CONTEMPORARY SRI LANKA: GENDER AND FEMINISM, POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND WAR, GRIEF AND MEMORY.

HER SMILE LINGERS

MALATHI DE ALWIS SELECTED ESSAYS

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Malathi de Alwis (6 Oct 1963-21 Jan 2021), was a leading Sri Lankan feminist anthropologist. She earned her Ph.D. in socio-cultural anthropology from the University of Chicago in 1998, where she was a founding member of the Women Against War Coalition. She was the recipient of at least two prizes for Best Essays in Gender Studies: the Ruth Murray Memorial Prize (1995) and Silvia Foreman Prize (1996) awarded by the University of Chicago and American Association of Anthropology, respectively. After returning to Sri Lanka, she then joined ICES as a Senior Fellow while simultaneously holding a visiting professorship at The New School, New York, U.S.A (1999-2004). From 2004, Malathi worked with the International Centre for Ethnic Studies and the Social Scientists' Association, and was a visiting professorial fellow at a number of universities around the world. At the time of her death, she was working as an independent research scholar, while teaching in the MA Program in Women's Studies at the University of Colombo. She has written about militarism, nationalism, feminism, memory, and mourning; and written collaboratively with a number of scholars, including Pradeep Jeganathan, Kumari Jayawardena, and Jennifer Hyndman.

Contents

Acknowledgements

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1) Reading the 'Body' in Rumours of Death. *Pravada* Vol 3 (6). August 1994 (with Pradeep Jeganathan).

2) In the Field of Vision: The Discursive Clothing of the Sigiriya Frescoes. In *Embodied Violence: Communalising Women's Sexuality in South Asia*, edited by Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis (eds). Delhi: Kali for Women and London and New Jersey: Zed Press, 1996.

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Foreword

Once in a generation there comes a scholar who understands her country and its people with such a profound sensitivity that her work becomes emblematic. Malathi de Alwis is one such scholar. Her work reflects a deep understanding of three decades of Sri Lanka's most turbulent history. She is always at the empirical and conceptual battlefront, recording, analysing and reassessing not only the revealed realities but also our modes of analysis and reasoning. Her work is rich with anthropological detail, capturing suffering within the tapestry of human relations that weaves around the daily lives of people living at the borders. This understanding is informed by frameworks of analysis that are cutting edge and deeply philosophical while maintaining a moral anchor in the pursuit of social justice.

At the most fundamental level, Malathi is a chronicler of events. She is present in historical time at all the events that posed fundamental challenges in a post-colonial context, especially for women. Reading her work is to see the trajectory of women's issues in Sri Lanka. From an original reading of the historical approaches to the Sigiriya frescoes to analysis of life in a refugee camp she reflects an in depth and deeply nuanced view of the many issues that women have faced and continue to face. Her representations of women in politics are also pioneering efforts that are empirical and detailed. Often partnering with Kumari Jayawardena, Malathi's work is comprehensive and deeply satisfying for anyone searching for the truth.

Beyond being a chronicler Malathi's work is brilliant and incisive because of the conceptual analysis she brings to her studies. She is at ease with the greatest thinkers of the world and her work is deeply influenced by progressive critical scholars, especially post structural and post modernists approaches though her facts sometimes take her beyond the limitation of the frame. She was very aware of the scholarship around the world that is relevant to her research. Her network of scholars and friends was extensive as was seen in the collective mourning that took place after her death. She was constantly in discussion about ideas, methods and ways of research only taking a break for her passion for wildlife. She lived and breathed scholarship and her sensitivity to social justice gave it an edge that made it relevant for anyone who believed in social change.

In the spirit of the intellectual tradition that encouraged her, Malathi was also an interrogator and a disrupter. In her work on the Sigiriya frescoes she interrogated the role of sexuality in our national heritage. Embedded and working with the Mother's Front in the 1980s, she disrupted motherhood as constantly reproduced in culture seeing it as also a site for protest and defiance. After the Tsunami in 2004 she explores the complexity and gender norms associated with masculinity and mourning in eastern Sri Lanka and the strictures of gender constructs in how we deal with grief. She became very involved in working with internally displaced people, her work constantly interrogating the IDP paradigm and the practices of humanitarian service.

Malathi's disruption and interrogation had an aim and a purpose. In some ways her work is deeply political- not in the sense of servicing any political party, but in understanding the power structures that lie behind a reality. Her disruptions and interrogations were to reveal the coercive power of certain social norms and ideas in maintaining and controlling the way we represent the world. Her hope was that in unsettling these norms and ideas we will free ourselves and society to work toward a more equitable social order. The chapters contained in this book capture this lens through which she saw the world; a lens that would enlighten many who were fortunate enough to make her acquaintance.

Malathi loved knowledge but she knew it was conditioned and immersed in power relations. Her aim was to liberate us from the shackles that constrain our minds so that we can move forward with the understanding that the "real" is also performative. And therein lies the hope. Beyond the realism and the determinism of some of her intellectual mentors, Malathi always believed transformation was possible and she worked tirelessly to make it happen. She believed that intellectuals themselves cannot be detached or separated from history. To refuse to act in the world would be to be complicit. Never ostentatious, always connected to nature and rarely foregrounding herself, Malathi's memory will remind us that the best of our intellectuals have always been defined by the rigour of their scholarship and the deep sensitivity of their understanding.

Radhika Coomaraswamy
Colombo, Sri Lanka

Introduction

This book brings together a collection of essays by our friend, mentor and colleague Malathi de Alwis, whose death at the age of 58 has left us bereft. Malathi was a truly brilliant scholar of Sri Lanka. A pioneering feminist anthropologist, she was also a cultural critic, teacher, naturalist, and activist. However, in her essence, she transcended all of this. Malathi was a 'consciousness' that worked delicately, but with absolute force, to look at and explain how a nation's history is marked by turbulence and atrocity, injustice and suffering, and resistance.

Malathi de Alwis's scholarly work interrogated issues that are central to contemporary Sri Lanka: gender and feminism, political violence and war, grief and memory. The essays we include here address these themes. They showcase Malathi's adeptness at fusing sophisticated theory with granular details of lived experience. This rare skill reflected who Malathi really was. She was a highly trained anthropologist, who received her PhD from the University of Chicago and taught at universities in the US, Europe and South Asia. And she was also passionately devoted to understanding Sri Lanka, and the communities she worked among and researched. Mala, as we called her, was always observing, listening, participating- on the streets of Colombo, on the porch of a house on the east coast, in a temple where a ritual was being performed.

The reader of the essays in this book will encounter a tireless, pulsing mind. Malathi was always questioning narratives, even her own. Several essays here deal with feminism and women's movements in Sri Lanka - which Malathi shows as contoured by nationalism, brutal political violence and civil war. Motherhood was often her focus. Her work on the Mothers Front that was formed in southern Sri Lanka in the 1990s by women whose children had been disappeared by the state is pathbreaking - both in its theorising of the politics of motherhood, and in its nuanced portrayal of responses to these women's grief. She reveals why even a repressive state could not dismiss or shut down the organised protest of mothers – motherhood after all was accepted as the most noble of states. Yet her study of the spectacular 'rituals of cursing' these mothers publicly engaged in – cursing the President, calling for his 'head to be splintered into a hundred of bits' – shows how they did not fit into any easy idealised notions of the 'feminine'. And despite her own deep empathy with these grieving women, Malathi also drew attention to limitations of their political movement – especially its failure to reach beyond

the ethnic divide and recognise the common suffering of mothers and wives in the north and the east.

Malathi's scholarship on female sexuality and the constructed notion of a 'good woman' ranged far and wide. Several chapters in this volume reflect this. A pioneering essay on the renowned 6th century frescoes of bare-breasted women at Sigiriya shows how these sensual drawings were desexualised by puritanical Sri Lankan nationalism and made to fit into notions of female respectability. Sex could not be accepted as part of the nation's heritage - it was vociferously denied, in fact.

Relatedly, in her essay on notions of 'purity' among communities displaced by war in Eastern Sri Lanka, Malathi shows how refugee women were often judged as 'morally loose' – partly because displacement had forced them into paid work, activities that were unsupervised by their men. And she links this to a wider context- the refugee communities' despair and longing for the homes they lost, which they understandably refer to, and idealise as, places of 'purity.' The onus of maintaining a semblance of 'purity' in the refugee camps then seems to fall on women. As Malathi notes,"the refugee woman is produced as a cipher for all that has been (temporarily) lost as well as what must be preserved for the future; her community's purity of displacement is imbricated in her moral purity".

Malathi de Alwis's writing had an extraordinary way of mixing the emotional with the intellectual. We see this in her work on memory and memorialisation. After the 2004 tsunami, Malathi conducted years of field work among bereaved men on the Southern and Eastern coasts of Sri Lanka – especially pertinent as the tsunami killed three times more women than men. In her essay included here on mourning and masculinity she writes of shattering loss and of coping strategies used by men. A man whose daughter had been killed cherishes the imprint of her foot on the floor of their home – a mark she'd made as a toddler, accidently stepping on wet cement. Malathi tells of grieving men who can only find solace in building public memorials to their families. And she reveals, quite astonishingly, that bereaved men received little attention from various non-governmental agencies who were providers of psychological support services. These interventions were seen as relevant only for women and children due to assumptions about their social and domestic vulnerability. Men, on the other hand, were often stereotyped as 'alcoholics and wife-beaters' and offered help for addictions, rather than for acute grief.

Malathi de Alwis's writings always had the power to surprise, and she did this with great integrity and care. She would offer us a new idea; she would turn an accepted narrative on its head – but her thinking was always rooted in attentive field research or in the close scrutiny of texts. Malathi refused lazy rhetoric, for her it was only the truth that would endure. She was the scholar you could trust.

We are privileged to present these selected essays by Malathi de Alwis curated as a single volume, which were picked by Malathi herself shortly before her death, for translation of her writings into Sinhala. As editors, working across continents and time zones, we are aware of the limitations in the volume; and yet, we feel reassured that the twelve articles included here were picked by Malathi herself for justifiable reasons, which we leave with readers to reflect on.

How lucky we are to have had Mala – taking on the big concerns of our time, examining them with love and care. She concludes her essay on the Sigiriya frescoes by conjuring the uncontainable power of these painted women -their "smile lingers', as she says. We hope the reader of these essays will see- as we do- that Mala's vast humanity and Mala's irrepressible smile, lingers.

Sonali, Caryll, Chulani, Kanchana and Vraie

CHAPTER ONE

Talking about the body in rumours of death[1]

Malathi de Alwis and Pradeep Jeganathan
(University of Chicago/International Centre for Ethic Studies)

Introduction

Social analysis, and politics, we want to suggest, are intimately linked. We cannot speak or write of a particular place and time, without being enmeshed in a politics of power. Sri Lankan anthropologists have long realized this; the best of them, to paraphrase Jonathan Spencer, write from within (Spencer 1990). Novices though we are, we too write from within. We speak about contemporary Sri Lanka, where torture and violent killings have become part of the 'everyday'. The rise of violent anti-regime movements on the one hand, and the intensification of state repression on the other hand, has dulled the shock stories of death, torture and repression might have invoked at a different time. Stories about violent death are common in contemporary Sri Lanka, among men and women of different class and ethnic groups.

We present here, notes from a state of terror; Colombo, in the latter half of 1989. We speak of the stories the terrorized tell from within, and yet also against terror that surrounds them. Even as the terrorized speak about terror, however, they reproduce and foreground oppressive socio-cultural structures; in the case at hand, an oppressive construction of gender is central. Our material here is from Sinhala and English-speaking residents of Colombo, both women and men, of the intermediate and capitalist classes; industrialists, professionals, middle level government employees, teachers, and intellectuals. They were both volunteered to and prompted by us during the summer and early fall of 1989, when we were living in Colombo. It was a difficult time for all of us, a time of uncertainty and doubt, as

1 This brief essay was written during those terror-ridden days of August and September 1989. It was subsequently presented at the 20th Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison, Wisconsin in November 1991 and at the Gender Studies Workshop, University of Delhi in September 1993. We gratefully acknowledge all the comments we received from those who participated in the lively discussion that succeeded the presentations. We are especially grateful to Radhika Coomaraswamy who first suggested that we write on this topic.

we flitted between the chaotic and the ordered, despair and hope, expecting to find the next day, week or month that life as we knew it would be no more.

Michael Taussig (1987) in *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man* puts it far more eloquently, and insightfully than we can:

> All societies live by fictions taken as real. What distinguishes cultures of terror is that the epistemological, ontological, and otherwise philosophical problems of representation-reality and illusion, certainty and doubt—becomes infinitely more than a 'merely' philosophical problem of epistemology, hermeneutics, and deconstruction. It becomes a high-powered medium of domination . . . thrust into consciousness as the space of death (1987:121).

We will let these insights guide us through the 'spaces of death' in the state of terror in contemporary Colombo. The stories people told each other and us about the violent death of others, we suggest, was a desperate response to the chaos of terror; they were last ditch attempts to speak against an unspoken knowledge of confusion and helplessness. They were attempts to fix the shifting fictions of reality, to speak of knowing and through knowing to asset authoritative control.

Stories about the violent death of others are about empirical knowledge and authenticity. Always framed by an authoritative account that produces the credibility of the story, they continue about details of what happened and why, when and where. Centrally, such stories are about the body: the corpse. Intersecting as it does with modern forensic practices, autopsies, post mortems and dissections, the 'reading' of the corpse can be the final arbiter in an effort to stabilize the space of death (cf. Foucault 1973).

These detailed rumours of death are also meshed together with Explanations, with a capital E, of the violent death. Such explanations produce 'moments' of insight into the larger socio-cultural structure that constitute and is constituted by them. These explanations have at their core basic views about the nature of society and its inhabitants held by those very inhabitants.

In the summer of 1989, faced with around 35 violent deaths a day, upper-middle class groups in Colombo, told stories about the deaths of only the prominent and well known; the vast majority of those who died – unemployed youths from rural

and semi-urban areas, the children of the lower segments of the intermediate classes, and middle and poor peasants – entered their consciousness only as statistics. Visual familiarity pushed television personalities in the group of the prominent and well known. In this short essay we will attempt to examine popular constructions of two such deaths: the killing of (1) Premakirthi de Alwis on June 31st 1989 and of (2) Sagarika Gomes on 15th August 1989, in the suburbs of Colombo.

Let us be clear, at the outset, that this investigation is not an attempt to excavate and privilege a 'True', 'Really Real' version of 'what happened and why'.[2] Instead of taking a positivistic position, we find it more insightful in the face of the multiplicity of available socio-cultural constructions of the 'event', to take a different stance: We suggest that these multiple narratives are best understood as interpretative accounts that are, in turn, locatable in a larger socio-cultural structure. In this particular instance, we find that the 'gendered body' of the 'victim' is the central signifier that structures these multiple interpretative accounts.

Note also that our concern with these 'rumours of death' is not reducible to the specificity of the two cases under study. Rather, this essay is also an attempt, as part of a large feminist project, to refine our own understanding of the interlocking theoretical categories of 'sexuality' and 'the body' that could be used to examine and critique the construction of gender in human society.

In our presentation of these 'interpretative accounts' we introduce a typology that is suggested by the structure of the accounts themselves: 1) A background description that presents 'well known' information about the persons killed; 2) "Reasons" for the killing; and 3) Specific details that surround the 'event' of death itself. Within this typology, we also make two other analytic divisions: First, between dominant and minor accounts; second, between immediate and later accounts of the 'event'. We begin with a few social facts. Both de Alwis and Gomes were minor TV personalities with de Alwis being the better known of the two. Gomes' career, as a singer, however, extended beyond television. A tabulation of informant accounts is presented below.

2 The 'interpretative' that follow have been gleaned from, formal conversations, and newspaper reports, 'read' in and around Colombo, in the months immediately after the 'events'. They represent, we suggest, a near totality of the major, 'true' versions of the 'events' available at the time.

Biographical Details:

De Alwis (42 yrs, married)
Dominant accounts
1. (a) Womanizer: Married twice, continues to have extra marital affairs
2. On state TV: Live lottery show; Sunday Breakfast show

Minor account
3. Well-read, Knowledgeable

Gomes (27 yrs, unmarried)
Dominant accounts
1. (a) Flirt; four boyfriends, 'very friendly'
   (b) 'beautiful'
2. On state TV/entertainer: featured singer on entertainment programmes on and off TV

Minor account
3. Independent, assertive woman.

Turning to the table above, it is clear that both de Alwis, and Gomes were characterized sexually: they are said to have had multiple sexual partners. However, in the case of Gomes, we discern a difference at the outset: her sexuality is inscribed on the 'body' in a way that de Alwis' is not. Gomes is seen as a (sexually) 'beautiful girl'. Note that there are no references to de Alwis as handsome, only as well read and knowledgeable, which we suggest is a 'preferred' sexual attribute in a man. In the context of violent anti-regime movements, the links of both entertainers to state institutions were also highlighted by many informants.

Next, we turn to 'reasons', A 'rumour of death' is often constructed as a narrative. As such, casual links between sections become crucial. Tabulated below are 'reasonable explanations' for the killings:

Explanations/Reasons:

De Alwis

Immediate/Dominant

1. (i) Anti-militant comments at the funeral of a victim of militant violence
   (ii) Scornful dismissal of militant 'hartal' letter

Later/Minor

2. (i) Revengeful husband of mistress
   (ii)Wife jealous of mistress

Gomes

Immediate/Minor

1. (i) Pro-govt-singer
   (ii) Newscaster when regular readers were under militant threats

Later/Dominant

2. (i) STF man jealous of Army boyfriend
   (ii) Army man jealous of other boyfriends
   (iii) Spurned small businessman
   (iv) Spurned hotelier speaks to the militants to dispense 'justice'
   (v) Politician boyfriend's wife commissions killing
   (vi) Militant killing as punishment for sexual liaison with the President.

The immediate rumours surrounding the killings were overtly political. They stressed the 1) links that Gomes and de Alwis had to the regime/state, 2) their explicit anti-militant positions, and then argued that the killings were the work of anti-regime militants. Interestingly however, later accounts mark a major shift in the case of Gomes. A set of sexual reasons for the killing become predominant. As one can see from the large number of different accounts of this nature that are available, these accounts were widespread. Note also that many of these later accounts have a political tinge while maintaining and underlining a sexual motive for the killing, In the case of de Alwis, on the other hand, the distinction between political and sexual accounts is sharp, with accounts stressing a sexual motive for the killing being quite rare (the account in the table comes from a single source). This is, indeed remarkable when one notes that many versions of de Alwis' (extra-marital) sexual relationships were a dominant narrative in his biography.

The construction of the *specifics* of the killing(s) forms the core of a 'rumour of death'. Informants are at pains to causally link a given 'background', and 'reasons' with the reconstruction of the events immediately prior to the killing (abduction) and the killing itself.

Event

De Alwis:

1. Abduction
   Friendliness towards abductors; "Laughed & joked with them". Left voluntarily. Intended to return. Wife had made coffee & was awaiting their return.
2. Killing
   Shot

Gomes:

1. Abduction
   Friendliness towards abductors. "Laughed & joked with them". Left voluntarily. Recognized abductors. Tied to 'boyfriend' story
   Contradiction between statements and actions: "Don't worry I'll be back" vs. Took off jewellery; worshipped parents (suggests premonition of death).

2. Killing
   Shot and stabbed
   Non-sexual torture
   Sexual violence:
   *nudity
   *rape
   *gang rape
   *Rape with foreign object

Once again, but very sharply now we see differences between the cases of de Alwis and Gomes. Two major factors emerge in the case of Gomes, which are absent from all accounts of the 'event' of de Alwis' killing. 1) A dominant version of the 'event' sees it as an outgrowth of Gomes' sexuality; and 2) Both sexual and non-sexual

versions are being inscribed on her body; the inscriptions of the sexual versions being most detailed.[3]

Let us now proceed with a contextualized 'reading' of these accounts. Both Gomes and de Alwis were TV personalities and public entertainers, visual and discursive commodities, available for public consumption. Therefore:

1. It would seem that informants expected, and argued that their sexual practice would be morally 'loose'. Interestingly, the intensity of the 'loose sexuality' is not different in the two cases"; it is difficult to mark a difference between Gomes and de Alwis here.

2. Their (serious) speech acts are heard. We suggest that these speech acts contain a coded sexual kernel that maybe decoded by the patriarchal ear of informants even though it does not emerge explicitly in their accounts:

*de Alwis' TV appearances were structured so that he, 'knowledgeable and well read' man impressed, and then flirted with a coy female partner.
*Gomes singing voice had, we suggest erotic value, especially when rendering 'love' songs.

3. Most importantly their bodies intersect a public gaze. We suggest that this gaze is a patriarchal[4] one that produces and assigns differential 'sexual and erotic' value to signifiers in a visual field. The operation of this gaze upon each particular agent produces wheat we have named, for brevity, 'the gendered body'. It is clear, here, that Gomes' body carried a much higher 'sexual' value than that of Alwis.

While we do note a difference of intensity from our informant accounts in the sexualization inherent in (1) and (2), we also note that this sexualization is gendered. In the dominant cultural logic operating here, Gomes is constructed as a 'beautiful'

3 Unrepentant positivists should note that sexual violence is denied in the inquest proceedings and the Assistant Judicial Officers' report. Informants, in general, however, argued that the AJMO was quite wrong or had been bribed to hide the 'truth'. Note that it is widely believed that anti-regime militants do not practice rape, or sexual torture. This binary increases the importance of the nature of the violence done to the body of the victim by the killer(s) in the accounts of the informants.

4 While we acknowledge that both men and women are participants in this 'gaze', we suggest that it is patriarchal because it operates within a patriarchal power structure that is hegemonic.

and 'promiscuous' woman given her status as an audio and visual commodity. There is an unstable duality inherent in the image of the 'promiscuous beauty': she is, simultaneously, alluring but dangerous and duplicitous, a source of pleasure, but also of destruction and evil. The construction of a man, like de Alwis, even though it is sexual, is not unstable in this way. Furthermore, and most importantly, we must note the difference in the constructions of the gendered body here. The central point seems to be that while both de Alwis and Gomes were seen to exist in a sexualized space, Gomes' body was central in that space, while de Alwis' was not.

Given the uncertainty surrounding the space of death in both cases, the dead body becomes a central ground where the accounts of the death can be fixed. Even though a reading of de Alwis' body was not explicated in the accounts we heard, we suggest that it nevertheless remained important negatively. That is, in the case of de Alwis, it can be suggested that the importance of the body after death, and the low sexual value placed on it 'overdetermined' de Alwis' highly sexualized biography producing remarkably few sexual motives and reasons for his death.

Gomes' body, however, emerges as the major signifier of her death. Note that there are two 'moments' in the production of this body; First, as 'beautiful', and second as a mutilated corpse. The first, described in point 3, above, takes a visual construction, from TV for example, as its input. The second 'moment' of production is described in section 2 (killing) of the tabulation of the EVENT, above. In this case a discursive construction was primary: pictures of the dead body were not available for mass consumption. However, the two 'moments' were (nearly) always juxtaposed for differential signification: a still picture, or video tape of Gomes accompanied the gruesome reporting of violence upon her body in the media, or the remark 'she was a beautiful girl' would begin or end a verbal informant account.

This juxtaposition, we suggest, is an explicit the amplification of the unstable duality inherent in the construction of female sexuality we spoke of earlier. The two poles of the construction are explicated in the different images of the body that are now linked by narratives: the stories of death. These narratives expand upon the duality of the 'promiscuous beauty' and 'evil distractor' dichotomy 'explaining' the 'ease' with which Gomes could proceed from one pole to the other. As Gananath Obeyesekere, Laleen Jayamanne and Mala de Alwis have noted in their own work, from diverse theoretical orientations that draw upon ethnographic examples from the Sri Lankan social field, the very construction of 'promiscuity' sanctions the mapping of violence and especially explicit sexual violence, upon the body of the

woman (de Alwis 1989; Jayamanne 1989; Obseysekera 1963). Our analysis of the case at hand, we suggest, is supported by, and speaks to such previous claims.

The capitalist, and intermediate classes of Colombo, we conclude, have not risen to their finest hour. Instead of joining together with the small group of courageous activists who struggle tirelessly for peace against the tide of violence, these privileged social groups seek to re-normalize the chaotic terror that surrounds them by reconstituting "high powered medium(s) of domination" which are then thrust into the "space of death".

And what about us, the anthropologists, who speak authoritatively about knowing and through knowing, assert control? The story of Sagarika's death had to be repeated, in detail, for our analysis to proceed. Thus, we too are trapped in the politics of power. Are we to wring our hands in despair? If, our analysis was to be "objective" that might be our only course of action. However, to write from within is not to be objective: we write to make a stand. It is not the telling of the story that matters but how it is told. We too, like all those we spoke to in Colombo, speak of terror. Yet, we have tried to read against the grain of that narrative and to speak in a different voice. And if in that voice of terror and space of death, you have also heard a cry for a just peace, then only can there be some worth to this essay.

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CHAPTER TWO

Sexuality in the Field of Vision
The discursive clothing of the Sigiriya frescoes

Malathi de Alwis

As a woman I'll gladly
Sing for these women
Who are unable to speak

You bulls come to Sigiri
and toss off little lovesongs
making a big hullabaloo

Not one has given us
a hear-warming sip
Of rum and molasses.

Maybe none of you thought
We women could have lives
Of our own to get through

— Richard Murphy, *The* Mirror Wall[1]

Positioning

I have deliberately appropriated the title of Jacqueline Rose's (1986) book *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* because I find that it has important resonances with what I write. Though I will not be discussing her use of psychoanalytic theories, I am very sympathetic to her attempts to pose the question of women's sexuality as a starting point of her work—especially in her examination of its intransigent and fragile representations in cultural life.

1 Richard Murphy's (1989) book of poems was based on the 685 verses that were written by visitors to Sigiriya between the eighth and twelfth centuries, on a plastered, highly finished and glazed wall at Sigiriya (named the "mirror wall" by early archaeologists). These verses were systematically copied and translated by Senarat Paranavitana (1956) and are included in his two-volume tome. The poem quoted is based on a verse that was believed to have been written by a woman visitor to Sigiriya.

In this paper, I hope to explore the articulation of certain notions of female sexuality with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. My focus will be on a series of visual representations of women at a Sri Lankan archaeological site/sight — Sigiriya.[2] While Sigiriya is of crucial importance for the nationalist project in Sri Lanka today, its contemporary form and content, I would argue, can be best understood by reading it as a colonial production, subsequently appropriated and contested by nationalists. It is this contestation and simultaneous narrativization of the nation by nationalist scholars which will be my central concern here. The process of nationalisation and narrativization, though authoritative and forceful, was not without its contradictions and complexities. The Sigiriya paintings exemplify one such site/sight of ambiguity and tension - a battleground upon which notions of sexuality, morality, purity and race, sparred and parried.

Sigiriya: Historical and archaeological site/sight

The Sigiriya paintings are also a sight/site within a larger archaeological site, which I will call the Sigiriya complex. I will first briefly contextualise these representations within this larger grouping.

The Sigiriya complex gets its name from an independent rock formation that rises up about 600 ft, from the coastal peneplain in the Central Province of Sri Lanka. The etymology of the word 'Sigiriya' locates it as a compound of the two words — 'Sinha' (lion) and 'giri' (rock) (Deraniyagala 1955: 369). Encroached on by the "demolishing hand of time" and the "slowly advancing jungle" Sigiriya is suddenly 'revealed' within an authoritative and historical discourse to a Ceylonese public in 1831 (De Silva 1971: 3).[3] The revelation here is that Sigiriya is no longer merely an interesting geographical and geological formation with a few 'ruins' scattered upon its surface, but that it has a history — an extremely romantic and dramatic one at that. The honour of making this momentous 'revelation' goes to Major Jonathan Forbes of the 78th Highlanders.

This 'history' of Sigiriya is located in a fifth century Pali Chronicle called the *Mahavamsa*. George Turnour, a British Orientalist and civil servant in Ceylon, who first discovered this text and translated it into English in the early nineteenth

2 I use 'field' in the double sense of an archaeological locus or site as well as a focus of vision or sight.

3 Though I use the more nationalist, 'Sri Lanka', I will resort to the colonial *'Ceylon'* whenever I refer to the time periods in which it was used —the 19th and early 20th centuries.

century, claimed that it contained a chronological, continuous and 'authentic' history of Ceylon extending from 500 BC.[4] The 'discovery' of various 'ruins' upon the Ceylonese landscape from now on became identified with specific historical moments mentioned in the text while simultaneously serving as crucial markers of the 'authenticity' of this text and the 'history' it recounted (Jeganathan 1995).

This 'reciprocal' authentication was especially exemplified in the 'discovery' of ancient capitals, such as Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Sigiriya, which were described in the *Mahavam*sa. Major Forbes, who met George Turnour in 1827, was delighted to be informed that "notwithstanding the disparaging assertions of English writers on Ceylon, there were still extant continued native records of great antiquity", and even more to be told that "the sites of several of the ancient cities mentioned [in these records] were still unknown, or at least had *remained unnoticed by Europe*a*ns"* (Forbes 1841 4-5, emphasis mine).[5] This information inspired him "to acquire some knowledge of the Cingalese language, and to search for those vestiges of antiquity which could further verify the native chronicles."

Forbes' 'discovery' of Sigiriya thus enabled him to reveal a link in the 'glorious' past of Ceylon. His memoirs, *Eleven Years in Ceylon* published in 1841, for the first time places the descriptions of his 'finds' on the Sigiriya rock side by side with the newly found 'historical' narrative of Sigiriya. From now on the connection between the site on the ground and the citing in this 'ancient' text are consistently reiterated in all subsequent descriptions of visits to Sigiriya. For example, when British travellers, Mr and Mrs Gay, visit Sigiriya in 1912 they take along the *Mahavamsa* as their guide book: "After a long rest and a long good supper, we took our 'Mihavansa' [sic], and there under the brow of the great 'Lions Rock', read again the strange, fragmentary history of Kassapa and his crime" (Coker 1913: 269).

Let me now briefly outline a composite Sigiriya history culled from various dominant readings of the *Mahavamsa*, a history also provided in most school textbooks and travel guides.[6]

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4 For a brilliant location and deconstruction of this text, see Jonathan Walters (2000) and Pradeep Jeganathan (1995).

5 What constitutes "knowledge" here is European authentication, familiarity and appropriation (cf P. Jeganathan. op. cit).

6 Gananath Obeyesekere (1989) who did some research in the Sigiriya area has noted that there are several folk versions of this tale that provide different 'readings' of it. However, we cannot ignore the fact that they too are being recalled and 'read' in the present.

King Dhatusena (459-77AD), rules in the capital of Anuradhapura. He has two sons—the hot-headed Kassapa by a wife of unequal birth, and his favourite Moggallana, by the anointed queen and thus his rightful heir. Dhatusena also has a beautiful daughter whom he adores. She has been given in marriage to his sister's son, i.e., his nephew, Migara, who is now the Commander of Dhatusena's army. One day, Dhatusena notices his daughter's "vestments trickling with blood" and learns that Migara has brutally whipped her on her thighs "although she was blameless" (Forbes 1841: 4; de Silva 1971:2). Incensed, Dhatusena orders that Migara's mother, i.e. his sister, be stripped naked and burnt at the stake. Migara's entreaties prove fruitless and he vows to wreak vengeance on the king. Migara incites Kassapa, who has always resented the fact that he can never be king, to stage a coup d'état. While they manage to take the king prisoner and Kassapa ascends the throne, they are unable to kill Moggallana who escapes to India.

Still bent on revenge, Migara convinces Kassapa that Dhatusena has hidden his treasurers until Moggallana's return. Ordered to confess its whereabouts, Dhatusena walks into one of the irrigation tanks built by him and proclaims that this is his treasure. Furious, Kassapa orders his death. Migara gleefully complies by having Dhatusena stripped naked and plastered alive into a wall.

Kassapa, fearing the inevitable return of Moggallana, decides to seek refuge in the "inaccessible stronghold of Sihagiri" (Forbes 1841). At the summit of this rock, he builds a magnificent palace, which resembles Alakamanda—the abode of the god Kuvera. Hoping to atone for his fearful crime of patricide, he also patronises Buddhism and founds a monastery at Anuradhapura. In the eighteenth year of Kassapa's rule, Moggallana returns io Lanka with an army of South Indians. Confident of victory, Kassapa descends to the plains to battle with Moggallana. However, during the battle a stretch of marshy ground causes Kassapa to turn his elephant to take another course. His troops misconstrue this move as a sign of retreat and break up in disorder. Kassapa realises to his dismay that his capture is imminent and slits his own throat on the battlefield.

After Moggallana attends to Kassapa's obsequies, he returns to Anuradhapura and sets up his kingdom there. He hands Sigiriya to the priesthood and, from then on references to it more or leg disappear from the public record.

With the rediscovery of Sigiriya in 1831 and its re-inscription within a 'glorious' historical narrative, the Sigiriya complex became a popular site of exploration and adventure—a challenge to European masculinity. Journals, such as the ones published by the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch) and the *Monthly Literary Register*, contain innumerable articles that document the exploits of these various adventurers, travellers and colonial administrators alike, who 'discovered' ruined monuments and tanks upon the rock or actually accomplished the perilous ascent to the summit aided by the 'natives' who "went up (the rock) like cats" (Berthia and Nell 1993: 86).

The Sigiriya complex's transformation to that of an archaeological site occurred in 1895 when H.C.P. Bell, the first Commissioner of Archaeology in Ceylon, was commissioned by Sir Arthur Gordon, the Governor of Ceylon, "to carry to completion the survey of either Sigiriya or Yapahuwa" (Bell 1897:44). Bell selected Sigiriya as it was of "higher antiquity and directly greater interest" (*ibid*). He began by systematically clearing the jungle, surveying and mapping the rock and its environs and later moved on to excavate and restore the 'ruins'. During this time, strong iron stays were bored into the rock and a sturdy wire ladder leading up to the fresco chamber was constructed in order to make the paintings more accessible to visitors. Almost a century later, Bell's biographers note that his work at Sigiriya was "the most dramatic of the episodes of [his] career, both in the actual danger and difficulty of the undertaking and in the peculiar interest of some of the discoveries made in the course of the excavations" (Bell and Bell 1993: 83). Bell's name also first became known to a wider public through his reporting of his work at Sigiriya to the RAS(CB) and it was also during this time (1898) that he was elected an Honorary Member of the Society; "in more ways than one Sigiriya was the peak of his career" (*ibid*: 100).

The Sigiriya frescoes: (Re)production & (Re)presentation

Now, let me return to the Sigiriya paintings which are popularly identified as frescoes.[7] The best preserved are located in a horizontal pocket midway along the almost perpendicular western facade of the rock. They have been dated to the time of King Kassapa's reign in the fifth century. Though it is believed that there were

7 Technically they do not fall into the category of frescoes as they have not been painted on a wet surface, but a dry one.

around 500 depictions of women in this and other rock pockets, there are only 21 complete figures visible today.

