as the razor's edge
wraps around
evil thoughts
floating around
drying the rivers,
chasing rain clouds away.

N (B):

Her long winding tongue lashes out
omens about
snakes that strike out at twin towers
at all the small minded
bickering of our folks
for positions and power
screaming prophecies of
of wars, famine and soap operas!!

[Total darkness. A jumble of words and phrases in the dim light as the stage gets slowly lit up again. As the stage becomes fully lit the absence of Witch is noticeable. She has disappeared. The projector can be used here effectively]

What happened?

A wind blew my candle out.

This blasted power cut.

Can you hear the rumble of a train dashing by?

- D:** No, I hear only the roar of a plane taking off in the dark not knowing where it is going. Unloading trunk loads of people; Fleeing villages and jungles
You heard it? Land mines explode, like a volley of laughing bullets.

[Somebody laughs softly. Scenes of war in stylistic outline can be projected on the cyclorama if necessary.]

- C:** Suppose it is a good omen, otherwise we are done for. The silence of Death-it heralds momentous happenings, like the insistent drumming of the town crier. Stuff folk tales are made of. Come on, you all sitting there like butter won't melt in your mouth. You got nothing to say here?

Come on, get a move on! We have to hurry! Get going. You there, what are you up to? This way.
Please be silent!

Act II

Scene I

[Witch has a change of costume. The director can be innovative here. Witch can wear a version of jungle fatigue which is in clear parody of the uniform of the armed forces. Or she can be in boots and heavy khaki attire, ready for the long journey to the city. She walks slowly but hopefully toward the city. If possible this can be done through video projection. The city can be indicated through a number of moving signs like traffic lights projected onto the screen behind.]

A or any combination of characters:

She is breaking into the walls of the city.
the walls of the city, open up!
Open up for the queen of the forest to enter! She'll bring
the cool air into your air conditioned offices, and Free up
your cluttered thoughts, the jealousy in your hearts!

[Witch looks a little weary at this point. She hails a three wheeler that comes that way. The role of the three wheeler driver can be played by D]

W: Hey, three wheeler. I have to go to the city, how much ah?

[She bargains with the Three Wheeler Driver (T. W. D). This can be done in mime. She shakes her head at the price he quotes]

No, two hundred rupees is too much for this short distance across the walls. No I will give you one golden fruit. It will bring you peace and happiness, Health. People will pay what you ask for. Just check it out please. They will not quibble, bargain and harangue. And tip you too for good measure.

T.W. D: Coool! I'll be rich then!

W (shaking her head):

No that's the sad part of it. You may mint money but will never be rich. The wealth that the golden fruit brings will never take you farther than the palace walls. That's my prophecy. Sin no?

T. W. D:

Then I don't want your custom, Madam. I'll go elsewhere. Plenty of fish in the market. Even a twenty rupee note will add to the little hoard. And I have an ambition. To become a guard at the Prison gate.

W: Oh driver. I am sorely disappointed at you, at the anointed!!

T.W. D: Ah?

W: Nothing. I walk then. It is not far to the market in the city. The golden fruit are heavy but I knew you would not fall for my prophecy. Just tried to pull a fast one on you. How can I wish for the moon, when I do not even have fare for footboard space on the private bus.

N: Do you all see her? Wicked Witch bangs on the city walls.

W: Knock, Knock, who's there?

N: **[Marching like a sentry guard]**
Thud, Thud, Thud, Thud

[You see a group of two to three men goose stepping or marching. Thud, thud, thud. Everybody watches Witch keenly, straining to hear what is going on inside.]

B: What's that?

C: What do you see?

W: Wait. Be patient! Let me peer into the darkness.
I see a hydra, A twelve-headed Ravannan.

Other onlookers:

Witch! Witch! We can't wait. Anything more?

[A pantomime of a long line of people jostling one another.

They are a cantankerous crowd.]

Person 1:

"We want bread"

[Two other persons take up this slogan]

We want bread! We want bread!

[A person comes in with a sack and serves stones from the sack to the people in line. One stone per person. The people obediently collect the stone and move off. Some people fight among themselves for bigger stones. In a corner a black market in stones is conducted]

Person 3:

I see the light

Stand up for your fight!

Oh -----

[Wicked Witch displays her wares in the centre of the city square]

W: These will give you long life! A healthy life!
You will become powerful and strong!
You will command a hundred thousand men
Who will eat stones to please you!

A: Oh Wicked Witch, how can you?

W: Shut up! I am from the forest. I know to survive. I understand these wolves and foxes and the vultures among them.

B: Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!

[The Sentry cross again. But this time they run smack into Witch. The following sequence can be as stylized as possible]

Stop! Stop! Stop you hag. Where from? Where is your pass? Where is your ID? Where is the police registration? Let me see (looks inside her bag, over turning it). You cannot sell this here.

