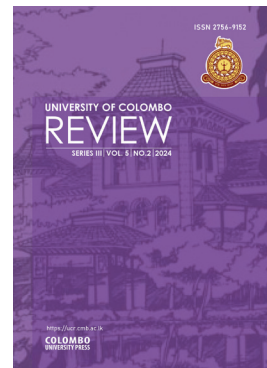


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The construction of the Sri Lankan Northern Tamil Woman: The shaping of identities across three decades

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the overarching themes emerging from the identities of Northern Tamil women in Sri Lanka over the last three decades. The war has impacted their lives in many ways and has shaped their identities over time. The paper aims to identify some of the significant markers of their identities, the historical periods in which these narratives were formed, and how these contributed to the construction of knowledge through scholarly articles, fiction and reports. The paper is divided into sections based on these three genres, preceded by a theoretical analysis and a brief historical timeline of the war. It becomes evident that during various periods of the war, different identities of these women were highlighted while simultaneously, some other facets of their identities were rarely or never written about or discussed by authors of fiction and reports. These identities and narratives also shaped the efforts initiated by organizations that chose to intervene in these communities post-war.

KEYWORDS:

Sri Lanka, Women, Identity, Tamil, Agency, War

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Introduction

The three-decade-long ethnic civil war in Sri Lanka gave rise to a substantial body of English fiction and nonfiction literature that delves into various aspects of the war. Notably, these works shed light on the role and condition of women during the war. This focus on women is evident either through explicit and detailed portrayals of their experiences. The literature produced during different periods by various authors and for different audiences has created diverse forms of knowledge.

In this context, the construction of identities for women, especially Northern Tamil women in Sri Lanka, is significantly influenced by the production of knowledge in these literary works. The paper aims to trace the trajectory of how the identity of the Northern Tamil Woman was shaped through pivotal moments in Sri Lanka's civil war and its aftermath. Through a careful examination of the creation of this knowledge, the article will explore how specific identities were formed and how these identities continue to impact the lived realities of these women.

By analyzing the literature produced during and after the war, one can better understand the perspectives, biases, and societal norms prevalent at different times. Moreover, it will be possible to gain insights into how these portrayals have contributed to shaping the perceptions of others about the experiences of Northern Tamil women. By acknowledging the role of literature in constructing identities and reflecting on the implications of these constructions, we can foster a deeper understanding of the challenges and issues women face in conflict-ridden regions.

Theoretical underpinnings

Leading Scholar and Feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (2003) 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' is a seminal piece of literature that provides an appropriate theoretical framework for this paper. Her work seeks to understand how the identities of a community of women who can be considered the 'subaltern' (socially, politically and geographically excluded) are shaped.

Spivak's concept of the subaltern considers the marginalization and voicelessness of certain groups. Northern Tamil women of Sri Lanka, having endured suffering within powerful structures of discrimination, wartime violence and the cultural oppressions of their own community, fit within this concept of the subaltern. Spivak's essay also explores the historical and conceptual aspects of Western academia and literature that impede the voices of those in the margins from being heard. Spivak believes that even the most concerted and genuine efforts by academics and writers to represent their voices and stories fall short and, even worse, silence the subaltern. Sri Lanka's colonial history and post-colonial marginalization of the Tamil community have limited the opportunity and ability of Northern Tamil women to share their experiences. Moreover, the representation of these women in

post-colonial literature often falls short of capturing the nuances of their condition and place in Sri Lankan society. In addition to this, some efforts to represent the subaltern frequently run the risk of homogenizing their experiences. This is especially evident in the Sri Lankan context, where political and social discourses around Northern Tamil women are heavily dominated either by generalized narratives or by the narratives created by the diaspora (Ganeshanathan, 2023). However, Spivak notes, “One must insist that the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous” (Spivak, 2003, p. 79). Can the aspects of the subaltern that appear outside the dominant discourse be sufficiently and effectively represented? This is Spivak’s most crucial question, and this paper seeks to grapple with it. Can the discourse around Northern Tamil women extend beyond popular narratives of victimhood and offer narratives shaped by lived experiences of their resistance and agentic capacity?

Chandra Mohanty’s “Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses” analyzes the production of the “Third World Woman” as a “singular monolithic subject” in Western texts in the 80s and 90s (Mohanty, 1984, p. 333). Mohanty talks about “the uncritical use of particular methodologies in providing “proof” of universality and cross-cultural validity” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 337). We see this often in reports that attempt to provide solutions and conclusions based on seemingly universal approaches to understanding concepts such as agency and empowerment. In the case of Northern Tamil women, the complex intersectionality of class, caste, gender, religion and geography are often not taken together into consideration. Moreover, these women’s local knowledge and experiences are centered as part of the discourse, but Western frameworks are imposed by both academics and practitioners when trying to understand their condition. Here, as Spivak also contends, the subaltern’s identity becomes transferable. This leads to both the homogenizing of these women and the erasure of essential aspects of their identity within these dominant discourses.

Finally, French historian and literary critic, Foucault’s theory on power and knowledge is relevant in how these literatures are produced, accepted, and distributed. Institutionalized power often determines who writes what, when, and how.

