

# POETIC DECONSTRUCTIONS OF ARMED CONFLICT: WOMEN VOICES FROM SRI LANKA

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## **Abstract**

In this article I begin by addressing stereotypes associated with the bodies of women in traditional south Asian societies. My focus is Sri Lanka and chronologically the civil war therein. While traditional societies such as the Sri Lankan have deified the reproductive body of the woman, extolling it in religion and celebrating its sensuousness in poetry, these strictures changed drastically with the formation of the Illavar – the women’s brigade of the LTTE. The need of the hour was to enlist women fighters for the cause of the imaginary homeland of Tamil Eelam. This move had to be successful not just through the arduous physical training undertaken by young women training to be cadres but sociologically there had to be acceptable for women forfeiting their roles as sacrificing wives and mothers. This societal acceptance is accomplished through discourse as facilitated by the LTTE wherein reverence otherwise bestowed on women in their self-sacrificial role is transferred to function duty as suicide bombers for the cause of the motherland in the offing thereby the violence of the act is extolled as the ultimate sacrifice of martyrdom performed for the greater communal good. I compare this with the act of poetry-writing by women showing this an exercise of female autonomy and resistance.

**Keywords:** Woman, Resistance, Body, LTTE, Poetry, Martyrdom.

Theorisations of the civil war in Sri Lanka often classify it as either LTTE (Lankan Tigers of Tamil Eelam) terrorism or an ethnic conflict. Disparately discreet as these understandings do appear, and this is mainly on account of media coverage of the war carried out under GoSL censorship; analysis shows them as interrelated and as misnomers for a war that blighted thousands. To read this neo-colonial war purely

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from a right-wing perspective of warring ethnicities means ignoring the pitfalls of majoritarian governance or for that matter the inter-racial cohabitation and *bonhomie* as had existed on the island of Ceylon prior to independence; while to simplistically slot non-state violence as terrorism amounts to a failure of perception regarding the naturalisation of colonial structural violence within the post-colony. While colonial discourses of civilising the heathen or dark regions of the earth's surface served to obfuscate their deployment of violence (physical and psychic) as an essential mode of governance in the colony, it also naturalised the very idea of violence as an essential part of governance. This extended to patriarchal ideas of the exercise of violence as a chastening and corrective force by a benevolent authority. Added to this is the explaining away of violence on the bodies of women through religious texts that deem it righteous and legitimate. This article is concerned with women's voices regarding the turn their lives have taken with the all-pervasive presence of conflict on their homestead. How do they deal with the violence? Do they embrace it, do they reject it or do they resist it? How then is resistance articulated when performing violence on the other is deemed as noble and honourable? My contention is that resistance in this scenario is embodied in the speech-acts of women which are indictments of patriarchal administrative and social structures and are now manifest as violent and unrelenting conflict.

Following self-rule in Sri Lanka as in the subcontinent at large, assertions of national identity began with prescriptive dress codes. The ideological weightage of this sartorial fashioning being the construction of an exclusive and ideal Sinhala-Buddhist womanhood wherein ideas of modesty, purity, chastity and respectability were paramount. Women from the Burgher, Tamil and any other community residing on the island were marked by their absence of these very qualities. As Malati de Alwis shows in her essay "Sexuality in the Field of Vision: The Discursive Clothing of the Sigiriya Frescoes", the nudity of the Sigiriya frescoes caused immense discomfiture amidst this new breed of nationalists.<sup>1</sup> The fact that women from the Burgher and Tamil communities, for instance, had been among the foremost doctors and educators on the island did nothing to alter the racial profiling at work.<sup>2</sup> What was being silenced or erased at this historical juncture was the enabling coexistence and cross-cultural symbiosis as had existed on the island and the empowerment that the conviviality and cosmopolitanism thus generated had created in Ceylonese society. In the quest for an

exclusive national (majoritarian) identity hybridity came to be decried as contamination. Theorising the political and economic foundations of this phenomenon across a wider sociological spectrum, Yuval-Davis in *Gender and Nation* shows how “purity” plays out in the lives of women as and when ethnic collectives embark upon setting-up exclusive boundaries marking off their ethnic selves from the other:

The central importance of women’s reproductive roles in ethnic and national discourses becomes apparent when one considers that, given the central role the myth (or reality) of ‘common origins’ plays in the construction of most national and ethnic collectivities, one usually joins the collective by being born into it. (Davis 1997, 27)

Expanding on the theme, Amrita Chhachhi, in *Forced Identities: The State, Communalism Fundamentalism and Women in India*, points out how modes of behaviour, dress codes and discourses of chastity and modesty among other traditions are deemed ethnically/culturally appropriate, creating the boundaries needed to exercise control over the female reproductive body in the interests of the collective and define “our” women as opposed to “their” women (Chhachhi, 1991, pp. 144, 175) thus in Sri Lanka the Kandyan style of sari became the national mode of dress and was hardly accepted as such by the Tamil or Burgher communities.

However, with the onset of the civil war, gender demarcations on the island, particularly regarding labour and space underwent a rapid redefinition, particularly on the Jaffna peninsula. To begin with, the stereotype of the heroic male warrior versus women as victims and more often as “silent” sufferers of the war was being rapidly replaced with women-headed households and more radically with women soldiers who were now needed to be enlisted as cadres for guerrilla outfits on the peninsula and had to be combat hardy. This subversion of gender roles was rendered acceptable as it was being performed in the interests of Tamil Eelam - the nation in the making. Eelam too had to be represented by its women and in this case, the representations ranged from images of women as traditional sari-clad, thali and kumkum sporting images of feminine auspiciousness to a radically different idea of womanhood - the new, combat-hardy, militant women-fighters trained to perform deadly acts of suicide bombing as had been carried out by Illavar - the women’s brigade of the LTTE. However, as Sitralega Maunagur points out, these differing representations were viscerally

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connected through the age-old notion of self-sacrificial womanhood. She has drawn attention to traditionally idealised notions of Tamil womanhood and the desexualised body by drawing from an anthology of Tamil heroic poetry from the 1st century A.D. entitled *Puranaanuru* wherein are elaborated on the qualities that women, particularly mothers, must cultivate. Modesty and chastity have pride of place here. As Maunaguru points out, the LTTE literally created as iconic and exemplary the image of the dutiful woman, first as a mother and then as a dutiful warrior for the motherland, (even if in the making). Women were required to actively and dutifully offer their bodies for the service for both causes. (Maunaguru 1995, p. 158, 175).<sup>3</sup> To show the continuation of this strain of exemplary womanhood, a more recent example could be drawn from the World Tamil Movement conference held in Toronto in 2001, wherein the Tamil poet R. Cheran explicates the valorised position of women in Tamil culture thus:

Mere words or poetry fall short of remotely expressing the place of women in Tamil culture. Women are regarded with the utmost respect and reverence, as they are the keepers of wisdom, the connection to the divine and the teachers of life.<sup>4</sup> (2001, p. 21)

While the poet Cheran may sincerely believe that he is according honour to womankind by his words, they are in effect a reiteration of patriarchal discourses attributed to the female body as has also been deployed by Sinhala nationalist discourse wherein also women (although exclusively of Sinhala-Buddhist origins) are repositories of spirituality and culture. As for the Sri Lankan Tamil community, these notions held sway despite witnessing the lived experience of women on the Jaffna peninsula wherein when they were not enlisted as soldiers, or suicide bombers they functioned as breadwinners for their families needing to protect their offspring from forced inscription into the “baby-brigade” of the LTTE.<sup>5</sup>

With militarisation becoming the order of the day on the Jaffna peninsula, women’s lives acquired a new and violent normal particularly since every male of Tamil ethnicity was targeted by the authorities as a terrorist and by the guerrilla outfits operating on the peninsula as a potential soldier. This led to widespread “disappearances”, as sons and husbands never returned home after the ubiquitous “questioning” by state authorities or were recruited by the LTTE. In this scenario,