The frescoes were first sighted in 1875 by T. H. Blakesley of the Public Works Department who viewed them through field glasses as he was unable to make the perilous climb up to the fresco pocket. However, in June 1889 Alick Murray (1889), also of the Public Works Department, at the request of the former Governor of Ceylon, Sir William Gregory, enters this "hitherto inaccessible chamber" and takes tracings in chalk from 13 of the frescoes (1889: 183). Murray's report of this whole enterprise reads like an adventure story. Despite the "absolute refusal of the resident chiefs and the local population to have anything to do with the disturbances of a rock chamber which they believed to be inhabited and protected by Yakkos' (demons) in spite of the strong appeal—nay, order—of the European Revenue officers of the district", Murray finally reaches the chamber with the help of three stone-cutters from South India. Unable to stand or sit on the chamber ledge, Murray gets a special platform fixed on with iron stanchions upon which he lies full length on his back to make the tracings. Inches away from a sheer drop of 160 feet, tossed about by fierce winds and pecked at by swallows, Murray works from sunrise to sunset for an entire week. The "terrified natives" keep watch below his perch expecting him to be done to death by the demons and are finally "constrained to admit at the end [of his task] that [he] had succeeded in frightening the demons away". Extremely conscious of his 'historic' contribution within the British archaeological 'project', Murray hermetically seals a bottle containing a current newspaper, a few coins, and a list of friends who had visited him in the chamber, and cements it into the wall "to be discovered by the archaeologists of some future era". The proceedings are then "concluded on a solemn note with a bhikku being permitted to chant a *gatha* for the preservation of the bottle, and Murray and his compatriots singing 'God Save the Queen'" (De Silva 1971: 4).[8]

However, though H.C.P. Bell "frequently praised [Murray's] 'pioneer work' he felt that the copies failed to give anything like a true presentation of the vividness and coarseness of the original colouring" (Bell and Bell 1993:87). Bell's yearning for a reproduction of the frescoes "with a faithfulness almost perfect" was fulfilled in

8 The sexual overtones of this project cannot be ignored as Murray cements a bottle into this womb-like chamber that is adorned with paintings of sensual women! The singing of 'God Save the Queen' is ironically double-edged in view of later interpretations that the frescoes depict King Kassapa's queens.

1896-97 when D.A.L.Perera, the first draughtsman of the Archaeological Survey produced twenty-two beautiful facsimiles in oils. In the face of Perera's "singular talent, unflagging patience and real courage", Murray's week-long adventure pales into insignificance. Yet, unlike Murray's case, the heroism of Perera is always mediated through the writings of Bell (1897:108):

> Mr. Perera spent nineteen weary weeks—practically five months—in the cheerless 'pocket' caves of Sigiri-gala working on day after day from morning to evening — exposed latterly to the driving force of the south-west wind, and sorely tried at times by inflammation of the eyes and attacks of fever—before the final touch could be put to the last of the twenty-two paintings.

Perera's copies were then deposited and later displayed at the National Museum for the comfortable viewing of a larger public:

> I did not, I admit, choose to scale a dreadful little bamboo ladder which mounted up from the long Gallery to the frescoe cave, swaying over vacancy as it went. Instead, I studied the ladies of Sigiri from the facsimile paintings at Colombo, which are admittedly marvellous in their accuracy (Farrer 1908).

The making of the facsimiles was indeed a momentous achievement as these frescoes now became visually accessible to an extremely large number of people not only by being on 'view' at the Museum but by being reproduced in various journals, magazines and newspapers (see Murray 1889:184). [9] Along with the increased visual access to the frescoes there also arose a need to make meaning of these paintings. Unlike the historical narrative that could be matched with the Sigiriya complex as a whole, there were no specific references to the paintings in the Pali Chronicles. Nevertheless, all interpretations of the frescoes attempt to inscribe them within the larger historical narrative of the *Mahavamsa*. Travel writer Kishor Parekh (1970) articulates this desire when she suggests that the paintings of these "sensuous women of Sigiriya" were commissioned by Kassapa

9 Though photography was utilized for purposes of archaeological recording in Ceylon since 1870, the inaccessibility of the fresco chamber provided 'limited' opportunities to photograph the paintings. An amazing photograph in Bell & Bell (1993) documents D.A. Perera photographing the frescoes while hanging in mid-air, 150 ft. above ground on a flimsy chair. Despite such heroism, Bell reports that the force of the wind impeded the shutter speed of the camera producing pictures that were "more or les blurred". Not to be defeated, the indomitable Perera nevertheless completed an "excellent little oil painting to scale" of the two fresco 'pockets' after a week's 'rocking' in space"! (Bell 1897: 257).

"[the] princely parricide who feared danger but loved pleasure" (1970: 31). Thus, implicit in the celebration of these paintings are notions of beauty, royal patronage, secular pleasures and a refined sense of aesthetics that is seen as a marker of Sinhala culture at its zenith.

However, this incorporation of the Sigiriya frescoes within a Sinhala tradition did not occur so easily. In 1897, when H. C. P. Bell reported to the RAS (CB) that "artists trained in the same schools, if not the very same hands, must have executed both Indian and Ceylon frescoes" he caused quite a furore among the Sinhalese literati of the time. C.M. Fernando commenced a heated debate with Bell on this issue that spilled over into local journals and newspapers (Fernando 1897: 127-28). Much chastened, Bell did not repeat these assertions in his 1905 report! (Bell and Bell 1993: 97). There now seems to exist a consensus of opinion among most Sri Lankan scholars as well as foreign art historians, that though the Ajanta and Sigiriya frescoes share some similarities, they differ considerably in technique and colouring. Some Sri Lankan scholars are even more ambitious in their claims:

> The extremely perilous conditions under which the western face of the enormous rock was painted, the high quality of the technique adopted at such an early period, the clear and beautiful line work, the mellowness of the shading, all contribute to placing the Sigiriya paintings amongst the *foremost wall paintings of any period in any part of the world* (emphasis mine) (de Silva 1971: 19; emphasis mine).

This notion of the 'superiority' of the Sigiriya frescoes was also tacitly promoted by the State in an advertisement put out by the State Gem Corporation in the *Times of Ceylon Annual* 1973. The equation here was between the Sigiriya paintings and gems. Interestingly, Kishor Parekh made a similar analogy a few years earlier by calling the paintings "Jewels of Sinhalese culture" that had endured the "ravages of time" (Parekh 1970: 31). In this advertisement, both commodities (touted for the consumption of tourists here) can "stand the test of beauty and quality". By calling upon men and women "of discerning taste", "connoisseurs", the advertisers not only attempted to justify the pricelessness of the paintings and the equally high cost of the gems, they also suggested that only a certain class of people can truly appreciate such products.

The Sigiriya frescoes: Site/sight of sexuality

What makes the Sigiriya frescoes most interesting is that they are not merely markers of a culture at its zenith, but also the only examples of an open celebration of the sensuality of the female body in Sri Lankan painting. I do not wish to speculate here whether the female figures are clothed or unclothed, merely to draw attention to the fact that in either case, the detailing of the female form—the voluptuous lips, the curving breasts, the swelling nipples—are clearly visible. As Margaret Miles (1985) has so aptly put it, "Some of the most puzzling historical images and the most difficult to interpret are those in which nude human bodies or nude parts of bodies play a central role in the visual communication" (1985: 190). She gets to the crux of a feminist concern in such a context when she points out:

> [N]o pictorial subject is more determined by a complex web of cultural interests than visual narrations of the female body; such images are not susceptible to simple naturalistic interpretation. Moreover, with no other depicted object is it less safe to assume a continuity or even a similarity of meaning between its original viewers and the modern interpreter (*ibid*).

Miles herself has done very interesting work on fourteenth century Tuscan religious paintings that depict the Virgin Mary with one exposed breast. Her major concern is to contextualise these paintings within their specific historical period. She notes that while the visual associations of a modern viewer to a bare-breasted Mary may consist largely of the soft pornography that covers the newsstands today, a medieval viewer would look at it quite differently. Through her sensitive exploration of the complexities of fourteenth century Tuscan culture, Miles shows us that these paintings had more to do with attempts to control women's power to nourish through breast-feeding, than with implying an overt eroticism (Jordonova 1980).[10] Unfortunately, such sensitive work has not been done with regard to the Sigiriya frescoes. Undoubtedly, they are very old paintings and the only references to them occur in some of the 685 verses that were scratched upon a plastered wall facing the fresco pockets (which I will come back to later). I do not plan to posit a better way to read these paintings; my main interest here is to explore how these visual texts were 'narrativised' by a group of scholars in Sri Lanka.

10 Jordonova (1980) discusses the changing sites of eroticism in the female body in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe. See especially pp. 49-50 on the eighteenth-century emphases that sexual attraction was founded on the breast meshing with medical injunctions that women should breastfeed their children.

The reason I have decided to concentrate on a somewhat narrow scholarly discourse is because I think that these scholars played a very important role in constructing a "collective identity" of the newly emergent nation-state in post-Independence Sri Lanka (late 1940s and through the middle 1950s). They were greatly interested in showing that the Ceylonese, too, were capable of being intellectuals and scientists and usually displayed their erudition by expounding on their 'indigenous traditions', trying to make meaning of their 'culture' and 'heritage'. In these scholars' world view, the majority of the archaeological and historical research on Ceylon, until the early part of the twentieth century, had been conducted by various British civil servants (de Silva 1969; Godakumbra 1969). The results of their research were always published in English or other European languages for "the information and edification of their countrymen in their home countries" (Godakumbra 1969:20). The Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch), founded in 1845 and one of the major bodies that encouraged "antiquarian studies" was also seen as constituting itself as a very exclusive Society. Godakumbura notes that until the l930s, the meetings of the Society were after-dinner gatherings which one was expected to attend in dinner-suits. He rather scathingly says that the "few natives" who were admitted were thoroughly Europeanised and lived apart from the majority of their countrymen "they had no roots in the soil; they had no contact with the common man". The State-run Archaeological Survey during this time also presented its findings in English and thus had a limited audience. Since the Sinhala press hardly reported archaeological 'discoveries', and excavation sites were closed off to the public with archaeological operations being conducted within barbed wire fences, "the ordinary citizen had no idea of the meaning and purpose of archaeology".

However, the consolidation of the nationalist movement and the proliferation of Sinhala print capitalism in the 1940s, spearheaded the translation and publication of the *Mahavamsa* and its commentaries, in Sinhalese. Many nationalist scholars were extremely fluent in Sinhalese and were thus able to communicate their ideas about Ceylon's 'glorious' past in both Sinhala and English. More and more people thus began to read about the ancient monuments and to embark on pilgrimages to these sites. It was during this time then that the Sigiriya frescoes were transformed into one of the many visual markers and sites of the newly emerging nation-state's cultural heritage. After Ceylon gained independence in 1948 "the need to bring before the public with greater emphasis the cultural heritage of the nation was served by the appointment of an officer to handle matters connected with publications" (de Silva 1969:1178). Handbooks serving as guides to important archaeological

sites were first reprinted and later freshly prepared in both English and Sinhala. These books had brisk sales and were soon out of print. Tourists were also catered to with the production of "first class picture postcards" of ancient monuments, sculptures and paintings. However. I wish to propose here that the overt sexuality and eroticism of the women in the frescoes did not make the frescoes' transition to being part of a nation's cultural heritage, a very smooth one.

Sexuality in the scholars' 'field of vision'

Roland Barthes (1977) wrote in *Image-Music-Text,* "all images (are?) polysemous; they imply, underlying their signifiers, a 'floating chain' of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others" (1977: 38-39). As Barthes went on to note, polysemy poses a question of meaning, i.e., images become bound up with an uncertainty concerning the meaning of objects or attitudes. "Hence in every society various techniques are developed, intended to *fix* the floating chain of signified in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs" (*ibid*).

I suggest that the most terrifying sign of all to Sri Lankan scholars was what they perceived as the sexual and the sensual. The exposed breasts of the Sigiriya women ruptured the scholar's field of vision, bringing into recall identification, pleasure and distrust. When each scholar attempted to 'fix' both consciously and unconsciously, the meaning of this sign *he* (I use this pronoun deliberately as all the scholars involved in this discourse were male), was acting as a socially constructed being. Therefore, when he attempted to interpret these paintings, he drew on various concepts and ideologies with which he had been imbued in the continuous and dynamic construction of his socio-cultural being. In this context, it was unavoidable for him to ignore the 'larger' issues of his time, such as race, religion, nationalism, etc. However, this eagerness to discuss 'larger' and 'more pressing' issues, I suggest, was also an attempt to displace the scholar's anxiety about the overt sexuality of the Sigiriya women.

By the late '40s and early '50s there were two major theories that had been propounded about the women in the frescoes. One was by an Englishman, an eminent archaeologist, H. C. P. Bell, and the other by the internationally known art historian, Ananda Coomaraswamy — half British, half Sri Lankan. Bell thought the frescoes depicted a procession of queens and princesses of King Kassapa's court,

attended on by their maids, on their way to a Buddhist shrine north of Sigiriya (Bell 1897). He based his claim (and so did Blakesley and Murray before him), on a division of labour, i.e., some women have been depicted as carrying flower trays while others are merely holding the flowers, and of colour, i.e., the women of "darker hue" carrying the trays were believed to be a different race (*ibid*: 254). Bell expands on this hypothesis in 1897 by noting that the serving maids "of unattractive mien" had been given a greenish complexion as "badge of servitude", which clearly marked them off from the "high-born dames, their mistresses", who were pale-yellow 'blondes' or orange-hued 'brunettes'" (Bell 1897: 254).[11]

Bell was determined that these were portraits of real queens and princesses for each figure was "imbued with divergent traits in face, form, pose and dress, which seem to stamp it as an individual likeness". In his report to the RAS (CB) in December 1897, he waxed so eloquent on the various characteristics of these maidens that Governor Sir West Ridgeway in his vote of thanks for what he described as Bell's "maiden meditation" commented: "As your official chief I was rather shocked for a moment at your intimate acquaintance with the feelings of these ladies, and I began to fear a Breach of Promise case until I remembered how very much older, they were than yourself" (Bell 1905: 17). Bell was convinced that the figures were not, as they appear to be, naked above the waist but "in reality fully clothed in a short-sleeved jacket of finest material. So thin, indeed, that the painter has occasionally contented himself by indicating it by a mere line of deeper colour" (Bell 1897: 15). He also suggested that the reason for the women being cut off at the waist by clouds was a purely practical measure that had been adopted by the artist in order to economise space due to the concavity of the rock surface.[12]

Coomaraswamy (1956) strongly disagreed with Bell on many points, noting that the frescoes contained no religious (read Buddhist) feeling (see also Coomaraswamy 1965),[13] rather they were "penetratingly sensual" and probably depicted Apsaras or divine women, the latter identification being based on the very fact that the women were cut off at the waist by clouds which he noted was a sign of divinity

11 News of Bell's work at Sigiriya had got around by this meeting, and besides the RAS(CB) members, there were "75 ladies and 125 gentlemen present, certainly a record for a meeting of the RASCB upto that time" (Bell and Bell 1993: 100).

12 Here Coomaraswamy falls back on the puritan Buddhist notion that differentiated between the devotional/human and the divine/heavenly. Buddhism, which called for a moral and ethical way of living was divorced from the sensual pleasures of heavenly beings who were connected with folk religions and Hinduism.

13 Bell also does allude to this possibility in a footnote (op. cit., 1897: 254).

(Paranvitana 1947).[14] However, both scholars could not communicate in Sinhala and belonged to the colonial elite who wrote for and spoke to a more cosmopolitan audience in the metropolis as described by Godakumbura.

In 1947, Senarat Paranavitana, the first Sri Lankan Commissioner of Archaeology, defiantly challenged these two theories by writing a series of minutely detailed papers on the significance and meaning of the Sigiriya frescoes. Paranavitana was a self-taught scholar and epigraphist, who gradually rose within the ranks of the Archaeological Department through sheer hard work producing a prodigious number of articles in both Sinhala and English on a variety of subjects. However, the Sigiriya complex was one of his favourite research sites. His intention was not just to decipher the meaning of the frescoes but to prove that King Kassapa was a God King modelled along the lines of the mythical god Kuvera who lived in Alakamanda (Wickramasinghe 1935:29). His interpretation of the frescoes was crucial to his thesis. He completely naturalised the Sigiriya women by asserting that they were really personifications of clouds. The 'golden-coloured' ones being "lightning princesses" and the 'lily coloured' ones being "cloud damsels" who hovered around Alakamanda attending to every whim and fancy of Kuvera (as described in the Indian Sanskrit text *Meghaduta*) (Paranavitana 1950: 148-50 and 154-56).

Though most Sri Lankan scholars were sceptical of this theory, the public was delighted and in 1974, a blockbuster film titled *The God King* was made in Sri Lanka. Paranavitana never overcame his disappointment at being spurned by his scholarly audience however, and while in retirement during the 1960s he became rather crazed and professed to be able to read "inter-linear inscriptions", supposed to be inscribed in minute characters on many ancient stone epigraphs found scattered in various parts of the country (Paranavitana 1972:5). His last book, *The Story of Sigiri* was based on translations of these inscriptions which just *happened* to prove every single point he had been trying to make about Sigiriya for much of his adult life. In his single-minded attempt to prove that King Kassapa was a God-King, and through his naturalisation and neutralisation of the women, Paranavitana avoided dealing with the overt sexuality of the Sigiriya women. This was left to a few other

14 Paranavitana obviously wanted to at least elevate one Sri Lankan king to a higher status thus elevating his cultural heritage as well. When he wrote for a more European audience in *The Illustrated London News*, he extended his comparison of Sigiriya to that of Xanadu (April 3, 1954: 530-32).

scholars who were also trying to make meaning of the paintings around the same time.

The most vociferous denial of the sensual was from M.D. Raghavan, an ethnologist and assistant director of the National Museum in Sri Lanka at this time. He was horrified that Coomaraswamy found the frescoes "penetratingly sensual" and wrote rather despairingly in 1948:

> If Sigiriya art does nothing but express and communicate sensuous or sensual ideas, all our interest in the Sigiriya art would seem a waste, for Sigiriya art is truly great and could not possibly have been conceived or created to serve the sole purpose of exciting sensuous thought (Raghavan 1948: 66).

He asserted that these paintings were "deeply symbolic and suggested scenes of religious worship comparable to what can be seen at any Buddhist shrine today. According to Raghavan, these women were the wives and daughters of Kassapa, offering homage to the Buddha. The permanent representation of their worship on the rock was used by Kassapa to supplicate the Buddha in an effort to atone for the sin of patricide. Yet, Raghavan 's efforts were interrupted by his own gaze: if the women seem rather sensual, he argued, "it is well to remind ourselves that a certain amount of sensuousness has formed part of the religious customs and observances of most countries, in the past". Seeming unconvinced by his own argument, he then attempted to re-define sensuality "as indeed any work of art which appeals to our sense of the beautiful", collapsing sensuality into beauty. Many of the women in the frescoes, he went on to point out, are mature "dowagers" and "matrons" who by wearing the tali and tilak like all well-married Tamil ladies, conclusively inform the viewer that they are respectable *wives*. Raghavan, like Bell, also stressed the fact that these women were not bare-breasted but actually wearing a cloth of "superfine texture" because of the incredible heat of the rock in the tropical sun!

Nandadeva Wijesekera, who claims to be the first Sri Lankan anthropologist, wove a complex theory of race in 1947, by proposing that the women depicted in the frescoes could be racially differentiated according to their varying hues of colour. By expanding on Bell's allusions to racial difference, Wijesekera labelled the women being served, the 'golden coloured' ones, as Aryan and the women serving, the 'dusky ones', as either Dravidian or of Negroid stock. The Aryan typology he culled from these paintings included the "more superior" features: long face, straight

nose, delicate features and athletic body as opposed to the Dravidian typology: largeness of frame, thick lips, dark eyes and matronly features (Wijesekera 1991).

In a slightly later paper, Wijesekera was more concerned about shedding "Fresh Light on the Sigiriya Frescoes", which consisted of yet another interpretation of the content of the paintings. I strongly suspect that this paper was written to counter the interpretation given by a popular novelist, Martin Wickremasinghe (1935), in a more literary journal in l938.[15] Wickremasinghe sought corroboration for the content of the paintings in classical Sinhala literature (*ibid*: 29). Rather haphazardly matching snippets of poetry with various segments of the paintings, he proposed that the frescoes depicted women participating in an erotic, aquatic festival. Wijesekera (1983), who decided to debate Wickremasinghe (without actually naming him), based his argument on the premise that "festival occasions were never serious moments", and then did his utmost to prove that the women in the frescoes do not even betray a smile (1983:274).

> Every one of those figures is portrayed in a studied pose of mental preoccupation. Do not some figures express poignant withdrawal from something strange and awe-inspiring, something awful and lamentable. The whole scheme is woven around such a central idea of deep loss or mourning, maybe for Kasyapa (*ibid)*.

P.E.P. Deraniyagala, director of the National Museum, writing in 1951, also reiterated Bell and Raghavan by pointing out that frescoes "strongly suggest that there was some feminine element incorporated in the religious ritual of those days and alluded to the fact that these women might be temple dancers (1951:73). In a later paper he also attempted to differentiate between the "sexually free" art of the 'West' and the more "spiritual" 'East', epitomised by the Sigiriya frescoes: "The female figure has always been treated with restraint and dignity [in Ceylon] there was less of a craving for the naked figure which has proved such a stimulus to western artists and especially their patrons (*ibid*:12).

Can the sexual be part of a nation's heritage?

These scholars' persistent de-sexualisation of the frescoes greatly facilitated the Sri Lankan government's response when vandals sprayed green paint on fourteen

15 Other scholars were publishing in more scholarly journals like the *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch), Spolia Zeylanica* (The Journal of the National Museum), *Artibus Asia* and *Orientalist*.

of the paintings and chiselled and hacked two of them—one on the head and the other, "above the waist", in October 1967 (de Mel 1968). The Minister of Cultural Affairs at the time, Mr lriyagolla, is reported to have stated that this vandalism was tantamount to "stabbing one' own *mother* in the heart". If not for Raghavan's stress on the "maturity" and impeccable morality of the Sigiriya women and many other scholars down the line who had also highlighted their religiosity and sobriety, Iriyagolla's statement would have sounded extremely ridiculous. The recourse to the symbolism of mother here further concretises the Sigiriya frescoes' status as a national treasure, which at this moment is made synonymous with the nation-state of Sri Lanka, invariably referred to as the Motherland.

One of the main reasons for the puritanical and moralistic posturing of these scholars stemmed from a 'Protestant' Buddhist ethic that was being strongly promoted by Sinhala Buddhist revivalists in the new nation-state. These Buddhist revivalists were mainly petit bourgeoisie: small landowners, shopkeepers, minor bureaucrats, school teachers, etc., educated in Sinhala, and the 'organic intellectuals' of the rural areas; as well as those from the merchant and professional segments of the bourgeoisie educated in both English and Sinhala and concentrated in the larger cities. The latter group formed the intellectual core of the revivalists (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:7-8). The now classic formulation of a Protestant Buddhist ethic was first coined by Gananath Obeyesekere in 1970. Obeyesekere's use of the meaning of this term was twofold: (*i)* many of its norms and organisational forms were historical derivatives from Protestant Christianity and (ii) it was a protest against Christianity, and its associated Western political dominance.[16] "Thus, for example, those very norms that were derived from Western Victorian Protestanism were thrown back at the 20th century West—Westerners [were] believed to be sexually lax, and there [was] a general condemnation of 'Western' values" (*ibid*). Unlike in the case of India, which Chatterjee (1989) has analysed so elegantly, the discourse of Sinhala nationalists did not hinge upon the resolution of the 'Woman Question' which, in India, included such volatile issues as sati, child marriage, purdah and the ban on widow remarriage.[17] Nevertheless, the regulation of female

16 Obeyesekere also suggests that it was a protest against peasant beliefs in demons, sorcery and magic, which were viewed as having corrupted the pure doctrinal Buddhism. The resurrection of this doctrinal Buddhism thus, also involved a demythologising of peasant beliefs and a rationalisation of their cults.

17 As KamalaVisweswaran (1990:65) has pointed out, the 'Woman Question' in India was the "usual shorthand to signify a range of issues concerning women which [were] also read as references to the nation. For example, British appeal to the degraded status of Indian women was one of the primary ways of legitimizing continued colonial presence."

morality was integral to the nationalist project. As the Anagarika Dharmapala, an influential leader of the Sinhala Buddhist revival put it, "the glory of woman is in her chastity" (Guruge 1963). Many of his injunctions concerning female chastity were mapped on the body. Dharmapala, in his *Daily Code for the Laity* or *Gihi Vinaya* (1898) and in later newspaper articles, which circulated widely advocated that Sinhala-Buddhist women wear the Indian sari as a sign of their modesty, chastity and unique "Sinhalaness".[18] He specified a length for the sari, insisting that a woman's "black legs" should be completely covered. His injunctions on the osari blouse, in a society where many peasant women were often bare-breasted, were detailed and repeated. A blouse, Dharmapala wrote must be long, covering fully the woman's breasts, midriff, navel and back (Guruge 1963: 37-38 and 85). Dharmapala's own mother was the first to wear the sari in December 1884 on a pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya in India, and it soon became the standard "national" low country dress for low country Sinhala women (Obeysekere 1979: 305; Guruge 1965: LXXVI).[19]

Counterpoint

The academic discourse on Sigiriya in no way held hegemonic sway over the entire population. One of the main reasons for this was the approximately 700 verses that were written in the so called 'pure' form of Sinhala—Elu Sinhala, on the 'mirror wall' at Sigiriya. It is believed that these verses have been written by visitors (mainly males) to Sigiriya between the eighth and twelfth centuries AD. Many of them are very sexist, but they also specifically take the sexual into consideration. Almost 60 per cent refer to the Sigiriya women, often in extremely erotic and sensual language. Even today, they are constantly published in glossy magazines and newspapers along with photographs of the Sigiriya women, quoted in de Mel (1968), as in the following samples:

> Ladies like you
> Make men pour out their hearts
> And you also
> have thrilled the body
> Making its hair
> Stiffen with desire

18 *Gihi Vinaya* (Sinhala) went into 19 editions by 1958 (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988: 213-14).

19 Similarly, Dharmapala advocated the cloth and banian for men but this form of attire was not adapted as quickly or as widely as was the saree (Guruge 1965: LXXVI).

> The girl with golden skin
> Enticed the mind and eyes,
> Her lovely breasts
> Cause me to recall
> Swans drunk with nectar.
>
> When you come to mind, the heart aches,
> The blood boils and I cry aloud.
> Your waist makes me bound to you in my heart

It is important to note, however, that many of the scholars discussed above were not aware of these verses until systematic rubbings were taken, translated and published by Paranavitana in 1957. Later scholars who were familiar with these verses, however, were careful to point out that "[t]here was no coarseness or vulgarity evinced in [the] comments" of these early visitors (de Silva 1971:15).

Some of the more popular interpretations of these frescoes fluctuate between the prosaic and the fanciful. They run the gamut from proposing that Sinhalese monks, or Indian or Chinese 'mendicant' artists painted these women to them being the work of "Kassapa's soldiers, relieving the tedium of their watch by painting 'pin-ups', 'topless' ones!" (Udalagama 1969: 119; de Mel 1968). Paulinus Tambimuttu (1970) who wrote in a popular journal soon after the restoration of the frescoes damaged by the vandals, concluded

> Thanks to Mr Meranzi and Dr de Silva [the two restorers][20] visitors will continue to be delighted by the breasts of our Sigiriya ladies, which, according to Mr Arthur C. Clarke [a greatly cherished celebrity in Sri Lanka) are "as well developed as those of any of the current beauties of the Italian or Hollywood screens" (*ibid*).

Ironically, this celebration of sexuality in the frescoes is even today, tacitly promoted by an increasingly puritanical State in the face of an extremely lucrative industry: tourism. The State which constantly sends out communiques to its

20 Interestingly, the two restorers, Maranzi (sent over from Italy under the sponsorship of UNESCO), and Dr R. H, de Silva (Archaeological Commissioner at that time and an 'expert' on fresco paintings), continue Alick Murray's 'tradition' by burying two coins engraved with their names in that same fresco chamber (Tambimuttu 1970). This 'historic' second 'moment' of burial celebrates not a 'copying' but a "revivification" of the paintings to their "pristine beauty" so that generations can continue to "delight" in them (de Silva 1968: 12).

female employees—especially news readers on TV who enter the public's 'field of vision' daily, on how they should behave (modestly) and dress (be well 'covered')—blithely touts the bare-breasted Sigiriya women to the tourists.[21] This exploitation of sexuality to capture a specific consumer's 'field of vision' is especially marked when we consider the layout of the larger Sigiriya complex with reference to the fresco pocket. Visitors to the frescoes usually have to pass through a series of souvenir stalls that line the paths and stairways that ascend the rock. The most abundant items on display here are postcards of the Sigiriya maidens and various souvenirs that are inscribed with their forms.[22] It has been argued that off-sight/site markers in the form of postcards, souvenirs or literature, when taken together, constitute a narrative sequence that leads the tourist to a sight/site with already well-formed preconceptions (Neuman 1989:15). Therefore, 'sightseeing' actually involves a process of matching these preconceptions with the actual sight/site, which leads to a site/sight's meaning always being mediated by its souvenirs. One begins the ascent of the rock with the sensual representation of the Sigiriya women inscribed in one's mind. After about ten minutes climbing, one finally arrives at the iron spiral staircase that leads up into the fresco pocket. Despite the seeming sturdiness of the staircase, it is still a rather harrowing experience as the wind ferociously tears at one's clothing and if one looks down it is a sheer drop of 160 feet. The dimly-lit fresco chamber, adorned with these sensual women, at the top of the staircase thus offers a safe womb for the tired traveller as well as a pleasurable feast for the eyes.

Conclusion

The dilemma the Sigiriya frescoes present for the Sri Lankan State and its nationalist intellectuals today, is very similar to what was experienced by the scholars discussed above. The nation-state wants to posit a continuity with a glorious past and in this sense, Sigiriya is a perfect example—an elaborately constructed fortress with ingenious water gardens and mirror walls, displaying the finest paintings to be found in the whole of Sri Lanka. This historical continuity has been especially

21 Ironically, it is also the tourists, i.e., white women, who are now bestowed with the reputation of going about scantily clothed. Bare-breasted white women on nudist beaches in Sri Lanka have now become the major attraction for the local population!

22 Recent excavations at the larger Sigiriya complex have unearthed miniature terracotta figurines (between 10 & 20 cm) that closely parallel the frescoes. Professor Senake Bandaranayake, Director of the Sigiriya Archaeological Project has interpreted these figurines as being 'art about art' or souvenirs that were meant to be taken away by visitors to Sigiriya around the seventh or tenth centuries AD (Daily News, Feb. 3, 1992).

emphasised by the State with the increase in tourism from the 1970s onwards. However, Sigiriya poses a specific dilemma in that the eroticism of the Sigiriya women jars with the historical continuity that is being posited. As Partha Chatterjee (1989) has noted for India, in Sri Lanka too, one of the key ideological responses of nationalism to a colonialist critique of Ceylonese tradition war to latch on to the Orientalist dichotomy of the east as spiritual and the west as material. The major terrain for this discourse was the colonized woman (Mani 1989). While the 'Western' woman was portrayed as being sexually free, the Sri Lankan woman epitomised submission, chastity and restraint (Jayawardena 1986).

The studied eroticism of the Sigiriya women was not quite in keeping with this image of the modest and pure Sri Lankan woman. Nationalist scholars therefore attempted to discursively clothe and domesticate them. Their rhetoric revolved around whether the women were clothed or not, and on who 'owned' them. Since no male appears in the frescoes, attempts were made to deny that absence by insisting that the women had existed under some sort of patriarchy. They *had* to be the wives and daughters or handmaids of the king, who were involved in dignified activities such as religious ceremonies—paying homage to the Buddha on behalf of their king or mourning his death. Any mention of the women's possible participation in an erotic festival was quickly silenced. On the contrary, they were swiftly drawn into the private/domestic realm to counteract the public gaze that was constantly on them.

With the proliferation of the tourism industry, the State's activities of exploiting the sexuality of these frescoes through advertisements, posters, postcards etc., fracture the nationalist scholar's moralistic rhetoric. Even though the women are discursively clothed and domesticated, they remain "exotic nudes" or "archaic erotica" for foreign tourists and the immoral "other" of the modest Sinhala woman.[23] I think this dilemma of embarrassment, yet exploitation of the frescoes, echoes the seeming 'Western' contradiction, now hegemonic to some degree worldwide, that constructs female sexuality as profane as well as powerful. Unfortunately, in this instance, the profanity as well as the power of the Sigiriya frescoes has been manipulated by male scholars and a patriarchal State but . . .the Sigiriya smile lingers.

23 This latter dichotomy was aptly illustrated on the cover page of the 1966 *Observer Pictoria*l A Sinhalese woman, her breasts decorously concealed by her jacket, was juxtaposed against the swollen-breasted Sigiri woman!

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CHAPTER THREE

Notes towards a discussion of female portraits as texts[1]

Malathi De Alwis

"It is no accident", noted Walter Benjamin, "that the portrait was the focal point of early photography" (cited in Arendt 1968: 226). The cult of remembering loved ones, whether they be absent or dead, offered "a last refuge for the cult value of the picture…the aura emanated from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty." Here too, I write of portraits, of female portraits. However, with a difference. My interest here is not merely the 'cult value' or 'exhibition value' of a portrait but rather, its value as a 'text,' a signifier of the past which nevertheless enables "manifold contextual and circumstantial interpretation" in the present.[2]

I begin with a discussion of the photographic representation of women in what I consider one the richest commentaries on Ceylonese society at the turn of the century – *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* (Wright 1907). Like the ubiquitous postcard that produced and encapsulated stereotypes of the colonized as it marked out the "peregrination of the tourist, the successive posting of the soldier, the territorial spread of the colonist", for those left behind in the mother country (Alloula 1986: 193), *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* too was of and about the Ceylonese and not primarily for their consumption (Walters 1995). It was compiled around the year 1904-1906 by Arnold Wright, an Englishman who was commissioned by the British government, which was interested in capturing and classifying the essences of each of its colonies. However, the project of this enterprise also went beyond mere "imperial zoology" (*ibid*). *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* did not stop short at the categorization of the Ceylonese into ethnic groups and castes but extended to a detailed and extensive exposition on the various formation of capital on the island. The many Ceylonese families that contributed to and accrued wealth through graphite mining, tea, rubber,

1 These brief notes were inspired by various conversations I have had with Kumari Jayawardena in the process of our research for the SSA project on "Retrieving Women's History". If not for her constant cajoling, even this little would not have been written!

2 "Unlike a 'message', a 'text' is more open-ended and can be read in many different ways" (Umberto Eco quoted in R. Srivatsan 1993: 193).

coconut, cinnamon and cocoa cultivation etc., were lavishly displayed in this text along with other Ceylonese individuals, families and institutions that participated in pursuits that proliferated with the rise of capital, such as leisure activities as well as educational, medical and social services, for example.

Unlike the postcards that were produce during the colonial era, which Malek Alloula (1986: 193) evocatively describes as the "fertilizer of the colonial version", the majority of the natives on display in *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* were actively involved and implicated in their self-representation. Each family that was invited to represent themselves in this volume not only provided their photographs and accompanying texts, but paid the British government according to the inclusions and the quantity of photographs. Thus, the wealthier one was the more one could 'advertise' that wealth and status. Many eminent, native scholars, such as Ananda Coomaraswamy, P. Arunachalam etc., were also invited to contribute chapters on the island's art and crafts, inhabitants etc., thus continuing a British tradition of classification, of knowledge-making, now well learned by the natives themselves through the colonial system of education.