“There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.” (Foucault, 1976, Introduction, p. 27).

Foucault makes an essential argument about women’s identities and the way they are portrayed by silences. This can be applied especially to the experiences of Northern Tamil women in Sri Lanka: there are some gaps and omissions about

important aspects of the lives of these women. Moreover, Foucault's concept of power and knowledge critiques the regulation and control of bodies and populations. In the case of the Northern Tamil woman, she is subject to various forms of regulation through instances of militarization, police surveillance and patriarchal norms, among others.

Methodology

The paper provides an overview of literature produced about Northern Tamil women during the war. It also provides commentary, where appropriate, on the type of work produced over time and how these works have been produced, i.e. what led to the research and writing about the specific issue, its impact on women, and its social and historical significance. Discussions of scholarly articles, fictional and non-fictional literature, and reports is included in this study. Where appropriate, certain suggestions are offered by the author to strengthen and refine approaches to portraying Northern Tamil women in fiction and reports. The rationale for exclusively selecting English language literature is that it provides a particular type of perspective, being a connecting language. Moreover, including local language fiction requires a more exhaustive analysis that surpasses the scope of this paper. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that local language fiction, especially Tamil fiction, offers distinct perspectives that warrant exploration and analysis in a separate scholarly endeavor. English reports from local and international organizations are included in this paper as they provide unique insights and exposure to the post-conflict situation in the North. These organizations have engaged directly with communities, offering some diverse perspective. Particularly in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, when access to the North was limited, these reports became a crucial avenue for understanding the issues in the Northern Province, including those affecting Tamil women.

Finally, reflections from a paper with interviews conducted for previous research conducted by the author will be included in the analysis. The author of this paper conducted these interviews individually over the phone (during COVID restrictions) in Tamil, with a group of 10 women residing in Udayarkattu, Mullaitivu, in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. The Tamil transcripts of the interviews were translated into English by the author.

The production of the Sri Lankan woman

Before delving into the various types of knowledge produced about the Northern Tamil woman and the shaping of her identity, it is perhaps necessary to focus on the production of the "Sri Lankan Woman" first. The Sri Lankan woman cannot be considered a homogenous entity that can be neatly categorized. Regrettably, this oversimplification has frequently occurred in literary works and women's lived experiences. What is also important to note is that a homogenous

understanding of the “Sri Lankan woman” is often based on a standard that reflects the hegemonic powers that have ruled the socio-cultural landscape of Sri Lanka. As Sri Lankan anthropologist Malathi de Alwis points out, “Sri Lankan women, be they Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim, continue to be constructed as the reproducers, nurturers and disseminators of ‘tradition’, ‘culture’, ‘community’ and ‘nation’” (de Alwis, 2002, p. 675). However, much of this ‘tradition’, ‘culture’ and ‘nation’ is determined by a male standard. Over the years, the country’s female population has been neatly categorized and labeled when possible. The ‘respectable women of the home’ (Jeganathan & Ismail, 1995), the ‘elite bourgeois women’ with their close ties to the West (de Alwis & Jayawardena, 2001), the ‘juki girls’ who became symbols for sexual immorality and fading Sri Lankan traditions (Lynch, 2007, p. 217), the ‘war widows of the North’ (Jayasinghe 2015) are a few of the specific, limiting and highly problematic categorizations of women in Sri Lanka. The issue with these categories is not that they are entirely untrue. Some truth lies in the defining characteristics of these women who have been grouped based on their ethnicity, occupation and family pedigree, among others. However, they do not provide a complete picture of who these women are. Additionally, many of these stereotypes are harmful and reinforce negative and problematic cultural practices and behavior. For example, these narratives can often fuel under-researched, misaligned NGO projects that continue to view these women as victims and not agents within their communities. Scholarly articles have explored the various identities of Sri Lankan women over the years and have offered feminist critiques on the negative impact of these categorizations (Thiruchandran 1999; Jeganathan & Ismail 1995, Maunaguru 1995; Jayawardena & de Alwis 2001) and the difficulty of understanding the nuanced nature of women’s lives in the complex social, religious, economic and political landscape of Sri Lanka.

Many scholarly articles draw attention to the problematic nature of categorizing women into specific groups without a nuanced exploration of their conditions, behaviors, personal choices, and desires. However, casual literature such as magazines, promotional articles and newspapers have shaped and reinforced stereotypical identities. Newspaper articles, as early as post-independence in the early 1950s, grapple with the social expectations laid on women. In “Casting Pearls”, Jayawardena and de Alwis speak of many newspaper articles, both in Sinhala and Tamil, that set standards for local women while also vilifying foreign women/foreign educated women who are ‘unduly’ influencing local women (Jayawardena & de Alwis, 2001).

On the other hand, the Tamil woman’s identity has predominantly been determined by her ethnicity and the history of violence and subordination her people have experienced. Schrijvers states,

“Two extreme images of Tamil women have emerged: (1) aggressive women soldiers and suicide bombers in the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Elam (LTTE);

and (2) pitiful, poverty-stricken, dependent war victims in refugee camps. In between these extremes, many variations have developed, and men and women of different backgrounds are actively influencing these images” (Schrijvers, 1999, p. 307).