W: I am not doing anything wrong!

A: Or Right.

Guard: Stop you witch, smuggling in stuff, from forbidden territory---

[The crowds now cheer on the guards.]

Produce her before the magistrate!

Who is she?

Let the media rip her story apart!

She is a suicide bomber.

[The audience can be encouraged to join in on the heckling here. The guards drag her to where a judge has suddenly appeared. A clerk waits in attendance.]

Judge: (This can be B: reading from a big heavy tome):

You are found guilty madam. Of smuggling in essential items. Apparently after your arrival the prices have come down here, and come down there. Do you know what you have done? (He looks severely at Witch) The people may even begin to eat. Get a real taste for food. You are too dangerous.

From the crowd of on lookers:

Burn her at stake. The lamppost with her throat necklaced.

Judge: On the other hand, we would like to co-opt you. I offer you options... it's globalisation today you see. A vast world awaits you, like the fantasies of credit cards. We have 54 televisions channels airing the same show. Be contented. You may choose between the jail at Kottanchennai, the hard cement floor, cockroaches, a rough guard, no visitors. Or a pleasure trip to my spare bed behind the courthouse once every week

Crowd: This is not fair. She is from the forest. And look how ugly she is. She is a Soorpanakka, changing forms as she likes.

Strip her.

W: Isn't there any other way? No middle path? Please!
Where is everyone! Where have you all gone! Friends and foes, whose curiosity drove me out here. I am in the clutches of fiends, devils, land grabbers and the free media!
Their fangs tear me apart.
Let me go!
Leave me alone!

D or C: Leave her alone! She is the bearer of potent magic. She may curse you.
She may get snakes to eat your liver in dark dungeons.

B: Let her go! She is not alone!
She has friends from all over who are just round the corner.
Demons, devils and diminutive dwarves.

Judge: Starve her! Put her on a plain thosai diet!

W (Breaking down): I came to eat!

[A few people look upon her in contempt and disgust. With some this sentiment is mixed with pity]

A person: See what she has in her bag!

W: What could I carry in my torn bleeding bag my dear?

(The Guards wrangle with her)

Guard 2:

You spoilt my appetite now. No witch's curses around me. Look at all the trouble you're causing around here? I have to go for a ritual bath before I turn in today.

W: I wanted to eat too. But I want to eat stones to know and understand the taste of anger, hate and power.
Let me go

She struggles with the guard who holds her tight

Guard 1:

You are a fool. As if we don't have enough trouble without your meddling.

We do not allow goods from the forest that far from civilization. Our priests will lose all occupation when gods mingle with the rabble
we cannot separate witches from women bonded in love
women bonded in love and hate.

Judge:

This is the verdict of the Court.
These are the ways of the world

Throw her into the jail at Kottanchenai
And make peace with
Kitty Hawk and the Arms Build Up!

Act 2: Scene 2

[Witch is dragged across the stage. The crowd follows her hurling stones and abuses at her. The Crowd has turned up with the stones they had collected. They yell and shout. They collect the stones in a pile on which Witch sits.]

Person 1: What is she? An alien?

Person 2: Animal. It is two legged?

Witch: Look, there at your guard! He is three legged and is still standing.

Person 3: I wonder what it is like beneath all those clothes.

W (in a murmur of chanting):

Strip me. Where are the accursed bones buried deep in the forest, I am trying to remember. Is there no evil at all left in this world for me to survive? The noise here is too much for my head.

(The crowd forms a wall from behind which Witch peers out.)

W: How their sweat, stale and clammy, clogs up my memory. If only the stories will come back and then I will be back in my dream.

[The Three wheeler Driver is a guard at the entrance to the prison wall. He walks up and down in obvious apprehension and dilemma.]

Driver:

What shall I do now? Throw everything to the winds and take off to Timbuktu? What will my children do, if even

gods are collapsing in thirst. Look! No offerings. People starve. Please. Who can I turn to? Let me try at least. Maybe where the judge failed I will succeed. Wicked Witch, you are in my grip. Do you know who I am?

W: Rascals! Sons of bitches! You'll pay for this I know.

[Noticing the Three Wheeler Driver]

So you did end up as jail guard! I see. I should not have wished you well. My mistake. So Satan, God's angel are you? A fitting duel you think? A poor woman, you think I am?

T. D. W: No, a beauty queen, turned witch.

W: You are a fool.

T.W.D: Witch, you are crazy. Why didn't you just beg pardon! Guilty my lord, and name the time and place?

W: My eternal juices just buckled under the judge's smelly breath of gin and tobacco mix. The sentries-bah... they are all Gay! And my carelessness, I tell you, I had bartered two golden apples for a flat screen Sony television, and a contract with MTV for demonstrations on do-it yourself magic art. You think we can do a show here?