The consumption of such a volume in a "market of Western consumers", was twofold (Walters 1995, unpaginated). It stimulated an imperial gaze as well as imperial grasp. This was not mere exotica efficiently compiled for the titillation of the Western consumer but it was also meant to entice such a consumer to invest his/her wealth in the British colonies. What better index of progress in the colonies could such an investor wish for than the prosperity of those colonies' elites so glossily reproduced in *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon*.

Yet, I wish to discuss here, not merely the representation of native wealth and accomplishment but to also highlight a subterranean discourse of exploitation and silencing with the pages of *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon*. This exploitation and silencing, I suggest is mapped upon and articulated through, the bodies of women represented in this text.

'Ethnographic' Women

The earliest portrayals of women in Sri Lanka were in what I term the "ethnographic mode" where the emphasis was not specific individuals but rather on identifying particular categories, castes and classes of women through such classificatory

captions as "Tamil Coolie Women" or "Kandyan Girl". The woman's body was made to double as socio-cultural and racial marker of 'difference'; her bodily props, such as jewellery and 'costuming' overlaying re-emphasizing her supposed phenotypical particularities. Often these photographs were taken against natural or artificial backdrops of Nature, thus accentuating the 'primitive' and 'exotic' otherness of these nameless ethnographic 'curiosities. One merely has to scan the writings of early travellers and missionaries to notice the myriad illustrations and later photographs that painstakingly attempt to document seeming 'ethnic' typologies.

The absence of men in many of these 'ethnographic' photographs also accentuated the 'availability' and seductiveness of these women on display while there remains no question about their erotic value in such books as *The Secret Museum of Anthropology*, which was privately issued by the American Anthropological Society in 1935.[3] Containing 257 reproductions from Ferdinand von Reitzenstein's "valuable work" (AAS 1935: unpaginated), *Das Weib bei den Naturvolkern,* this book displays three photographs of Ceylonese women along with other ethnographic 'samplings' of womanhood and titillating 'sexual oddities', such as the "Hottentot apron" or the loin dimples of a Javanese girl. Photograph number 32 depicts a full-length, naked torso under the caption "A Sinhalese Venus" while number 33 on the same page depicts the upper body of a bare-breasted woman arrayed in a variety of jewellery and a shawl hanging from the left shoulder partly concealing on breast, under the caption "Charming inter-racial product of Wedda".[4] Photograph number 225 takes up an entire page and depicts the mid-level torso of a bare breasted woman in a lungi (against a background of shrubs in soft-focus) under the caption "A Ceylon beauty revealing racial fullness of breast". While such a book obviously epitomizes the complicity of ethnography with pornography, it also recalls to me Malek Alloula's (1986: 28) formulation of the 'rhetoric of camouflage'; only the photograph's avowed purpose of ethnographic alibi that it is documenting aspects of race/culture/society will be foregrounded no matter what themes the photographer has selected. Captions, such as "Sinhalese Venus" or "Charming interracial product of Wedda", evoke erotic fantasies they may feed. Caption number 225 is a bit more explicit but once again camouflages its intent by calling attention to its subject's racial fullness of breast – if one can figure out what that means.

3 I am grateful to Chas Mackan for telling me that such a book even existed.

4 The flat backdrop seems to suggest that both photographs were taken in a studio.

The 'ethnographic' photograph's transition to a postcard and its concomitant 'mechanical reproduction' enabled its ready availability at a very low cost as well as its swift proliferation across the globe. Like the erotic postcards of Arab women that propagated the phantasm of the harem, postcards of ornately attired as well as bare breasted naïve women contributed to the phantasm of Ceylon as an 'exotic', 'tropical', Paradise Isle.[5] The progression of 'ethnographic' photograph to postcard comes full circle in the Honourable Mr. P. Arunachalam's article on "Population: The Island's Races, Religions, Languages, Castes and Customs" in *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* which is not only liberally interspersed with many 'ethnographic' photographs (of the more decorous kind) but reproductions of 'ethnographic' postcards as well.

Labouring Women

Less prominent but nevertheless present in the above-mentioned tome are several photographs of, once again, nameless women labouring in the cocoa groves, plucking tea, peeling cinnamon, cleaning plumbago etc. The arduous labour of these women is often 'artistically' arrested as they are made to pose for the camera; the landscape, their work tools and the products of their labour providing more 'realistic' backdrops and props for these tableaux (*ibid*: 243-6). Thus, even as they labour, these women continue to stimulate the desiring gaze of the viewer. These women's participation in the capitalist productions of the 'public' sphere preclude any references to 'domesticity' or the possibility of familial ties to the men with whom they labour. Most often, they are depicted in work gangs that are entirely made up of women but supervised by men. In pages 246 and 606 for example, these women squatting beside piles of cacao or baskets of plumbago are juxtaposed against their well-dressed supervisors and owners who stand over them; a telling indictment on the gendered hierarchies of power at work here.

Elite Women: The latter half of this text documents the wealthy elite families of this era, the majority of them divided according to the provinces in which they live, invest capital, accrue profits and oversee the labouring women and men who so marginally people this text. The financing of *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* was also in keeping with the capitalist spirit of its time: the more money one paid, the more information and photographs once could have included about one's

5 See the private postcard collection of Professor Jonathan Walters, Walla, Walla, Washington.

family. It is a fitting document of Louis H.S. Pieris' wealth then that he could not only afford to finance an entire page of photographs of his family and residence-the delightful Whist Bungalow but that he could also proclaim to society at large, the accomplishments of his wife (herself the progeny of the illustrious de Soysa family of Alfred House fame), by displaying the unique wedding cake she had created (with an accompanying lengthy text describing it), and her studio (*ibid*: 552-4).

Similarly, the rest of the elite women, the majority of whom are Sinhala, also appear as signifiers of their husband's or father's status and wealth. Decked out in the latest fashions (be it 'Western' or 'Oriental') and adorned with family heirlooms, they pose along with their offspring against a backdrop of family estates, residences, servants, race horses and prize dogs; an ironic continuum of patriarchal possessions. Even the captions that identify these women very clearly mark them out as the property of their husbands: "Mrs. Louis H.S.Peiris" or "Mr. & Mrs A.E. Buultjens and Family". In the event of her husband having predeceased her, she appears under the name of her son (*ibid*: 715). It is thus the wealth of these patriarchs that enables them to signal their proprietorship over their women and to dictate these women's appropriate positioning within these visual texts; a luxury unavailable to their less wealthy male peers or 'ethnographic' and labouring women.

In the texts that accompany, such photographs and which extensively document the educational, enterprising and philanthropic pursuits of Ceylonese gentlemen, the names of these women mainly appear as markers of event of exchange i.e. marriage and reproduction i.e. birth. A random example reads thus: "Dr. Clarence Pedro Fonseka…married Leonara Fernando, daughter of Simon Fernando Sri Chandrasekara Mudaliyar, an is now the father of three daughters and six sons" (*ibid*: 671). Note how the text cleverly appropriates even the successful production of progeny only for the patriarch.

If the Sinhala women were well 'kept in place', the Muslim families went one further. Their women remain under erasure both visually and textually. No mention of marriages or off spring are made in the texts that accompany photographs of predominantly Muslim males with a scattering of pre-pubescent girls (*ibid*: 501, 821). Such calculated silencing of women on the part of the Muslims and to a lesser extent, the Sinhalese and Tamils, I suggest, is a particularly illuminating illustration of what I call 'patriarchal nationalism'. As I have argued elsewhere, after Partha Chatterjee, one of the predominant nationalist response and resistance

to British colonialism in Ceylon took the form of a gendered separation of spheres; a feminized 'private' and a masculinized 'public' (de Alwis 1994; Chatterjee 1994). The Ceylonese nationalists who perceived themselves to be the legitimate heirs of the nation, attempted to protect the distinctive spiritual and cultural essences of Ceylonese 'traditions', which they believed could be contained and nurtured within the 'home' by the women while they waged the battle for Independence on the treacherous terrain of the profane, materialist, 'world'. Thus, the nationalists not only transformed Ceylonese women into signifiers of tradition/ community/ morality/ spirituality but they also sought to define and regulate these women's lives by relegating them to the nation was to serve as the progenitors and nurtures of future generations of patriots.

The families that so graciously posed for their photographs in such a hegemonic text as *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* reflect such an ideology in the making.[6] The photographs and accompanying texts were very carefully, indeed self-consciously, produced. It is not surprising then that the elite women in this text only appear under the signs of the 'domestic' and 'feminine'; as decorative appendages to their successful husbands, or as part of a prosperous family. Many of their 'props' also signify genteel femininity and the maternal; tiny handbags, frilled parasols, ornate chairs, delicate fans and of course plenty of babies and children- hugged to their bosoms, upon their laps and tumbling at their feet. However, the opportunity to view Selina Peiris in her studio and read of her artistic achievements, as she was the first Sinhalese lady to compete in the annual exhibitions of the Ceylon Society of Arts (*ibid*:552); or to suddenly come across Sylvia Buultjens (wife of A.E.Buultjens) strumming a guitar beside her barefooted children and husband (*ibid*: 775), provides a breath of fresh air, a glimpse of an alternate lifestyle.

It must be acknowledged however, that painting and music were considered appropriate feminine accomplishments that 'educated' women were encouraged to acquire during this period and in that sense, these two women have not broken free of their 'feminizing' moulds (Jayawardena 1986: 120-21). Yet, it is heartening to mark the fact that women did pursue other interests besides home making, within this text. Also, the fact that a woman's achievements were even given this much prominence, on the part of Seline Peiris, is a vast improvement from the way

6 The female body was also fashioned as one of the most visible markers of nationalist resistance through the wearing of the saree, which was vociferously promoted by the Anagarika Dharmapala during the latter half of the 19th century. Even a brief perusal of the above-mentioned text will reveal that this form of attire had not been completely adapted by the Ceylonese elite at the turn of the century.

other women of her class have been treated in this 'master' text. It is also probably that the progressive A.E. Buultjens- trade unionist and strong supporter of female education,[7] encouraged his wife to subtly but surely question current norms of middle-class domesticity; displaying one's children as "barefooted gypsies" must have taken a lot of courage! [8]

The only Ceylonese woman who appears in her own right as businesswoman and commands almost an entire page for herself is Miss Violet Muthukrishna, who along with her sisters and brother, started the first Shorthand and Typewriting institute in Ceylon. However, in spite of Miss Muthukrishna's entrepreneurial successes, she prefers to present herself against a 'domestic'/'intimate' backdrop of ornate staircase, decorative stool and flowers; the 'suggested' props for women at photographic studios (p.121). The intended message seems to be: even though I am unmarried and participate in materialist, 'public' activities, I am still a genteel respectable lady.

To contrast the representations of women in *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* with those that were produced for private consumption is a rewarding exercise. In this section, I shall introduce into my discussion some women's portraits that were produced in the early half of the 20th century, at the birthing of a new nation.[9] These portraits provide an alternative view into w omen's lifestyles that was just barely suggested in the photographs of Selina Pieris and Sylvia Buultjens.

Plate 1: Taken in the 1940s this depicts the matriarch of the wealthy and prestigious Abdul Gaffoor family with her offspring. Mrs Abdul Gaffoor who was an extremely "strong willed, no-nonsense kind of woman",[10] confidently poses here with her predominantly female progeny; providing an interesting parallel image to the photographs in *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* mentioned above which excluded Muslim women completely and only made reference to patrilineal descent in the accompanying texts (for example, see p.501).

7 For a brief account of A.E. Buultjens' progressive activities see Jayawardena (1986: 126), many of which were not included in his brief biography in *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon*.

8 However, Kumari Jayawardena notes that when one of the Buultjens' children had grown up, she had been ashamed to notice that she was barefooted in this picture!

9 My grateful thanks to all the families that willingly shared their private photographs and memories of the remarkable women I discuss here and Kumari Jayawardena for her painstaking research into their lives.

10 Comment made by one of her descendants.

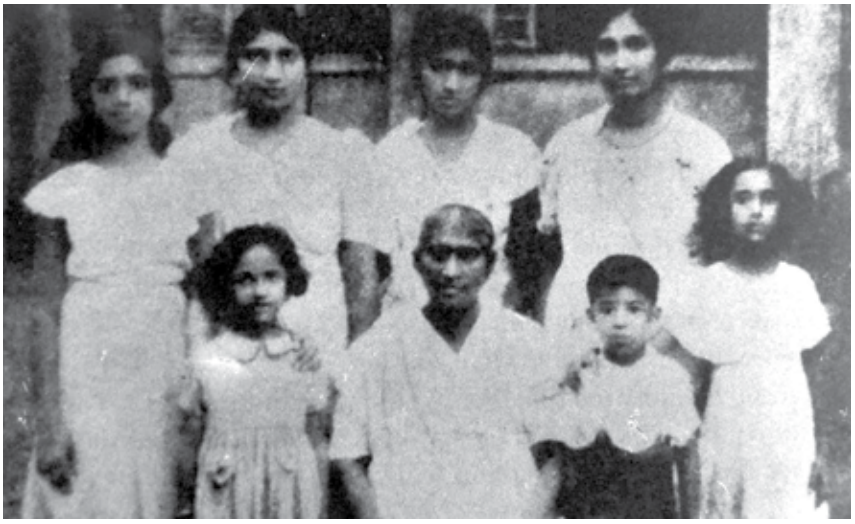

Plate I

I return to my discussion of props through Plates, II, III, IV and V; and I begin with my favourite, that of Alice Isabella de Abrew and her bicycle taken at the dawn of a new century (**Plate II**).

Plate II

According to her descendants, Alice posed for this photograph while returning home one day from her painting class. The determination that drove this young woman to insist on posing with her bicycle in a photographic studio, coupled with the pioneering spirit that embarked upon it in the streets of Colombo in a day and age when women not only rarely went about unescorted but would not

have dreamed of riding something a s 'frivolous' as a bicycle, amazes me. Kumari Jayawardena recalls that even in the 1940s, she and her school friends were reprimanded for riding bicycles by Ven. Narado Thero at the Vajirarama Temple in Colombo: "Riding bicycles and driving cars are not suitable for Buddhist girls and women".

Of this intrepid lady, Alice de Abrew, we know very little else except that she was the sister of Lucy de Abrew, the first Sinhala woman to enter Medical School (who unfortunately died before she could qualify as a doctor), and Peter de Abrew, the well-known Theosophist, temperance agitator and Manager and trustee of one of the first Buddhist girls' schools, Museaus College. Peter De Abrew was a close friend of Martinus Perera, a fellow temperance worker and well-known businessman who was the first to import bicycles to Ceylon in the 1890s. Mr Perera, whose own mode of transport was the bicycle, often visited the de Abrew household and possible encouraged Alice de Abrew to purchase one as well.[11]

Plate III

Plate III depicts Dr Rachel Christoffelsz at the wheel of her car (Brohiere 1994). This photograph, which was taken in the 1920s, illustrates how far Ceylonese women had progressed. Many of them were now qualified doctors and drove their own cars as well. This arresting photograph contrasts very well with that of **Plate IV** depicting Dr. Verona Wirasekera, the first Sinhala woman doctor. Taken in the 1930s it shows Dr Wirasekera decorously attired in a long blouse and saree,

11 Credit is due to Kumari Jayawardena for this bit of conjecture.

busily writing at her desk, which is stacked with large ledgers and papers; a framed certificate hangs upon the wall. Dr. Christoffelsz and Dr. Wirasekera, though both doctors, convey two very different messages through the props they have chosen. Dr. Christoffelsz at the wheel of her car conjures up an image of a dashing, independent young woman, while Dr. Wirasekera at work at her desk is a fitting example of quiet intelligence and industry.

Plate IV

Similarly, Lady Daisy Dias Bandaranaike in **Plate V** exudes strength and confidence as she sits at a desk, pen poised over paper. The quality of the photograph suggest it was taken in a studio which then throws up the possibility that this was the pop out of many available studio props that was chosen by Lady Bandaranaike. The wife of Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike and mother of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, Lady Daisy was nevertheless an important personality in her own right. At the time this photograph was taken (around 1928), Lady Daisy has been separated from her husband for a long time with along with her two daughters and a retinue of servants, set up residence by herself. She is also credited with fostering anti-colonial sentiments in her despite the fact that he lived with his father who was less critical of British Rule.

Plate V

I conclude my brief discussion by invoking Umberto Eco once again. Eco reminded us that a photograph was open to "manifold contextual and circumstantial interpretations" even though it may denote one particular known object. The example he used was a portrait of Lenin, which would have signified many different things to many different people in many different periods of time (cited in Srivatsan 1993: 193). Similarly, what I have attempted to suggest here is the importance of recognizing representations of women not just for their portrayal of a particular personality but also for how the photograph as a whole can illuminate our past as well as our present; what did a bicycle signify in 1900? How does a barefooted child signify the rebellion of her mother? I have provided several readings of these photographic 'texts', but that does not preclude further readings in other place and other times.

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CHAPTER FOUR

The Production and Embodiment of Respectability: Gendered Demeanours in Colonial Ceylon*

Malathi de Alwis

Introduction

Gananath Obeyesekere, in his pioneering formulation of the Sinhala practice of *läjja-baya,* glossed as shame-fear, notes that Sinhala females as well as males are socialized into such practices in very early childhood. He goes on to observe, however, that "in spite of the cultural view that females should be especially *läjja-baya,* it is the male child who becomes sensitive to the second part of the verbal set, *baya,* or 'fear of ridicule', "as it is men who "have public roles and hence must be more sensitive to the reactions of others" (Obeyesekere 1984: 505; Cf. Jonathan Spencer 1990). In this paper, I want to extend Obeyesekere's insights into the gendered practices of restraint among the Sinhalese, particularly in terms of how female subject positions are produced through the interpellation of *läjja-baya*, or, as I gloss it, 'respectability', by historicizing the category of 'respectability' and locating the micro technologies of power that participate in this work of interpellation and embodiment.[1] Such a project, I suggest, is crucial for understanding the centrality of notions of 'respectability' within Sinhalese as well as Tamil society especially in terms of its effect on the freedom and mobility of women.

While, as Obeyesekere (1984) notes, Sinhalese men maybe especially susceptible to 'fear of ridicule,' as it is they who have "public roles," I argue that it is equally central to women's lives as it circumscribes their practices within the private as well as the public. Unlike Obeyesekere, however, I also wish to historically locate the categories of public and private and unmoor them from a stark binarism. In a previous article, I discussed how patriarchal notions of *läjja-baya* could restrain women's lives, while also sometimes enabling them to inhabit public *personas* and

1 Althusser's formulation (1971) of interpellation, which can be described at the simplest level, as a ritual of how ideological recognition, theorizes the material constitution of the subject through ideology. Pierre Bourdieu's discussion (1977) of cultural embodiment enables an understanding of how such interpellations target the body and mark it.

perform public roles that they may not have been able to do otherwise (de Alwis 1995). Yet even in such situations, women were constantly under surveillance and vulnerable to being sexualized and shamed i.e., being labelled *läjja-baya nâti* (loose and immoral) and therefore subject to the unmaking and unmasking of their 'respectability'. In this context, I found it more productive to gloss *läjja-baya* as 'respectability' rather than deploying Obeyesekere's gloss of shame-fear. This was also due to the fact that my paper was framed by an argument with Partha Chatterjee where I sought to posit the notion of 'respectability', as opposed to his notion of 'spirituality', as being more useful to understand the positioning of bourgeois women in the public sphere in post-independence South Asia. In addition, I found 'respectability' to be a powerful category for analysis as it is inextricably linked with several inter-connected regimes of power, such as patriarchy, capitalism and imperialism; it is a category with a particular history that enables a reading of its play at the microlevel, while simultaneously recalling macrolevel, global processes of domination and exploitation.

Although *läjja-baya* is not a historicized category, it is definitely an anthropologized one that purports to explain a set of practices, a style of being, that is distinctive to Sinhala culture.[2] It is my intention in this paper, therefore, to begin a reconceptualization of this anthropological practice by glossing it as 'respectability' and providing an account of a historicized moment of its articulation in colonial Ceylon among both Sinhala and Tamil women. My work here parallels, in important ways, Pradeep Jeganathan's recent argument that respectability has a certain political location in contemporary urban Sri Lanka. That location, he argues, is in opposition to a category of masculinity that he glosses as 'fearlessness'. The subordinated, anti-normative nature of that category draws attention to the continued moral, normative positioning of 'respectability' in the ethnographic present and is a necessary complement to my historicization here (Jeganathan 1998).

It is not my argument here that 'respectability' is 'invented' in this colonial context, rather it is my suggestion that the valence of this category -- its location in a moral and normative order -- is remade in this encounter. It is also not my intention

2 There is a corresponding terminology for Tamil discourses and practice can also be glossed as 'respectability', but it is one that has not been as anthropologized (in the context of northern Sri Lanka), as has been Sinhala practices and discourses. For a contemporary mobilization of particular Tamil notions of modesty, see Sitralega Maunaguru (1995).

to trace the chronological development of 'respectability' within an obviously extensive time span, but rather to interrogate specific moments of its articulation at a particular historical juncture. Such a project, then, is very much tied to the terms that I used to explain it. By *articulation* I mean "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 105). What is central here, as Jean Comaroff also points out in relation to her work on the conversion of the Tshidi Barolong in South Africa, is that articulatory processes involve a mutual transformation and, more importantly, the modified identity or "encompassing formation" that emerges is a product of "the interplay" of elements or systems. This conjuncture, however, is one "between unequal orders, and between systems in contradiction" (Comaraff 1985: 154-5). By *moments,* I mean the "differential positions, insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 105), which is to say that I will resort to particular temporal locations within a larger grid of chronological time to signpost dense points of transformation.

I focus here on the early years of the missionary enterprise (roughly 1820-1850) in colonial Ceylon when the encounters with the 'heathen' as well as attempts to convert them was the paramount discourse of the missionaries. I will interrogate a set of disciplinary practices that was mobilized in the mission schools and boarding schools in particular, a phenomenon which was crucial to this project of 'conversion' and transformation. Such a complex of practices was transportable across Empire, while simultaneously having the ability to articulate with 'manners and customs' that were local and specific to each community. The remarkable success of the missionary project of transformation, of schooling, was that even though the 'heathen native' may have resisted 'conversion' to Christianity, it was much more difficult and complicated to resist her interpellation into a Christian moral order and to reject her embodiment of capitalistic and modern discipline.[3]

It is clear that the Evangelical movement, which was spearheaded by the Clapham sect, staunch members of the Church of England who thought to reform it from

3 In 1850, the colonial administrator James Emerson Tennent noted that the educational labours of the American Mission in northern Ceylon had "produced almost a social revolution" despite the fact that only a very small percentage of the students had become converts (1850: 276). While Tennent grossly exaggerates the number of pupils that attended the schools run by the American Mission, what I want to highlight here is his cognisance of the fact that while one could only count a very small percentage of pupils as committed and genuine converts to Christianity, the dissemination of Christianized manners of living through the schools was undeniably more hegemonic and extensive.

within while also being able to form a bridge between the old ruling aristocracy and the aspirant middle classes,[4] gave to Victorian society "its sense of high moral tone, and facilitated the generation of the regulated and disciplined subjects necessary for the Industrial Revolution" (Scott 1994b: 265, fn.12; Cf. K. M. de Silva 1969: 375-6). The values of "individualism, spiritual democracy, and a rational self-improvement through labour," (Comaroff 1985: 10), which were encompassed within its moral order and disseminated within England and across its Empire *via* a density of practices in Evangelical schools, could also lead us to posit that the Evangelical missionaries not only endeavoured to 'instruct' the poor or 'convert' the 'native heathens', but that they also sought to make productive national and native bodies. Bodies that were ready for industrial labour by being disciplined to perform routinized tasks that were punctuated by the chiming of the clock or the ringing of the church bell (Cf. Michel Foucault 1979); as well as bodies that were proficient in domestic work -- the feminized and bourgeois corollary of masculinized industrial labour (Cf. Hall 1979). This "self-disciplinary work," as Bryan Turner put it so aptly, meant, in effect, "that to civilise was to trammel" (cited in Roberts *et al* 1989: 65).

Obscene Tongues and Restless Bodies: Missionary Encounters with the Heathen

David Scott, while delineating important distinctions between the Old British Colonial System of Empire, which rested on "the application of a mute physical force" on the bodies of slaves, and the New Colonial System of Empire which replaced it with "techniques of subjectification, surveillance and discipline," notes that the colonial missions were very much the emblems of the latter system. And critical to this "modality of colonial power" in the nineteenth century was the influence of Evangelicalism both in England and across its Empire (Scott 1994b: 139; Cf. Knorr 1944). Indeed, "the Evangelical impulse," notes K.M. de Silva, "gave to colonial administration a continuity and a sense of purpose that was even more marked than that provided by the secular creed of laisser-faire" (de Silva 1965: 24). The Evangelical movement sought to invest Christian practice "with an earnestness and conviction, with an urgent sense of the depravity of man, and

4 In this venture, they shared much with the "methodism" of John Wesley except that Wesley sought to reform religion and society by breaking away from the Church of England, while the Clapham Sect chose to launch their project of reform while still remaining within the Church of England (Hall 1979). Hall also provides an excellent discussion of the Clapham Sect's influence in transforming English national morality, a significant proportion of which was premised on relegating the woman to the home.

the need for salvation" through an intensely individual experience of conversion (Scott 1994b: 139-140). Therefore, the fate of the 'heathen races' in the outposts of the colonial Empire became a central concern of the Evangelists, who viewed education as being the most crucial means of 'civilizing' and reforming the 'natives,' while simultaneously eroding the foundations of the indigenous religions (de Silva 1969: 378; cf. Ruberu 1962: 111-14).[5]

It was the pressure exerted by the Evangelicals that was largely responsible for the acceptance of education as a responsibility of the colonial state, both in Ceylon and India, at a time when such a policy was still a matter of great controversy in England (de Silva 1969: 378; cf. Ruberu 1962: 111-14). It is also no coincidence, then, that when the majority of the missions first set up station in Ceylon, they did so at a time when the colonial administrators both in England and Ceylon were either members of the Evangelical movement or acutely influenced by it.[6] During the tenure of Governor Robert Brownrigg (1811-1820), who along with his wife was a "devout Christian" and "full of sympathy with missionary effort" (Ferguson 1898), there arrived in Ceylon the Baptist Mission in 1812,[7] the Wesleyan Mission in 1814,[8] the American Missionary Society in 1816,[9] and the Church Missionary

5 I will not discuss the impact of the Evangelical movement in America, but suffice it to say, that the American missionaries who worked in Ceylon espoused a similar philosophy and aspired to similar goals as will be obvious from my discussion in the rest of the paper.

6 Key administrators in the Colonial Office in England such as the Permanent Under-Secretary James Stephen and the Colonial Secretary, Glenelg as well as the Colonial Governor of Ceylon, Stewart Mackenzie (1837-41) were members of the Evangelical movement, while the Colonial Secretary, the third Earl Grey and the Colonial Governor of Ceylon, Robert Brownrigg (1812-1820) as well as a host of subordinate officials were very sympathetic towards its ideals (de Silva 1965: 26 & de Silva 1969: 380-81).

7 The chief objective of the Baptist Missionary Society which was founded in 1792 in Northamptonshire, England, was to spread the word of Christ "through the whole world beyond the British Isles" (Historical Sketches of the Baptist mission 1850: 5).

8 The Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society was founded in 1739 by John Wesley as an outcome of the Evangelical revival in England. The arrival of the mission in Ceylon was mainly due to the exertions of the Chief Justice of Ceylon, Alexander Johnston (1805-1819), who met William Wilberforce in London in 1809 and requested him to send a Protestant mission to undertake religious and educational activities in Ceylon (Ruberu 1961; Jayasuriya n.d.: 57). The Wesleyan Missionaries also pioneered the Sunday School movement in Ceylon (Harvard 1823: 371).

9 The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions headquartered in Boston, was founded in 1820 by the general association of Massachusetts for the purpose of converting 'heathens' to Christianity, in the East. The members of the Board represented Congregationalists and Presbyterians, while some laymen such as physicians and printers were also part of the missions. Many of the missionaries were trained at the Theological Seminary in Andover, Mass. The first American missionary to Ceylon, Rev Sam Newell, actually arrived in Galle by accident, in 1814 (on his way back from visiting Mauritius after the colonial government in India had forbidden him to remain in the country). He was received very kindly by Governor Brownrigg and though he did manage to set up station in India later that year, he recommended that the Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions send a mission to Ceylon. (Tennent 1850: 108-12; See also Ruberu 1962: 149, fn 7 and Fernando 1950a: 110). Though foreigners on British soil, the Americans were treated with great

Society in 1818.[10] In addition to these missions, there existed in the country at that time the Roman Catholic Missions -- Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans and Augustinians -- which had been set up during the Portuguese governance of the maritime provinces of Ceylon from 1505-1658, the Dutch Reformed Church that was set up during the governance of the maritime provinces by the Dutch East India Company from 1658-1796, and the London Missionary Society which arrived in Ceylon in 1805 during the governance of those provinces by the British under the administration of Governor Frederick North.[11] However, Tennent notes that "so rapid" had been the decline of Christianity after the departure of the Dutch colonists that when the Anglican missions arrived between 1812 and 1818, the Protestant form of Christianity "might be considered almost extinct." The work of conversion had to be commenced afresh and "a new agency and system were to be introduced, differing in every essential and particular from that resorted to by the clergy of Portugal and Holland" (Tennent 1850: 106-7).[12] It was crucial that no credence should be attached, as had been the wont of the Portuguese and Dutch,

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cordiality by Governor Brownrigg who saw them as espousing a similar philosophy of moral reforms as the other missionaries. However, the American missionaries did not fare as well with Brownrigg 's successor, Governor Barnes (1824-1831), who along with the Home Office's support, openly thwarted the mission's efforts for expansion and development. However, the missionaries received a respite when Barnes was replaced by Governor Robert Wilmot Horton (1831- 1837) who rescinded some of the colonial government's strictures against them. Their power was further consolidated through the recommendations of Colebrook-Cameron Commission (Ruberu 1962: 158-161, 193-6 & 254-5). Nevertheless, the Americans confined themselves to the Jaffna peninsula throughout their mission in Ceylon --partly because of its strategic location in relation to India which was the mission's main target in South Asia, partly because the colonial government wished them to be as far away as possible from the capital and the headquarters of British missionaries (Russell 1982: 21; Ruberu 1962: 160-1).

10 Founded in England in 1799, the CMS was the missionary wing of the Church of England. The CMS had been considering Ceylon as a possible site for missionary work as early as 1801. However, it was only after interest in the mission was created in Ceylon by Rev. Claudius Buchanan and the Chief Justice Alexander Johnston, the latter who was instrumental in forming several CMS Associations in the country, that any serious attention was to the island (Jayasuriya n.d.: 64; Fernando 1950b).

11 Since the LMS (founded in England in 1795) worked in cooperation with the Netherland Missionary Society (founded in 1797), the four missionaries arrived who in Ceylon were Dutch (Ruberu 1962: 140, fn 3). The missionaries worked closely with the colonial government by superintending government schools and were thus paid by the government. While the parent society applauded this affiliation, it also made no effort to increase the strength of its Mission in Ceylon and by 1816 had stopped listing it as one of their mission stations. The LMS was thus the most short-lived mission in Ceylon (Ruberu 1960; see also Fernando 1949: 198-208).

12 Tennent also notes that according to the Baptist missionaries who had most frequently come into contact with the Roman Catholic priesthood and their 'converts' in the Western province, the Roman Catholic Sinhalese were the "most superstitious, and sunk in ignorance even below the heathen who surround them." In addition, there were "no books or tracts on Christianity in circulation amongst them -- their schools few and inefficient -- of the great mass of the adult population a smaller proportion of Roman Catholics able to read than of any other religious community in the Island -- and in short, all the public operations of the priesthood apparently directed on the principle that the less religion is understood, the more it is likely to become revered and feared" (based on the Notes of Rev. J Davies, Tennent 1850: 116-7).

to the "sincerity of multitudinous conversions, the result of no mental exercitation, and the origin of no moral improvement" (Tennent 1850: 114). The fact that all the Protestant missionaries were well cognisant of this is epitomised in the American missionary, Rev. William Howland's statement that it was "the *moral* condition of the Hindoo[*sic*] which creates a demand for missionary labour" (Howland 1865: 5, emphasis in original).[13]

While thus "estimating" the "nature of the work" to be done in the northern reaches of Ceylon which was where all the American stations were congregated,[14] Rev. Howland was also quick to stress that though the Tamil Hindus were heathens and idolaters, they were "not sunk to that depth of degradation found in Africa and the islands of the Pacific. Their dress, their houses, and their manner of life are such as not to require a material change on their becoming Christians" (Howland 1865: 3-4). Yet, a close reading of any missionary text on the Hindus of northern Ceylon or the Buddhists of southern Ceylon tell a different story. The missionaries' labours to bring about the moral salvation of their heathen populace in fact was centrally premised on the transformation of their spiritual as well as their material manners of life.[15] Sir Emerson Tennent best captures the simultaneity of such changes in his

13 With regard to the Buddhist Sinhalese in the south of the island, Sir Emerson Tennant caustically pointed out that the "most formidable difficulty which the missionary had to overcome is the listlessness and indifference to all religion engendered by the feeble moral sense of the Singhalese[*sic*] themselves. Even the civilizing rudiments of their own social creed they are deplorably ignorant of " (Tennent 1850: 250).