The earlier discourse of the cultured, traditional Tamil woman still exists in various forms and has not been substituted by the identities surrounding the war (Schrijvers, 1999, p. 30). However, both extremes are problematic and have been critiqued and addressed by activists and feminist scholars over the years (Maunaguru 1995, Thiruchandran 1999, Sornarajah 2004). Modern Tamil women grapple with the traditional understandings and expectations of Tamil womanhood juxtaposed alongside renewed understandings of womanhood impacted by the war. The war offered a space to renegotiate identities but left a vacuum where Tamil women now grapple with finding their place and identity in post-war Sri Lanka (De Visser, 2018 ; Michael, 2022; Gunawardana & Koens 2020).

Collective identities are not always used in an oppressive manner. Motherhood has often been utilized to form movements of resistance. The Mothers’ Front in Southern Sri Lanka and the Mothers of the Missing in the North are examples. When needed and appropriate, identity can be used to further political and social gains for women (Jayawardena & de Alwis 2002, de Alwis 1997, Hoole et al. 1992). However, the women themselves must make a deliberate choice. The Mothers’ Front, formed in Jaffna in 1984 to protest the increasing arrest of Tamil youth, is an example in which Tamil women used their identity as mothers to mobilize a protest. Simultaneously, they criticized the manipulation of this identity when Tamil women were encouraged to have more children to increase the Tamil population (Jayawardena 1986). Women must be able to negotiate their identities with the understanding that they are not static but fluid and flexible over time and circumstance (De Visser, 2018; Mohanty 1988).

Marking the different periods of Sri Lanka’s civil war

The Sri Lankan civil war spanned three decades and marked the island’s history with its violence and destruction at various times. While the war between the LTTE and the military took place in the North of the island, it shifted from region to region as the LTTE gained and lost strongholds. The rest of the island experienced the war in varied forms, such as bombings, suicide bombings and the palpable fear that anything could happen at any time. Even though the cities and villages far away from the North may have retained some level of normalcy, it was impossible to tell when or where an attack from the LTTE would be experienced. While the experiences were different regionally, they were also evidently different for different ethnic and religious groups. The experiences of the Tamil community across the island varied depending on their location, wealth, networks, and family ties (De

Visser, 2018, Wickrama, Ponnampereuma, Perera, Wickramaratne, & Thanigaseelan, 2020, Ulakentheran, Kandeepan, & Rafaitu, 2020).

It is often asserted that Sri Lanka's civil war began around the time of the killing of 13 soldiers by the LTTE (Al Jazeera, 2007). The root causes of the war and the tension and dissent that had erupted due to it had been simmering in the North for quite some time. This unleashed a spate of violence, culminating in the 1983 Black July riots that destroyed the lives and homes of many Tamils across the island (Al Jazeera, 2023). The riots, also known as Black July, produced much literature and created a dialogue surrounding the events (Frances, 2003; Jeganathan, 1995; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2001). Sri Lankan English fiction has also found itself using the backdrop of the July 1983 riots in its stories and shaping of characters (Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, *Shankari Chandran's Song of the Sun God*, *Jean Arasanayagam's All is Burning*, *Nayomi Munaweera's Island of a Thousand Mirrors*). As the LTTE grew, it required women to join its ranks. The LTTE portrayed this new Tamil woman as someone who could now break away from the confines of her home and become a warrior for her people. This is portrayed in Adele Anne's insider account "Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers" (1993).¹ However, the female LTTE cadre's agency and control over herself have often been debated in academia and political/feminist activism (de Mel 1998, Coomaraswamy 1997, De Silva 1994, Alison 2003). Female LTTE cadres also comprised a large part of the movement's 'Black Tigers' wing, dedicated solely to suicide bombing (Dissanayake, 2017). Women had to apply to be in this group, and many female cadres saw this as the ultimate act of sacrifice and service.

The ceasefire between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE (UN Peacemaker, 2002) in 2002 brought in a new season of limited access to the North and East and a round of peace talks. These peace talks generated dialogue about who should be at the table. Feminist activists in Colombo and other parts of the country sought to participate in this dialogue while urging leaders to allow women to be part of the decision-making process. The ceasefire was wrought with tensions on both sides, exacerbated by the Tsunami aid-related concerns regarding large amounts of missing or misappropriated funds by the government after the tsunami in 2004 (The New Humanitarian, 2007). During this time, Tamils in the North and East faced the grim reality of being refugees. Schrijvers notes that this phenomenon of being a refugee brought about many changes to the social set-up of the Tamil community. This also affected women in a myriad of ways. Many of the individuals Schrijvers interviewed were concerned with how women behaved in the camps and the perceived breaking down of morals and values (Schrijvers, 1999, p. 320). However, as Schrijvers points out, the images created about the refugee woman in

¹ Adele Anne was the Australian-born former leader of the women's wing of the LTTE who was married to Anton Balasingham, the chief political strategist and negotiator for the LTTE

newspaper writings and other public media did not fully encompass the reality in the camps (Schrijvers, 1999, p. 322-323). The dialogue and knowledge surrounding the refugee experience, especially for women, is an essential facet of the narrative of the Tamil community's lived reality of the war.