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women-centric protest movements such as the “Mother’s Front” took centre stage on the peninsula.<sup>6</sup> While to protest in times such as these is in itself an act of bravery, we must also bear in mind that traditionally in south Asian societies, the body of the grieving mother, particularly for a warrior son, commands a space of formidable respect. This undoubtedly enabled mothers who were staging protests against the state machinery at a time when extreme forms of terror had paralysed civil society networks on the island. So now, a discourse decried by feminists as patriarchal and stereotypical was being effectively deployed by mothers grieving the violence of the times. The mothers were speaking out not only against the state, as is commonly believed, but also the war machinery of the LTTE and against the violence that had become such a normative part of their lives. With the moral weight of motherhood behind them, the Front attracted tremendous mass support. As a performative speech act, the movement subverted the traditional injunctions of isolation imposed on women during mourning and by bringing the body of the grieving mother out into the public realm not only did they perform grief but more so staged resistance to violence. By doing this, the movement redefined the practice of motherhood, making it more of an active, public experience, whereby mothers assuaged their grief instead of keeping it in the realm of the private (Schriver 1989, pp.185, 209). The means of protest used by the members of the Front to express their grief and demand redress were customary cultural practices such as, heaping of curses, invoking of superstitions and folk-rituals of black magic, fasts undertaken at the temple of Kaliaamma seeking divine vengeance as justice for their murdered kin. The movement was attacked by the state for encouraging stereotypes of irrationality, gullibility and superstition associated with women and for hysteria - often blamed on their bodily cycle and finally, they were accused of politicising grief by making it such a public affair.<sup>7</sup> As a spokesperson for the state, the Defence Minister for the UNP, Ranjan Wijeratne, chastised the protesting mothers for: “having failed their duty by their children and the nation” (De Mel 2001, p.244) thus once again resorting to age-old patriarchal injunctions to keep the woman’s voice and her body within the private space of the homestead. Gauging the tremendous political currency of the movement, the UNP government in the South formed its own Mother’s Front, in opposition to what they termed was the SLFP’s Mother’s Front of the North. This propagandist politicisation and bifurcation led to the eventual dissolution of the movement in the South while in the North, the movement ultimately

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dissipated under LTTE pressure. Pointing to the social effectiveness of the “Mother’s Front”, Niloufer De Mel points out that the movement created the much-needed empathetic space wherein women, often the silent sufferers of conflict and the silenced bearers of its brutalising effects could reach out to one another, swap stories and expect to be understood and supported in a humane manner. The members of the Front, as Mel points out, were: “as much in dialogue with each other as they were with the nation” (De Mel 2001, p.247; De Alwis, 1999).

As speech acts of resistance, the Protest poetry written by women protesting the war interrogates the patriarchy that bolsters this violence. These poetic enunciations radically broke class barriers along with ethnic barricades. The common thread binding women together at this time was the oppression they faced on account of violence, as has been stated by the editors of the Trilingual Anthology, a collection of poetry by women from different strata, ethnicities and walks of life:

As women who write in different languages, belong to different ethnic groups, religious communities, regions and cultures, we are divided. Yet, we share the experiences of oppression that are rooted in the patriarchal norms that rigidly control and constrain our lives. It is this same-ness and this difference that make our coming together all the more complex, and rich.

(Sanmarga 2002,n.p)

‘A Mother’s Lament’ penned by Sanmarga, (the pseudonym used by Sarvamangalam Kailasapathy) is part of the above-quoted anthology compiled by the Women & MediaCollective. The speaker’s words bear witness to the psychic disempowerment engendered by war, apart from its material losses.

A Mother’s Lament  
 You lie on the road dust  
 Your body soaked in blood  
 I bend down to see your face  
 Yes son it is you  
 “Why do you cry mother?”  
 The gathered crowd inquires  
 “Do you know the boy”  
 Threatens the man with the gun  
 “No I don’t.” I shake my head  
 Denying you my first born

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In Kurukshetra, when Karna falls Kunti runs and takes him in her arms  
 And cries "Oh my son"  
 I am a sinner to be born now for I cannot even claim you as my son

If only I had some strength  
 I will take you in the night  
 And cremate you in Chemmani  
 This hand which fed you rice  
 Two nights ago, would have courageously  
 Done this duty as well

You went away for six months  
 Unable to bear the oppression of Ravana  
 .... Why did you return my son?