14 It is the opinion of many scholars of this period that one of the chief reasons for the great success of the American Missionaries in Ceylon was that they focused all their resources and manpower on one region of the island instead of spreading themselves too thin (Ruberu 1962: 163; Fernando 1951: 191). The Wesleyan Missionary Society and the Church Missionary Society, the two most powerful missions in Ceylon had stations both in the north and south of the island. While the CMS was the first mission which was encouraged to work in the newly conquered territory of the Kandyan Kingdom in the 'interior' of the island, in 1818, the Wesleyan mission never set up station in that region (Rev. Fernando, 1950b: 205-6). The Baptist Missionary Society which not only had the smallest contingent of missionaries in the country, but whose stations were continuously besieged by financial problems, limited themselves to a few missions along the south-west coastal region and the Kandyan region; they were the best represented mission in the latter area (Ruberu 1962: 145-6; de Silva 1965: 26-7). In short, missionary activity was concentrated on the maritime regions of the north, the east and the south-west, the regions which had been under European domination since the sixteenth century, while the Kandyan region, which had fended off conquest until 1815, was where the resistance of Buddhism was at its strongest and the "progress of Christian instruction" at its slowest (de Silva 1965: 27, Tennent 1850: 91 & 300-9)

15 I want to make clear here that I am not suggesting that the missionaries **did not** have differential responses to Buddhism and Hinduism. As David Scott pointed out, British colonialism's attitudes towards the various religions they encountered requires careful historicization, analysis and qualification. He himself has provided a definitive genealogy of British colonial production of knowledge about Sinhala religious practice (see David Scott 1994b, chapter 5). The point I want to make here is that despite the fact missionaries perceived the two religions differently, they were agreed on the fact that both religions were not only inferior to Christianity, but that they also had an exceedingly deleterious effect on the mental and countenances of the 'natives'.

observations that: "there is no missionary station . . . in the neighbourhood of which we may not discern the awakened energy of the people, the embellishments of their dwellings, the openings of village roads, the enlargement of their gardens, and the general extension of cultivation" (Tennent 1850: 324). The harbingers of moral salvation in collocation with civility and civilization are signalled here through the familiar tropes of awakening and opening, embellishment and cultivation.[16]

The moral cultivation of the native populace was also specifically gendered. "The first missionaries speak for the condition of the female part of the population," notes Wesleyan missionary, Rev. Spence Hardy, "as such as could neither be described nor believed by those accustomed to breathe only the wholesome atmosphere of Christianity; and tell of their mental degradation, their moral depravity, and the wretchedness of their lives" (Hardy 1864: 253). The abasement of the native women by their men and their religion was perceived as being enough qualification "to initiate a mission against paganism" and once such a "mission" was initiated, it was soon discovered that "[w]hatever Christianity may do for the man, for the woman it does more" (*ibid*: 250-52).[17] Indeed, the Sinhala women, when converted and civilized, "were much more intelligent, decent in outward appearance and more moral than others" (Selkirk 1844: 324); as if "they belonged to a different race" (Hardy 1864: 250). These women's morality, we can then surmise, was clearly signposted through a transformation of their minds and their bodies -- they now displayed 'intelligence', which in the early years of missionary activity most often meant a knowledge of the scriptures (e.g. see Winslow 1835: 166 and Selkirk 1844: 250 & 482); and an 'outward appearance', 'demeanour' or 'countenance' which was frequently embellished with adjectives, such as 'decent', 'domestic', 'modest', 'gentle', 'simple', 'submissive' and 'shy'. It is the notion of (moral) appearance that I would like to pursue further in this paper.

This moral appearance or demeanour, I would suggest, was engendered through a particular lifestyle or 'manner of living' that required the disciplining of women's bodies and their sexuality through the regulation of bodily gestures, movements,

16 For a discussion of similar material transformations in Africa, see example, Comaroff & Comaroff (1991); Hansen (ed.) (1992); Hunt (1990: 447-474); in the Pacific, see for example Grimshaw (1989); Jolly (1991: 27-48) and Pollock (1989: 53-82).

17 It was doubly in the interests of the missionaries to educate and convert the women because it was, they who were perceived as most attached to their 'heathen' religions: "They tell their husbands that, if they become Christians, they will throw themselves into the well; and mean what they say. These mothers take their young children to the temple and teach them to bow before the idol, and smear their faces with ashes (Leitch & Leitch 1890: 10; cf. Harris, 1994: 41).

dress and marital relationships simultaneous with the disciplining of the mind.[18] Such "careful redefinition of seemingly insignificant details of habitual process," notes Jean Comaroff, are not only products of the processes of "deculturation" and "reculturation" that "produce a new man[*sic*]" within "totalitarian institutions" such as Goffman's asylums, but also, *pace* Monica Wilson, bear a marked resemblance to routines that accompany millenary Christianity (Comaroff 1985: 543; cf. Bourdieu, 1977: 94). Extending such an argument even further, I suggest that projects to disseminate the fundamental principles of a moral womanhood were most successfully carried out by totalitarian institutions such as the missionary schools (see below for a further discussion). It is thus not surprising that what first struck Rev. James Selkirk of the Church Missionary Society, when visiting a Sinhala village in February 1837, was the "very great difference in the *manner* and *conduct*" between the women who had been taught in the Christian girls' schools and those who had not. He further reports that while the former "were intelligent, ready to converse and answer any question that was asked them on religion," the latter were "ignorant, some of them impertinent, or if not so, ran away into their houses, and talked to us through the windows, and had not the least knowledge of religion" (Selkirk 1844: 481-2, emphasis mine). These unschooled women's ignorance, once again framed in terms of a knowledge of religion, is also coupled here with a reading of their conduct and manner as being impertinent and uncivil -- they ran away and talked through the windows. Colonial administrator James Emerson Tennent also stresses the vulgar, unrestrained manner of Sinhala women in their "secluded villages", who "especially cherish the spirit of discord, and rise in furious passions against each other, which are vented by railings, loud, virulent, and obscene (Tennent 1850: 251).

In northern Ceylon, the 'uncivility' of Tamil women was subjected to even more intense scrutiny by Harriet Winslow, who accompanied her husband Miron Winslow, one of the first missionaries representing the American Board for Foreign Missions, who set up station at Uduvil. Though women were not allowed to be missionaries in their own right during this period, Harriet Winslow nevertheless played a crucial role in propagating Christianity among Tamil women and children; and was instrumental in founding, in 1824, "one of the oldest girls'

18 Roberts et al. (1989) point to a similar articulation of (moral) womanhood influenced by European Romanticism (first learned in English mission schools), that was valorised by Burgher 'Cultured Gentlemen' who contributed articles to the journal *Young Ceylon* (1850-52) during the mid-nineteenth century (see especially p.74).

schools in Asia."[19] Mrs Winslow's copious official and private correspondences as well as meticulous diary notations on the "details of missionary operations," unlike those produced by the majority of her European counterparts representing other Christian missions in northern and southern Ceylon, were posthumously edited by her husband and published in 1835 (Winslow 1835: 4).[20] This publication along with many others of that genre were crucial in keeping alive interest and support for the missionary effort back home in America.[21] Unlike the annual reports on the progress of Uduvil Girls' School that were submitted to the American Board of Missions every year or Minnie Harrison's history of the school written to coincide with its centennial celebrations in 1924, Mrs Winslow's memoirs move beyond the mere documentation of mission successes to capture for us the "*particulars"* of her daily experience; her painful encounters with native women often led her to seek re-affirmation of her own civility and morality rather than *vice versa*.

During Harriet Winslow's early encounters with Tamil women, she writes despairingly of the "heathenish indifference" exhibited on these women's faces and sometimes when they "appear attentive, we may unexpectedly find every opportunity embraced to turn aside their heads, and laugh" (Winslow 1835: 163-64). These women's talkativeness and "careless ease," their restlessness and inattentiveness whenever Winslow attempted to spread her "message" and induce them "to 'come with us that we may do them good,'" often provoked the further condemnation that these women "know nothing, and fear nothing" and that they "seem to glory in their obstinancy and degradation" (Winslow 1835: 184 & 368). Against these seeming character faults of the native women-- obstinacy, fearlessness, talkativeness, restlessness, inattentiveness and careless ease -- Mrs Winslow constantly constructed herself as their antithesis, an exemplar of one who walks "softly before God;" to this end she desired to "be *moderate in all things-not*

19 I take this from the subtitle of Minnie Hastings Harrison's book, *Uduvil, 1824-1924: being the history of one of the oldest girls' schools in Asia* (1925). Harriet Winslow was a committed advocate of female missionaries and believed them to be teachers than men: "when I see missionaries who by close thinking and by intercourse only with men of thought like themselves are accustom certain use of words beyond the comprehension of the ignorant, attempting to instruct children, I am more and more convinced that *females* also should be employed among the heathen" (Winslow 1835: 185 [emphasis mine]; cf. Jayawardena 1995: 34-5).

20 If any journals were kept by the Baptist Missionaries, they did not survive the bombardment received by the Baptist archives during World War II. Journals kept by the Wesleyan missionaries have also not survived. However, it is reported that the CMS archives contain 19 boxes of unpublished letters and journals written by their missionaries (de Silva 1965: 303-4).

21 See especially the Appendix written by Rev. Miron Winslow which is an impassioned plea for "working men" to become missionaries, "the most humble and self-denying of labors" (Winslow 1835: 401-7).

hasty, in speaking or acting- *be kind to all- not talkative-not noisy- be thoughtful- be brave* -and *much in ejaculatory prayer*" (Winslow 1835: 397, emphasis in original).

Though Mrs Winslow, whose "labours of love among the Tamul [*sic*] people" spanned 13 years, had tried to instil in the native a women "moral and religious character" through her daily visits to them at home well as through the founding of a maternal association for "mutual aid" and "training up their children," she was forced to acknowledge at the end that though some more "special exertions" had been made to convert native women, "there is still but little encouragement, for they are more 'mad upon their idols' than even the men, and seem to glory in their obstinacy and degradation" (Winslow 1835: 399, 184, 182 & 368). The continued resistance of many Tamil women to the missionary women's efforts to "Do them good" was, most often successfully circumvented through the conversion and disciplining of their daughters and subsequent generations, through missionary schools in general and boarding schools in particular.[22]

In the following section, I will explore some of the educational practices that were pursued in the girls' boarding schools, with a particular focus on one of the oldest ones, Uduvil. However, it is important to note that there were many types of schools (the ones which taught English being perceived to be more superior to the ones which taught exclusively in the vernacular languages of Tamil and Sinhala) that were founded by the various missionary groups.[23] Take, for example, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, who were described as having "the best equipped and most elaborate education structure," one that "surpassed, any similar work of the English missions in the rest of the Island" (Wyndham 1933: 45; Ruberu 1962: 255).[24] They maintained three categories of schools out of which

22 In the south, Wesleyan missionaries pursued a similar trajectory when they sought to "establish schools that they might have access to the mothers, as they appeared to be no other way of breaking through the barrier that surrounded them" (Hardy 184: 253).

23 In 1834, there were 236 mission schools that catered to a student body of approximately 9,250 with an attendee rate of 40% (Ruberu, 1962: 236). The Wesleyans had established 90 schools with a student's body of around 4,500, the Americans, 78 schools with a student's body of 3,095 (2,612 boys, 483 girls), the CMS, 53 schools with around 1800 students (1,556 boys, 254 girls), and the Baptists, 15 schools serving around 600 students (478 boys, 128 girls) (Ruberu 1962: chaps VI & VII).

24 For a detailed discussion of the educational systems established by other missionary groups, see Ruberu (1962: chapter VI and VII). It is also important to bear in mind that though the colonial government only played a secondary role (and secular private establishments to a lesser extent) in the education of the 'natives' during the period, they did maintain a large number of schools as well. The educational services that were provided by various Buddhist temples were never tabulated or even considered worthy of investigation by colonial administrators and commissioners, such as W. M. G. Colebrook. For an extensive discussion on

the most numerous were the (l) Village or Native schools which were free and co-educational. They provided a very elementary education in Tamil so that native children would be "fit to understand" Christianity and to "raise a Tamil reading population" (Ruberu 1962: 189) -- no doubt, to read the voluminous supply of Christian tracts that were produced by the Mission press![25] Many of these schools also taught needlework to the girls and some appropriate 'vocational' skill to the boys on the premise of providing suitable training for low-level blue-collar employment as domestic servants and artisans. There were 78 such schools in 1833 providing education to 612 boys and 483 girls. A selection of the brighter students from the Native Schools were accepted into the (2) Central Day Schools -- some which were free and others which charged a nominal fee -- and provided a secondary education that was adequate for the procurement of low-level, white-collar employment in the government. The students were taught Christianity, Tamil, English, Geography and Arithmetic. There were only three such schools in the region which had a total enrolment of 75 students (all boys) in 1832. While the curriculum in the sex-segregated (3) Charity Boarding Schools was similar to that taught in the Day Schools, the students in the Boarding Schools were also "fed, clothed, and educated at the expense of the Mission" (Quoted in Ruberu, 1962, p. 190). The Mission maintained two boarding schools, one for boys at Tellippalai and one for girls at Uduvil. In 1833 there were 85 boys enrolled at Tellippalai and 50 girls at Uduvil. After great hardship, due to the colonial government's hostility towards this project, a Seminary for the exclusive preparation of native ministers and teachers was also established in Batticotta in 1827. The "most forward lads" were selected to this institution of higher learning from the Tellippalai Charity Boarding School (Ruberu 1962: 197).[26]

Docile Bodies and Domestic Arts

One of the chief aims in the setting up of sex-segregated boarding schools in Ceylon was to remove children from "daily intercourse with the heathen" (which included their parents) and the "evil" and "decadent" "customs and manners"

non-missionary schools (see Ruberu 1962: chapter VIII).

25 The printing press employed 82 workmen and produced 50,000 volumes annually during its first twenty years in operation (Wyndham 1933: 45).

26 Excerpt from the *First report of the American Missionary Seminary* (Ruberu 1962). For a discussion of Brownrigg's successor, Governor Barnes attempts to block the founding of a College for Higher Education, see Ruberu (1962: 193-6).

of "idolatry."[27] Girls' boarding schools, in particular, were considered crucial in keeping young girls "*pure* and *uncontaminated* till married with the approbations of their Christian guardians" and trained "in all the discipline and acquirements essential to economy and domestic enjoyments at home" (Tennent 1850: 159-161, emphasis mine). While some of the first girls' boarding schools were founded in northern Ceylon by missionaries representing different Christian denominations -- the American missionaries at Uduvil in 1824, the Wesleyans at Vembadi in 1834 and the CMS missionaries at Nallur in 1842 -- their unmitigated success prompted a proliferation elsewhere in the island as well as in other colonies.[28, 29] After visiting several of these schools, even the Director of Public Instruction was forced to concede that "the agencies of the Christian Churches in Ceylon had with one consent recognized the value of female education as a *moral power* in the home and in the principal centre of their educational activity." The boarding schools they had established, he further noted, "had become powerful agencies *to raise the tone and manners* of the lower social strata." He thus went on to conclude that if the British Government wished to procure "permanent and indelible rather than transitory results," the cost of educating one girl in a Mission boarding school or a Convent "was worth ten times the sum for a girl taught in a day school" (Bruce 1910: 32, emphasis mine).

The success of the boarding schools from this point of view, I suggest, was largely dependent on several strategies that were adopted by the missionaries to create a particular ambience in which they could propagate 'womanliness' as a manner of living, a manner of style that suggests underlying dispositions of piety, modesty and morality. They sequestered the native girls from their parents as well as the

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27 *First report of the female girls' boarding school in Varanay,* Jaffna: Press of the American Mission, 1843: 3, Tennent 1850: 155, Wilson 1976: 61 & Winslow, 1835: 47). Segregation occurred at several levels here as the students were segregated from the other sex, from their parents and homes and often even from their previous identity; they were bestowed with a new name and character dependent on whom their benefactor might be in England or America. CMS Missionary Rev. Adley describes such a process thus: ". . . I baptized the boys in the name of Edward Bickersteth, William Marsh, Joseph Pratt..., and afterwards described to them the character of the persons whose names they bore, with solemn exhortation that they would follow them as they followed Christ" (cited in Ruberu 1962: 214-5; Cf. Tennent 1850: 179). For a description of a similar process that occurred in the American Mission's girls' boarding schools, see Wilson (1976: 61).

28 Tennent notes that it was the American missionaries' success at Uduvil that "smoothed the way for similar efforts on the part of their fellow labourers", instead of courting and canvassing for pupils, the CMS missionaries embarrassed to find that they had more applicants than they could handle when they opened their Girls' Boarding School eighteen years later (ibid: 61).

29 Their successes in Ceylon spurred the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to adopt a similar policy in Hawaii and in 1837, the Waikulu Girls' Seminary was opened "at a discreet geographical distance" from the boys' high school (Grimshaw 1989: 40-1).

rest of society for extensive lengths of time,[30] thus creating what Foucault aptly called "a protected place of disciplinary monotony (Foucault 1979: 141), within which the student' body, her mind and her soul could he instructed and shepherded in a capillary way. The missionaries who donned the doubly authoritative mantle of being both the student's teachers as well as parents, thus transformed the boarding school into a space of power as well as a place of care; the stable, almost 'other-worldly' environment that was created and the parental authority vested in the missionaries enabled them to supervise and discipline every waking hour of the girls -- down to the "smallest fragment of life and of the body" -- with great precision and purpose (Foucault 1979: 140).[31] For, as Rev. Spence Hardy notes, "[t]he alphabet is no spell in itself, to exorcise the demonism of many generations and of whole districts" (Hardy 1864: 253).

I would like to understand such disciplining through Foucault's notion of 'techniques of government' which in its widest meaning extends between "the way in which you govern your wife, your children, as well as the way you govern an institution" (Foucault 1987: 130); the sum of both which is encompassed within the boarding school. Most crucially, for my project at hand here, 'techniques of government' provide a bridge between the missionaries' needs to determine the (moral) conduct of the native girls and their attempts to maintain and continue such a formation of domination. The most tried and tested 'technique of government' in this regard was the timetable (an inheritance from the monasteries) which established rhythms, imposed particular occupations and regulated the cycles of repetition. Here, time "penetrates the body and with it all the meticulous controls of power"; it extracts from the body "ever more useful forces" (Foucault 1987: 130). Part of such an usefulness entailed the need to guard against the possibilities of the native collapsing into her natural condition of sinfulness (Hall 1979: 17). The resilience obvious efficacy of a timetable at the oldest girls' boarding school in Ceylon- Uduvil -- is manifested in Mrs Harrison's statement that "in many respects" it continued to be followed even a hundred years later (Hall 1979: 17).

30 At Uduvil for example, the girls were allowed to spend a day and two nights at home once a month and were forbidden to go "at other times except case of sickness, death or weddings" (Winslow 1835: 255; also cited in Hastings 1925: 10).

31 The missionaries' positioning themselves as the parents of the girls extended to providing them with a dowry and often, finding a suitable marriage partner who was also a Christian (see below). Harriet Winslow in describing how her girls' school acquired her first boarder notes that it was only after the girl had had to stay overnight at the mission house due to a storm and had 'lost caste' due to her partaking of a meal with them that managed to convince her father to bring her back a few weeks later and hand her over to their keeping with the words: "you have been like a father and mother to her, so you may now take her, but tell me what you will do for her; you must find her a husband" (Winslow 1835: 254).

5.00 am **:** rising bell, arranging bedding, washing faces and hands.

5.30 am **:** Bible verses and hymns assigned for the day would be memorized followed by morning worship.
The girls would then separate to perform their chores-- sweeping, dusting, cooking etc.

8.00 am **:** breakfast of cold boiled rice and curds.
All meals would be taken sitting in rows "facing each other -- each with a brass plate or basin to receive her portion"

8.45 am **:** devotions

9.00 am **:** lessons began

1.00 pm **:** lunch

1.45 pm **:** writing lessons

2.30 pm –
4.30 pm **:** sewing

5.00 pm **:** evening worship
After a supper of boiled rice and pepper water, the school would re-assemble for another hour of evening study which would be followed by singing and prayers

8.00 pm : bed

The daily routine at Uduvil was crucial for the student's insertion into a regimen of Christian worship — interspersing her day with prayers, hymns and Bible readings; [32] religion was to be a daily rule of life rather than a matter of doctrinal purity (Cf. Hall, 1979: 17), or "adoption without surrender of opinion" (Tennent 1850: 29). It also sought to inculcate in the student particular Christian values which for Mrs Winslow, for example, were meant to be epitomised by the female missionary: "Her education should be practical and solid rather than theoretical and showy, and whatever may be her situation, habits of great industry, economy, and self-denial are of the utmost importance. It is well to have them previously formed and established by practice" (Winslow 1835: 310). The key words here are practicality, industry, economy, self-denial and repetition. In terms of practicality and industry, the students were trained to labour not only at their lessons, but at their domestic chores as well, sweeping and cleaning their dormitories, prayer

32 Adapted here from ibid: 21-3. Helen Montgomery, chronicler of the exploits of the American Board of Mission's women's missionaries, records a similar program of activities which she notes was "fairly typical" in a "well-organized missionary boarding school in the Orient" (Montgomery, 1910: 99-100). Also see Denzer (1992: 119) for a similar example of a strict regimen that was adopted by the Church Missionary Society in Ihadut, Nigeria.

rooms, schoolrooms, dining hall and compound. The missionaries who took over from the Winslow's assigned "the first or highest class" to sweep and clean the mission house as well "under the personal supervision of the missionary ladies" (Harrison 1925: 22). While two Tamil Christian women had been hired as cooks for the school, it was also their "duty" to instruct the girls "day by day" in cooking and the preparation of ingredients -- grinding curry stuffs and coconuts.[33] Such labour also contributed to a sense of self sufficiency and economy within the mission as hired help was kept to a minimum with the girls providing many of the services themselves. The cultivation of an ethic of self-denial among the girls is evident through the grim regimentation of their day that seems to provide them with little time for leisure. Their food, similarly, was very simple and without much variety; their breakfast of cold boiled rice (usually left over from the night before) and curd enlivened "with plantains occasionally" (Harrison 1925: 22). The daily routine, like other forms of drills and exercises, not only contributed to an economy of movement, but also "imposed on the body tasks that [were] both repetitive and different, but always graduated" (Foucault 1979: 161).

The propagation of a Christian manner of living was further advanced by a set of rules which was in force from the inception of Uduvil but printed and hung up in the school hall around 1848. Though Harrison was proud to note that these rules "reflect the ideals of America in young ladies' select seminaries in the [eighteen] forties and fifties" (Harrison 1925: 22), they can be dated even further back as they very much ear the stamp of Harriet Winslow. In the same way that Winslow desired to walk "softly before God," to be moderate in all things -- neither hasty nor noisy in speaking or acting (see above), the first rule at Uduvil required that "Girls whenever they sit or walk or run should be quiet, orderly and submissive." The orderliness, obedience and punctuality of students was further ensured with the second rule that "Girls who do not go to their meals as soon as the bell rings, shall lose their food." While punishment through denial was meted out through rule 3, rule 4 successfully inserted chosen students into the system of surveillance by making them vigilant of other student's lapses and giving them the authority to hold them accountable: "Monitors must only point out the faults [of the girls in their charge] but also point out the individuals who have committed such faults" (*ibid*:

33 Mrs Winslow was very assiduous about converting her domestics (her husband notes that no domestic "lived in her family any number of years without becoming a Christian" [Winslow 1835, p. 397]) not merely to increase their 'fold', I suspect, but rather to ensure their honesty for she was often won to exclaim that "[a]n honest domestic is not to be expected" and that they could have no "dependence on them" (*ibid*, p.172).

23).[34] As Harriet Winslow remarked of the early heathen women she encountered: "[i]f they can be made to feel that they are sinners, much, very much, is gained" (Winslow 1835: 301). The individuation of students by making them confront their respective sinful characters was also replicated, for example at meal times, where each student was assigned her own plate to eat from (a strange phenomenon for someone who was used to eating out of a common dish) and given the responsibility of washing and scouring it; "it was a matter of common pride to keep [the brass plate] bright and shining like a polished metal mirror" (Chamberlain 1925: 83).[35]

Rules 2 and 5 sought to further inculcate an ethic of self-denial, while simultaneously stamping out what the missionaries' perceived as ostentatious and uncivil "native customs":

> No child while a member of the school shall be allowed to pierce the nose for a jewel or wear on if pierced before, on penalty of immediate dismissal. Jewels for the toes are wholly disapproved of and not allowed.[36]
>
> Girls who use betel and tobacco shall for the first time be fined a dollar; for the second offence two dollars. If found the third time they shall be dismissed (Harrison 1925: 23).

34 Such a system was further extended in many secondary schools run by the Wesleyan mission as well as in some government schools established by Governor Brownrigg, through the introduction of the Bell or Madras Monitorial System. This system involved the practice of training pupils to teach other pupils. Dr Andrews Bell originated this scheme in Madras when he experienced a shortage of teachers and introduced it in English schools in 1811 where it became very popular during the early nineteenth century (Ruberu 1962: fn 1 & 179).

35 I will resist the temptation here to make a connection between the role of mirrors in enabling an awareness of individuality and uniqueness!

36 There are interesting resonances here with the Joy Tax that was imposed by the British government (from around 1798-1808) during the tenure of Governor Frederick North (1798-1805) in an attempt to make a financial recovery after the disastrous Madras administration. Unlike the other exploitative taxes imposed on the natives, the Joy Tax was to have a prohibitive effect on female education. Since this tax gave the government the authority to charge one shilling from every individual who wore ornaments, parents started keeping their daughters from school as they did not wish them to go out in public unadorned as they were too poor or wished to resist the payment of this tax (Ruberu 1962: 56, fn 1, & 63). It is interesting to note that twenty years later, the importance of education had become so paramount in the lives of the Tamil people that a ban on the wearing of ornaments did not lead to a mass withdrawal of their children from the school (the boarding school however is also a space that blurs the boundaries between public and private as it is a public institution but nevertheless cloisters its students from the public. The fact that their unadorned daughters did not have to make daily treks between home and school must definitely have been a source of relief for the parents).

According to Harrison, tobacco, betel leaf and arecanut were regarded as stimulants and beautifiers by Tamil women and, interestingly, it was the rule that strove to ban their use that generated the greatest amount of resistance, or in Harrison's terms, disobedience, by the girls" (Harrison 1925: 23-4).[37] Fines, constant speeches on its evils by members of the school committee and even a voluntarily written pledge by native teachers to "discontinue the afore-mentioned articles while engaged in teaching," did not deter the girls until it was announced that their fines would be subtracted from the dowry that was promised to each girl when she completed her schooling (Harrison 1925: 24).

The missionaries' grim determination to legislate what and how and at when the native girls' should study, worship, eat and perform their ablutions along with how they should adorn themselves, regulate their gait, gestures and speech recalls Bourdieu's theorization of the "hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, and ethic . . . through injunctions as insignificant as 'stand up straight' or 'don't hold your knife in your left hand'" (Bourdieu 1977: 94). While Bourdieu's formulations sought to understand the embodiment of the "arbitrary content" of Algerian culture, I suggest it can also be applied to understand the transformations that occur within a culture when it encounters another culture, a different moral order, in a relation of power. The mission boarding school was an ideal space in which youthful, gendered bodies could be cloistered from the rest of society, 'dismembered' of previous cultural meanings and imbued with a new 'remembering'; by "treating the body as a memory," the systematic reform of habitual bodily processes lodges within it, "in abbreviated and practical, i.e., mnemonic, form the fundamental principles of the arbitrary content of the culture." The principles of such a moral order which are "embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness . . . cannot even be made explicit; nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and, therefore, more precious, than the values given body, *made* body" (Bourdieu 1977: 94, emphasis in original). I discuss below what I consider to be the quintessential practice of moral embodiment -- sewing -- so deep are its ramifications at so many levels of a woman's being.

37 She also notes that this rule was adopted "after much consideration" in August 1845.

Pious Hearts and Nimble Fingers

I now return to the daily routine of the Uduvil girls to draw our attention to the centrality of needlework in their education; two hours every day was spent in sewing. Deborah Gaitskell, writing about Christian missionaries in Johannesburg, notes that it always fell to the task of the female missionaries to instruct native girls in sewing while no equivalent 'vocational' subject was taught to the boys, thus allowing male missionaries opportunities for being educational administrators (Gaitskell 1983: 245). A similar situation was in existence in Ceylon. For example, it is reported that though Mrs Spaulding was "too taken with her own children" to shoulder the responsibilities of her predecessor, Harriet Winslow, she nevertheless taught sewing "on which the girls would spend the entire afternoon" (Harrison 1925: 17-18).

Why did the missionaries lay such stress on sewing? As several feminist historians have demonstrated, sewing was a quintessential marker of nineteenth century, middle class domesticity in Euro-America. Not only was sewing the most frequently recorded domestic labour performed by middle class women (Green 1983: 79), but needlework "in all its forms of use, elegance and ornament" was also considered to having "ever been the appropriate occupation of woman" (Welter 1966: 165). It became so metonymic of domesticity that Tennyson could write, albeit with great irony:

> Man for the field and woman for the hearth;
> Man for the sword, and for the needle she
> . . . All else confusion" (quoted in Hall 1980: 62)

Or W. Thayer's painting *Life at the Fireside* could depict an idyllic scene of three generations of women sewing: "the woman of the house mending her children's garments, the grandmother knitting and the little girl taking her first stitches, all in the light of the domestic hearth." (Welter 1966: 165, fn.74). This painting captures very succinctly the graduated assault of a feminizing ideology on the female body and mind simultaneous with her physical and intellect maturation.[38] Missionaries, such as Harriet Winslow, have been quick to add that sewing was also an indispensable qualification for the wife of a poor man "as a missionary is of

38 I am grateful to David Scott for pointing this out to me.

course supposed to be. She must know how to *cut,* and *make,* and *mend* every kind of garment" (Winslow 1835: 308, emphasis in original).[39]

Yet, what was the logic behind its introduction among native women? What was its relationship with practices of conversion, for example? La Ray Denzer suggests that it was part of a missionary "strategy" to win female converts (Denzer 1992: 118). The success of such a possible is strategy highlighted by the American Women's Board of Foreign Missions' Chronicler, Mary Chamberlain, who exclaims how well crocheting, needle-work and embroidery "worked their charm" in the newly "opened" homes of South India (Chamberlain 1925: 28). Sewing also played a crucial role in Harriet Winslow's attempts to entice her first pupils at Uduvil:

> Soon after we came to Oodooville, two little girls were often seen about the house . . . If we spoke to them, they appeared alarmed, and ran away. After a while, . . . they ventured to stop and listen to us, then to sit down on the door-steps few minutes, afterwards to receive a little fruit when offered; and at length, by the promise of a jacket, when they should be able to make one, they were induced to take a needle and learn to sew. They were much pleased, and every day came and sat in the door two or three hours. We then told them of the advantages of being able to read, and persuaded them to try to learn (Winslow 1835: 253-4).

Maria Mies, on the other hand, claims that "there is no doubt" that the missionary women taught lace making to their poor converts (in Narsapur, South India) "in order to help them make a living" (Mies 1982: 30-1). Deborah Gaitskell too considers the enabling of "dressmaking employment" through such a skill as needlework which transcends its "purely domestic connotations" (1983: 245) -- a fact that is corroborated by Rev. James Selkirk as well, who notes that when converted Sinhala girls "go out to service in English and Dutch families they are extremely useful to them with their needles" (Selkirk 1844: 324).

Yet, why was sewing presented as "an indispensable accomplishment for Christian womanhood" even after conversions were obtained (Gaitskell 1983: 245)? I suggest that much more was riding on the acquisition of such a skill and accomplishment. Sewing played a crucial role in the very moulding of Christian women, in the construction of a particular moral demeanour. It was a practice

39 She also notes that when in Ceylon, she was "obliged to cut and prepare" all her clothes as well as those of her children and some of her husband's (*ibid*: 305).

that insisted upon neatness, orderliness, concentration, patience and precision, qualities which Harriet Winslow found so wanting in the native women she tried to convert. Unlike other forms of domesticated labour, it could also be performed with and in complete silence.

The "silent precision of human machinery" involved in the task of sewing was also perceived to be the "perfect image of prison labour" (as opposed to the conversation of the workers and the whistling of the machines in the cotton mills which concomitantly produced a "disorder of ideas and morals") in the nineteenth century female workshops at Clairvaux, notes Michel Foucault as he recalls its echo in the "regulated rigour of the convent" (Foucault 1979: 243-4). The prisoners, seated in rows below a crucifix and supervised by a sister, work in "strictest silence. It seems that, in these halls, the very air breathes penitence and expiation" (Faucher cited in Foucault 1979: 243).

Needlework also invariably imposed a particular posture with which is connected the qualities of restraint, meekness and industry-- straight back, bent head, lowered eyes, busy fingers. The correct folding of the cloth over one's fingers, the placement of the needle at just the right angle, the steady and rhythmic flick of the wrist, every micro gesture and body movement had also to be supervised and disciplined in order to produce the most elegant and perfect stitch -- be it the hemming on an undershirt or the embroidery on a ball dress. Following the dictum "Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do" (Chamberlain, 1925: 96), the Christian missionaries in Ceylon thus produced a new generation of women, their "minds imbued with Christian precepts, and fingers accustomed to needlework" (Selkirk 1844: 516-7). The relationship between minds and hands that Selkirk alludes to here was something that was openly cultivated by the missionaries (see, for example, Winslow's tactics of enticement quoted above), and is brilliantly explicated by a Church Missionary Society headmistress running the Gayaza Girls Boarding School in Uganda:

> We find it well to begin with their capable hands, teaching them handicrafts, and after a time they like them, and are industrious over them. To sewing they take at once, but we do not teach them first to make an entire garment. Then we teach them the alphabet and other rudiments of learning and encourage them at the same time to bring their newly awakened thoughts to hear upon their manual work, the

> garments they want to make etc. The common sense and even initiative that they will develop over needle work is surprising. *We find their minds and their bodies must be educated pari passim* (cited in Nakanyike B. Musisi 1992: 175, emphasis mine).

The pedagogical enterprise al Gayaza thus seems to follow a particular trajectory, from "hand to mind," or, as Nakanyike Musisi puts it, from the practical to the abstract.[40] The coordination and discipline of the hands through practical work, enables a similar process in the mind to grasp the abstract. In light of such a trajectory, then, Spence Hardy's telegraphic description of the moral degradation of women in the village of Kurana in Southern Ceylon, through the exclamation: "the use of the needle was unknown becomes more intelligible" (Hardy 1864: 123).[41] Such a statement not only means that the women of Kurana did not know how to sew, but also the fact that they had not been 'educated' in abstract thoughts and moral virtues. This process of abstraction through 'literacy' and the transformation of consciousness in those who acquire it also parallels the abstractions engendered through monetization; both processes generate an awareness of explicit systems (i.e., of knowledge and value) "beyond the immediate contexts that generate them" (Comaroff 1985: 143).

While the missionaries went to great lengths to stress the fact that it was needle*work*, rather than manual labour, that was considered appropriate for a Christian woman, they never failed to emphasise its practicality and usefulness.[42] The Uduvil Annual Report of 1843 notes that while the girls spend their afternoons "principally in plain sewing," fancy needlework, "of which they are very fond," was only encouraged to a "moderate extent."[43] A later report continues this theme by pointing out the importance of "keeping the ornamental within proscribed bounds" (Quoted in Harrison 1925: 52). Yet as Chamberlain is quick to point out, it was "fancy work"

40 The simultaneity of such a process is best exemplified at the "Lace House" run by the American Board of Missions in South India, where "[u]seful and entertaining books" were read out aloud to occupy the minds of the girls they worked at their lace pillows (Chamberlain 1925: 158).

41 See also Tremnell's Report quoted in Tennent (1850: 311) "the instruction and training of females was so utterly unknown that 'before the missionaries came among them a needle had never been seen in the district'" (see also Selkirk 1844: 245).

42 In Hawaii, the missionaries representing the American Board of Missions went to the extent of changing labour patterns by introducing the cultivation of cash crops among the native men and inducing native women to spend more time in "domestic occupation" -- sewing and knitting and taking their children (Grimshaw 1989: 36-39).

43 *Second report, of the female boarding school at Oodooville*, Jaffna. Jaffna; Press of the American Mission, July 1843: 5.

that brought in revenue and in this sense, one could say it had a practical value (Chamberlain 1925:83). However, the teachers at Uduvil, who by 1843 were mainly instructing the daughters of Tamil elite, were not principally concerned about the lucrativeness of needlework, but rather with its value as a practical but also genteel accomplishment that inculcated an ethic of self-denial and self-control. In same way that they circumscribed the adornment of the girl's body and the stimulation of her senses through the banning of jewellery, betel and tobacco and the rationing of rich foods, they also sought to circumscribe her aesthetic stimulation, vanity and pleasure by moderating her production of "fancy work."