The war intensified in 2006, and the death toll of soldiers, civilians, and LTTE soldiers kept rising. The last phase of the war perhaps was the most brutal, with rampant violence unleashed to defeat the LTTE. This came at an unimaginable and unexplainable cost to the men, women and children living in the North and East and to the military. Activists and news reporters documented the last phase of the war, but only certain information was available to the public. Years later, with greater freedom in the media, stories of the horrors of the final phase of the war are being released to this day. On the one hand, the literature, both local and international, that surrounds this period of the war and its aftermath is marked with calls for justice and authentic reconciliation. On the other hand, it is representative of nationalist factions (who were entirely sympathetic to the Sri Lankan government and its military with a strong sentiment against any criticism of both) calling for complete impunity for the army and other involved parties.

The post-war period has shown an increase in the number of Tamil women in the North being portrayed as activists and protectors of justice both in literature, reports, and some print media. The Mothers of the Disappeared and their protests have gained significant media attention and have been the subject of many debates. These women have been considered the front-runners of peace activism and proponents of justice and reconciliation. These Northern Tamil mothers represent the families of the thousands of individuals who disappeared during the civil war. Their protests have been characterized by persistent demonstrations, hunger strikes, and vigils, often involving symbolic acts such as displaying photographs of the missing and holding silent marches (*Sunday Observer*, 2019, *Groundviews*, 2018, *Colombo Telegraph*, 2019, Buthpitiya, 2022, Thompson-Senanayake, 2014). This identity has been shaped by the implicit assumption that women are peace-loving and justice-oriented. It has also been influenced by the practical reality of women having to pursue avenues for justice because of the large number of men who died, were disabled, or went missing during the war.

It must be noted that this paper identifies Northern Tamil women as those living in the Northern Province who belong to the Tamil ethnic group. They reside in the districts of Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Mullaitivu, and Vavuniya. These women are part of a community that has a distinct cultural, linguistic, and historical identity, shaped by centuries of Tamil civilization in the region. Their lives have been significantly impacted by the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009).

Locating the literature

Each of these literature groups offers different narratives about the Northern Tamil woman. What English articles and writings offer at times are starkly different to what Tamil or Sinhala articles may offer. The Northern Tamil woman of Sri Lanka is wrought with multiple, complex narratives and identities. Her identity is not static: she is constantly evolving.

Scholarly articles

Scholarly articles have grappled with the various dimensions of the war and specifically the Northern Tamil woman's role in it. These articles tackle issues related to class and caste, sexuality, displacement, and interpersonal power relationships, among many others. The key issues this literature grapples with could be divided into a few broad categories under which these women's identities are shaped: agent versus victim, female-headed households, and female cadres.

The binary of agent and victim is a well-explored theme under which many scholarly articles have been written. *No more tears sister – the experiences of women in Broken Palmyra* (an inside account of the Tamil crisis written by those closely involved in academia in the North during the late 1980s) (Hoole, Somasundaram, Sritharan, & Thiranagama, 1992) explores the issues of rape and molestation during the Indian Peace Keeping Force's time in Sri Lanka.² The authors above comment on the lack of avenues for women to protest, and on the families of victims hiding the atrocities done to their daughters, wives, and/or sisters. The victims had to bear the burden of shame and guilt in secret.

The psychological toll of the war on Northern Tamil women has been addressed in various literature. Their trauma is both of a collective and individual nature. Dr. Daya Somasundaram, psychiatrist and author war-related trauma, has written extensively on this issue (2007; 2014). Trauma for Northern Tamil women comes in many forms, chief among them being the impact that gender-based violence has on them. Somasundaram notes increased violence against women and trauma among communities due to this (Somasundaram, 2007). However, he also talks about women supporting rehabilitation efforts in their communities. He mentions one such woman (unnamed) from an organization named Tharaka who was trained as a psychosocial worker and later nominated with 1000 other women for the Nobel Peace Prize by a women's group named 1000 Peace Women (Somasundaram, 2007). It is important to note that despite deteriorating social relationships due to the complexity and devastation of war, complex mental health challenges and increased violence, women are still inserting themselves in spaces of change and healing. When women

² Between 1987-1990 the Indian Peace Keeping Force was in Sri Lanka with the mandate to guarantee and enforce the cessation of hostilities as part of the Indo-Sri Lanka accord which brought a temporary truce to the Sri Lankan civil war

are discussed under the banner of ‘victimhood’, it is difficult for writers and readers alike to see beyond this identity.

Articles like the “The tragedy of Tamil women in conflict” by Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake (2001) identifies issues such as the lack of infrastructure to assist women experiencing violence in conflict zones and the need for institutional support. Articles such as “Gender conflict and displacement: Lessons learnt from Sri Lanka” by Jennifer Hyndman and Malathi de Alwis (2004) and “Fighters, victims and survivors: constructions of ethnicity, gender and refugee-ness among Tamils in Sri Lanka” by Joke Schrijvers (1999) identify the particular challenges related to displacement and how Northern Tamil women’s identities shaped by being internally displaced.