T.W. D: You have got me bewitched, whatever others may say! If only had I accepted that golden apple at that time, and carted her here, maybe none of this would have happened. I think she cursed me for being so stingy. But how did I know. I only took her to be a silly woman from a border village who breathed through her mouth. How did I know she

carried the poisons of the jungle to terrorise us here with her potent breath, fire-eater!! I'm in torment!

W: You! May you rot in heaven! The judge would have been more worthwhile.

T.W. D: (Turns away in desperation):

Do you bless me? What am I do?
Valliamma, Theivannai, Lord Buddha
Who could promise Nothing. Nothing begets Nothing.
There are no offerings
at the altar.

The shrine room
has a vacant stare
stronger than that of
Kali and others of her ilk.

Where shall I go?

(Cries out) Is there no good anymore anywhere in this world? Is there no hiding place where I can lose myself, away from the prying eyes... Has the city no eyes, not even ears bored into its walls, so that I can curl into sleep in its folds?

Look at all these people here! Look! Earth! Open up. Heaven! Where is your mercy?

W: Unsex me!

[A cobra enters the stage, as though it is rising from the depths of the earth, raises its hooded head and speaks to the audience or to nobody in particular. The cobra should be dressed as a hijra]

Cobra: Am I the serpent of Eden or Adhiseshya,

Holder of the world?
The Grand Thief of the under world
hoarding jewels in pouches of poison.
where they turn to stone
and the shadows of thieves grow long!

[Three wheeler driver attempts to flee. He is physically held back by the others]

Gods and other scoundrels of the sky what shall I do? Where is the pure moment? What apparition is this? This God of the forest and the world, holding back in pleasure and love. If I flee with the forces of the forest who will weep when my children rebel? Who will mourn, when they erect towers for Mammon. I am Lot's wife who had too much salt in her system, and froze to death and turned to stone on a hot blood day.

[Three wheeler driver turns around and stares and is frozen still by the sight of a cobra with its raised hood and as the cobra continues to speak. The others who had been holding onto the driver slowly make themselves scarce]

Cobra: Choose, choose, guard and driver! You can clamp on the irons on her wrist, and you'll be safe. Remember though, your wife will continue with her dalliance with the priest and the politician. You remember that day when on the Poya day, there was not a drop to be found, the streets deserted, and you went home early? What did you find? Your tiny tots will soon forget you. They will seek your face in the dimmed memory of a long lost friend. You of course, in your drunken stupor have no cares. Neither for clarity nor paternity?

N: Give shelter, Guard! See... the refugee
Fleeing terror and war

Fleeing language marches
Fleeing PTA
Fleeing pass laws in the Vanni
Fleeing emergency
Fleeing the dictatorship
of the power cut!

T. W. D: What do you want me to do now? Is there no other way?
You know I will lose my job, with the EPF, New Year bonus.
And the NGOs are closing down. There's nobody to hire my three wheeler.

Cobra: I am the mistress and master of the underworld. And you can be my guard and driver. Can you hear the rumblings in the belly? My incessant love for those in conflict?

[Holds the guard close to his/her belly]

Driver: What do you offer me?

Cobra: Abandon.

Driver: Ah... only that? What will I abandon?

Cobra: And authority! You are to my liking, lover of the spirits. I will watch over you and protect you when the city crashes like the stock market. My hooded wisdom is there for you for all eternity. Everybody talks of corruption here. It is so blatant in sun-lit areas. I protect the dark from its dust motes. It's nice down there.

You are to my liking, Chariot Driver of
Dark forces, Lord Krishna,
Who crept through the back door to women's chambers
And won the battle of Kurukshethra with heaven-born

dishonesty.
You'll be a great man yet.
Come over here. Now!

I take you for my own.

[The cobra embraces and holds tight the three wheeler driver close to his body. The Driver collapses and falls into a hypnotic state. Witch arranges the stones in a circle around them. Three wheeler driver shakes himself off from the slumber that is loaded with sexual allusions. After a heavy pause he turns toward Witch and talks to her urgently]

B (blinking): Look, the lights came back!

T. W. D: Wicked Witch, Wicked Witch, Hear me? I cannot go away with you. How can I dream of that even? It is my home. This rubble. The never ending roar, rattle of the traffic-lulled me to sleep. From a very early age, I learnt to suck at the nerve of every tavern and brothel in the city. Ate leftover thosais from the Saiva hotel at Sea street.

[Pause]

But you are a blessed woman. You are a blessed woman and there is so much to learn.

On looker: Cut out the crap man, we are in a hurry!