The 'Fine Linen' of Righteousness

Gaitskell ponders whether sewing was "partly a survival of the centrality of Western clothing as a sign of African conversion" (Gaitskell 1983: 245). One could easily substantiate such a claim with, for example, that wonderfully stated photograph entitled "New Fashions for the Congo" in Helen Montgomery's book *Western women in Eastern Lands*, which depicts an obviously converted native woman dressed in a high-necked, long-sleeved white dress, industriously plying her sewing machine (which has on its cover the apt words, "DOMESTIC"!) in the open air while clustering around her are curious women, men and children attired in dark-hued 'native' dress (Montgomery, 1910: 261), or certain answers to the London Missionary Game popular in nineteenth century England and in many mission stations:

> Question: "Where is Pecalsdorp? What change has been produced on the Hottentots there?"
> Answer: "A station in South Africa. The people have changed their sheepskins for European clothing, and a great moral improvement has been produced."[44]

Similarly, American missionaries in Hawaii used sewing as the central cog in a linked chain of domesticating transformations that they wished to impose on the women they converted; sewing not only afforded domestic occupation, but provided the clothing "sorely needed by the whole population, *and the clothes would generate occupation in mending, laundering, ironing and storing*."

44 This game was similar to the contemporary game Trivial Pursuit but had a clear moral and pedagogic agenda while also being a novel way to collect money for the missions-- if one could not answer a question, one had to a pay a fine to the missionary box! (Hamilton 1989: 239, fn 2).

Hawaiian women who had first encountered missionary women ironing and "said with heartfelt sympathy, 'I pity you'," were now themselves relegated to such a pitiful task through the introduction of sewing and clothing" (Grimshaw 1989: 36, emphasis mine). In most colonies, such discourses and practices surrounding the production and maintenance of clothing as well as the transformation of taste in clothing styles and fashions, can also be linked to the development of the textile industry in the mother country through the expansion of markets for imported thread and machine-manufactured cloth within the Empire (Cohn 1996: 143-149).[45]

In Ceylon, the problem that confronted the missionaries was not that the natives did not possess any clothing, but that their system of hierarchy deemed that lower caste men and women should not be clothed above the waist and even those who were authorised to clothe themselves did not do so with any regularity or 'decorum'. The "Kandian [*sic*] women," notes Rev. Spence Hardy, "when in their own homes, and about their every-day work, even with higher classes, in remote villages too much of their clothing is kept in the strong box, and too little worn" (Hardy, 1864: 253). Harriet Winslow reports of a similar dress code among Tamil women, who with the exception of those from higher castes and "those connected with us, or under our influence, seldom wear anything above the waist." The nakedness of their children she finds even more deplorable:

> Children generally wear nothing until they are five or six years old, except a string or a silver chain around their middle[46]…You may easily conceive, therefore, that their minds are soon tilled with all manner of impure thoughts. It is often disgusting to see them, and distressing to know their habits from their earliest years. A door to sin is thus thrown open which no man can shut; and *nothing can do it but Almighty power* (Winslow, 1835: 89, emphasis mine).

Yet Winslow prefaces her account of the "manners of the natives" with the statement that the "native Christians do not change their dress on joining us, nor do we by any means wish it. It is altogether better for them than ours would be" (Winslow

45 The intrusion of foreign cloth and tastes into India, for example, led to the near demise of its thriving and sophisticated local weaving industry and became one of the foci of Mahatma Gandhi's anti-colonial campaign of swaraj (ibid; cf. Sarkar 1973).

46 See Selkirk (1844: 60) for a similar description of Sinhalese children.

1835: 288).[47] It would thus seem that the early missionaries saw their primary role as clothing the natives with already existent forms of attire (mainly the cloth and jacket), which had been adapted from previous colonisers such as the Portuguese and the Dutch."[48] To this effect, they were assiduous in gifting the natives with cloth and teaching as many of them as possible to sew. It is reported that girls who were adept at needlework in Wesleyan Native Schools were often rewarded with cloth, thus reinforcing the relationship between sewing and clothing.[49] In his storybook for Children, *Punchi Nona* (Little Lady), Wesleyan missionary Rev. Samuel Langdon spends much time describing the prize for "Good Conduct and General Proficiency" that his recently converted protagonist Punchi Nona receives-- it is a 'lady's companion' -- "a sort of portfolio fitted up with scissors, thimbles, needles, hooks and crooks." When presenting it to Punchi Nona, the Governor's wife remarks that she hopes Punchi Nona will use this "beautiful present which had been sent by the kind ladies in England to the best purpose -- that of assisting the work of clothing the household" (Langdon, 1884: 103-4). Several cloths and jackets and a sewing kit were also central components in the dowry that was given to the graduates of Uduvil until 1855.[50]

However, Harriet Winslow seems almost apologetic for the fact that more drastic steps had not been undertaken to signal the conversion of the natives through their outward appearance.

47 In Travancore, South India, however, missionary wives of the London Missionary Society, specifically designed a "loose jacket" that could be worn by Nadar (lower caste) women to cover their breasts and fulfill the "criteria for modest clothing that befitted Christian women" during this same period. Interestingly, this move to 'civilize' and modernize Nadar women was to precipitate unexpected consequences; it was used as a route to rupture prevalent caste hierarchies. Instead of adopting the jacket that was designed by the missionaries, the Nadar women chose to wear breast cloths similar to those worn only by upper caste Nair women. This led to violent protests by the Nair community leading the British government to intercede on their behalf much to the opprobrium of the missionaries (Cohn 1996: 139-146; cf. Hardgrave 1968). I am grateful to Ritty Lukose for reminding me about this set of events.

48 However, this was to change as colonial and missionary influence was consolidated in the island. The wearing of dresses and trousers and shirts by middle class women and men respectively, had become so prevalent by the mid nineteenth century, that the transformation of attire became one of the key anti-colonial platforms of Sinhala Buddhist nationalists such as the Anagarika Dharmapala (cf. Jayawardena 1986: 120 & 126; de Alwis 1994: 94-5).

49 Wesleyan Missionary Society Native Schools Report for 1818 (quoted in Ruberu 1962: 212).

50 Quoted from the *Uduvil school report of 1856* in Harrison, 1925, Appendix B. Dowry was gradually reduced from one third of the original articles that were presented, to a bible and work bag and finally, in 1924, to only the Christmas presents each student received from the boxes that were sent by friends of the mission in America (*ibid*).

> You may be slow to believe, what is nevertheless true, that a female with a cloth round her waist and thrown over her shoulders, as she has when she attends meetings [at the Mission House], appears much more modestly dressed than ladies generally are in America. She is entirely covered, except her feet and hands, and in such a manner that the wind may almost blow her down without subjecting her person to observation.
>
> The children in our schools, dress decently, as we think, though you might judge otherwise. Girls, unless very small, wear a cloth and jacket which makes them perfectly decent. This is only in our schools. Those living at home seldom know what a jacket is . . . (Winslow, 1835: 289).

Such seemingly subtle transformations nevertheless did not go unnoticed. Emerson Tennent, visiting Uduvil in the Spring of 1848, remarks with much pleasure upon the "neatness and modesty" of the girls' dresses which "showed to much advantage as compared with the scarcely delicate costume of the females of Jaffna in general" (Tennent 1850: 177). Though many of the native children who came under the tutelage of the early missionaries both in the north and south of Ceylon were from the poorer classes, it was a great source of pride for the missionaries that they were able to induce them to be "neat and clean in their appearance" (for after all, as Hardy notes, cleanliness is godliness) which in turn was seen as an indication that they had imbibe "ideas of decorum and modesty" (Hardy, 1864: 252 & 254). Rev. Miron Winslow, pondering the progress of the American mission in north Ceylon, recalls with pride an "especially lovely" image of a native Christian school teacher leading her train of "forty or fifty little heathen girls" to church winding their through the green paddy fields "in their best dress; which, though not always very white, contrasted agreeably with the verdure of the fields, and inspired the hope of their being at length clothed in that 'fine linen' which is 'the righteousness of saints'" (Winslow 1835: 351).

The missionaries sought not only to discipline and punish, but to also reward those who followed their rules. For example, the prize categories at the Uduvil Girls' Boarding School prize giving held on February 15th 1886 illuminates the manners of living that they wished to encourage: 19 prizes for general scholarship, as well as for needlework and deportment, 8 prizes for punctuality and attendance, 4 prizes for neatness of person and dress, 3 prizes for instrumental music and 2 prizes

cooking. The graduating class which numbered twenty-four girl, "all professing Christians," was handed a diploma, a Tamil Reference Bible and a lyric and hymn-book in the presence of an audience comprising of several missionaries and "a large number of native friends, including many of the leading educated men and women of Jaffna," the majority of the latter being Uduvil alumnae (Leitch and Leitch,1890: 83-4). As in the case at Uduvil, the prizes that were bestowed at other mission schools too frequently reflected the kind of life the missionaries felt their proteges should lead or the values and sentiments they wished to encourage. The Wesleyan Mission presented cloth to girls who were good in needlework and Langdon's Punchi Nona got a 'Lady's Companion' as a prize for good conduct and general proficiency (see above). CMS missionary Rev. William Harvard also describes how he would reward young girls in the newly-opened mission schools in the south with "pin cushions and similar articles" that his wife had "wrought with her own hand" (Harvard 1823: 89).

Sacralizing Sex

While the missionaries were convinced that if they clothed the natives, they could close a "door to sin" and come closer to controlling the natives' propensity for "all manner of impure thoughts," it was obvious that their licentiousness which was "so universal that it had ceased to be opprobrious" was being propagated by other manner and customs as well (Tennent 1850: 52). Most dangerous of them all was considered the custom of polyandry practiced by the Kandyans where several brothers would share one wife, and most shockingly, it was sometimes "not confined to the men of one family but extended to a plurality of neighbours; the meaning of it being, however a much disguised, that the woman is supposed to require more than one man to watch" (Hardy 1864: 251; Tennent 1850: 289). Even when polyandry was not practiced, the missionaries interpreted Sinhalese marriages to be "mere bargains", which were contracted and dissolved with "extreme facility" (Tennent, 1850: 289). It was not surprising therefore, that "chastity [was] not a virtue" and "[s]hame and compunction [were] sensations comparatively unknown; the senses rather than the soul become the monitors of the man, virtue and vice [were] terms which acquir[ed] relation only through the interests and passions of the moment" (Hardy 1864: 251; Tennent 1850: 251). Such barbaric practices and sentiments, along with the Buddhist religion, which equated woman with sin and temptation and was "ungracious and insulting" towards her, did not provide the

circumstances in which she could be “man’s help meet and companion” -- as was the case within the Christian family (Hardy 1854: 251).

Harriet Winslow was also dismayed to find that the Tamils’ “want of social habits which contribute so much to our enjoyment, deprives them of so many aids in their Christian course” (Winslow 1835: 196). One of the Winslows’ earliest interventions in effecting a “beneficial change” in “heathen” social habits was to introduce a Christian form of marriage which was simple and “in more conformity to our own customs” instead of “absurd and idolatrous” marriage practices where “the parties are not even consulted. Everything is settled without their consent, and perhaps without their knowledge” (*ibid*). She describes with much pride how she and her husband “prevailed” upon a heathen bride and groom “to take a piece of cake together, as a substitute for smoking which is common among them -- the wife taking the cigar after the husband” (Winslow 1835: 298). Yet, effecting such changes in heathen wedding ceremonies did not necessarily lead to “domestic happiness”, which “of course they know little of,” notes Harriet Winslow, as “there is so little attachment in these connections;” (Winslow 1835: 196 & 273). The heathen males and females “are quite separated, in all their ordinary transactions. Husband and wife must never eat together, and a man cannot touch a woman’s hand in public without disgrace” (Winslow 1835: 196). It is thus with some annoyance that Winslow observes that she does not know “that they give us credit for loving each other more than they do, for they are exceedingly slow to believe that others are better in any respect, or even so good in most, as themselves” (Winslow 1835: 196).

It is clear that Winslow’s notion of love between husband and wife was centrally connected with the larger spiritual goal of converting the heathen, a project in which she obviously saw herself providing a crucial but secondary role. After tabulating the exhausting and arduous household responsibilities that she has to shoulder as a wife of a missionary, she is quick to point out that a “female need not, however, imagine that all her talents must be wasted on petty things.” Rather, it is in her that her husband must “find all his society;” he must he “encouraged and strengthened by her prayers, sometimes aided by her counsels, and always relieved as much possible from worldly cares, from the trials of temper and patience, which would hinder him in his appropriate work, by her considerate attention to all the family concerns” (Winslow, 1835: 203). It is this notion of “separate spheres” of different but complementary gender roles, which underwrote “an entire system of institutional practices and conventions” that ranged from a sexual division of labour

to a sexual division of economic and political rights in nineteenth century Euro-America (Poovey 1988: 8-9). The articulation of separate spheres in the colonies was epitomised by the missionary and his wife who replicated such a worldview through the boys' and girls' schools that they often founded and supervised.

In the context of the boarding school, the only family with which the students interacted on a daily basis was that of the missionary's and thus their conception of a Christian family was strongly influenced by their everyday encounters with this family. For example, the missionary couple would teach various subjects in the school and senior girls would often visit the Mission House for special lessons or to sweep and clean it as part of their domestic training (see above). The missionary couple epitomized "sacralized union" between two consenting individuals and the "rationalized, complementary productivity of husband and wife" (Comaroff 1985: 140). Similarly, the missionary family was the quintessential nuclear unit, the "atom of structure" in industrial capitalist society and the basis of the private family estate" all surrounded with trim and orderly gardens" (Comaroff 1985a: 140; Tennent 1850: 177). Most importantly, it was a "bulwark, a defence against the immorality of 'the world,' a haven in which Christian morality was practiced" (Hall 1992: 254).

While the natives' family unit was the extended household and their strength was derived from a web of secular, kin relationships, the missionaries too drew sustenance from overlapping Christian family networks. There was the family of origin back home (which participated in copious correspondences and often took care of children sent away to be educated), the mission families spread across Ceylon and in other colonies, the mission church back home and most importantly of all, the family-to-be in heaven. It was the hope of meeting once again in heaven that largely alleviated the frequent loss of children and the early deaths of spouses among the missionaries" (Cf. Hall 1992). It was this extension of the nuclear family into the future and the belief of family reunions after death that the missionaries sought to encourage and inculcate among their heathen populace. Mary and Margret Leitch of the American Mission describe how deeply affected they were at the sight of a heathen funeral (for a child) soon after their arrival in northern Ceylon: "I found the mother beating her face on the ground and wailing most piteously . . . very often mothers, under such circumstances, will refuse to eat food for days together, and sometimes a mother's hopelessness and despair are such that she commits suicide." They juxtapose this scene with one that they witness at

a native Christian families' funeral for their child. They notice a "look of hope on the faces of the parents" and at the burial site, the parents' faces are "upturned to heaven" with a "look of resignation and peace. . . In my heart I thanked god that we had such a Gospel to give to the heathen -- a Gospel which presents such glorious hopes. Our dead are not lost but gone before. . . ' and God shall wipe away all tears from all eyes'" (Leitch and Leitch 1890: 68-69).

As I also pointed out above, the missionaries not only exerted their authority as teachers, but also as parents of the students. This was especially marked in the case of the girls, as the missionaries had promised to provide their dowries once they completed their schooling. During the early days of the boarding school, many girls were married off as soon as they were of marriageable age or when they received an eligible offer, though, as Winslow notes, "if it were not for the loose habits of the people, we should prefer having them wait longer" (Winslow 1835: 255). Winslow also describes traumatic tales of converted boys and girls who were forced to marry "heathen" Tamils. However, such "defeats" became much less as the missionaries began to exert more and more influence on whom each student should choose as his/her marriage partner. Graduates of the boys' school were strongly encouraged to marry graduates of the girls' school and *vice versa*. As Myron Winslow himself acknowledges, "a leading object" of the Uduvil girls' boarding school was "to furnish suitable partners for the native preachers and other assistants in the mission. It was considered of great importance that they should marry educated, and especially Christian wives. If not, they would probably form unscriptural connections with the heathen which would injure their usefulness and perhaps destroy their souls" (Winslow 1835: 273). Besides keeping their husbands on the straight and narrow path, it was also noted with pleasure that many of the "born again" proteges of the female boarding school "were settled among the idolaters where they had opportunity, as Christian wives and Christian mothers, to exhibit a pleasing contrast with heathen families, and to show the loveliness of domestic virtue in the midst of abounding vice. One such example in a dark heathen neighbourhood is like a star on the thick brow of night" (Winslow 1835: 273).

Harriet Winslow's and other missionaries' projects to influence through schooling, the offspring of the rebellious Tamil and Sinhala natives that they first encountered proved to be so successful that Emerson Tennant could write triumphantly in 1850

about the number of households in "innumerable hamlets and agricultural groups" in which "one or both of the parents have not only been instructed in the principles and precepts of Christianity, and acquired by domestic training a thorough appreciation of the habits and advantages of civilized life, but are now anxiously engaged in inspiring their own tastes and communicating their own information to their children" (Tennent 1850: 162). Schools, such as Uduvil, began to find daughters of past pupils attending the school as well as several alumnae returning to teach there (after receiving a higher education in South India or America) or donating prizes to the school (Harrison 1925).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to theorize the category of 'respectability' by unpacking a particular historical moment of its embodiment by Sinhala and Tamil women in colonial Ceylon. I have specifically focused on the interpellator practices within the girls' boarding schools in order to scrutinize the micro-technologies of power that impinged on a girl's body; the way she ate, walked and sat, how she spoke, dressed and married was supervised, routinized, corrected, punished or rewarded and transformed.

I explored at length the multi-dimensionality of a particular micro-technology of power -- needlework -- which enabled the fashioning of a particular bourgeois femininity and moral demeanour, while simultaneously affording the possibility of genteel employment to the poorer classes. A knowledge of sewing was also the lynch pin for the development of abstract thought while presaging the production of clothing, and concomitantly, neatness and decorum.

My interrogation of the category of 'respectability', I would like to reiterate, is not premised on the suggestion that Ceylonese society did not subscribe to notions of propriety and morality prior to the arrival of the missionaries but, rather, that such indigenous moral orders were *remade* in an articulation with Victorian, Christianized notions of morality within a colonial relation of power. The encompassing, modified formation of 'respectability' that was produced thus signified the interplay of both systems; it retained some aspects and rejected yet other aspects of both systems.

For example, while the chewing of tobacco and betel and the smoking of cigars were accepted practices for Tamil women within a Hindu patriarchy, the missionaries perceived them to be unfeminine and immoral 'customs and manners'. Yet, though the Winslows could "prevail" on a bride to share a piece of cake rather than a cigar, at her wedding, it took much more effort to "ban" the chewing of tobacco and betel in their school. Similarly, while the missionaries were shocked to see low-caste women go about bare-breasted in public (an accepted practice in both Sinhala and Tamil society at that time) and did their utmost to popularise the wearing of a jacket among women of all castes -- by gifting cloth and paying almost obsessive attention to the teaching of sewing, they desisted from completely transforming contemporary native styles of attire (which had already been much influenced by Indian, Portuguese and Dutch fashions).

It is crucial, however, to remember that such seemingly delicate negotiations were occurring within an unequal power relation that was played out to its most extreme limit in the charity boarding school. As I noted earlier, the boarding school is a space of power as well as a place of care. During the early years at Uduvil, for example, when the majority of students were from lower caste and poor homes (since no other students could be procured despite "exertion and entreaty" [Tennent 1850: 160]), their complete economic dependence on the missionaries which even extended to them receiving a dowry at the end of their schooling period, made the students, and their parents, especially vulnerable to interpellation. Many parents who sought to resist the missionaries' encompassing grip on their children had drastic consequences; they either had to withdraw their child from school or lose access to her (For example, see Winslow 1835: 150-2, Leitch and Leitch 1890: 126- 8). In later years, when the "respectable families" and those with "property and influence in the district" clamoured to attend the boarding schools (Tennent 1850: 160), the missionaries continued to have the students and their parents in their thrall as now, a good English education provided significant symbolic capital.[51] For boys, it was also essential for the procurement of high prestige jobs in the colonial government and for pursuing higher education overseas. For the

51 Jane Russell notes that by the mid-nineteenth century, the economic benefits in attending mission schools had become so "patently obvious" to the Jaffna Tamils that they had no qualms about being baptized as Christians in order to gain entrance to these schools. Tamil Hindu nationalists such as Ponnambalam Ramanathan frequently railed against such a sorry social phenomenon: "There is a great deal too much hypocrisy in Jaffna in the matter of religion, owing to the fact that the love of the missionaries for proselytes is as boundless as the love of the Jaffnese to obtain some knowledge of English at any cost" (an excerpt from an 1884 speech to the Legislative Council quoted in Russell 1982: 2).

girls, the boarding school was the indisputable site of the production of the modern woman who was domesticated, virtuous and feminine; a chaste and accomplished wife who developed into an intelligent and competent mother (Cf. de Alwis 1994). Thus, the boarding school, though educating a miniscule percentage of the native population, was instrumental in producing and reproducing, an important segment of the bourgeoisie that was at the forefront of the nationalist reform movement in the latter half nineteenth century.

While I have stressed the importance of remembering the unequal power relations that existed during colonial rule in Ceylon, it is also important to point out that impositions of power were already in existence prior to colonial rule, a fact that is well documented by historians as well as the missionaries themselves who have described in great detail the "inequities" of the caste system and its "deplorable" treatment of both Sinhala and Tamil women.[52] Many missionaries made it one priorities to speak out against the caste system and to integrate students from various castes in their schools despite much antagonism from upper caste families (See for example, Leitch and Leitch 1890: 13-15; Selkirk 1844: 325). Similarly, and as I have pointed out above, they strove hard to educate native women despite local patriarchal assertions that females were "incapable of learning" (Selkirk 1844: 296; cf. Winslow 1835: 184). In fact, what was most striking about the missionaries' advocation of education, clothing and, in more general, a Christian manner of living among the converted Hindus and Buddhists of Ceylon was their assertion that such embodiments of respectability, civility and modernity could transcend the hierarchical preoccupations of class and caste which were supposedly entrenched within the doctrines of the heathen religions. However, transformations that occurred within Sinhala and Tamil society as a result of the missionary encounter also often perpetuated structures of inequality or produced yet other formulations of oppression. For example, the missionaries continued to reproduce existing class hierarchies within Sinhalese and Tamil society through an elaborate system of schooling that provided very basic, vernacular education to the poor and a sophisticated English education to the native elites (and maybe a few poor scholarship students). Similarly, while the missionaries exerted themselves in educating and 'elevating' the position of the native woman in Sinhalese and Tamil

52 See for example, the historical account of Robert Knox, 1966, [1681] and the work of historians of the pre-colonial era such as R.A.L.H. Gunawardena1979, and Jonathan Walters (2000). Almost all accounts of Ceylon, be they be written by travellers, administrators or missionaries addressed the system of caste among both the Sinhalese and Tamils. For a brief culling of their descriptions regarding the dire consequences faced by women who married below their caste, see Elizabeth Harris (1994: 22-4 & 29).

society, they also succeeded in introducing another formulation of patriarchy that promoted a conception of "separate spheres" which relegated the woman to the home and man to the world.

The importance of educating the native woman was framed by a concern not only to convert her -- on the premise that if you convert the mother, you convert the whole family -- to Christianity, but also to a Christian manner of living and being. While the missionaries may not have succeeded very well in their original venture of converting her to Christianity, they surely were victorious in producing a moral transformation within her that was physically manifested in her dress, domestic skills, marriage patterns and demeanour. It is such a conundrum that Tennent marked in his statement that the educational labours of the American mission in northern Ceylon had "produced almost a social revolution" by 1850 despite the fact that they had converted very few (Tennent 1850: 276). The micro-technologies of power that were harnessed in the pursuance of such a social revolution, were ironically, also those that were transposed to Buddhist and Hindu girls' schools that were founded by nationalist reformers during the latter half of the nineteenth century. It was also some of the products of the missionary schools who were accomplished dancers, singers or tennis players, who had their own careers, who fought for female suffrage etc., who were now dubbed to be 'unrespectable' or *läjja-baya nâti?*[53] The Hindu and Buddhist girls' schools took extra special care to eradicated the propagation of such Anglicized and Christianized vices by a move to indigenize and sacralize their curricula.[54] Yet, while the content of the curricula was somewhat modified, many of its structures were retained; the daily routines and drills, rules of behaviour, the regulation of attire and most importantly, instruction in 'practicality' and 'respectability' through domestic science courses in cooking, sanitation, first aid, thrift and needlework continues to this day in all schools (de Alwis 1995).

In this paper, I have focused on the normative ordering of a gendered, moral demeanour and manner of living among a small percentage of the Ceylonese population, during the early nineteenth century. I have not pursued the stories of those who refused such an interpellation or even those who resisted attending

53 See Roberts et al (1989: 59-67), for a discussion of a similar, masculinized phenomenon during this period -- the Cultured Gentleman -- among middle class Burghers.

54 Which also led to the promotion of ethnic and religious chauvinism (for a discussion of the dissemination of Sinhala Buddhist hegemony through Sinhala textbooks and the LTTE's strategies to provide a contemporary counterpoint to it, see de Alwis 1995; cf. Siriwardena et al 1982).

missionary schools altogether. In fact, I suggest the yield of this work lies in the very delineation of such a norm -- the production and embodiment of respectability. It is a norm that continues to circumscribe contemporary Sri Lankan women 's behaviour. If we do not understand its production and dissemination, we will not understand how to transform it.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Motherhood as a Space of Protest: Women's Political Participation in Contemporary Sri Lanka

Malathi De Alwis

During the years 1987 to 1991, Sri Lanka witnessed an uprising by nationalist Sinhala youth (the JVP or Janata Vimukthi Party) and reprisals by the state that gripped the country in a stranglehold of terror. The militants randomly terrorized or assassinated anyone who criticized them or supposedly collaborated with the state. The state similarly, but on a much larger scale, murdered or "disappeared" anyone it suspected of being a "subversive," which included thousands of young men, some young women, and a number of left-wing activists, playwrights, lawyers, and journalists who were either monitoring or protesting the state's violation of human rights. Bodies rotting on beaches, smouldering in grotesque heaps by the roadsides, and floating down rivers were a daily sight during the height of state repression from 1988 to 1990. It was in such a context that the Mothers' Front, a grassroots women's organization with an estimated membership of more than 25,000 women, was formed in July 1990 to protest the "disappearance" of approximately 60,0000 young and middle-aged men. Its only demand was for "a climate where we can raise our sons to manhood, have our husbands with us and lead normal women's lives" *(Island* 9 February 1991). The seemingly unquestionable authenticity of their grief and espousal of "traditional" family values provided the Mothers' Front with an important space for protest unavailable to other organizations critical of state practices.[1]

The Mothers' Front phrased its protest in the vocabulary that was most available to it through its primary positioning within a patriarchally structured society-that of motherhood, which I define here as encompassing women's biological reproduction as well as women's signification as moral guardians, care givers, and

1 The Mothers' Front was inspired by and shares much with similar organizations in Latin America, but I want to highlight here the importance of historical and material specificities rather than make comparisons of different movements.

nurturers. I fully agree with the argument that maternalist women's peace groups project essentialist views of women that reinforce the notion of biology as destiny and legitimize a sex-role system that, in assigning responsibility for nurture and survival to women alone, encourages masculinized violence and destruction (Hartsock 1982; Houseman 1982; Lloyd 1986; Enloe 1989). Nevertheless, I think we need to consider carefully the reasons that "motherist movements" adopt the strategies they do (Schirmer 1993), and what effects they have. In light of such a project, I would like to consider here the contingent usefulness of maternalized protest at a particular moment in Sri Lankan history. However, such an attempt at a positive reading cannot ignore the complex interplay of power within this space that also reinscribed gender and class hierarchies and reinforced majoritarian ethnic identities while those of minorities were erased.

Though the Mothers' Front's agenda remained very limited, its few, brief, and spectacular appearances on the Sri Lankan political stage nevertheless placed a government on the defensive, awoke a nation from a terrorized stupor, and indelibly gendered the discourses of human rights and dissent. It also created a space in which a much larger, nonracist, and more radical protest movement could be launched to overthrow in the general elections of August 1994 an extremely repressive and corrupt government that had been in power for 17 years.

This chapter will concentrate only on exploring how the Mothers' Front created a space for itself within a predominantly patriarchal political landscape by articulating its protest through the available, familiar, and emotive discourse of motherhood. This space was mediated by a powerful political party that was predominantly male, Sinhala, and middle class. Yet the reper*toire of* protest employed by these women, albeit under the sign of the mother and mainly limited to tears and curses, was the most crucial component in an assault on a government that had until then held an entire nation at ransom on the pretext of safeguarding the lives of its citizens. It is in this sense that I assert the contingent value of the Mothers' Front's repertoire of protest.

The Mothers' Front

> Tears ... are common to all. Yet, there is nothing more powerful on earth that can wring tears from others than a mother's tears.
>
> - *Lankadeepa* 28 June 1992

The first branch of the Mothers' Front was formed on 15 July 1990 in the southern district of Matara, a region severely affected by "disappearances."[2] The meeting was held under the auspices of Mangala Samaraweera and Mahinda Rajapakse, members of Parliament and of the main opposition party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), from Matara and Hambantota, respectively. Fifteen hundred women from the district elected officers to coordinate the group's activities. They decided to work out of Mr. Samaraweera's home because the climate of violence warranted some protective measures.[3] A majority of the women were severely traumatized: "At that time we were like children constantly needing to be told what to do. Sometimes I would come away from one of our meetings not remembering a single matter that was discussed;' commented one officer.[4] Within six months, branches of the Mothers' Front had been set up in ten other Districts (often under the aegis of an SLFP MP). By 1992, Front members numbered 25,000, most of whom were from rural and semirural areas and of the lower and lower middle classes, women well acquainted with poverty and hardship.

Initially, the Front's focus was mainly regional and it made little headway, except in compiling systematic and extensive documentation about the "disappeared:' Visiting police stations, army camps, and local government offices with lists of the missing and petitioning various state institutions and officials for information produced few results. The women often viewed their reception at such places with a certain resignation and cynicism, tolerating politicians who promised the earth when campaigning but became dismissive when elected, and accepting that the everyday provision of state services was often contingent upon one's wealth and status. Yet, what fuelled their pursuance of such activities and their increasing anger at being thwarted was an overriding confidence that their "disappeared" were alive and should be sought before trails grew cold. As one mother eloquently pointed out to me, "I gave birth to that boy. Surely, won't *I* sense it if he dies?" The

2 On 20 May 1990, the Organization of Parents and Family Members of the Disappeared (OPFMD) was formed to do similar work among the families of "disappeared" trade union workers and left-wing activists. It was closely aligned with Vasudeva Nanayakkara, opposition MP and politburo member of the left-wing NSSP (Nava Sama Samaja Pakshaya). The OPFMD rarely received as much publicity as the Mothers' Front, but it supported the Front and joined in its rallies, and members of the Front often participated in OPFMD rallies (see fn. 9).

3 Mr. Samaraweera reports that a branch office set up independently in Weligama (in the southern Province) was attacked by thugs.

4 The event of "disappearance" not only inscribed the minds of family members with anguish but also turned their bodies into ciphers of agony. Most seemed to suffer from trauma-related neuroses: children who stopped speaking; old and young women who complained of memory loss, fainting spells, seizures, weight loss, severe chest pains, and the like; and fathers who died of sudden heart attacks.

first seeds of protest were sown in such moments of stubborn refusal to give up hope, to concede failure. The "absence of bodies;' noted Jennifer Schirmer (1989: 5), creates a "presence of protest". In early 1991 the Mothers' Front showed "its muscles" *(Island* 27 January 1991) by targeting the epicentre of power - the capital Colombo and capturing the attention of the entire country.

A 19 February rally in a Colombo suburb at which thousands of these "chronic mourners" (Schirmer 1989: 25), clad in white and holding mementos of their "disappeared'; demanded that the nation not forget them or their "disappeared." The rally also commemorated the death of well-known actor, newscaster, and journalist Richard de Zoysa, who had been abducted, tortured, murdered, and dumped upon a beach by a paramilitary squad the year before. His mother, Dr. Manorani Saravanamuttu, who had publicly accused senior police officers of being involved in her son's abduction, had returned from self-exile at this time and was invited to serve as the president of the National Committee of the Mothers' Front. The nature of the Front, its seemingly conservative and apolitical rhetoric, and the unorthodox avenues of protest it subsequently employed made a counterattack by the state especially difficult and complicated. Unable to contain the Front through its usual authoritarian practices, the state was constantly on the defensive, dealing in counter-rhetoric, counterrallies, and counter-ritual.

Counter-rhetoric

As in the case of the Madres of Argentina or the GAM (Mutual Support Group for the Reappearance of our Sons, Fathers, Husbands, and Brothers) of Guatemala, the rhetoric of protest used by the Mothers' Front can be read as confronting a repressive state by revealing the contradictions between the state's own rhetoric and practices. By appealing for a return to the "natural" order of family and motherhood, the women were openly embracing patriarchal stereotypes that primarily defined them through familial and domestic subject positions, such as wife and mother. However, by accepting the responsibility to nurture and preserve life, which is also valorised by the state (de Alwis 1994), they revealed the ultimate transgression of the state: it was denying women the opportunity to mother by its resort to clandestine tactics (cf. Schirmer 1989: 28).

The Sri Lankan state's major rhetorical counter to the Front's implicit accusation is very interesting. On the day of the Mothers' Front's first rally in Colombo, President

Premadasa expressed sympathy "with the mothers whose children have been led astray by designing elements." He continued, "Many now in custody are being rehabilitated" *(Daily News* 19 February 1991). In a similar vein, Minister of State for Defence Ranjan Wijeratne pontificated: "Mothers are not expected to stage demonstrations. Mothers should have looked after their children. They failed to do that. They did not know what their children were doing. They did not do that and now they are crying" *(Daily News* 15 February 1991). Both men were suggesting that the women had not been good mothers, but the president was also suggesting that because of their deficiencies the state had taken on their responsibilities by rehabilitating their children. By bringing in notions of rehabilitation, the president was deflecting the women's accusations of the state's complicity in the "disappearances" and killings.

Government officials used various rhetorical ploys to slander the Mothers' Front. The most vociferous was Ranjan Wijeratne, who denounced the Front as "subversive" and "anti-government" *(Daily News* 14 March 1991); characterized it as "against the security forces who saved democracy" *(Daily News* 23 February 1991); threatened to "get at the necks of those using the Mothers' Front" *(Island* 20 February 1991); and stepped-up police surveillance of its leaders *(Sunday Times* 29 March 1991).[5] The SLFP was also consistently accused by government-owned media and various government ministers of trying to use the Mothers' Front to further its power *(Daily News* 19 February, 23 March 1991; *Sunday Observer* 24 February 1991). The state's central thrust was (1) to undermine the primary subject position of the women by suggesting that they had been "inadequate" mothers and (2) to undermine their credibility by insinuating that their organization was a puppet of a political party.