As the literature on women’s distinctive place as victims in the civil war proliferated, writings on women’s agentic capacity and ability to empower themselves even in dire circumstances began to surface. These writings were authored by some of Sri Lanka’s foremost feminists, academics, and activists who often wore all three of these hats at any given time. “Women’s activism, motherhood and the state in the context of Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict” by Kumudini Samuel (2003) identifies four key women’s organizations/coalitions which emerged in the 1980s and examines their activism and appropriation of ‘motherhood’. Among the organizations discussed are the Northern and Southern Mothers’ fronts, Women’s Action Committee and Mothers and Daughters of Sri Lanka. The work of the Northern Mothers’ Front was an essential aspect of the work of Northern Tamil women in their communities during the war. The Mothers’ Front led protests, challenging the State and the LTTE. Even though they claimed their traditional roles as mothers when necessary, they were quick to criticize any narratives demanding their women adhere to strict and patriarchal socio-cultural rules. “The contingent politics of the women’s movement in Sri Lanka after independence, 1948-1998” by Malathi de Alwis and Kumari Jayawardena (2002) provides a brief overview of the various dimensions of the women’s movement in Sri Lanka. “After victimhood: cultural transformation and women’s empowerment in war and displacement” by Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake (1998) speaks of the importance of looking beyond the victimhood of women and identifying the areas in which women are transforming their communities and the circumstances they have been placed in. The above are two amongst a significant number of pieces of literature that have looked to identify Northern Tamil women as more than just victims. While violence and discrimination continue to be a lived reality that requires ongoing attention, it is equally important to highlight women’s agency, empowerment, leadership, and resilience as prominently as their experiences of victimhood.

Many Tamil women in the North have been identified explicitly under three categories. Female-headed households (women who are primary breadwinners of

the household because of the death or disability of husbands during the civil war), war widows and Ex-LTTE cadres. These identities have defined various aspects of their lives. The discourse around female-headed households in the North has been extensively written about from an economic and sociocultural perspective. Two examples of writings on FHH, “The other victims of war: Emergence of female-headed households in Eastern Sri Lanka” (1997) and “The other victims of terror: Households in chaos” (2003) by Selvy Thiruchandran are important critical works that highlight some key issues faced by FHH and offer a more nuanced perspective on the issue. Thiruchandran points out the importance of identifying what ‘household’ means for these women, especially drawing attention to households in refugee camps. Such a nuanced approach allows for a broader understanding of these women and the narratives about them. In “Female-headed households in situations of armed conflict”, Sepali Kottegoda (1996) takes issue with official reports and information describing them as households with widows and as vulnerable women. While the unfortunate conditions of many of these women are true and are evidenced through the qualitative research work of those such as Thiruchandran and Kottegoda, much of this official information also takes the form of reports by international NGOs and local NGOs with the hopes of providing support and intervention to ‘uplift’ the lives of these women. While it is not prudent to disregard all of these efforts, it is essential to critically analyze their impact on these women and the kind of narrative these efforts perpetuate. These narratives inevitably influence the lived realities of these women. This is discussed further below under the section on official reports.

Female LTTE cadres are a group that piqued the interest of both international and local writers. Women joining guerilla or anti-state violent movements were not a new occurrence. However, the transformation of the often traditional, reserved Tamil woman to a violent and skilled militant was a fascinating subject for many. The Northern Tamil woman’s identity, shaped by her militancy, became a subject of many social and psychological analyses. Much of the scholarly analyses focused on the agentic capacity of female LTTE cadres. “Tiger Women and the question of emancipation” by Radhika Coomaraswamy (1996) posits that being a female LTTE cadre was not a step towards emancipation but a stepping away from essential values such as peace and non-violence. The LTTE tasked these women with what were traditionally perceived as highly masculine roles. An important question Coomaraswamy poses is whether their new status will remain the same after the war ends. Fifteen years later, we know now that it has not and has adversely affected their reintegration process and their status as civilians through the eyes of the state (Groundviews, 2024, Friedman, 2018). “Agent or victim? The Sri Lankan woman militant in the interregnum” by Neloufer de Mel (1998), and “Women in the LTTE: liberation or subjugation?” by Mangalika de Silva (1994) are works that discuss the price that Tamil women militants pay for transcending gender norms during a

particular period. The civil war offered a unique moment in time when these Tamil women were asked to take on leadership roles, often those considered masculine, and did not have to engage in any traditional female roles. The discourse around female LTTE cadres has often been binary as well. Are they agents? Or are they victims? In the context of war, it is crucial to examine the implications when women are presented with opportunities to experience certain freedoms and benefit from a specific form of emancipation, even if only temporarily. This binary approach to understanding Tamil women in the context of the war in the North has rendered some of the knowledge about them incomplete because it does not capture the other nuances of their intersectional experiences.

Fiction

Fiction plays a vital role in creating narratives and sharing stories about central periods of a nation's history. Fiction provides a platform for writers to present the realities and horrors of war in a way that news and reports do not. Through fiction, readers can delve into characters' individual lives and the intricacies of places loosely based on reality. While fiction is not often the whole truth, it still shapes narratives and identities about people and places.