If I claimed you as my son,  
 They will come home and take away  
 your brothers and set fire to my hut  
 will load my cow on their lorry  
 and drive away to Palaly

who is there to question them?  
 I am just a poor woman

....  
 .... My grief will one day destroy those  
 Who have been so cruel.  
 While those who advocate a separate state  
 On platforms endlessly  
 Are guests in neighbouring country safe and secure,  
 You who gave your life for the country  
 Are dead on the road-side

My heart breaks to leave you  
 On the road-side  
 I am a sinner who cannot even claim  
 my son as my own. (Women in Wartime 2002, p. 24, 26).<sup>8</sup>

My analysis of Sanmarga's text shows the violence of authoritarianism whereby patriarchy is not simplistically located in binaries of men versus women. As the text shows, it is economic marginalisation and not ethnicity that is accountable for the speaker's anguish. She cannot

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bury or even publicly claim the lifeless and mutilated body of her son for now the carcass is intended to serve as a spectacle deterring future offenders to the cause. Her predicament is two-fold, for while on the one hand, it shows her vulnerability and helplessness in the face of power structures, particularly the violence with which they control lives, on the other, it is her need to articulate the injustice of the act, the authoritarianism that has spurred it and as a mother to vent her grief and call out to the ones responsible that rises as an anti-war, anti-violence cry. In this, her subject position as a mother has proven to be the most enabling. Her words draw attention to her economic situation rather than her ethnicity and with this, she touches on the silenced dynamic of this (or for that matter most) conflict. As a speaker, Sanmarga attributes her helplessness to being “just a poor woman” and her duress is not on account of being a Tamil in a Tamil-dominated area but the self-alienation and psychic violence she experiences as a mother for having to undergo the unnatural act of denying the lifeless body of her child. Again, it is as a mother that she also needs to protect her other children from the war machinery. Her predicament, as she pronounces it, accrues on account of her economic powerlessness and ethnic identity appears immaterial throughout this speech-act.

Moreover, it is “the man with the gun”, that the mother perceives as threatening - whether he be of the Sinhalese armed forces or the Tamil-Tigers. Neither does she clarify for the readers whether her son’s death was ‘punishment’ as meted out to those deemed deserters/traitors by the LTTE as per their ideas of justice or was it a staged terrorist encounter by the armed forces acting under the aegis of the Prevention of Terrorist Activities leeway?<sup>9</sup> While neither case justifies this spectacle of cold-blooded murder in broad daylight in the marketplace and intended to spread paranoia, the ambiguity regarding is an enabling speech act as it creates the scenario of the theatre of war which had become a living reality for Sri Lankans such as herself. Adding to this, her lament that her son had “returned” to the peninsula raises the question of forced recruitment by the Tigers?<sup>10</sup> His murder then shows the shrinking space for non-violence and for individualistic choices when the violence of war is the order of the day. Furthermore, is the mother’s reference to “Ravana”, the mythical demon-king of the epic Ramayana, a reference to the head of the Tigers – Vellupillai Prabhakaran or the President of the elected Democratic Party, or to both – for as perpetrators of violence should not both be indicted? The power of the text as articulated by



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the lamenting and desexualised body of the mother lies in its exposure of patriarchy.

Adding to the subversion of the normative order wherein she must disavow her son's body, now an abandoned carcass lying in the dust by the roadside is the belief that a son will further a mother's sense of agency, particularly within traditional and conservative communities.<sup>11;12</sup> Nationalist ideologies too glorify women's bodies as producers of sons who would be future soldiers and protectors of the motherland. Jyotsana Agnihotri Gupta in *New Freedoms, New Dependencies* states:

The internalisation of this so-called ideal that nationalism put up for women simply reinforced the traditional notion that the fruition of women's lives lay in producing heroic sons. The nationalist ideology, therefore, simply appropriated this orthodox bind on women's lives by glorifying it. (Gupta 1996, p. 60)

Sanmarga's speech-act, however, is a rare enunciation for poetic texts written in Sri Lanka around this time usually extolling nationalist sentiment whereby veneration for the body of the mother in the household is extended to the nation as motherland, and protecting the motherland, even at the cost of one's life, is equated with the service rendered by a dutiful son towards his mother. This is usually the case with families of personnel from the armed forces as this poem entitled *To My Son on the Battlefield*, written by the mother of a soldier stationed on the front shows:

To my Son on the Battlefield  
 When her son Dutugemunu went to battle  
 The venerable queen did not shed tears  
 I cannot do likewise my son  
 For warm tears are cascading down my face  
 Even if you die in the battlefield, beloved son  
 Lay not your rifle upon the earth, hand it over to another  
 This is the way I know you are my eldest son for sure  
 Tomorrow I'll send my heroic younger son to battle (De Alwis 1998, p. 262)

One can make a strong argument that the above verse extols war to the extent that the mother even seems to propagate its continuation by vowing to send her "younger son to battle". The legend of King

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Dutugemunu, the founder of the Sinhala race and his mother Vihara Maha Devi as recounted in *The Mahavamsa* has been foundational for this post-independence phase of militant Sinhala nationalism. The circulation of this myth of the young king's desire to wage war against the Tamils worked towards legitimising the idea of Ceylon as Sinhala-Buddhist land. Gananath Obeyesekere in his study entitled *Dutthagamini and the Buddhist Conscience: Religious and Political Conflict in South Asia* presents his version of this dialogue between the queen and her son, the young Dutugemnu:

The queen came and caressing Gamini spoke thus: why dost thou not lie easily upon thy bed with limbs stretched out my son? The son replies "over there beyond the Gange (the river Mahaveli) are the Damilas (Tamils), here on this side is the Gotha (ocean), how can I lie with outstretched limbs? (Obeyesekera 1993, p. 92)

The propagation of this myth by Sinhala nationalism is especially evident in the speech-acts by wives and mothers of the armed forces personnel as the cited text shows. While she expresses her distraught state of mind over the possible death that could await her son, at no point does she question the legitimacy of the battle as the Sanmarga mother had done or imply that it is a waste of human life. Her speech-act shows her internalisation of the myth of the courageous mother as exemplified by the legendary queen-mother Vihara Maha Devi and so the glory earned by her son-as-soldier overrides the grief of his possible death. Women/mothers with sentiments such as this were the need of the hour for both, the Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms and they provide ample illustration of the discourse at work. As war machinery the body politic needs at this time is just the reproductive capacities of women but for them to extol the right sentiments. It is these "Moral Mothers" and their "Stalwart Sons", as indicated by the title of Malati's essay who show the effects of coercion through discourse and its poetic representation.<sup>13</sup> Noting the cultural import of images such as: "'warm tears' and the dispatching of another son to take the place of the first", Malati de Alwis notes how these images became familiar tropes during the armed conflict and even found their way into popular forms of public discourse such as: "war songs, political speeches and statements to the press by bereaved parents ..." (De Alwis, p.262). She adds:

The nation-state, i.e., the motherland conceptualises the citizen subject through a particular configuration of 'motherhood': nurturing and caring for her citizens in exchange for a similar reciprocity. In times of crisis such as war or an uprising such symbiotic relationships are especially highlighted: the heroism required of her male citizens foregrounded against the sacrifices of her female citizens. In addition, the female citizen is often perceived to embody the Motherland (they are both nurturant yet vulnerable); her rape or capture symbolizes the very desecration of the community/nation/land.

(De Alwis 1998, p. 254)

According to this equation, while the male body as protector, is duty-bound to defend the motherland; the woman-as-mother must order her sons to battle and not mourn their death/martyrdom if such be the case. This deification of motherhood at the national level however, much like the mother goddesses of the Indian pantheon did little to alter the lives of real women as the text by Sanmarga shows. Moreover, since this so-called power was exercised within the confines of and in the service of a nationalism which very clearly is patriarchal it didn't do much to improve the gender equilibrium either within society as a whole, or individual households. It was only in the absence of the male head, which is not an uncommon occurrence for a conflict zone that women were in-charge of their household economies. In most cases, this ascendancy in the power hierarchy was not a matter of choice but an enforced reality.