Counterrallies

The state attempted to disrupt the first Mothers' Front rally by banning demonstrations and creating an atmosphere of distrust and panic with suggestions of possible bomb explosions and an LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) infiltration of Colombo. At the second rally in Colombo a month later to commemorate International Women's Day, the state implemented a different countertactic under the aegis of First Lady Hema Premadasa: a rally in another

5 When Wijeratne was killed in a bomb blast in late March 1991, many Front members and SLFP organizers directly connected his death to the efficacy of their collective protest.

part of the city to which women were bussed in from various Seva Vanitha units affiliated to government departments, especially the armed forces.[6] While the Mothers' Front mourned the "disappeared;' the women at the state counterrally mourned the deaths of male relatives who had been killed by the JVP in the south and by Tamil militants in the North and East. The state-owned *Daily News* on 9 March 1991 carried an entire page of photographs of the state rally but no mention of the Mothers' Front rally.

In July 1992, the United National Party (UNP) government even inaugurated a UNP Mothers' Front in the Gampaha District, the stronghold of the Bandaranaike clan and thus synonymous with the SLFP. At its first meeting, the only female minister in the cabinet, Health and Women's Affairs Minister Renuka Herath, categorically declared, "It was the children of those mothers who slung photographs and marched who killed the children of you innocent mothers" *(Divaina* 27 July 1992). She promised financial support for the members of the Gampaha District Mother's Front and to erect memorials to their children's bravery. The women were still waiting to have their promises fulfilled when the government was overthrown two years later.

Religious Rituals as Resistance

The tactic of the Mothers' Front that most unnerved the government, especially the president, who was known to be extremely superstitious, was the skilful use of religious ritual as resistance. As Marx has so perceptively pointed out, "Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the *protest* against real distress" (cited in Comaroff 1985: 252). Most families of the "disappeared" were intimate with such manifestations of religious distress, which included beseeching gods and goddesses, saints, and holy spirits with special novenas (Catholic masses), penances, offerings, donations, and the chanting of religious verses over a period of months; taking vows, making pilgrimages, and performing *bodhi pujiis* (offerings to the Bo tree); and resorting to sorcery and the placement of charms and curses on those deemed responsible.

6 All wives of government officials and all female officials had to join this national social service organization, Seva Vanitha, which replicated the hierarchical structure of the government in that the president's wife was the leader, cabinet ministers' wives were below her, and so on.

The SLFP first realized the powerful potential of publicized religious practices when members of the Mothers' Front participated in the SLFP-organized 180-mile *piida yiitrii* (march) to protest government policies and human rights violations, in March and April 1992. The absolute abandon and passion that the mothers displayed at the Devinuwara and Kataragama *devales* (temples), as they broke coconuts and beseeched the deities to return their sons and husbands, and heaped curses on those who had taken them away, surprised the SLFP organizers and provided tremendous photo opportunities for the media (e.g. *Divaina* 4 April 1992). The president apparently took this collective and ritualized display personally; on the advice of his Malayalee swami, he immediately participated in a counter-ritual in which he was bathed by seven virgins.

Sirimavo Bandaranaike (the leader of the SLFP) publicly linked the two events at the second national convention of the Mothers' Front on 23 June 1992, and her daughter Chandrika Kumaratunga suggested at the convention that the mothers' curses during the march had effected the sudden and much publicized disclosures of former deputy inspector general of police Premadasa Udugampola, who had masterminded the paramilitary hit squads that terrorized the southern and central provinces of Sri Lanka at the height of the JVP uprising in 1989-1991.

The ritual of religious resistance that received the most publicity and generated much comment was the deva kanalawwa (the beseeching of the gods), which took place in the afternoon of 23 June 1992. The Mothers' Front had picked the date because it was President Premadasa's birthday and coincided with the commencement of his extravagant brainchild: the *Gam Udawa* (village reawakening) celebrations. Not surprisingly, therefore, many of the wrathful speeches at the convention focused on his autocratic style of governance and megalomania. Afterward, the SLFP provided lunch to the mothers and bused them to the Kaliamman *kovil* (temple) at Modera, where they were greeted by locked gates and a battalion of police standing guard. SLFP MP Alavi Moulana instructed the first group of mothers to break their coconuts outside the gates. Almost simultaneous with this and the loud chanting of "sadhu, sadhu" that rent the air, the gates were hastily opened by a somewhat chagrined senior police officer, though access to the inner sanctum was still denied. The small premises soon became packed with weeping and wailing women, many of whom boldly cursed Premadasa and his government. Asilin, one of the mothers and my neighbour at the time, chanted over and over, "Premadasa, see this coconut all smashed into bits. May your head too be splintered into a hundred bits, so

heinous are the crimes you have perpetrated on my child:' Another mother wept, saying, "Premadasa, I bore this child in my womb for ten months. May you and your family be cursed not for ten days or ten weeks or ten months or ten years or ten decades but for ten *eons:'*

The passion, the pathos, the power of these weeping, cursing, imploring mothers riveted the entire nation. Not only did the mothers make front-page news the next day and for much of that week but their display of grief was a topic of discussion for several months. Some alternative as well as mainstream Sinhala dailies and Sunday editions began series of articles that focused on individual families of the "disappeared:' An editorial warning issued when the Front was founded now seemed prescient: "When mothers emerge as a political force it means that our political institutions and society as a whole have reached a critical moment-the danger to our way of life has surely come closer home" *(Island* 20 February 1991).

Counter Rituals

To ward off the mothers' curses, President Premadasa sought refuge in an elaborate counter-ritual - the Kiriammawarunge Dane (the feeding of milk mothers), an archaic ceremony now connected with the Goddess Pattini.[7] On his birthday, 23 June 1992, the day of the commencement of Gam Udawa (and the day of the Mothers' Front's deva kanalawwa at Modera), the president offered alms to 68 (grand)mothers *(Silumina* 28 June 1992). At the conclusion of Gam Udawa and another deva kanalawwa organized by the Mothers' Front on a smaller scale at Kalutara, south of Colombo, on 3 July 1992, he offered alms to 10,000 (grand) mothers while North Central Provincial Council Minister for Health and Women's Affairs Rani Adikari chanted the Pattini kanalawwa to bring blessings on the president, the armed forces, and the country *(Daily News* 7 June 1992).[8] Though the commonly held belief is that Pattini is predominantly a guardian against infectious diseases, she is also the "good mother" and ideal wife whose chief aim is to maintain "a just and rationally grounded society" and can thus be read as a counterpoint to the goddess that the Mothers' Front appealed to: the "bad mother"

7 For a brief description and analysis of this ritual, see Gombrich (1971); for a discussion of its origins, see Obeyesekere (1984, especially 293-96).

8 However, this was not the first time the president publicly participated in this ritual (e.g., Lankadeepa 13 January 1992; Island 22 March 1992). Nevertheless, the repetition of this ritual within such a short period and on such a grand scale suggests it was not mere coincidence. The ritual is usually performed with just seven (grand)mothers, and the chief (grand)mother, rather than a politician, leads the chanting.

and evil demoness Kali, who deals with sorcery and personal and familial conflicts (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 158-60).

It was not only Premadasa who was disturbed by such rituals. The urbane minister of industries, science, and technology Ranil Wickremasinghe, warned, "If your children have disappeared, it is all right to beseech the gods. After all, if there is no one else to give you succour it is fitting to look to one's gods. However, if one conducts such deva kanalawwa with thoughts of hate and revenge, it could turn into a *huniyam* (black magic) and backfire on you" *(Divaina* 13 July 1992). Ironically, despite such dire warnings and counter rituals, Premadasa was the victim of a suicide bomber before a year was out. A few days after his death, a beaming Asilin came to see me with a comb of plantains (considered to be an auspicious gift). "He died just like the way I cursed him;' she said triumphantly.

Tears and Curses

The complicated interplay between the Mothers' Front and the state operated on a common terrain that took for granted the authenticity and efficacy of a mother's tears and curses. Though the state could retaliate that these women were not "good" mothers and that they were the pawns of a political party, it could not deny the mothers' right to weep or to curse because, after all, that was what was expected of women. Rather, when these women wept or cursed en masse and in public, it became an embarrassment for the state, which then organized its own "Fronts" to engage in counter-rituals. In a context of violence and terror, the tears and curses of the mothers finally stirred a nation and shamed a government.

It is important to bear in mind that tears and curses differed in signification. A mother's tears are a familiar, emotive trope in the arts and a part of the public practices of grieving, such as at funerals. A mother's curses are a familiar yet less discussed practice mostly restricted to the private, religious domain. The SLFP had manipulated the emotive power of tears at the Mothers' Front rallies it had organized, but it was the spontaneity of the women themselves, during the *piida yiitrii,* that had suggested an alternative avenue of protest that was not merely emotive but powerful in its staging as well as in the ferocity of its call for revenge. The presumption inherent in a curse that it could bring about change through the intercession of a deity complicates efforts (for a believer such as the president) to stall such change, for the curse now transcends the human. The use of curses as

public protest and the use of religious ritual as resistance not only had no precedent in Sri Lanka but could circumvent emergency laws that were applicable to standard forms of political protest such as demonstrations and rallies.[9] To ban the right to religious worship was something an autocratic government that repeatedly defined itself as a protector of the people's interests would not dare to do. Not that the government did not toy with the idea. After all, the gates of the Kaliamman *kovil* were locked when the Mothers' Front arrived, and the alternative media were quick to highlight such blatant violations of human rights *(Aththa* 24 June 1992; *Divaina* 6 July 1992).

For the members of the Mothers' Front, weeping and cursing were nothing new. What was new was that the gaze of an entire nation was upon them and that their cause had achieved national prominence. One could also point out that despite their participation in a mass movement, their activism continued to be limited to tears and curses. It was quite common for politicians at the Mothers' Front rallies to exhort the mothers that it was "time to stop weeping and move beyond;' while at the same time congratulating them for having brought about the sudden disclosures by the former deputy inspector general of police, Udugampola, the unnerving of Premadasa, and even the death of Wijeratne. This circumscribing of the mothers can be chiefly attributed to the fact that they had merely exchanged one structure of power riven with gender and class inequalities for another. Socialized within a society that defines women primarily through familial subject positions, such as wives and mothers, these women might nevertheless have managed both to mobilize and transcend these categories had they chosen to organize themselves as the Mothers' Fronts in the north and east had done (see below) and as the Madres in Argentina continue to do. Mobilized and funded by a group of men who were representatives of a powerful political party, these women were never pushed to break out of gender and class stereotypes or to form links with other women's groups.

9 Besides its efforts to ban demonstrations in February 1991, the state also attempted to ban and later curtailed a protest march of the Mothers' Front organized in Kalutara on 3 July 1992 (to coincide with the end of the Gam Udawa) by forbidding the Front to carry its banner and insisting that the women walk in single file. As a news report pointed out, there were as many policemen as there were mothers *(Divaina* 4 July 1992). On World Human Rights Day, 11 November 1992, a sit-down protest coordinated by the Organization of Parents and Family Members of the Disappeared (OPFMD) and joined by some Mothers' Front organizers like Mahinda Rajapakse was teargassed and baton charged by the Riot Squad, leaving several of the leaders injured (*Island* 12 November 1992).

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party and Male Orchestration

On an everyday level and in organizing rallies and rituals, the financial backing and infrastructural support of the SLFP were crucial. Mothers' Front members elected their own officers and ran their regional offices relatively autonomously but remained under the control of their respective SLFP MPs, who provided much of their funding and office space. The SLFP coordinators (such as Mangala Samaraweera) set the agenda for rallies planned in Colombo, handled the advertising, sent out invitations, and hired buses to transport women from various regions of the country. A couturier, Samaraweera was central in designing the Mothers' Front logo: the Sinhala letter *M* containing a mother cradling a baby. He acknowledged that he was instrumental in identifying the Front with the colour yellow because yellow was not associated with any Sri Lankan political party and because it echoed the ribbons displayed in the United States that symbolized hope for the return of the American hostages held in Iran. His office drafted petitions for the Front-demanding an independent commission to inquire into "disappearances;' and calling for the state to issue death certificates and to compensate the families of the "disappeared"-and organized the lobbying to bring these demands into effect.

It was the events held in Colombo, however, that made the SLFP and male dominance of the Mothers' Front the most visible. The following account of the 19 February rally in Nugegoda (a suburb of Colombo) is especially telling:

> Most of the people on the stage, in the shade, are men, with perhaps two or three women visible. Most of the mothers, dressed in white, are seated at the foot of the stage in the sun. As the meeting starts, the press, cameras, videos spill onto the stage ... sometimes even blocking the microphone and the speaker ... the disrespect for the speakers is more apparent when a "mother" is speaking About twenty women's testimonies were interspersed among the politicians' speeches, which often took over fifteen minutes, to the five minutes the women seemed to use (Confidential report, INFORM 1991).

Though representatives of other opposition parties had been invited to speak, they were a mere "smattering" compared to the SLFP MPs "jostling on the stage;' who in their speeches "were hell bent on making it a party-political rally" (Confidential report, INFORM 1991).[10] Even the two leading women in the SLFP, party leader

10 Mahinda Rajapakse did make an effort to rectify this gender imbalance halfway through the meeting, but

Sirimavo Bandaranaike and her widowed daughter, Chandrika Kumaratunga, were obviously not committed to the Mothers' Front; their late arrivals and early exits annoyed many mothers who had hoped that these powerful women would be more approachable.

No attempt was made to rectify the errors of the previous year at the second national convention, which was held indoors and drew a more modest crowd on 23 June 1992. Once again, the stage was dominated by males mainly representing the SLFP. Of the 20 speakers, only eight were women, of whom four represented the SLFP. This gender imbalance created a marked spatial hierarchy that was completely contradictory to the goal of a national convention, where one would have thought that at least once a year, these mothers would have an opportunity to come to Colombo - the seat of power - and speak, and the politicians and concerned citizens would listen. On the contrary, what occurred was that the politicians on the stage were listened to by thousands of women seated below them who listened, wept, and wailed almost on cue. However, there were a few instances when women exceeded their roles as listeners: when their wailing drowned out a speaker; when a woman was so moved by a speaker that she insisted on sharing her own story; and when another demanded that she be allowed to hand a petition to Chandrika Kumaratunga while she was giving her speech. Yet, the majority of the women felt that at least this part of the meeting had been a useless exercise. One woman commented cynically, "At least this year they gave us a free lunch packet." The women's disillusionment with the SLFP-organized meetings and rallies stemmed not only from frustration at being marginalized but also from impatience with orthodox forms of political protest, such as when one politician after another either tried to absolve himself of blame for having participated in similar kinds of repression in the past or attempted to blame the state for all ills (views of some Mothers' Front members from the Matara District). went to great lengths to build an anti-government coalition by incorporating the participation of various political parties, progressive religious dignitaries, and specific interest groups, such as those representing the Organization of Parents and Families of the Disappeared and the Organization for the Disappeared Soldiers in the north-east, the majority of the mothers viewed the attempts as mere political ploys. The only worthwhile participation they were involved in, they felt, was when they were able collectively to beseech the deities on behalf of their "disappeared" and call for the punishment

since the stage was already very crowded, few women took up his offer (Confidential report, INFORM 1991).

of those at fault. For someone like Asilin, who may never see her son again, the knowledge that she may have had a hand in the death of the president was indeed a powerful weapon in the hands of the weak.

Class Domination

The only woman who rose to national prominence as a Mothers' Front spokesperson was Dr Manorani Saravanamuttu. The reasons for this hinged on her class position and social status. Dr Saravanamuttu, a scion of a prominent Tamil family in Colombo, had married into an equally prominent Sinhala family, the de Zoysa's. Her only child, Richard, was a popular actor, broadcaster, and journalist. Divorced for many years, she had an extensive medical practice. Her ancestry, professional status, and dignified bearing afforded her much respect among all ethnic groups in middle-class Sri Lankan society. She was transformed into a public personality when she courageously pressed charges against senior police officers for murdering her son, and an entire nation's sympathy was aroused when newspapers published photographs of her as she watched her son's burning pyre. When she had to flee the country because of threats to her life, she was also embraced by an international human rights community.

Dr. Saravanamuttu's main link with the women in the Mothers' Front was the shared pain of loss and grief. Yet, she counted herself more fortunate than they: "I am the luckiest woman in Sri Lanka - I got my son's body back" *(Amnesty Action,* November/December 1990). She was conscious from the outset of the chasm of inequality that divided her from the other mothers: they could not afford to leave Sri Lanka when their lives were threatened; they were not fluent in English or literate enough to file habeas corpus writs; the list was endless. However, what the mothers appreciated was that Dr Saravanamuttu made it clear that she genuinely cared about them and constantly tried to form bridges of friendship and support. Her speeches, often in faltering Sinhalese or simple English, always directly addressed the concerns of the mothers' present-cautioning them to be "watch dogs" in regard to political parties, including the SLFP; reminding them that they were not alone in their grief, that Tamil women in the north and east were also suffering as were women in faraway Latin America; and sharing the news that women around the globe had pledged their support to the Mothers' Front. When Dr. Saravanamuttu realized that the mothers had been side-lined at the 19 February rally, she quietly left the stage and mingled with the women below (Confidential report, INFORM

1991). Her individual mission to fight her son's murderers in court was articulated as a battle waged for all mothers: "Most of them don't have the means to obtain justice. But I have the means and the social position. I'm doing this for every mother in Sri Lanka who has lost a son" *(Amnesty Action,* November/December 1990).

Dr. Saravanamuttu's overtures and actions were not sufficient to shatter an entrenched class and patronage structure. When the mothers sought the help of their MPs, they were following a familiar route of patronage between politicians and constituents: the people elect an MP and then expect him or her to look after them. Even if the quid pro quo arrangement does not often work in practice, it is a last resort in the face of despair. MP Mangala Samaraweera noted that in his father's day, people would line up outside his office requesting jobs; in his day, people lined up outside his house asking him to find their sons and husbands *(Lankadeepa* 28 June 1992).

Erasing Tamil Women's Agency

It was extremely unfortunate that the SLFP, in its efforts to build an oppositional coalition against the government through the Mothers' Front rallies in Colombo, did not make a sustained effort to forge links with minority ethnic parties or organizations, except for a token representation from the Eelam Peoples' Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF). The most glaring absence was that no member of the original Mothers' Front - which began in the North of Sri Lanka in 1984 and later spread to the eastern part of the island was invited to speak or even mentioned as providing inspiration for the Mothers' Front in the south at any of its meetings. In fact, when I questioned Mangala Samaraweera on that Front's antecedents, he promptly mentioned the Madres of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, whose strategy of marching with photographs of their "disappeared" he had introduced among the Sri Lankan women. I found it quite astonishing that he did not think it worth mentioning that there had been an earlier parallel in his own country. Thus, in a seeming move to internationalize the southern Mothers' Front, its organizers were completely erasing the agency of Tamil women not just from their own memory, but from the memory of an entire population in the south. In fact, it was Gamini Navaratne, the former editor of an important English-language weekly in Jaffna, the *Saturday Review,* and one of the few Sinhalese civilians who chose to remain in the North during the height of the Civil War in the 1980s, who attempted to set the record straight, albeit in a somewhat skewed fashion. He

disputed the claims made by the organizers of the southern Mothers' Front that it was "the first of its kind in Sri Lanka" and reproduced an article he had written in 1984 reporting on the first march organized by the Northern Mothers' Front to protest the arrest of more than 500 Tamil youths by the Sri Lankan state. It is dismaying that he trivialized the agency of Tamil women by portraying himself as the instigator and ultimate hero of that protest campaign *(The Island,* 3 March 1991).

The northern Mothers' Front, like its southern counterpart, was active only for about two years.[11] However, unlike the newer Mothers' Front, it was controlled by and consisted of women from all classes who "mobilized mass rallies, and picketed public officials demanding the removal of military occupation and protesting against arrests. Not only the spirit, but also the enormous numbers that they were able to mobilize, spoke loudly of the high point to which such mass organizations, especially of women [could] rise" (Hoole et al 1990: 324). The northern Mothers' Front also inspired Tamil women in the East to begin their own branch, which in 1986 took to the streets with rice pounders to prevent a massacre of members of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) by the LTTE (Hensman 1992: 503). In 1987, one of its members, Annai Pupathi, fasted to death to protest the presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF). She was subsequently immortalized by the LTTE (it was common knowledge that the LTTE had forced her to keep at her fast), which now offers a scholarship in her memory. It was finally the increasing hegemony of the LTTE and its suppression of all independent, democratic organizations that did not toe the line that pushed the Mothers' Front in the North and East into political conformism, thereby losing its wide appeal and militancy. "It became another Y.W.C.A'; its central structure, mainly made up of middle-class women finally confined itself to works of charity (Hoole et al 1990: 324). Many members also migrated abroad or to Colombo. Several in Colombo now work with southern feminist organizations with which they had had close ties. These women were an available resource that the organizers of the southern Mothers' Front chose to ignore, with one exception: Ms. S. Sujeewardhanam, from Batticaloa, who had been invited to be part of the presidium at the first national convention of the Mothers' Front on 19 February 1991, along with Dr. Manorani Saravanamuttu (Colombo) and Ms. D. G. Seelawathi (Matara). In contrast to the huge open-air public rally held later on that day and attended by more than 15,000 people (one

11 I gratefully acknowledge the help of R. Cheran, Sarvam Kailasapathy, and Chitra Maunaguru in connection with the following material.

of the country's biggest public gatherings in recent years), the convention of the Mothers' Front was much more focused on procuring international support and was attended by more than one hundred foreign invitees representing embassies, NGOs, and the press. It was in the organizers' interest to create an image that proclaimed that the Mothers' Front was not anti-government but pro-peace and, more important, that it was being run by women from different ethnic groups and classes. Much concern was expressed about the plight of the mothers in the North and East and the need to form branches in those regions (Confidential report, INFORM 1991).

The organizers had dispensed with such rhetoric, however, by the time of the second national convention in 1992. Only two of the twenty speakers mentioned the suffering of Tamil mothers, and, with the exception of Dr. Saravanamuttu, no Tamils were given an opportunity to address the gathering. The absence of Tamil or other minority participation in the Mothers' Front meetings reduced the possibilities of launching a more integrated, national protest campaign that could have also gained much from the experiences of Tamil women in the north and east of the island.

Conclusion

The members of the Mothers' Front were motivated not by ideology but by circumstance to participate in a protest campaign against the state. Despite repeated assertions that it was not political or anti-government, the Front generally identified representatives of the state as perpetrators of 'disappearances"; the President, the supreme repository of state power, was its key target. Yet, the fact that the main opposition party, the SLFP, was coordinating the organization justifies doubt about its nature. However, the political participation of so many women articulating a specific subjectivity, that is, motherhood, had been unheard of until the Mothers' Fronts in the North and East took to the streets in 1984 and 1986 and the southern Mothers' Front demonstrated despair and anger through public, collective, ritualized curses.

Despite the limitations inherent in the identification with the familial and the nurturant, and the mobilization of feminized repertoires of protest, such as tears and curses, these women did manage to create a space for protest in a context of terror and violence. In fact, the contingent power of their protest stemmed from

their invocation of "traditional" sensibilities and the engendering of emotional responses by presenting themselves before a government and a nation as grief-stricken, chronic mourners for their "disappeared" whose only resort now was to beseech the deities for justice. Ironically, in a time when the protesting voices of several left-wing feminist and human rights activists had been silenced with death, it was the mothers' sorrowful and seemingly apolitical rhetoric and practices that alerted a nation to the hypocrisy of the state. The Front's politicization of motherhood by frequently linking it to a discourse of rights and dissent was continued to its full realization through the campaign strategies of SLFP politicians (cf. Schirmer 1989: 26); and, in the 1994 general elections, prime ministerial candidate Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga. Herself a grieving widow and mother, she cleverly articulated the mothers' suffering as both a personal and national experience. She too "sorrowed and wept" with them but also made it clear that she was capable of translating her grief into action, of building a new land where "other mothers will not suffer what we suffer."[12] [12] Ironically, Ms. Kumaratunga's embodiment of these grassroots women's suffering also usurped their space of protest; the materiality of their lives was sacrificed for an election slogan.

What has become of the thousands of women in the Mothers' Front? Have their lives changed significantly with a more progressive government in power? The new government has appointed three Commissions of Inquiry to look into the "disappearances" and killings that occurred during 1988-1991.[13] We cannot yet predict what will result. Maybe the women will receive individual hearings, another chance to demand that the perpetrators of violence be brought to justice. Maybe their "disappeared" will be restored to them. Perhaps they will receive financial compensation, although that would pale in comparison to all that they have lost, sometimes even their sanity.

12 Excerpts from Ms. Kumaratunga's final advertisement before the elections that was published in both Sinhala and English newspapers.

13 While the previous government did appoint a commission to investigate "disappearances" due to intense pressure exerted by the Mothers' Front as well as international human rights organizations, it empowered the commission to look only into "disappearances" that occurred from the commission's date of appointment, 11 January 1991, rather than during the height of the repression in the south, January 1988. The commissions appointed under the new regime, although rectifying this error, continue to ignore the atrocities that were perpetrated in the north and east by the previous regime because it is not empowered to investigate "disappearances" of Tamil youth as far back as 1979, under the guise of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (cf. Pravada 3(10) 1995)

It also remains to be seen how the women's involvement, however marginal, in a protest campaign has changed their lives. Although the majority of women who were part of the movement had been relegated to their homes and to the margins of an increasingly militarized society throughout much of their lives, the Mothers' Front did provide some opportunities to air their grievances and anger in public and to create strong networks among themselves. Several groups of these women have now formed links with feminist groups and other nongovernmental organizations that are providing them with trauma counselling and help with establishing self-employment projects. Yet the numbers are minuscule relative to the thousands of women and their families across the country who continue to grieve and to bear the livid scars of a nation-state that has blood on its hands.

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CHAPTER SIX

The "Language of the Organs" The Political Purchase of Tears in Contemporary Sri Lanka

Malathi de Alwis

Between June 1990 and May 1993 there emerged in southern Sri Lanka a significant and unprecedented political movement: the Mothers' Front. With an estimated grassroots membership of over twenty-five thousand women protesting the "disappearances" of approximately 60,000 male affines and/ or relatives, the Mothers' Front was an extraordinary political organization. It was not only the single largest women's protest movement of its time but arguably one of the most effective in the modern history of Sri Lanka. As I have suggested elsewhere (de Alwis, 1997a, 1997b), much of the political effect of the Mothers' Front stemmed from their mobilization of a particular configuration of "motherhood"—which I define as encompassing women's biological reproduction as well as their interpellation as moral guardians, caregivers, and nurturers—exemplified in their claim that all they wished for was a return to a time "where we can raise our sons to manhood, have our husbands with us and lead normal women's lives" (*The Island,* 9 Feb. 1991). Such an articulation of "motherhood" is undoubtedly undergirded by specific notions of "respectability" and "domesticity" (de Alwis 1998*),* but its emotional purchase was predominantly predicated on the construction of these women as grieving and suffering mothers. I would like to explore here the crucial role that was played by a particular signifier of such suffering and grief—tears. The location of tears within the naturalized female body, which is always already constructed as a site of the "real" and the "authentic," not only evoked popular sentiment but also legitimized protest.

Maternalizing Suffering

Emotions, according to Abu-Lughod and Lutz, are among those "taken-for granted objects of both specialized knowledge and everyday discourse" that are only now

entering the realm of anthropological inquiry (Lutz 1986; Lutz and White 1986). Primarily the preserve of philosophy and psychology for a long time, emotions continue to be tied to "tropes of interiority" and granted "ultimate facticity by being located in the natural body"; it is the aspect of human experience that has been "least subject to control, least constructed or learned (hence most universal), least public and therefore least amenable to sociocultural analysis". The location of emotions in the "natural body" also enables the frequent and easy ontological slippages that, for example, masculinize aggression and feminize suffering.

The feminization of suffering is a field of study that has been greatly enhanced by feminist research and writing during the past two decades that has deconstructed as well as historicized the rationalization and medicalization of the (primarily middle-class, Euro-American) female body during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[1] Hysteria, dementia, melancholia, and depression are familiar terms today that were discovered through and inscribed upon the bodies of women over the centuries.[2] The possession of a uterus and the bodily cycles that were linked to it such as menstruation, pregnancy, lactation, and menopause were perceived to be central to a woman's pathologies.

For many early feminists, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, and Shulamith Firestone, the specificities of the naturalized female body provided a unique means of access to knowledge and ways of living while simultaneously limiting women's capacity for equality (Grosz 1994: 15). These epistemological positions nevertheless stemmed from "patriarchal and misogynist assumptions about the female body as somehow more natural, less detached, more engaged with and directly related to its 'objects' than male bodies" (*ibid*: 15). The work of many contemporary feminists too frequently falls into the trap of attributing an "indisputable authenticity to women's experience," which is then perceived as enabling the construction of individual as well as collective identities and as engendering agency, resistance against oppression, and even feminism (Scott 1994: 31).[3] As Joan Scott (1994) has perceptively pointed out, this process of

1 For a sampling of this extensive literature see the pioneering work of Ehrenreich and English (1979); Jordanova (1980); Lloyd (1984); Showalter (1987); Smith (1976); Smith-Rosenberg (1973); and Wood (1973). See Veith (1970) for a useful historicization of hysteria. For a discussion of some of these psychological states within a broader civilizational framework, see Foucault (1972).

2 Radden (1987) makes a crucial differentiation between the earlier, romanticized notion of melancholia that was predominantly associated with men and modern, medicalized discourses on melancholia that are primarily focused on women and define them as deviant and deficient.

3 Mohanty (1987) has a pithy phrase for this: the "feminist osmosis thesis." It succinctly describes a

making "experience visible," of valorizing it as *the* authoritative evidence that grounds what is known, precludes its historicization and the interrogation of the structures of power that enable its production (1994: 25- 26).[4] As a matter of fact, it is precisely this "'authorized appearance of the "real"'" that serves to " 'camouflage the practice which in fact determines it'" (deCerteau cited in Scott 1994: 367). Our challenge is thus not to make experience the origin of our explanations but rather the very subject that we "seek to explain" (Scott 1992:26). Such a project however, must also be cognizant of the fact that what "counts as experience" is "neither self-evident nor straightforward" but always contested and therefore always political (Scott 1994: 387; see also Jeganathan 1997: 212).

In this section, I am interested in unpacking how Sinhala women's quotidian experiences and material practices are frequently maternalized and articulated upon and through the body of the mother.[5] Such maternalized embodiments are produced within a discourse of suffering that engenders a particular sentiment because of their very location in such a maternalized body. For example, the Sinhala word for suffering, *dukha* (which can also mean pain, grief, misery, yearning, or sacrifice, according to the context in which it is used), when used in a semantic coupling, such as *dola duka,* glossed as "pregnancy cravings," enables one to move beyond the standard equation of this term with "perverse appetite" to also understand the suffering the woman experiences during this period—"her nausea, vomiting, bodily weakness and the desire for certain objects, which is painful to the individual till satisfied" (Obeyesekere 1963: 323).

It is also from this moment of pregnancy that a woman's life is frequently equated with suffering. References to "my mother who bore me for ten months" or "who suffered tenfold and birthed me into this world" invoke the mother's ten-month pregnancy—the ten being poetic license, as it enables the alliteration *dasa* (ten)

phenomenon where "females are feminists by association and identification with the experiences which constitute [them) as female". See also Mohanty (1984) for a critique of 1970s feminists such, as Robin Morgan and Mary Daly, who presume "experience" to be a transcendent category that unites all women across the globe. Similar important contributions have been made by King (1986), who questions the use of lesbianism "as a privileged signifier" (1986:85); and Riley (1988), who offers an extended critique of the category "woman," which is centrally premised on women's experiences.

4 Scott's article, "Experience," is an abridged version of "The Evidence of Experience." I will be referring to both versions.

5 The Sinhalese are the majority community in Sri Lanka, making up about 74 percent of the population. The largest minority, the Tamils, make up about 18 percent of the population, followed by the Muslims-Moors and Malays-who comprise 7 percent, the Burghers—descendants of the Portuguese and Dutch colonists—and other Eurasians (0.8 percent).

masa (month)—as well as her suffering during labor. Such "conceits," which are mobilized in literary representations as well as formal speech, are also accompanied by other "conceits" that delineate how one's mother fed one her bloodmilk *(le kiri),* cleaned one's bodily wastes *(katha kunu)* saw to one's well-being *(sapa duk),* and nourished one *(lokumahath kala).*[6] I want to especially draw attention to the popular "conceit" *le* (blood) *kiri* (milk)—an evocative word assemblage that concisely articulates the nurturing as well as sacrificial qualities of a mother's milk; it is her blood that is transmogrified into milk. A particularly interesting mobilization of this "conceit" was visible in a poster promoting breastfeeding that was issued by the Ministry of Women's Affairs. The poster, which was displayed during the height of one of the first major government offensives against the Tamil militants in the North, in 1986 and 1987, depicted a woman dressed in cloth and jacket—a marker of Sinhalaness—breastfeeding her baby while dreaming of a man in army fatigues. The caption below exhorted: "Give your bloodmilk [*le kiri]* to nourish our future soldiers" (see de Alwis 1994).

I would like to digress briefly to qualify my use of "conceit" as an "elaborated or exaggerated metaphor".[7] It is a form of speech that is particularly well located within another term that I invoke here: "discourse." As Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990) point out, the term "discourse" not only marks "an approach to language that is spoken and used," but it also suggests a concern with verbal productions that are "more formal, elaborate or artistic than everyday conversation" (1990: 7). While some linguists have broadened the term to encompass the nonverbal, such as music or weeping, or the "'unsaid'" of past utterances and present imaginings (Tyler cited in Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990: 7), it is Foucault's systematic theorization of the term that has defined it as being productive of as well as a product of power. Discourses, notes Foucault (1974), are the "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" *(*1974: 49). It is these varied senses and meanings of" discourse" that I will mobilize throughout this chapter.

Thus far I have discussed the "conceits" that are associated with the labour of "motherhood," such as pregnancy, birthing, and breastfeeding. I want to turn

6 Katha kunu is a phrase used in the popular construction of Buddha biography to describe the bodily wastes that had been expended by female dancers in the palace during their sleep. This was a sight that revolted Prince Siddhartha and added to his resolve to renounce his "worldly" life. (I am grateful to Pradeep Jeganathan for this reference). Note how Siddhartha's revulsion is linked to women's bodies here; it is a formulation that is repeated in other episodes of his biography. Similar moralistic ploys are mobilized in the narratives of other religions as well, the Christian construction of Eve being the most familiar.