When these authors have a certain power to shape narratives and tell the stories of a group of people, it is essential to consider what they do with that power. As Chimamanda Adichie said in her now famous TED talk 'The Danger of a Single Story',

"Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali (to be greater than another). How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are dependent on power." (Adichie, 2009).

Fiction surrounding the war has taken many forms. One form is that of books, which, although written with the war as the narrative backdrop, do not explore its everyday impact. In this category are books such as "Funny Boy" (Selvadurai, 1997), "Reef" (Gunasekera, 1994) and "Swimming in the Monsoon Sea" (Selvadurai, 2005). The other form is those stories directly intertwined with the war, with their characters and narratives consistently intermingling with the war. "Island of a Thousand Mirrors" (Munaweera, 2012), The Story of a Brief Marriage (Arudpragasam, 2016), "Song of the Sun God (Chandran, 2017), The Road from Elephant Pass" (de Silva, 2003), "Anil's Ghost (Ondaatje, 2000) "Love Marriage (Ganeshananthan, 2008). The above selection of works has been written by authors from the Sri Lankan diaspora or those who did not live in the North during the war. Many of these authors had migrated during the early stages of the war in the 1980s or were children of parents who had left Sri Lanka during that same time. It can also be seen that much of the writings

catered to perhaps specific audiences, such as the diaspora or an upper-middle-class English-speaking community.

The characters of Northern Tamil women portrayed in some of these books embody many stereotypes. While fiction does not have to follow the rules in describing the real life of these women, it would be helpful to attempt to produce more characters, especially that of the Northern Tamil woman, that are complex, nuanced, and closer to the lived realities of these women. It would also be helpful for such books to explore other women's identities without limiting them to the customary roles of widow, obedient/grieving wife, and ambitious child-turned-complacent woman. At times, authors may write about these nuanced experiences without any meaningful interaction or lived experiences with these women. When they do so, they are running the risk of co-opting existing narratives to create and bolster their characters. It would be important for writers to engage in more intentional research about the context of these women and existing literature about them when embarking on a creative pursuit of this nature.

For example, Munaweera's "Island of a Thousand Mirrors" has a problematic character of Saraswathie. We have met many Saraswathies in the pages of books written about the war by people who have not truly experienced the war. What is problematic about Saraswathie's character is neither the violence she experiences nor the complex range of emotions that she grapples with afterwards; it is not even the quick turnaround from not seeing the LTTE's point of view to becoming an ardent member. What is problematic is that there have been too many under-developed, un-complex, stereotypical Saraswathies who have appeared in fiction as portrayals of the Tamil women of the North. Violence against women was a horrific aspect of the war, and a theme seen in many works of fiction and non-fiction. However, especially in fiction, violence against women is often used as a tool to explain away drastic character changes and life decisions. "I stand with the girls of my class. We are Tigers, fully formed and as ferocious as our men, dog tags on our wrists, throats, and waist because we are not afraid to die cut up or blown to pieces" (Munaweera, 2012, p. 302).

An earlier work of fiction, "The Road from Elephant Pass" by Nihal De Silva, is a well-known book, in Sri Lanka among an English speaking audience, that was mandatory reading for all literature classes in the Advanced Level section of Sri Lankan high schools. This book provided an insight into the civil war during the late 1990s and early 2000s. When the book was published in 2003, for many young students around the ages of 15 and 16, it was their first experience reading war literature, primarily due to a lack of accessible information on the North for young people. The plot is simple: a girl who meets a boy and falls in love. Kamala Velaithan, an LTTE cadre, is one of the protagonists who falls in

love with the other protagonist Captain Wasantha Ratnayake the military officer. Kamala Velaithan's primary asset in this story was that she held on to some vital information without divulging the veracity of it to the army officer till the very end. Her character is written in broad strokes and is often two-dimensional. Her character is more symbolic in nature and not fully fledged and we do not get to see a significant character development over the course of the book. Many of the actions of the characters are used to simply advance the plot of the story.

"Song of the Sun God" by Shankari Chandran raises the importance of locating Tamil women geographically and understanding the difference between location and class in creating identity. It introduces Tamil female characters from different parts of Sri Lanka and abroad. The character's identities and the way their contexts shape them are apparent. The dimension of class and how it impacts the character's choices are also evident throughout the story.