This trope of valorised motherhood is predominant in discourse propagated by Tamil-Tigers as well and actually shows the cultural similarities between the two warring ethnicities despite their avowal of difference. The only difference is that with the Tigers women needed to serve as armed combatants and suicide bombers as well. Explaining the popular acceptance of this new phenomenon whereby the death of a loved one, on the battlefield is equated or elevated to the gifting of one's life for the motherland, Cheran, in his book entitled *The Sixth Genre: Memory, History and the Tamil Diaspora* links it to an ancient Tamil practice called *Maanam* and explains it thus:

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Another concept that receives wider articulation in the Dravidian-Chola-Tiger discourse is the concept of Maanam. The concept of Maanam, coupled with pride and valour constitutes a self-image of Tamils as proud and valiant people who would not tolerate any infringement of their honour and who would, if need be, redeem it by courting death. In the current dominant Tamil nationalist discourse, the Tigers are treated not only as a symbol of pride and honour but as the warriors, who reclaimed these qualities for the Tamil “race”. It is not surprising then, that the motto of the Muzhakkum is pulikalum innaal illaiyel elikathan thinnam thamarai (if it were not for the Tigers the rats would have devoured the Tamils). (p. 21)

Clearly, when communities take to arms, discourse must comply. Discursive construction is thus geared towards the deification of the sacrifice of self and body in the service of the nation/community. This sentiment rendered acceptable the idea of the armed virgin and legitimised, as far as Tamil society was concerned, the formation of the Women’s Wing of the LTTE - the Illavar - which translates as “birds of freedom”. This title appears ironic in view of the fact that while the women’s cadre endured training in armed combat similar to that undertaken by men, it was the women who were entrusted with suicide missions which they carried out successfully. Also, while in the subcontinent images of the Goddesses Durga and Kali in their avatars as fierce warriors, riding lions, wielding weapons and vanquishing demons are iconic; “real” women in combatant roles, as the Illavar typifies, are far from being commonplace occurrence.<sup>14</sup> So while the patriarchal discursivity of this new role cannot be denied, on no count does it render women into passive agents of patriarchy.

The following poem *She, the Woman of Tamililam*, issued by the cultural unit of the Tigers has been attributed to Captain Vanati, martyred at age twenty-seven in the battle of Elephant Pass on 11/07/91. While it shows what it meant for women on the peninsula to don battle fatigues, it was also intended to serve the cause of female enlistment.<sup>15</sup> The women cadres of Illavar, as the poem illustrates, were held up as models to be emulated by all Tamil women;

*She, the Woman of Tamililam*

Her forehead shall be adorned not with kumkum but with red blood  
All that is seen in her eyes is not the sweetness of youth (but) the tombs  
of the dead

Her lips shall utter not useless sentences but firm declarations of those  
Who have fallen down  
On her neck will lay no tali, but a Cyanide capsule!  
She has embraced not men but weapons!  
Her legs are going and searching,  
Not for searching a relationship with relatives  
But looking towards the liberation of  
the soil of Tamililam

Her gun will fire shots  
No failure will cause the enemy to fall  
It will break the fetters of Tamiilam!!  
Then from our people's lips a national anthem will tone up!!

(De Mel 2001, p.207)

On the surface of it the above text reads like and is a repudiation of feminine stereotypes of respectable domesticity as deemed ideal for women during the course of their natural lives. In the above text, the familial love and nurture of the homestead is supplanted by violence and the possibility of death which in this instance is the nobler – martyrdom for “then from our people's lips a national anthem will tone up” (ibid). While sacrifice finds no literal mention in the sentiments of honour and warrior-glory being extolled in the above quoted text but is the vital thread connecting the old and new roles for women. What is being repudiated in the process is what earlier was extolled as the softness of the female body and temperament, the tenderness of female hearts, the nurturing body of the mother and so forth. This new avatar of femininity also demanded a new dress code. Cadres of the women's brigade dressed, at all times, in belted trousers, loose shirts, rifle holsters and a gun slung over the shoulder. This was a complete change from the earlier strictures put in place by the LTTE demanding Tamil women in Jaffna wear the sari and not ride bicycles (De Mel, 2001).

The lines attributed to the martyred Captain Vanati moreover were issued by the cultural unit of the Tigers thereby rendering authorship into a collective expression rather than an individual and subjective one. Captain Vanathi's delineation of the woman fighter is intended to accommodate the widest possible denominator of LTTE female cadre,

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martyred or otherwise. Their bodies, as the propensity of women chosen to perform the act of suicide-bombing shows, were as much property of the LTTE as the body of the reproductive woman is for her husband/community/nation.<sup>16</sup> Feminists such as Francine D'Amico have raised this question as the article entitled *Feminist Perspectives on Woman Warriors* shows:

. . . . the woman warrior image subjects women to greater manipulation by those controlling military institutions, thus allowing women to be militarized but not empowered. . . . women's militarization provides no substantive 'feminization' of the military as a social institution. Military institutions and their needs (not women's needs) determine women's role in the armed forces. Women's military participation reinforces rather than undermines the gender structures of the military and the broader society.