7 The American Heritage Dictionary, second college edition, s.v. "conceit.

now to a *"conceit"—unu kandulu* (warm tears)—that has a more generalized usage but is also frequently produced as the most visible and tangible embodiment of a mother's suffering; the warmth of the tears suggests that they have been wrung out of her body and still retain her body heat:

> When her son Gemunu went to battle
> The venerable queen did not shed tears
> I cannot do likewise my son
> For warm tears [*unu kandulu]* are cascading down my face
> *(Birinda,* 25 Oct. 1993; my translation)

In this verse (excerpted from a longer poem published in a women's magazine), a mother addresses her son 'who is at the battlefront. She poignantly affirms her humanity as well as her despair by the warm tears that she cannot stem, unlike the legendary queen Vihara Maha Devi. However, in the second verse the mother shows that she is more than a match for the queen in her patriotism, for she goes on to exhort her son not to lay down his rifle even in death and promises to send his younger brother to take his place. The mother's fervent militarism and patriotism is subtly feminized by her tears, the sign of her sacrifice and suffering.[8]

What I found most significant, however, is how the reportage on the Mothers' Front re-signified women's tears as specifically maternal through their reiteration within a previously maternalized continuum of blood and milk. For example, a Sinhala newspaper carrying a photograph of a group of weeping women at a Mothers' Front rally bears the riveting caption: "Blood . . . milk and tears" *(Lakdiva* 28 June 1992).[9] Similarly, a two-page feature on the Mothers' Front rally, by the

8 For a discussion of the production of sacrifice and suffering as the chief requirements of female citizenship, see De Alwis (1994, 1998).

9 Revolutionary slogans have frequently sought to disrupt this continuum between blood and tears, however, by relegating tears to the sphere of weakness and blood to the sphere of action. For example, when a student activist at the University of Sri Jayawardenapura was killed by state troops in 1987, the JVP (a Sinhala nationalist youth movement), which was in the procession of regrouping at this time, chanted the following slogan during the funeral procession: *Epa epa kandulu bonne / Le valinma paliya ganne* (Don't, don't drink tears/ Extract your revenge in blood alone). Nevertheless, there have been moments when revolutionaries have found it useful to reiterate such a continuum as well. The poetry of Parakrama Kodituvakku, for example, creates the new "conceit" of "milk droplet" *(kiri kandula—literally* translated as "milk teardrop") to symbolize the rights of the masses (Maddegama 1979: 57-58). The combination of milk and tears successfully tinges the milky promise of nurture and fecundity with a suggestion of suffering and sadness. In a poem that is a clever reworking of a familiar lullaby, Kodituvakku urges the little child to seek this "droplet of milk" contained in the milking pot (which has gotten carried away by the river)

well-known activist and journalist Sunanda Deshapriya, begins by stressing the nurturing and sacrificial qualities of tears. Modifying a phrase by Maxim Gorky, Deshapriya asserts that "to create and sustain this world, one not only requires a mother's milk and sunshine but her tears as well" *(Yukthiya,* 5 June 1992).[10] Thus the suffering produced through labour becomes linked to suffering produced through loss.[11] The production of tears as such a complex and concatenated bodily fluid, as an essence of "motherhood," proved to be one of the most powerful forms of "body speech"[14] that was mobilized in the public(ized) practices of the Mothers' Front and the discourses they engendered.[12]

Sentimentalizing Maternity

An exploration of how suffering is discursively maternalized also necessitates an understanding of its reception, its effect. One could make the argument that the "conceits" I have discussed merely contribute to trivializing and making cliche the deep emotions that are meant to be conveyed. However, I propose that they can be read as engendering an even greater empathy and affect because of their very familiarity. They have become a shorthand, a concise and efficient way of expressing as well as evoking a particular sentiment among those who understand the Sinhala language. "Conceits", such as *le kiri* or *unu kandulu*, enable the writer to express specific sentiments about Sinhala motherhood that immediately evoke a similar sentiment in the reader for they now share a similar language—of verbal allusions as well as of refined emotion. It is this sharing, this commonality, that lends depth and poignancy to the feelings expressed and evoked.

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that his mother has labored to collect for him and was planning to feed to him while bouncing him upon her bosom *(lamada):* "Along the river and like the never-ending river seek/ Crossing smouldering deserts scour/ Dodging rifles and menacing swords speed/ With the milk droplet you lost on the day of your birth return" (Kodituvakku, "Gangata Udin Yakku Giya . . .!; my translation). The mother here represents the motherland. By not having her nursing her own child (which does not fit in with the lullaby that Kodituvakku evokes), the poet manages to accentuate the labour of the mother (who has to milk the cow) by de-linking it from the more naturalized labour of breastfeeding. However, the mother continues to be portrayed as the repository of nurture, vulnerability, and dependence and thus becomes the predictable catalyst for her child/ citizen's agency.

10 Deshapriya had been the recipient of such nurturance and sacrifice himself; during his imprisonment of six and a half years (for participating in a youth uprising in 1971), his mother visited him every month without fail, "carefully concealing her despair and offering words of comfort and encouragement" *(Yukthiya* 5 July 1992).

11 I am indebted to Lauren Berlant for this evocative formulation.

12 This is a term used by Schirmer (1994: 189) to describe women's resistive bodily practices within public spaces. I have mobilized it differently here to suggest the communicative potentiality of tears.

"Formulaic language," as Abu-Lughod (1986) has noted," allows individuals to frame their experiences as similar to those of others and perhaps to assert the universality of their experiences" *(*1986: 239). While Abu-Lughod reads this assertion of universality as a search for a "semblance of social conformity" in a context where the poetic sentiments that are uttered are in marked contrast to everyday discourses and in violation of the moral code of the Awlad' Ali (*ibid*: 239), I perceive it as an index of the hegemony of a particularly Sinhala, Buddhist, and patriarchal discourse. Unlike in the poetry of the Awlad' Ali, the "conceits" used and consequently the sentiments expressed in and evoked through Sinhala poetry are also utilized in prose and some forms of everyday discourse such as public speeches, posters, and news reports. They are part of a broader system of emotional expression that is effectively disseminated and learned *via* a variety of ideological State Apparatuses, such as the school or the family (Althusser 1971).

I also wish to argue that "conceits" engender a certain restraint and refinement of feeling because they have been codified and made formulaic, even though the language of the "conceit" itself may be rather exaggerated and effusive. Such restraint and refinement are also hallmarks of "sentiment," as suggested in the following dictionary definitions: " 3. Refined or tender emotion; manifestation of the higher or more refined feelings; 4 exhibition or manifestation of feeling or sensibility, or appeal to the tender emotions, in literature, art or music; 5. a thought influenced by or proceeding from feeling or emotion; 6. the thought or feeling intended to be conveyed by words, acts, or gestures as distinguished from the words, acts, or gestures themselves."[13] "Sentiment" not only has multiple meanings, but its meaning has been transformed over the centuries so that it is now chiefly used derisively to convey "an imputation of either insincerity or mawkishness."[14] However, I wish to reclaim the notion of sentiment as both refined and restrained, as that "delicacy of feeling" that was crucial to the progress of civilization (Elias 1959: 94, 462-64), and at the heart of the "revolution in the scientific approach to

13 A similar production and dissemination of sentiment by an institution of the state, along with the support of florists in particular, is discussed in Hausen' s (1986) carefully argued essay on the creation of German Mother's Day during the 1920s in order to stem a decline in femininity and motherliness and engender a "moral rebirth" among the German Volk (1986: 387). See also Johnson (1979) for a less rigorous but nevertheless interesting analysis of the production of an American Mother's Day in 1914.

14 *Random House Dictionary of the English Language,* s.v. "sentiment." For an extremely nuanced and located discussion of "sentiment" and its related terms, "sentimental," "sense," "sensibility," "feeling," and "sympathy," see Brissenden (1974). For an interesting argument that seeks to posit a distinction between "sentiment" (as innately moral) and "sensibility" (as a psychological-physical response), see Kaplan (1987).

the study of man [sic]" in eighteenth-century Europe (Brissenden 1974: 37).[15] It was such "nuances of civilized conduct" and "fortifications for the self" that were central to the development of the modern subject (Elias 1959: 464; Gay 1984: 458), whose interiority and individualism were signalled by his or her ability to discover "the truth of their being" through the cultivation of their emotions (Foucault 1981: 5).[16]

What can these specifically located arguments about eighteenth-century Europe tell us about the production of sentiment in Sri Lanka? I would like to recall my argument regarding how a particular notion of "respectability" was remade in the articulatory encounter between Protestant missionaries and Sinhala Buddhist nationalists in nineteenth-century Ceylon (de Alwis 1997a, 1998). The missionary encounter had a similarly profound effect upon the production of affect in Sri Lanka. The cultivation of ''respectability" was inextricably tied to the cultivation of "sentiment"; to be "respectable" implied that one was in control of one's emotions, that one was restrained and refined. An exemplar of such "respectable" womanhood was the American missionary Harriet Winslow (1835), who always sought to be "moderate in all things" (1835: 397). Interestingly, however, what could not be fully reconciled within this schema of restraint was the public display of tears and copious weeping, for they were frequently perceived to be the only visible signs of Christian conviction and feeling among the heathen, be they men or women.[17] Harriet Winslow (1835) describes a "time of feeling and of triumph"

15 Brissenden (1974) is referring to the paradigmatic influence of British philosophers, such as David Hume, author of *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), and Adam Smith, author of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), whose work was based on the study of sentiment. For an excellent discussion of the differences between the work of Hume and Smith with regard to sentiment and sympathy, see Mullen (1988). For an analysis of how such ideas were perceived and transformed in the writings of Victorian novelists, see Kaplan (1987).

16 Foucault is speaking specifically about desire here, but I think his insights are useful for understanding the cultivation of emotions in general as well, a point also made by Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990: 6). Chakrabarty employs a similar trajectory of reasoning to make a different point about the production of Bengali subjectivity and sentiment (undated: 14). See also Sontag (1977) for a discussion of how sickness and suffering was perceived to make men "interesting" and was thus proclaimed as a mark of individuality and refinement by nineteenth-century romantics.

17 The writings of European Protestants in South Africa display a similar tension between their excitement at the sight of the Gospel melting the '"flinty hearts"' of the heathen and their '"endeavours to preserve decorum"' when the strong feelings of the southern Tswana (at the baptism of the first converts) gave rise '" to much weeping and considerable confusion"'; '"Sable cheeks"' became '"bedewed with tears,"' and the chapel turned into "'a place of weeping'" where some would "'fall down in hysterics"' and others would have to be carried out in" 'a state of great exhaustion"' (cited in Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 239). As Comaroff and Comaroff (1991) point out, emotionalism, was not only regarded with great ambivalence by British Nonconformists, but the display of such vehemence and lack of control was perceived as especially troubling "in those but one step away from nature" (1991: 239).

when a recently converted schoolmaster at Uduvil (in northern Sri Lanka)—who had once been "awakened" but then dissuaded by his friends—led a group of schoolmasters in prayer, his utterances "several times checked by weeping" (*ibid*: 234).[18] Similarly, she notes with satisfaction how greatly "overcome" several native girls were to hear about their kind benefactors in America whose only recompense was their conversion (*ibid*: 206). It was events such as these that Harriet Winslow (1835) and her husband found most "affecting to see" (1835: 357). As she noted during her youthful struggles, with her faith: "'Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of teats,' I would weep day and night, for my sins" (*ibid*: 17). The female missionary's propensity for such emotional expressions was not uncommon in the age of feminized religion and sentimental (i.e., mawkish) literature (Douglas 1978). However, even such displays were rarely exhibited in public and only confessed to in diaries and letters to close friends (Winslow 1835: 15, 17). In time, even the public(ized) tears of the more elite heathens — the last vestiges of their unbridled passion — were to be carefully checked and controlled in the mission schools; emotional restraint and refinement would become one of the defining characteristics of the bourgeois Sri Lankan woman.

The production of bourgeois Sri Lankan women as the epitomes of restraint and "respectability" was also dependent upon the construction of peasant and working-class women as their antitheses; the latter group was frequently portrayed as being ignorant, "unrespectable," and given to the display of wild passions.[19] What is particularly ironic is that the excessive exhibition of sentiment—that is, sentimentality in its present usage as being "Addicted to indulgence in emotion" —is nevertheless imbricated in the articulation of Sri Lankan, especially Sinhala, notions of civility, refinement, and humanity (OED 1989). It is the maternalization of suffering and sentimentality that effects such a dialectic epitomized in the journalist Kumaradasa Giribawa's comment in a feature article on the Mothers' Front: "Tears ... are common to all. Yet, there is nothing more powerful on earth that can wring tears from others than a mother's tears" *(Irida Lankadeepa* 28 June 1992). Note the dual labour of tears here—they produce and signify sentiment. The colloquial description of a civilized being—"one who has a mind and a heart" *(hithak papuvak aththek)—also* encompasses such an exhibition of sentiment within the

18 See also Leitch and Leitch (1890) for a description of an emotion-filled "revival meeting in Northern Sri Lanka, where people "with tears running down their cheeks" and voices "choked with emotion" prayed that their friends "be brought to Christ" (1890: 8).

19 Note how the nineteenth—Century colonial/missionary view of Ceylonese natives has been mobilized to describe only a particular segment of the population (see de Alwis 1998).

rubric of "humanism" *(miniska ma),* which insists that the heart should inform the mind and vice versa. It is this conception of sentiment, as reasonable feeling (Brissenden 1974: 54), that is also evoked in the journalist Sunanda Deshapriya's observation that tears are the best indicators of one's humanity as they show one's ability to feel love *(adaraya, snehaya)* and compassion *(dayava) (Yukthiya* 5 July 1992).

I have explored so far how tears—a tangible signifier of suffering—have been maternalized and sentimentalized through their discursive production as a bodily essence of motherhood. Such tears were also productive of tears in others and thus provide a tangible signifier of the reception of maternalized tears as well. Tears can thus be configured as signifying the suffering of labour and loss, on the one hand, and sentiment and humanism, on the other hand. This dual configuration of tears is premised on different readings of gendered and classed Sinhala bodies that span the "natural" and the "civilized"; the more "civilized" one is, the more apt one is to restrain and refine one's embodied expressions. What remains constant, however, is the ultimate "facticity" of the body that provides a particular authenticity to its productions, in this case tears. Such a conception is given further credence by the popular Sinhala belief that one does not shed tears if one is feigning grief.

In such a context, I have been particularly interested in understanding the discursive construction of proletarian maternity as both essence and excess, as evoking sentiment as well as exhibiting sentimentality. While much of this section has been taken up with considering the former formulation, spatial restrictions preclude an extended discussion of how working-class and peasant Sinhala women have been constructed as the practitioners of sentimentality and how these women mobilize such identities of excess to their advantage (see de Alwis 1998*)*. However, I hope to briefly pursue this trajectory of inquiry in the next section, with reference to particular practices of the Mothers' Front and certain discourses they engendered.

Producing "Authenticity

The Mothers' Front stated clearly from the outset that they were not a political movement and frequently stressed the fact that they were neither feminists nor anti-government. Their central demand was for a climate in which they could return to being mothers and wives and lead "normal women's lives." The fact that such an assertion of apoliticality could retain any credibility in the face of their

intimate association with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the opposition political party that was the primary funder and coordinator of the group, as well as have an emotional purchase was due to the public performance of maternal(ized) suffering by the members of the Mothers' Front. In fact, I would say, this is a performance of suffering in order to retain the specificity of a form of violence such as "disappearances" and the kind of suffering it engenders. My use of "performance" is not meant to suggest that these women were calculatedly staging a show of suffering but rather that when they wept and wailed at the public rallies and conventions that were organized by the SLFP, they were performing their gender as mothers and, more particularly, as suffering mothers. As Judith Butler (1990) has argued, gender is performative in the sense that it produces, retroactively, the illusion that there is an inner gender core, essence, or disposition. Such an illusion is enabled by acts, gestures, and enactments that express essences or identities that are *"fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (Butler 1990: 136). In short, the gendered body that is performed "has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (*ibid*: 136).

The performance of maternity and suffering by the Mothers' Front was crucially sustained through "corporeal signs" (Butler 1990: 136), which I prefer to refer to as "body speech" (Schirmer 1994:189). The "language of the body," as Bourdieu (1977) has pointed out, "whether articulated in gestures or *a fortiori,* in what psychosomatic medicine calls 'the language of the organs' is incomparably more ambiguous and more overdetermined than the most overdetermined, uses of ordinary language" (1977: 120). Such an overdetermination also stems from the notion that the body, perceived to be one of nature's most supreme creations, is "above suspicion" (Daston 1994: 244); it is the most persuasive site of evidence.[20] In the same way that a body under torture is considered to possess an " 'absolute credibility'" because of its operation under constraint (Aristotle cited in Schirmer 1988: 98), the traumatized body of the woman is perceived not only to bespeak the "real" and the "authentic" but to bear witness (Das and Nandy 1985: 193).[21]

20 I am referring here to the popular notion that nature (and thus the human body) is devoid of human intention. As Daston (1994) points out, what is implicit in the conventional distinction between facts and evidence is that for "facts to qualify as credible evidence they must appear innocent of human intention" (1994: 244; see also Lutz 1986). Such a distinction between facts and evidence is strongly contested and debated among historians of science, an argument that Daston (1994) herself is not interested in pursuing, as she is more concerned with exploring and historicizing how such an assumption was produced.

21 It is important to differentiate between the kind of violence "witnessed" by the bodies of the women Das and Nandy (1985) refer to and those of the Front's members. The majority of the former group of women had

I discussed above how public discourses produced tears as the most potent "body speech" of maternalized suffering, and how this articulation of a concatenated maternal essence, which signifies both labour and loss, was crucial to engendering popular sentiment, I want to extend that discussion now by exploring how such a dialectic between maternalized suffering and sentiment—both axes, importantly, being articulated by tears-furthered the credibility and "authenticity" of the Mothers' Front's protests. Such credibility is especially embedded in the traumatized body, and I will briefly discuss a particular aspect of such an articulation.

For members of the Front (as well as their relatives) the physical transformations of their bodies were important markers of their love and sorrow for their "disappeared." For example, Seela's husband would often show me a photograph that had been taken of her prior to her son's "disappearance" and remark on how plump and fair this now dark, wraith-like woman had been. Not only had Seela lost a great deal of weight, but she frequently suffered from blackouts. While her family fretted about her health and safety, Seela seemed to welcome these moments of amnesia because she was convinced that these were the times, she was communing with her "disappeared" son, wherever he was incarcerated.[22] It seemed that in her efforts to alleviate her son's suffering, Seela believed that she must submit to pain herself: "I get these terrible headaches when I regain consciousness. I think that's when my son has given some of his pain to me. If I take on some of his pain, then his pain will get less ... no ?" Trauma counsellors who have tried to work with Seela have categorized such forms of behaviour as psychosomatism—the experiencing of bodily symptoms as the result of mental conflict.[23] Many symptoms that were exhibited by other members of the Front are also included within this cate gory—dizziness, insomnia, loss of appetite, stomach cramps, shortness of breath, and chest pains.[24]

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been repeatedly raped and abused as well.

22 The majority of the Front members refused to accept the possibility that their son or husband was dead.

23 For an excellent discussion of the intersection of somatic pain and psychological pain that is constitutive of traumatic memory and stress disorders, see Young (1995, 1996).

24 I am grateful to the trauma counsellor (who wishes to remain anonymous) who discussed the provenance and treatment of such symptoms with me. For a Piercian analysis of similar symptoms in survivors of torture as well as survivors of the anti-Tamil riots of 1983 in Sri Lanka, see Daniel (1996). For a consideration of "numbing" in female survivor of anti-Sikh riots, see Das (1990). For an exploration of "silencing" and the public articulation of suffering via an incurable wound as well as through "fits" among female survivors of Partition, see Das (1991).

However, women like Seela have scant regard for the medicalization of what they have now taken to be a way of life. They have their own terms for the suffering that they undergo, which once again is articulated through familiar Sinhala conceits": *Mama Kandulu bibi inne* or *Mama inne andu kandulen*. These two very evocative "conceits" defy translation—a distant approximation would be "I am existing by drinking tears" and "I am in a constant state of tears." Journalists and politicians also often mobilized these "conceits" to describe the mental physical state of the Front's members, such as Sunanda Deshapriya's further complication of one "conceit": *Handuknadulin thetha baritha sithin* (with minds soaked in the tears constantly shed) (Yukthiya 5 July 1997). Unlike in a situation of death (particularly when the corpse is available to the family), where funerary rites provide order as well closure, a situation of disappearance draws out the process of mourning indefinitely and makes chronic mourners" of the grief-stricken (Schirmer 1989: 25). It is this chronic grief that is so poignantly captured by these "conceits": these women's lives have become so tightly intertwined with tears that they simultaneously produce tears while deriving sustenance from them.

These "conceits" also illuminate the complicated interplay between discursivity and materiality. They are useful and concise word assemblages that are mobilized by the members of the Front to describe a very specific and concrete reality of their lives. Yet we cannot ignore the fact that these "conceits" are drawn from a hegemonic discursive traditional that is both Sinhala Buddhist and patriarchal. Such a traditional constructs its own kind of materiality and reality. As Joan Scott (1994) has reminded us, what counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward" but always contested and thus always political (1994: 387). In the following section, I will analyse the political purchase of certain discourses about the Mothers' Front that contributed to the construction of a particular kind of lived materiality that was articulated in the cadences of suffering and sentiment.

The Political Purchase of Tears

The Mothers' Front was founded, funded and coordinated by the SLFP, which also organized the few but spectacular public conventions of the Front that were held in the capital city of Colombo during the years 1991 and 1992. These conventions became crucial sites for the shrewd exploitation of the Front's tears by the SLFP, in order to shame the ruling regime and to incite the populace. In their speeches at these conventions, members of the SLFP frequently sought to provoke the tears

of women while simultaneously admonishing them to stop crying and get on with their lives. The SLFP was thus not only funding and organizing the Mothers' Front but also controlling them emotionally; the women were produced as vulnerable, weak, and hysterical. This was an image that was readily circulated by the media as well. An extreme example of this was when a father of a disappeared suffered a fatal heart attack at the Front's second convention in 1992, and some news reports sought to connect his death to the tears of the women. One report suggested that the sight of "hundreds of mothers weeping and wailing, some beating their breasts in anguish, supplicating to the Gods in despair" must have been unbearable for the father, despite the fact that the man had actually died before the convention had begun or the women had commenced weeping (*The Island* 2 June 1992; *Yukthiya* 5 July 1992).

It was also the media's somewhat overwrought but nevertheless consistently sympathetic coverage of the Mothers' Front 30 that was crucial in moulding the opinions of its reading public.[25][26] An editorial comment in *The Island*, claiming that when "mothers emerge as a political force it means that our political institutions and society as a whole have reached a critical moment—the danger to our way of life has surely come closer home" (20 Feb 1991), crystallized the unease that many felt with the present government.[27] The fact that one of the most sacred cows of the Sinhalese—the sentimentalized and revered mother—was at the butt end of a callous government sparked the ire of many readers ponded with poems and letters to the press. One particularly long and distraught poem that began by commenting on how woman was "feted as mother" the day she "suffered and laboured and bore her children, "proceeded to detail how a mother's everyday sacrifices and struggles to bring up her sons had come to naught because her "innocent boys who had not yet lost the taste of milk from their mouths" no longer had the safety and warmth of her lap. The mother finally comes to the realization that her sons have been murdered and on fire (a common occurrence during the years of the JVP uprising); with the burning of her sons' bodies, the pedestal on which she has been placed as well as the institution of "motherhood" goes up in flames. The

25 Coverage of the Mothers' Front was generally sympathetic except for the newspapers that were owned by the ruling party and those were under the authority of the state; the two major TV stations that were authorized to cover local news events during this time were also under the jurisdiction of the state.

26 The ability of the media to manipulate the sentiments of a gullible audience could not have been better "exposed" or satirized than in Barry Levinson's movie *Wag the Dog* (1997).

27 When several mass graves were discovered and excavated in various parts of the island in 1994, the ruling party's reputation for barbarism and tyranny was concretized.

poem ends with the despairing cry: "Mother ... is it she who is the only cursed woman on earth?" (Damayanthi Amerasekere, *Irida Divaina,* 5). I find this poem particularly interesting because despite that fact that it provides a critique of the valorisation of "motherhood" (though such a critique is closely intertwined with a criticism of the government), it cannot avoid the standard "conceits" of the Sinhala language that evoke sentiments that are central to promoting and sustaining such a valorisation.[28]

However, signs of weakness, epitomized by the women's tears, could only be gently chastised in public, for there was a common understanding that the Front's members had suffered greatly, that "one could not impose limits on the tears that poured forth from a mother on behalf of her child" (Sunanda Deshapriya, *Yukthiya* 5 July 1992). The Front's tears thus could be fitted into an already familiar structure of sentiment that valorised a mother's capacity for suffering while also tolerating and pitying the "sympathetic sensibility of her organism" that "condemned" her to tears (Foucault 1973: 153-54). In fact, what rendered such tears particularly poignant and authentic was the excessive and spectacular way they were shed. News reports and features were particularly effusive in their detailed delineation of such "body speech": the mothers' tears poured forth in torrents *(Irida Lankadeepa* 28 June 1992), they wept and wailed and beat their breasts *(The Island* 2 June 1992), they tore their hair and struck their heads against the earth *(Divaina* 6 July 1992), they washed their meeting hall with their tears *(Lakdiva* 28 June 1992), and their garlands of sighs encircled the entire island *(Yukthiya* 5 July 1992). Even more powerful and moving than all these verbal illustrations were the numerous photographs of weeping women that accompanied the articles; they most certainly gave credence to the cliche that one picture was worth a thousand words.

Such excessiveness and abandon were particularly noticeable when juxtaposed against the way that the few middle-class women who were present displayed their emotion. When Dr. Manorani Saravanamuttu, the president of the Mothers' Front, and several SLFP politicians, such as Chandrika Kumaratunga, Hema Ratnayake, and Priyangani Abeydeera (who had lost sons, husbands, and/or fathers) addressed the meeting, their sombre voices did falter and quiver, they constantly choked back tears and frequently dabbed at their eyes, but they always managed to retain their composure and keep their emotions in check; Dr. Saravanamuttu

28 I am grateful to Wendy Kozol and Wendy Hesford for pointing this out to me.

and Ms. Kumaratunga were particularly emphatic: "We have cried enough. I am not saying that we should cry no more . . . but we have to move beyond that."[29] This hierarchical configuration of emotional control was of course topped by the father of a teenaged schoolboy "disappeared" from the Embilipitiya region who, as Sunanda Deshapriya was quick to note, "did not weep" when he addressed the second National Convention of the Mothers' Front *(Yukthiya* 5 July 1992).

What I find most interesting is that although the members of the Front were represented as weak and hysterical or as the puppets of the SLFP (a frequent charge by the government), their credibility as suffering mothers was unscathed. A frequent refrain that was taken up by the general populace as well as the media was that these women should not be sullied by politics, an opinion exemplified in the subtitle of Giribawa's feature article on the Front: "Mothers' Tears Don't Need Politics" *(Irida Lankadeepa* 28 June 1992). However, it was the very apoliticality of a symbolic essence of maternity such as tears that proved to be most useful politically. This is particularly clear when we consider how the state responded to the Front in terms of rhetoric as well as practices.

Contesting Tears

As in the case of the Madres of Argentina or the GAM (Mutual Support Group for the Reappearance of Our Sons, Fathers, Husbands, and Brothers) of Guatemala, the rhetoric of protest used by the Mother's Front can also be read as confronting repressive state by revealing the contradictions between the state's own rhetoric and practices. By appealing for a return to the "natural" order of family and "motherhood," these women were openly embracing patriarchal stereotypes that primarily defined them through familial and domestic subject positions, such as wife and mother. However, by accepting this responsibility to nurture and preserve life, which is also valorised by the state, they revealed the ultimate transgression of the state as well, for it was denying women the opportunities for mothering through a refusal to acknowledge life by resorting to clandestine tactics of" disappearance" (Schirmer 1989: 28).

The Sri Lankan state's major rhetorical counter to such implicit accusations is very interesting. On the day the Mothers' Front organized their first rally in Colombo,

29 Excerpt from the speech of Ms. Kumaratunga made on 23 June 1992, author's notes.

President Premadasa acknowledged that he sympathized "with the mothers whose children have been *led astray* by designing elements. Many now in custody are being *rehabilitated" (Daily News,* 19 Feb. 1991; emphasis added). In a similar vein, Ranjan Wijeratne, the minister of state for defence, pontificated: "Mothers are not expected to stage demonstrations. Mothers should have looked after their children. They failed to do that. They did not know what their children were doing. They did not do that and now they are crying" *(Daily News* 15 Feb. 1991). In both statements there is an overt suggestion that these protesting women have not been "good" and "capable" mothers, but the president's statement goes one further and suggests that because of their "bad" mothering he has had to take on the responsibility of "motherhood." ln other words, these women should have no reason to protest but rather should be grateful to him and to his government for rectifying the wrongs they have committed through the "rehabilitation" of their children. Through the use of euphemisms, such as "rehabilitation", the president also carefully circumvented accusations of the state's complicity in "disappearances" and arbitrary killings.

What is unmistakable in the government's responses, however, is that it dared not dispute or disparage the "authenticity" and depth of the women's suffering. What the government sought to do instead was organize its own rallies of grieving women, thus contesting the Front on its own terrain. For example, when the Front organized a rally in Colombo to commemorate International Women's Day on 8 March 1991, the state, under the aegis of the first lady, Hema Premadasa, and with the support of the national women's group she headed—the Seva Vanitha Movement [35]—organized a massive women's rally on that same day in another part of the city.[30] This rally was especially dominated by the Seva Vanitha units affiliated with the armed forces and far exceeded in numbers those present at the Front's rally. While the Mothers' Front mourned the "disappearances" of their male relatives due to state repression, the state-organized women's rally mourned the deaths of their male kin who had been killed by militants either in the south or the north and east of Sri Lanka. The state-owned *Daily News* (9 March 1991) carried an entire page of photographs from the state-organized rally, while no mention was made of the Mothers' Front rally.

30 It was mandatory for all wives of government officials as well as all female government officials to be members of this national social service organization, which replicated the hierarchical structures of government in that the president's wife was the leader, the cabinet ministers' wives or women cabinet ministers were her deputies, and so on.

Conclusion

The central concern of this chapter has been to understand the emotional purchase of the Mothers' Front, which I suggest was primarily premised on the discursive construction of the Front's members as grieving and suffering mothers. Such a construction was particularly enabled through the articulation of embodied signifiers of suffering-such as tears-which are maternalized and sentimentalized within Sinhala society. This "language of the organs" was especially persuasive and credible when located within the traumatized and maternalized female body; it provided the Mothers' Front with a particular authenticity that even its critics, such as the state, could not (and maybe dared not) dispute.

The political effectivity of the Mothers' Front must be understood as being predicated on the reiteration of patriarchal and Sinhala Buddhist conceptions of maternalized suffering and sentiment. However, it is also important to realize that at a time when other, more familiar and predictable voices of dissent had been silenced, it was the maternalist politics of the Mothers' Front that proved to be most effective. It is for this reason that I have argued elsewhere (de Alwis 1997a, 1997b), for a contingent reading of the Mothers' Front's protests. William Connolly (1991), in his multifaceted characterization of contingency, has called attention to the variable, uncertain, unexpected, and irregular potentiality of this concept (1991: 28). My positing of the efficacy of the Mothers' Front as contingent is premised on the variable and unexpected possibilities that are presented by this concept. However, such a political as well as theoretical position does not preclude the retention of a critical voice and vision that calls attention to the limitations of maternalist politics and understand the importance of striving for less limited formulations of political protests in the future.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Ambivalent Maternalisms: Cursing as Public Protest in Sri Lanka

Today a hundred and fifty shot
Yesterday seventy blasted
Even the poet becomes numerate . . .
The map erupts with gigantic bubbles of blood
Bursting and flooding the lacerated terrain

Jean Arasanayagam

During the years 1987 to 1991, Sri Lanka witnessed an uprising by nationalist Sinhala youth (the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna –JVP) and reprisals by the state that gripped the country in a stranglehold of terror.[1] Although the militants randomly terrorised or assassinated anyone who criticised them or allegedly collaborated with the state, the state similarly, but on a much larger scale, murdered or 'disappeared' anyone they suspected of being a 'subversive'. These included thousands of young men, some young women, and several left-wing activists, playwrights, lawyers and journalists, who were either monitoring or protesting against the state's violation of human rights. Bodies, rotting on beaches, smouldering in grotesque heaps by the roadsides and floating down rivers, were a daily sight during the height of state repression from 1988 to 1990. It was in such a context that women formed the Mothers' Front, a grassroots Sinhala organisation with an estimated membership of over 25,000 women, in July 1990 to protest against the 'disappearance' of approximately 60,000 young and middle-aged men.[2] Their only demand was for

1 The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front) comprised primarily nationalist Sinhala youth who wished to overthrow the government of the UNP (United Nationalist Party) on the grounds that it was corrupt, capitalist and classist. The rallying point for their uprising was the arrival of Indian forces in Sri Lanka (i.e., foreigners on Sinhala soil) to ensure an accord between the Sri Lankan state and the Tamil militants (primarily the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam} who were fighting for a separate state in the northern and eastern regions of the country. This battle, which was begun around 1980, continues today.

2 The Sinhalese make up 74 per cent of the population, the Tamils 18 per cent, Muslims 7 per cent and Burghers (descendants of Dutch and Portuguese colonists) and other minorities 0.8 per cent. While the Sinhalese are predominantly Buddhists (69.3 per cent) and the Tamils predominantly Hindus (15.5 per cent), both

'a climate where we can raise our sons to manhood, have our husbands with us and lead normal women's lives' *(The Island 9* February 1991). The seemingly unquestionable authenticity of their grief and espousal of 'traditional' family values provided the Mothers' Front with an important space for protest unavailable to other organisations critical of state practices.[3]

As Rita Manchanda (2002) notes the categories of 'gains' and 'losses' are particularly value-laden and complicated. In fact, they take on additional significance when used to evaluate a concept, such as motherhood — which I define here as encompassing women's biological reproduction as well as their interpellation as moral guardians, care-givers and nurturers — and its corollary maternalism, which is the mobilisation of this concept. Since the potency of maternalism, like most hegemonic formations, lies in its resiliency and malleability, it has also engendered a certain predictability in feminist debates on mother-ist movements, both nationally and internationally. Over several decades, feminists have continued to frame their arguments about maternal protests in terms of. binaries that posit that the mobilisation *of* 'motherhood' either essentialises or empowers women, or that it produces either victims or agents. Maternalist feminists, such as Jean Bethke Elshtain (1987), Ellen Key (1909), Catherine Reid (1982), Sara Ruddick (1980, [1989] 1995) and Olive Schreiner ([1911] 1978), are among proponents of arguments that women's crucial contributions to the cause of peace is through their mobilisation of 'preservative love' (Ruddick 1984). These feminists have privileged the family as the core of moral humanity and called for women to remain at home and launch their battles against (masculinised militarism and liberal individualism from within such a privatised and feminised space (Elshtain 1981, 1983a, 1983b, 1987). On the other hand, feminists critical of such arguments have suggested that such assumptions only reinforce the notion of biology as woman's destiny and legitimise a sex-role system that, in assigning responsibility for nurture and survival to women alone, encourages masculinized violence and destruction (see for example, Hartsock 1982; Houseman 1982; Stacey 1983; di Leonardo 1985; Lloyd 1986; Enloe 1989).

communities, as well as other minorities, contribute to a 7 per cent population of Christians (primarily Catholics) in the island (Serendib 19(5): 49).

3 The Mothers' Front has been inspired by and shares much with similar organizations in Latin America, but I want to highlight here the importance of historical and material specificities rather than make comparisons between different movements.