Most similar fiction is set either in Jaffna or Colombo or both, Tamil women portrayed in places like Kilinochchi or Mullaitivu being rare or non-existent. However, these women from Jaffna are often made to represent *all* Tamil women in the North. This does not take into consideration the disparate realities between these women. For example, issues of caste, class, and economic resources made available by the diaspora are often disproportionate between areas such as Jaffna and Mullaitivu or Kilinochchi. This also ignores the numerous interconnected aspects of power. Ganga, in "The Story of a Brief Marriage" by Anuk Arudpragasam, is married off in a refugee camp to escape the threat of sexual assault and other dangers that can befall a young woman without much family. Yalini, in V.V. Ganeshananthan's "Love Marriage", though living in New York, is drawn to her roots in Sri Lanka and finds herself intertwined in them. It is important to note that these books allow many stories to be told. But they could use more complex and nuanced approaches. Reading stories based on Kilinochchi, Vavuniya, or Mullaitivu would be essential as the war experiences, geographical context, economic and social classes and demographic placements were, at times, quite different from one place to the other. This would give a more comprehensive understanding of the diversity of people, places, and their experiences in the North. It would be necessary to go beyond the geography of Jaffna. As Manivannan writes,

"...it is for this reason that I call to task the translators and gatekeepers of Tamil language poetry out of Sri Lanka, who revel in showing only one face of a zocchihedron to the world: Jaffna-centric, bloody, without the reprieve of the mundane, let alone any multiplicity of truth" (Manivannan, 2019).

What Manivannan writes about translating Tamil poetry is true of much of the fiction portraying Tamil women from the North. They are often violently afflicted, hail from Jaffna and embody the socio-cultural values of generations of

Tamil women. The portrayal of these women requires greater depth and nuance. Credit must be given to some authors, such as Chandran and Arudpragasam, for attempting to do so in certain aspects of their novels. This attempts to push the boundaries of identities and narratives regarding the Northern Tamil woman. Manivannan adds,

“The archive must necessarily be incomplete because we are ever projecting our meanings: whether one is a Tamil woman who left the island as a child and bridges that loss with words, a foreign translator enamored of the idea of Eelam, an author who chooses to take on the mantle of symbolic witness, a reader, a researcher, a reporter, a person very far or very near (however one measure that distance). The archive must gently hold our projections, and as gently contradict them” (Manivannan, 2019).

While it is impossible to fully comprehend or accurately represent the lived experiences of these women, Mannivannan posits that our representations will inevitably be projections. Nonetheless, it is imperative to persist in efforts to seek out the uncommon and the non-stereotypical, critically deconstructing the apparent to uncover the layers and complexities of these women’s lives to the greatest extent possible.

Reports

Local and international reports provide a wealth of information on the condition of the Tamil women in the North. Reports have often been essential for Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) and International Non Governmental Organizations (INGOs) to create awareness of the issues that challenge these communities while hoping to keep the government accountable to addressing war-time and post-war time challenges and concerns. Northern Tamil women are considered a significant victim population of the war, and official reports by organizations are some of the largest groups of literature that provide insight into this demographic. Hence, it would be important to include them in this analysis. Local reports highlighting Tamil women’s conditions in the North have been published by locally established non-governmental organizations such as Women’s Education and Research Centre, Centre for Women’s Research, Women and Media Collective, International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES), and Centre for Policy Alternatives. These publications have covered various aspects of these women’s conditions and used qualitative and quantitative data to make specific claims and assertions about these women’s lives. Reports from INGOs have come through organizations such as Amnesty International, the UN, the International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch, OXFAM and the World Bank. These reports have often urged the state for more significant intervention in the conditions of these women and have pressed for justice and accountability.

When reports group both women and children to document the effects of war, it often does a disservice to women as it conflates their challenges and may omit specific challenges to women. “A Program for special assistance to children and women affected by armed conflict” by UNICEF and “Rebuilding lives: a new beginning -war widows and their children” by Save the Children Fund Norway are two reports published in 1999. While women’s issues are often tied to the rearing of their children during the war, it is problematic to always speak of women as mothers and caregivers. These reports conflate the experiences of women and children while also consistently portraying the women as caregivers and guardians. By claiming that women and children share some of the same types of vulnerabilities during the war, these reports can tend to erase other aspects of the women’s identity. It is crucial to differentiate between the experiences of women and children, even within the context of reports of this nature.

The umbrella term ‘Conflict-affected’ is often used liberally to write about Tamil women in the North (International Crisis Group 2017, ICES 2017, UNFPA 2015, ICRC 2009). While it is a valuable signifier to talk about the war’s effect and to identify groups of people, it can run the risk of painting these women solely in this light. Thiruchandran notes:

“There are wide disparities in the levels of culture they practice. Their caste and class locations, creating differential experiences, have also become fundamental to the difference. While the language they speak also has differential innnotations, pronunciations and sometimes meanings... What they say is ‘in context’ positioned and their discourse is ‘placed’ (Thiruchandran, 2001, pp.6-7).

Similarly, the concept of war widows and FHH is found ubiquitously in many reports concerning these women (International Crisis Group, 2017; United Nations Population Fund, 2015; International Committee of the Red Cross, 2009). The experiences of war widows or women who head their household are diverse. Not all women who are heads of the household have lost their husbands. Some of them are injured or have acquired disabilities and, hence, unable to work. The phenomenon of FHHs also emerged during the war because of the increased number of men who had joined the LTTE. Whatever the circumstance, the women who head these households have shown immense strength and resilience amid significant obstacles. Many anecdotal examples exist of women starting small businesses, using women’s associations to support each other, and engaging in vocational programs to find new opportunities to support themselves and their families (De Visser, 2018). FHHs are often the subject of reports and interventions concerning women’s economic empowerment. As discussed in a previous paper (De Visser, 2018) cited in this article, empowerment and agency have been misrepresented by many of the efforts to help these women. In a research paper by the INGO Oxford Poverty and Human

Development Initiative (Samman and Santos, 2009), empowerment and agency are approached from a developmental perspective. What is problematic here is that empowerment is considered something that could be measured and achieved. The report does not divulge what this empowerment does to the individual and what room the individual has to ‘achieve’ *more* empowerment. One section of the report notes, “No matter which indicator of autonomy is considered, women residing in the southern part of the (Indian) subcontinent consistently display significantly higher levels of autonomy than women residing in the north” (Samman & Santos, 2009, p. 9). Broad generalizations such as this take away from the everyday acts and moments of agency that women engage in.