(D'Amico, p.120)

Women as LTTE fighters then was not much of a repudiation of ossified gender norms. Since this role too, implied a storming of the male bastion even if it appeared glamorous on the surface, it was still couched in entrenched notions of sacrificial womanhood and loyal womanhood which were effectively deployed by the LTTE to replenish the ranks of fast-depleting male cadre. What the women of the Illavar did blow asunder were notions of tenderness and physical vulnerability essentially associated with the 'weaker' sex. Patriarchy however relies on deeper roots and through discourse, as this article has shown, entrenches itself in psychic spaces. In the final instance then, if patriarchy is to be summed up as control of women and their bodies, this authority was not relinquished by the male command of the LTTE. The soldiers whether man or woman, whether Sinhala or Tamil needed to be equally saturated in the colours of nationalism, the abstractions of which readily lend themselves for much heroic poetry, beginning with the Queen Vihara Maha Devi onwards. In this scenario, true resistance is demonstrated by Sanmarga as the mother who speaks in a voice of her own and in a voice that does not take recourse to nationalist sentiments but draws on the peculiarities of her position of having to live on the Jaffna peninsula and being caught in a violent cross-fire, not of her choosing or making.

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## Endnotes

1. Malati De Alwis and Kumari Jayawardene, 1996.
2. See Neloufer de Mel 2001,57;102; Neluka Silva 2004,97; 137.
3. In this regard, the murder/death of Ranjini Thirangama, a lecturer at Jaffna University and a strident voice speaking out against state and LTTE oppression, is a case in point.
4. Cheran, R, 2001, p. 21.
5. The location of the conference is significant in this regard as it explains the need of the speaker to highlight aspects of Tamil womanhood to a western audience.
6. The initiative of the Mother’s Front was begun by the poet and activist Richard de Zoyza’s mother following his disappearance. Protesting mothers on the Jaffna peninsula demanded to know the whereabouts of their children, taken into police custody for questions and having disappeared ever since.
7. Raka Ray in her study on women-centric protest movements has shown how these often take shape from local problems and are thus heavily influenced by local cultures and traditions. The ‘Mother’s Front’ in Sri Lanka was similar in this aspect being born out of a crisis of state. Moreover, when R. Premadasa met his end at the hands of a suicide bomber, the perception that folk-justice had taken recourse was a strongly prevalent sentiment. (Ray 1999; De Mel 2001)
8. Sanmarga’s poems first began to appear in a magazine called ‘Sollatha Seithigal’ around 1986. The war in Jaffna between the separatists and the GoSL had rapidly escalated during this time. Her poetry articulates a sharp socio-political criticism.
9. A ‘deserter’ refers to a soldier absconding from duty. However, the situation then calls for the military procedure of a court-martial, wherein the soldier will be tried under the military court and law.
10. The LTTE had a reputation for torture and cruelty in order to extract fear and therefore obedience from the cadres and civilian population. Refer to Narain Swamy for details.

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11. The deified status of Queen Vihara Mahadevi, in Sinhala folklore, accrues from her position as king Duttugemunu's mother.
  12. This is particularly the case with labour intensive, agriculture economies of Asia and Africa. Refer to Jyotsana Agnihotri Gupta elaborates in *New Freedoms, New Dependencies*.
  13. The title is also an ironic reference to the line-of-argument resorted to by the state whereby the members of the Mother's Front were upbraided by the state-representatives as "bad mother's" who had failed in their duty towards their family and towards the state and brought up children who were wayward and criminal.
  14. For more information on the women's wing of the LTTE, refer to Adele Balasingham's *Women Fighters of Tamil Eelam*
  15. The First Battle of Elephant Pass (1991): in this epic battle the LTTE cadre engaged with the Sri Lankan armed forces for control of the military base of Elephant Pass – a narrow strait of land connecting Wannu with the rest of the peninsula.
  16. For more on the female cadres of the LTTE, see Balasingham, 1993.

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