T. W. D. (Breaks apart the prison wall blocking Witch's path)
But you can have my vehicle. It is called a trishaw; it has three wheels. It has been my home for ages and now it's on its last leg. It can fly across the seven seas, It's Garuda

carrying Hanuman across Lanka's seas. You wait and see whether you will not be back home before the stars come out. But just check if there's enough juice for the long leap ahead.

W: I don't...

T. W. D: No, no. And I'll face the music, my wife-woman's wrath later when I go home sober but empty handed. And I'll blame it all on a woman ah. GO.

B: Wicked Witch! Wicked Witch!
Go! Safety awaits you.
Break down the city walls,
let not the tax collectors catch you,
bribe the bribery commissioners.
Where are the cheerleaders?

[A holds up a pack of cards. The pack of cards, or just one card could appear n the screen above as well.]

A (asks the audience): What you think?

C: The police are still out raiding two-hour hotel joints
They are mixing pleasure with severity. This is your only chance. Run! What are you waiting for silly woman?

W: Am I to leave everything, the riches of all tomfoolery, the finery of garment factories, and all the glittering pendulous stars attached to the mystery of this world.

[She turns sharply and faces the other actors who are jubilantly cheering her on.]

Why do you all want me away? If I stay now can I form a prison union? I would like to work magic into the driver's night time revels? f---, I can even imagine the riot we'll have, painting the city all rainbow colours. He may even become a politician an underworld gangster. We'll be trade union magnates, women activists. I'll be a twisting avenger in a soft porn movie. I'll induce him, in the hazy aftermath of his ganja smoking company keeping nights, to sell his kith and kin and be a lazy layabout. I'll be a bag woman! What are my choices, here or there?

[All of the characters now get together to cheer Witch's escape. But she walks apart. She looks tired and exhausted.]

Driver! Where are you?

[The Three Wheeler Driver hoists her on his shoulders. She sits astride his shoulders and from up above she looks around. She utters in a quiet tone.]

When I was small they said that man was going to the moon. Even us witches and magicians believed it. What a joke! We all went up to the highest hill in the forest and my father climbed the tallest tree to watch it all. I was perched on his shoulders. There was silence everywhere except for the faint hum of the space ship moving toward the dwelling place of old women, rabbits and craters and unhealthy air. Suddenly the radio went dead. And I had another vision. I felt my father's shoulders fill out, heaving and rising. He put me down on the highest branch of the tree. He disappeared into the night, into thin air. Sometimes I scan the face of the moon for his towering body. Who exactly did step on the face of the moon? Who, answer me.

[She looks around and at the others. She addresses them]

W: I am alone now. Lonelier than I ever was in the forest, or in the cold concrete cell of the prison quarters. Lonelier than

the lone woman crouched inside the waning moon, the face drawn out in one long leer.

I see the forest all around me,
Guard of the city. (She holds the driver by the hand)
I see the tree grow limp. Give me the binoculars
(a pair of binoculars is handed over to her)
The waters of the river have dried up. And the snake writhes
in agony
Coming out of his hole. It is dying to get out of the heat of
the earth, so thirsty.
Look at it! Is there a tomorrow?
Birnam forest moves, O witches!

[Long pause, during which Witch gets ready to move on. She gets down from her perch atop the Driver's shoulders. She collects her things strewn about. Others help her. She clears the stage of the props. If desired the set can be taken down too.]

You know what I shall do now? I will build my palace of golden fruit here, just here, outside the prison camp. We will be a forest of refugees here, bugging the hell out of you.

N:

I see the earth arise from the sea.
and the waters run over the fields.
Revolutions of the earth
are frozen for just one moment
and time is held in the space of her hand.

B: [shaking her]

Wicked Witch! Witch! Wicked! Wake up!

C: You are cheating us of your escape!

T. W. D: Let me hold one golden apple, just once, for luck. The cobra may drop in sometime!

[Holds up an imaginary apple to his scrutiny in a ritual gesture]

D: We are flying over the sea to the moon! Or Mars this time.

E: And my feet are firmly planted on earth. Where is my story?



'I am the Shadow Beast
And I' ll stalk this land's destiny
Like a woman's Curse'
in the shadow of the gun

People trapped between conflicting
demands, struggles and slogans spin stories
legends and yarns in their negotiation with forces
beyond their immediate control.

'Gods and other scoundrels of the sky
what shall I do?'
the wicked witch

Sumathy hails from a community of ungrateful minorities in
Sri Lanka and describes herself as acting with
feminist reason and on marxist impulse. She produces and
directs her own acts of performance and plays including most
recently a Tamil adaptation of Karnad's *Nagamandala*.
She has been working to create spaces for marginalised
people to image themselves as alternative actors
and narrators of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Her work is
about the power of narrative, politics, woman and land.
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