Similarly, broad generalizations can be made only when there are fixed definitions, indicators and ‘referents’. When organizations present research that does not acknowledge the nuances and considers the collective experience to be the only experience, it creates a falsehood about the identity of these women and blurs each individual’s life into the other. As Mohanty points out, when they do this, they risk homogenizing communities.

Interviews

The interviews conducted in 2018 in Udayarkattu, Mullaitivu (De Visser, 2018) provide an opportunity for reflection on the discussion of identity and narratives. Udayarkattu is a village on the outskirts of the city of Mullaitivu, and the women interviewed had lived in Mullaitivu for most of their lives. Their husbands were all living but disabled due to the war (De Visser, 2018). Mullaitivu is known for being the site of horrific violence during the latter stages of the civil war (*The Hindu*, 2022). It also has one of the highest levels of poverty and unemployment in Sri Lanka (Department of Census and Statistics, 2019). Among the Tamil community, caste and class also play a significant role in how people are treated by community members, community leaders and officials within Mullaitivu. In this context, there is little room for the women of this community to voice their unique experiences to those in places of influence within the broader community. Even within Mullaitivu, the experiences of the women in Udayarkattu are at times vastly different from the experiences of the women in the city of Mullaitivu. One of the women, Thivya, shares,

“We feel forgotten at times. Much of the aid efforts are quickly taken up by those in the city. People hardly come here, so we do what we can to help each other ourselves,” Saroja adds. “We also don’t want to wait around for handouts.”” (De Visser 2018).

Two things are evident in what Thivya and Saroja share. One is that narratives are often created by large organizations about entire communities by taking into account only the experiences of a small group or subsection.

Organizations working in some communities in one district cannot assume an understanding of the whole region. The second is that despite lacking resources and attention from many aid organizations, these women have found ways to solve their problems. These solutions may not conform to conventional frameworks, but they are effective for these women.

These findings challenge the identity of Tamil women in the North as merely helpless victims or dependent women. All the women interviewed showed immense initiative and lived busy lives that included significant amounts of volunteerism. They were part of many women's associations and raised small funds to help projects within their communities. What is particularly interesting about these women's associations is that no significant men's equivalents exist.

The women in Udayarkattu confront numerous challenges and frequently seem very vulnerable, with much of their lives characterized by victimhood. However, this is not entirely accurate. Although dominant power structures are widespread, they are not all-encompassing or entirely oppressive. These women have developed unique methods to navigate these structures, and their approaches are contingent on their specific contexts and circumstances, which must be acknowledged (De Visser, 2018).

Even though other researchers have also published interviews and research on smaller communities of women, these writers only sometimes highlight their stories. They often do not get highlighted within the broader narratives about these women and do not significantly enter the central discourse.

Conclusion

The identity of Northern Tamil women is characterized by its multi-faceted nature and its continuous evolution over time. Different historical epochs and conflict-related socio-political shifts have left their mark on these identities, giving rise to diverse narratives. The image of the LTTE cadre from Vavuniya in the 1990s, armed with an AK47, represents one aspect, while the widow taking on the role of head of her household in Kilinochchi embodies yet another dimension.

However, while capturing overarching narratives, these descriptions may inadvertently overshadow the intricacies and nuances that shape these women's lives. It is crucial to recognize that the identities of Northern Tamil women have been profoundly influenced by the significant shifts they experienced over three decades of war. The impact of these shifts on their lives deserves careful consideration.

The literature produced on Northern Tamil women offers valuable insights into how knowledge is constructed around their identities. The volume of literature has grown, especially since UN Resolution 30/1 in 2016, when the Government of Sri Lanka committed to implementing comprehensive transitional justice mechanisms. This has led to increased engagement in the North on reconciliation issues. However,

a more nuanced and comprehensive approach is needed. Efforts should focus on representing these women's diverse voices and perspectives to avoid oversimplified portrayals.

In conclusion, the identities of Northern Tamil women are complex and ever-changing, shaped by historical epochs and conflict-related socio-political transformations. The literature produced about these women plays a significant role in constructing knowledge about them. While acknowledging the positive trend of increasing literary representation, it is important to ensure that their diverse experiences are authentically captured and that the complexity of their identities is respected and appreciated. By doing so, we can contribute to a more profound understanding of the lives and struggles of these women, fostering empathy and promoting meaningful societal change.

Conflict of Interest

The author of this article hereby declares that there is no conflict of interest in publishing this article.

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