Although I myself have been implicated in such binary thinking in the past, my work with the Mothers' Front has made it increasingly clear to me that such dichotomous thinking has only debilitated political praxis rather than advanced it. We have become so caught up in the binary logics of our arguments that we have failed to see beyond them or out of them; such dichotomous thinking has not only obfuscated the differences that exist within the category of 'motherhood' but it has precluded our questioning why 'motherhood' is deployed in the first place.

In this chapter, I would like to focus on an especially spectacular public practice of the Mothers' Front that not only created a space within which women could articulate their criticisms about a repressive regime but also made fraught any quick and simple categorisation of these women either as victimised mothers or as idealised mothers.

Ritualised Cursing

The Kaliamman Kovil, a Hindu place of worship at Modera, a suburb of Colombo, sits atop a slight promontory overlooking the Indian Ocean, which crashes against the rocks below with a muffled roar. This *Kovil,* part of a larger temple complex, with a main shrine for Lord Ganesa as well as other Hindu deities including Siva and Parvati, exemplifies two religious' orientations — those of Buddhists and Hindus. As Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) have observed, the latter group, who are mainly Tamils, come primarily to worship Lord Ganesa and the other deities in the main temple (though they do propitiate Kali as well), while for 80 per cent of all Sinha la Buddhists who visit the temple complex, the Kaliamman shrine is the primary goal (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:141). [4] On the afternoon of 23 June 1992, this shrine became the site of an extraordinary public spectacle — a dewa kannalawwa (beseeching of the gods) by the Mothers' Front, who chose to hold their action on that day because it was President Premadasa's birthday.

After the second National Convention of the Mothers' Front, which was held in Colombo, the members of the Mothers' Front were bussed to the Kaliamman Kovil by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), organisers of the Convention.[5] On

4 Catholics also visit such shrines, and Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988: 142) report that they interviewed two Catholics along with 44 Buddhists.

5 The SLFP was the main opposition party during this period. Two of its members, who represented the districts of Matara and Hambantota in the parliament, founded the Mothers' Front. For a further discussion of the influence of the SLFP in the Mothers' Front, see de Alwis (1997 and 1998).

their arrival at the shrine, however, a padlocked gate and a battalion of policemen standing guard greeted the women. Not to be deterred, SLFP member of parliament Alavi Moulana instructed the first group of women to break their coconuts outside the Kovil gates.[6] Almost simultaneous with this and the loud chanting of '*sadhu, sadhu'* that rent the air, the gates were hastily opened by a somewhat chagrined senior police officer, though access to the inner sanctum was still denied. The small *kovil* premises soon became packed with members of the Mothers' Front who, apparently oblivious to the presence of the police, the press, politicians and curious onlookers, dashed coconuts on the ground, lit lamps, tore their hair, struck their heads on the earth and wept and wailed and beseeched the goddess to locate their 'disappeared' and punish those who had brought such suffering upon them and their families. 'They didn't take just one of my sons, no, they didn't even stop at two, they had to take all three of my boys', intoned one woman, '[m]y own boys that I carried in my womb, fed with my bloodmilk *(le kiri kala)* and nurtured for the past 20 years... Even if these beasts *(thirisan)* live freely now, may they suffer the consequences of their actions unto eternity, in all their future lives.' Another moaned and muttered: 'May they suffer lightning without rain (*vehi nethi* hena), may their families be ground to dust.'[7] Others called out the names of the perpetrators, including that of President Premadasa, and cursed them. Asilin, one of my neighbours whom I had accompanied to this protest, was chanting over and over again, 'Premadasa, see this coconut all smashed into bits, may your head too be splintered into a hundred bits, so heinous are the crimes you have perpetrated on my child.' Another woman wept, saying, 'Premadasa, I bore this child in my womb for ten months — may you and your family be cursed not for ten days or ten weeks or ten months or ten years or ten decades but for ten aeons.'

To ward off the women's curses President Premadasa sought refuge in an elaborate counter-ritual, the *kiriammawarungé dané* (feeding of milk mothers), an archaic ritual that is now connected with the goddess Pattini.[8] On 23 June, the day of

6 This is a usual practice in Hindu places of worship. If the coconut breaks with the white kernel facing up, it is supposed to be a good sign, and if it faces down, an inauspicious sign. The latter omen, however, did not seem to bother other supplicants at this shrine (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:142). One usually purchases the puja watti (offering basket) outside the temple and offers it to the deity; the basket includes coconut, camphor, sticks of incense, fruits and flowers.

7 This is a very complicated conceit, which defies translation. Suffice it to say that lightning without rain is meant to suggest the extraordinariness of the punishment that should be meted out to the perpetrators.

8 For a brief description of this ritual see Wijesekera (1990), for an extended description and analysis see Gombrich (1981; cf. Leach 1971: 690), and for a discussion of its origins see Obeyesekere (1984 especially pp. 293-6)

his birthday and the commencement of one of his pet projects, the *gam udawa* (village reawakening) celebrations — and also the day that the Mothers' Front had chosen for their *deva kañnalawwa* — he offered alms to 68 (grand)mothers (*Silumina*, 28 June 1992). At the conclusion of *gam udawa* and another *deva Kannalawwa* organised on a much smaller scale at Kalutara (south of Colombo) by the Mothers' Front, on July 3rd 1992,[9] he offered alms to 10,000 (grand)mothers while the North Central Provincial Council Minister for Health and Women's Affairs, Rani Adikari, chanted the *pattini kañnalawwa* to bring blessings on the president, the armed forces and the country (*Daily News*, 6 July 1992).[10] Though the commonly held belief is that Pattini is predominantly a guardian against infectious diseases, she is also the 'good mother' and ideal wife whose chief aim is to maintain 'a just and rationally grounded society' and can thus be read as a counterpoint to the goddess to whom the Mothers' Front appealed - the 'bad mother' and evil demoness Kali who deals with sorcery and personal and familial conflicts (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 158-60; see also Obeyeseker 1984).

Such rituals disturbed not only President Premadasa but even the urbane Minister of Industries, Science and Technology, Ranil Wickremasinghe, who warned, 'If your children have disappeared, it is all right to beseech the gods. After all, if there is no one else to give you succour, it is fitting to look to one's gods. But if one conducts such deva kannalawwas with thoughts of hate and revenge, it could turn into a *huniyam* (black magic) and backfire on you' *(Divaina* 28 July1 1992). Wickremasinghe's junior minister, Paul Perera, thought it fit to direct the Mothers' Front to a Sinhala proverb: *Wadinnata giya devalaya hise kada watena dinaya wadi aathaka nowanne' mwarine'* – the day will soon dawn when the temple at which you worship will fall down will fall down on your head *(Lankadeepa 28* July 1992). Nevertheless, despite such dire earnings and counter-rituals by the government, Preside Premadasa was blown to smithereens by a suicide bomber

9 One of Sri Lanka Freedom Party representatives in the Kalutara Provincial Council, Sumithra Priyangani Abeyweera, whose own father (an SLFP stalwart) was fatally shot by unknown assassins during this period, organised this protest. It commenced with a bodhi puja (offerings to the Bo tree) at the historic Buddhist temple at Kalutara and concluded with a *dewa kannalawwa* at the shrine to Lord Vishnu in the Alutgama Kande Vihara complex. During the procession of the Mothers' Front from the Kalutara Bodhiya to the Vishnu Devale, the police forbade the group to carry their banner and insisted that the women walk in single file. As a news report pointed out, there were as many policemen present as there were mothers (*Divaina* 4 July1992).

10 This is not the first time the president has publicly participated in this ritual (see *Lankadeepa* 13 January 1992; *Island* 22 March 1992). Yet the repetition of this ritual within such a short period and on such a grand scale suggests it was not a mere coincidence. This ritual is usually performed with just seven (grand) mothers, and with the chief (grand)-mother rather than a politician leading the chanting.

before a year was out. A few days after his death, a beaming Asilin came to see me with a comb of plantains (considered to be an auspicious gift): 'He died just like the way I cursed him', she said triumphantly.

Situating Sorcery within Maternalist Politics

Cursing is usually assimilated within the broader category of sorcery in anthropological discourses on demonism in Sri Lanka, which also encompasses the more spectacular rituals associated with spirit possession.[11] Defined as a 'technique of killing or harming someone, deliberately and intentionally' (Obeyesekere 1975: 1), sorcery is perceived to function as "a regulatory mechanism in a social context where formal institutions for settling disputes are absent or lacking" (Selvadurai 1976: 95). Indeed, the majority of the Mothers' Front members, who had incessantly petitioned politicians, hounded government bureaucrats, kept vigil outside army camps, and visited every police station in their region to no avail, were particularly intimate with alternative forms of mediation on behalf of them of their 'disappeared.' In fact, their resort to curses was just one manifestation of 'religious distress', which ran the gamut from beseeching gods and goddesses, saints and holy spirits with special novenas (Catholic masses), doing penances, taking vows, making offerings and donations, going on pilgrimages, and performing *bodhi pujas* (offerings to the Bo tree),[12] to visiting astrologers, palm readers and light readers (*anjanan eli*), placing charms, and chanting *vas kavi* (maleficent verses) and *seth kavi* (benedictory verses) over a period of months. Many of these rituals involved a mixture of invoking blessings on the 'disappeared', calling for his speedy return home, and calling also for the punishment of the perpetrators of 'disappearances'. The category 'perpetrator' spanned a wide spectrum, from friends, neighbours or relatives who were believed to have 'betrayed' the 'disappeared', to those who were directly involved in the abduction, as well as specific government

11 There is an extensive body of work on the various healing rituals associated with spirit possession. It includes the early contributions of Gooneratne (1865/66) along with many missionary and colonial accounts, e.g. Harvard (1823) and Tennent (1850), as well as anthropological studies by, inter alia, Kapferer (1979a, l979b, 1983), Obeyesekere (1969, 1981, 1984), Wirz (1954), and Yalman (1964). Scott (1994) provides a nuanced historicization and rigorous deconstruction of many of these accounts and studies. See also Jeganathan (1997) for an excellent problematization of anthropological discourses that seek to posit a relationship between rituals associated with demonism and ethnic riots. For a description and discussion of various forms of sorcery, see for example, de Silva (1926), Obeyesekere (1926), Pertold (1925), Selvadurai (1976) and Wijetunga (1919, 1922).

12 This is a relatively new form of Buddhist ritual that was a particular favourite of President Premadasa. For a useful description and discussion of this ritual, see Gombrich (1981), Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) and Seneviratne and Wickremaratne (1980).

officials who were ultimately deemed responsible for this reign of terror — senior police officers, government agents, parliamentary and provincial ministers and, of course, the president of the country. As Marx has so perceptively pointed out, "religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the *protest* against real distress" (quoted in Comaroff 1985: 252, emphasis in original).

Gananath Obeyesekere (1975:20) points out the cathartic efficacy of cursing, which channels people away from 'premeditated crime into its (to us) symbolic counterpart — sorcery'; he notes nevertheless how amazed he was 'at the sheer sadism and vindictiveness of the curses' that were uttered by both priest and supplicant at renowned sorcery shrines in Sri Lanka.[13] Not surprisingly, then, sorcery is a privatised practice that is usually conducted in the greatest of secrecy. Though sorcery is a familiar practice and all classes of Sinhala Buddhists, and even some Sinhala Christians, resort to it, the bourgeoisie frequently portrays it as a practice of the lower classes, and thus, like the public display of excessive weeping, code it as 'unrespectable.' Yet although people could 'naturalise' women's tears as a manifestation of feminised sentimentality — which invoked refined sentiments, in turn - their responses to the unprecedented public vocalisation of women's curses were more complicated and nuanced.[14]

The media, particularly the Sinhala press, which had consistently sentimentalised these women's maternity, and, concomitantly, suffering, sought to incorporate the Mothers' Front's curses this continuum of maternalized suffering: "The mothers first wept and wailed at the loss of their children. They sighed and moaned. After

13 Most formal rituals would involve the priest or priestess uttering the invocation and curse while the supplicant repeated it after him/her. However, this would not preclude the supplicant articulating her/his own curses in private. The Mothers' Front, however, had no option other than private cursing as they were denied access to the priests and priestesses associated with the Kaliamman shrine. The organisers of the Mothers' Front probably anticipated such an eventuality: hence their coming armed with their own curse, which was written out in very elaborate and formal language like that used by a priest or priestess; such invocations can also be copied from liturgical texts as well as from mass-produced 'prayer books' that provide the appropriate invocations for different deities; for an example of the latter kind of text (see Somakirthi 1974).

14 The public performance of curses, out of a plethora of other possible forms of religious **protest,** was the only aspect of public spectacle that the members of the Mothers' Front initiated themselves, quite by accident. The women's unscripted and abandoned supplication to Lord Vishnu at Devinuwara and Lord Skanda at Kataragama during the *Pada Yatra* (Long March) organized by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party to protest against government atrocities, in March/April 1992, took both the SLFP and the media by surprise. The Mothers' Front, which had been one of many groups participating in the *Yatra,* soon became the center of attention (see especially *Divaina* 4 April 1992) and inspired SLFP organizers to incorporate such *deva Kannalawwas* into the protest campaign of the Mothers' Front (the SLFP was planning to hold several of these *deva kañnalawwas* in different parts of the country but this plan never materialized, for some reason).

a while, those tears and sighs turned to anger. Then these mothers began to curse those who had deprived them of their children" (Kumaradasa Giribawa, *Irida Lankadeepa, 28* June 1992). The concerted focus of the Sinhala press was on the sincerity and depth or feeling with which the mothers articulated their curses and the fact thar much weeping and lamentation accompanied them; the press strove to engender feelings of pathos and empathy rather than, say horror at what these women were wishing on the perpetrators of 'disappearances'. Even newspaper articles that reproduced some of the curses made by the members of the Mothers' Front were quick to stress the brittleness and vulnerability of these aged women and the sentimental responses they evoked: "Tears welled up in the eyes of the onlookers who heard her sorrowful lamentation"[15] *(Divaina* 3 April 1992).

However, despite the attempts of the Sinhala press to sentimentalise the women's curses, the general public was much more discerning; they were able to differentiate between the pathos that was engendered by these women's laments, and the vengeful anger of their curses, which the public nevertheless interpreted as being morally defensible. As one female onlooker confided:

> I know that all religions say one cannot destroy hate with hate but I think these women are completely justified in wanting to take revenge (*pali gann)* on these animals *(saththu)* who have done such terrible things to their children ... and to their entire families ... I know that the government is not going to do anything about it ... after all they are the ones who are behind it, right? So, where else can you look for justice but to your gods? If they took my son, I would have done the same thing. These poor women . . .

Many poems sent to the newspapers that were written in support of these women also stressed the importance of avenging the crimes that had been perpetrated on these women and their kin. One verse (an excerpt from a longer poem) beseeched Lord Skanda (whom the women had invoked at Kataragama when on the *Pada Yatra*) in the voice of a mother:

> Use your divine vision, O Lord,
> to locate him who abducted my son
> Erase his name and identity and
> scatter his remains in all ends of the earth.[16]

15 Note here that the reporter refers to this woman's curse as a lamentation (*vilapa).*

16 A.M.W. Atapattu, *Irida Lonkadeepa,* 2 August 1992, my translation. For a discussion and analysis of the

Note how this curse calls for a similar 'disappearance' of the perpetrator of the 'disappearance' — the erasure of his name and identity, and, once he is killed, the dismemberment and burning of his body, once again thwarting identification. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) also consistently sought to stress the moral righteousness of these women's curses; while constantly reminding the Mothers' Front members that their tears were a sign of weakness and enervation, the SLFP enthusiastically promoted the women's curses as a powerful political weapon of the weak. It is not surprising then that Asilin, along with many other members of the Mothers' Front, should take credit for the death of President Premadasa. His death was just one more incident in a long chain of events that the SLIP publicly credited the Mothers' Front with effecting: these included the bombing of the motorcade of Ranjan Wijeratne, Minister of State for Defence, who had been the most vociferous critic of the Mothers' Front; the sudden confessions of former Deputy Inspector-General of Police, Premadasa Udugampola, who had become notorious for his atrocities against all those suspected of being members of the JVP; and the unnerving of President Premadasa who, as SLFP leader Sirimavo Bandaranaike pointed out in her speech at the Mothers' Front's second convention in June 1992, had had himself bathed by seven virgins (on the advice of his Malayalee swami in Kerala, India) to ward off the women's curses made during the Pada Y*atra* held several months earlier.

Indeed, for a group of women that society had marginalised because of their class and gender for much of their life, these pyrrhic victories were very precious. They were not concerned that the trip to the Kaliamman Kovil may have been part of a carefully orchestrated political spectacle of which they were to be the chief performers; what mattered most was that they were finally being given a chance to do something concrete for their 'disappeared' — unlike their participation at the morning's meeting where politicians *took* turns to spout 'hot air' while they listened and wept. Once the women entered the Kaliamman Kovil, they noted, they felt more confident and purposeful. 'We knew what we had to do here ... not like when we were in the [meeting] hall just sitting and listening.' 'After all we have been doing these *pujas* [rituals) in many other *devales* [Hindu shrines] ... we were glad that we got an opportunity to come to this famous *devale* and do a *puja* as well' (comments of Mothers' Front members from Matara). In fact, when Bandula Gunewardena, a representative of the MEP (Mahajana Eksath Peramuna),

recent rise In the worship of Lord Skanda (see Obeyesekere 1977).

a party that was supporting the Mothers' From campaign) attempted to read out a *kannalawwa* to goddess Kali, the organisers had great difficulty in getting the attention of the women present: Gunewardena's voice could barely be heard over the lamentations, chanting and cursing of many women who continued with their own invocations despite a request for silence.

The participation of the Mothers' Front in publicised religious rituals posed an additional dilemma for Sri Lankan feminists who had now to contend not only with these women's mobilisation of their maternity but also their religiosity. As left activist and academic Jayadeva Uyangoda (1992b) pointed out, the introduction by the Mothers' Front of 'voodoo in politics' was merely valorising women as the "carriers and bearers of culture", as those who have a "primary and initiating role in religious and magical rituals" (Uyangoda 1992a:4).[17] The unfolding of such a doubly stereotyped identity, the production of which I have interrogated elsewhere (de Alwis 1998), was further complicated here by these women's implicit faith in the efficacy of divine intervention over that of "rationalist and enlightened traditions of politics" (Uyangoda 1992a:5). Moreover, by personalising politics and producing President Premadasa as the epitome of evil, noted Uyangoda, the SLFP and the Mothers' Front were not only leaving "counter-democratic forces and structures unidentified and uncritiqued", but were also replicating the government's use of 'sinister substitutes' for 'open political competition, debate, discussion and electoral mobilisation' by exploiting and manipulating the "religious emotions of the people" (Uyangoda 1992b: 5).[18]

Although I share the concerns articulated by Uyangoda and other left and feminist academics and activists regarding the increasing authoritarianism of state and counter-state institutions, which has led to the debilitation of "secularist foundations of political conduct" (Uyangoda 1992a: 6), I am also troubled by Uyangoda's valorisation of the "traditions of political enlightenment" that are posited as 'rational' and 'democratic' in opposition to the 'irrational' and 'dark' underworld of demons and sorcerers that has now "burst its way into the light" and become "public and acknowledged" (Uyangoda 1992a: 5*)*. Such a formulation

17 Such a notion is further reified in the work of anthropologists such as Kapferer (I983: Chapter 5, cf. Scott 1994: Chapter 4).

18 Sorcery is always directed at individuals, posits Uyangoda, though many of the curses I heard prove him wrong (see above). However, it is an undeniable fact that the SLFP consistently sought to present President Premadasa us the ultimate cause of all ills and deliberately chose to hold the *deva kañnalawwa* on his birthday.

replicates Christian and anthropological discourses on demonism that David Scott: (1994) has so brilliantly deconstructed and historicised. In fact, it is just such a formulation that also enables the argument that those who participate in such 'demonic' practices are, by extension, "less rational and more emotional" (see for example Kapferer 1983: Chapter 5), a label that Uyangoda himself has criticised when applied to the members of the Mothers' Front (Uyangoda 1992a: 4).

Towards a Contingent Reading

The mobilisation of maternalized suffering and religiosity by the Mothers' Front marked out a crucial space — both conceptually and materially — within the political landscape of Sri Lanka. Here was a hitherto much-privatised practice that women were not only performing in public but were also using openly to speak ill of the president of the country. Indeed, the use of curses as public protest not only had no precedent in Sri Lanka but it could also circumvent emergency laws enforced by the state that were applicable to standard forms of political protest such as demonstrations and rallies.[19] To have banned people's right to religious worship, on the other hand, was something even an autocratic government that repeatedly defined itself as one with the best interests of the populace in mind would not have dared.[20] The presumption inherent in a curse, that it could bring about change through the intercession of a deity, also complicated efforts (for a believer such as President Premadasa) to stall such changes, for they now transcended the human. These women's curses, like their tears, thus set the terms of debate (now phrased in the idiom of religion). In the same way thar the government had previously constituted its own fronts of weeping women, it now organised performances of counter-rituals and counter-utterances as it was pushed to counteract the Mothers' Front curses.

19 Besides their efforts to ban demonstrations in February 1991, the state also attempted to ban and later curtailed a protest march of the Mothers' Front organised in Kalutara on 3 July 1992 (see page 187 and note 9). On World Human Rights Day, 10 December 1992, the Organisation of Parents and Family Members of the Disappeared (OPFMD) organised a sit-down protest, and some Mothers' Front organisers like Rajapaksa joined them. The riot squad led a baton charge and tear-gassed them, leaving several leaders injured (*Jsland*, 11 December 1992).

20 Of course, it is not that the government did not toy with such an idea. After all, the gates of the Kaliamman Kovil were padlocked when the Mothers' Front first arrived (though the alternative media were quick to highlight such attempted lockouts as blatant and very public violations of human rights; see *Aththa,* 24 June *1992 j Divaina 6* July 1992), and the temple guards continued to deny women access to both the inner sanctum and the services of a priest or priestess (which nevertheless did not deter the mothers from what they came to do).

These women's curses, which were accompanied by much weeping and lamentation, did enable a certain sentimentalisation of maternalised suffering, but could not mitigate the threat that mothers posed in seeking to effect change (through divine intervention). Unlike maternalised tears, however, maternalised curses disrupted representations of Sinhala culture and tradition. A sanitized notion of Buddhism, which strove to deny and repress demonic beliefs and practices, was the premise of Sinhala culture and tradition. A bourgeois norm of conduct, which I have termed 'respectability', could not circumscribe the Mothers' Front's performances of excess weeping or cursing (Alwis 1998). The majority these women, who aged bodies were marked as asexual, forestalled their re-inscription within a modality of 'respectability'.[21] However, the rubric of motherhood', which both legitimised the Mothers' Front protests and evoked sentiment, simultaneously circumscribed this unfolding of 'unrespectabilitty'; these women were not only speaking as mothers and but they were also calling for a return to 'normality'.

One could read the practices of the Mothers' Front, then as, engendering a fraught maternalism that was domesticated yet not respectable, that was demonic and threatening yet also sentimental and pathetic, that was poor and marginalized, yet also racially dominant and exclusionary. In a context where an autocratic government and a nationalist militant movement had silenced left and feminist voices, it was the mobilisation of such a fraught maternalism that not only appropriated and defined a particular political space but succeeded in winning the support of the Sinhala public and media. The contingent efficacy of such maternalised protest, however, must be understood in light of the very conditions of its possibility. In other words, the emotive power of tears and curses cannot be understood transparently; rather, they must be apprehended in relation to the cultural categories of 'respectability', 'domesticity' and 'suffering' both enable as well as circumscribe such a maternalised politics. Although such a paradigm shift, I argue, enables a move out of the more familiar binaries of essentializers versus empowerers, victims versus agents, through which such movements are frequently assessed, it still does not *determine* the efficacy of the Mothers' Front. It is for this reason that I find the concept of 'contingency' so useful.

21 My argument about this bourgeois modality of respectability, which was premised on the articulation of a particular moral and normative way of being a woman, also highlights how discourses that sought to sexualize women could frequently disrupt women's respectability. The point 1 making here, however, is that even though these aged women were marked as asexual, it did not necessarily follow that they could transcend their class positioning and thus inhabit a place of 'respectability'.

William Connolly (1991:28), in his multifaceted characterisation of contingency, has called attention to the variable, uncertain, unexpected and irregular potentiality of this concept. My positing the efficacy of the Mothers' Front as contingent is precisely premised on the variable and unexpected possibilities presented by this concept. I wish to argue that at a particular moment in Sri Lankan history, at a time when the government had silenced other, more familiar and predictable voices of dissent, the maternalist politics of the Mothers' Front proved to be particularly effective. However, such a political as well as theoretical position does not preclude the retention of a critical voice and vision that call attention to the limitations of maternalist politics and understand the importance of striving for less limited formulations political protest in the future.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

The Contingent Politics of the Women's Movement in Sri Lanka after Independence

Kumari Jayawardana and Malathi de Alwis

In pre-independence Ceylon, the situation of women varied according to class and ethnicity.[1] Capitalism under colonial conditions was both good and bad news for women, bringing economic exploitation for some, and educational and employment opportunities as well as franchise and democratic rights for others. The post-colonial experience was also a mixed bag, resulting in new forms of exploitation of women's labour in export processing zones and domestic work abroad, along with the growth of women's organisations and increased feminist consciousness on issues ranging from equal pay to the ethnic conflict.

In fact, the progress of the women's movement in Sri Lanka since independence over 50 years ago cannot be discussed without taking into account such a movement's antecedents in women's collective activism under British colonialism. Be it in the sphere of religious, social, economic all political reform, Ceylonese women have been at the forefront during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were not only dynamic and valued members of reformist and/or anti-colonial organisations, such as the Social Reform Society (founded in 1906), the Social Service League (1914), the Young Lanka League (1915) and the Ceylon Labour Party (1928), but also formed autonomous groups and movements, such as the Women's Education Society (Nari Shiksha Dana Sangamaya) founded as early as 1889, the Ceylon Women's Union (1904), Tamil Women's Union (1909), Women's Franchise Union (1927), Lanka Mahila Samiti (1930), Women's Political Union (1930), the All Ceylon Women's Conference (1944) and the Eksath Kantha Peramuna (1947).[2]

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1 We are grateful to Pradeep Jeganathan for his perceptive comments during our preliminary discussions for this chapter. Our thanks also to our anonymous reviewer for some useful suggestions.

In this chapter, we will switch between 'Ceylon' and 'Sri Lanka' in order to retain the historical specificity of their usage. The British used the name 'Ceylon' for the island during the eighteenth, nineteenth and early half of the twentieth centuries. The island's name was changed to 'Sri Lanka' with the adoption of the 1972 constitution, post-independence.

2 We are not listing here the names of older women's organisations, such as the Women's Christian

Even such a cursory listing must surely illuminate the varied nature and formulation of women's activism prior to independence. However, given the circumstances of colonial rule and the emergence and proliferation of nationalist movements during this period, it is clear that such public and collective participation—however varied they may have been—predominantly reflected nationalist and/or anti-colonial sentiments and aspirations. For example, even the performance of social service (which was the chief avenue for women's participation in the public sphere) was pried out of the stranglehold of religious philanthropy and conversion and produced as one of the chief duties of a patriot. In fact, in 1918, the *National Monthly of Ceylon* reported with satisfaction that one of the 'most helpful features of the national awakening of the people of Ceylon' was there 'growing desire to engage in efforts for the social, moral as well as the political uplift of their countrymen' (Jayawardena 1972). One could thus argue that social service was a politically contingent form of activism for women during colonial rule since it highlighted the conditions of the poor, the unemployed, the working class, etc., under colonialism. That is to say, social service played a particular political role at a specific historical moment; it enabled a critique of the colonial government for its inability to provide the basic necessities of life, while also providing an opportunity for the Ceylonese to work for the upliftment and self-sufficiency of their own people.[3]

In this chapter, we shall think about the women's movement in Sri Lanka from a similar perspective. We suggest that it is a broad-based movement that encompasses a variety of organisations and groups that have arisen out of different struggles and conflicts, at different historical moments. While some organisations have been short-lived, others have continued for several decades; while some have formed alliances, others have worked alone. As a matter of fact, the complexity and even contradictions encompassed within the rubric of a 'women's movement' have frequently led us to assert that there are several women's movements in Sri Lanka. Thus, our central concern here will be to highlight different kinds of political struggles in which Sri Lankan women have participated both collectively and publicly. It is the specificity of the struggle, we wish to argue, which informs activism and thus, rather than reading a particular response as either reactionary or progressive, essentialising or empowering, we wish to focus on its political efficacy

Temperance Union (1862), Young Women's Christian Associations (1882), the Girls' Friendly Society (1904), and Ladies of Charity (1904), which were founded by Anglican and Catholic missionaries and were predominantly local branches of foreign organisations.

3 The limitation of social service and its particularly contingent usefulness are especially well captured in the critique of such work by the Eksath Kantha Peramuna (EKP) on the eve of independence (see de Mel and Muttewegama 1997).

and contingency. In this chapter, then, we will concentrate on exploring three different articulations of the 'political' through a selective discussion of specific women's organisations in Sri Lanka.

The Battle for Political Rights and Representation

Sri Lankan feminists have always been proud of the fact that Ceylon was one of the first colonies to achieve women's suffrage in 1931. What is unfortunate, however, is that the role of the Women's Franchise Union (WFU) in this campaign has been frequently minimised and misrepresented. While there is no doubt that the WFU was made up of bourgeois women who were nowhere as bold or as militant as their British or Indian counterparts, and who presented relatively conservative proposals to the Donoughmore Commission in 1927, the fact that it was the first autonomous, multi-ethnic women's organisations in Sri Lanka that was founded with the sole purpose of claiming their political rights, is in itself noteworthy (see De Alwis and Jayawardena 2001). [4]

Though the WFU was frequently criticised by many of its male peers as well as the press, the organisation persevered for several years and, along with its breakaway group, the Women's Political Union (WPU) founded in 1930, provided invaluable support to the women candidates (though few and far between) who chose to contest the general elections under the Donoughmore Constitution of 1931 (Wijesekera 1995). In fact, Adeline Molamure, a member of the WPU, was the first woman to be elected to the newly constituted State Council in 1931. She was soon followed in 1932 by Neysum Saravanamuttu, who also received the support of the Ceylon Tamil Women's Union. In 1936, the Colombo Municipal Council amended its laws to enable women to sit on the council, which resulted in yet another member of the WPU—Dr. Mary Ratnam—becoming the first woman councillor in 1937 (Jayawardena 1993; Wijesekere 1995).[5] In 1960, Ceylon led the world in electing the first woman Prime Minister—Sirimavo Bandaranaike.

4 The WFU only demanded that women who possessed a qualification of a standard equivalent to the School Leaving Certificate Examination should be given the franchise (rather than universal franchise), and were content only to focus attention on their role as a crucial vote bank rather than directly arguing for women's representations in the legislative council. Their conservatism, however, is particularly illuminating of the material as well as ideological constraints within which they lived. For an extended discussion of this group (see de Alwis 1998b).

5 Though Dr Ratnam, was unseated on a technical flaw in 1938, her interest in municipal politics and women candidates for the municipality continued. She went on to endorse the candidature of Mrs H. M. Gunasekere in 1938, Vivienne Goonewardena in 1949, and Ayesha Rauf (Jayawardena 1993: 34-35).

Despite the fact that every woman elected to national office in Ceylon/ Sri Lanka has been enabled by her male kin (i.e., due to the demise or defeat of a father or husband), there is no doubt that they have been pathbreakers in their own right and have proved to be important role models for other women. This was especially well illustrated when Mrs Bandaranaike was first elected prime minister in 1960; the enthusiasm of her women supporters, noted the Ceylon *Daily News* (22 July 1960), 'was particularly noticeable' during her inauguration, and she was mobbed by a crowd consisting mainly of women when she visited Horagolla (*Observer*, 24 July 1960).

Political Participation Today

However, while women have turned out in great numbers to exercise their vote in all elections, to date, they continue to be grossly underrepresented in legislative assemblies—both at the local and the national level—as well as in administrative and decision-making positions.[6] Several decades later we are beginning to see a committed and concerted effort being made to rectify this imbalance, albeit in a small way. For the first time in the history of Sri Lanka, an independent women's political group came forward to contest the 1998 provincial council elections in the district of Nuwara Eliya.[7] This group led by Vimali Karunaratna, comprises a multi-ethnic conglomeration of eighteen women and four men, the majority of whom belong to the Sinhala-Tamil Rural Women's Network in Nuwara Eliya. The main objective of this group, as stated in their manifesto, is to 'enhance women's contribution to governance and the creation of a peaceful and prosperous society'.

What was particularly heartening about this new development was that this group received unprecedented support and encouragement from an umbrella feminist organisation, the Sri Lanka Women's NGO Forum, which is a broad network of autonomous women's groups based all over the island representing community-based development workers and activists as well as scholars and researchers who are committed to women's advancement. One of their main areas of focus is monitoring the implementation of the Platform of Action agreed upon by the Sri Lankan government at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing

6 Today, the representation of women in the national parliament is a mere 4.9%, 3.1 per cent in the provincial councils and 1.1 per cent in local authorities (Leitan and Gunasekera 1998: 1; see also the tables in W. de Silva 1995: 233).

7 Unfortunately, they did not win a seat in the election which was marred by violence and vote rigging.

in 1995. The promotion of women's active participation in political and decision-making processes has also been a central part of the NGO Forum's mandate, and it has recently begun a campaign to appeal to all Sri Lankan political parties to include more women candidates in their nomination lists, and to address women's concerns in their election campaigns and manifestos.[8] It is also working with various grassroots organisations across the country to disseminate more information regarding the importance of women's participation in the political and public spheres, both at the local as well as the national level. Two other organisations currently engaged in promoting women's political participation at the community level are Kantha Shakti and Agromart.[9]

This renewed concern regarding women's political participation is also reflected in the research being conducted by many women's scholars at universities as well as research institutes, including the Social Scientists' Association and the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, who are working on projects entitled 'Rural Women in Political Participation' and 'Women and Governance' respectively. One of the earliest studies that initiated such research was conducted by the Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR 1994) under the theme 'Women, Political Empowerment and Decision-Making'. The present government's commitment to assigning a quota of 25% for women in local government elections, as announced in its proposals for constitutional reform, is also indicative of the extensive impact of such feminist lobbying over the years.[10]

8 A similar effort was initiated by the Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR) when then sent a Gender Issue paper (which was signed by about thirty NGOs) to all political parties on the eve of the 1994 elections.

9 It is an undeniable fact also that most organisations that work among women, be it in the contest of economic empowerment or social upliftment, provide opportunities at varying levels for the building of leadership skills among women –a crucial prerequisite for a political empowerment. In this regard, the Change Agent's Programme, conceived in 1978 by innovators in the state Rural Development and Research and Training Institute (and later adopted by non-government organisations and groups as well), has made a crucial contribution (Jayaweera 1989).

10 These forms of affirmative action for women, however, have contributed to a lively debate within the feminist movement in many countries, as was manifested in India when rival feminist organisations clashed over the introduction of a women's quota of 33 per cent in parliament under the 81st Amendment of the Indian Constitution. While some feminist groups welcomed this quota as an important step towards righting the present gender imbalance in the Indian parliament, other feminists argued that such quotas would only continue to sustain the hegemony of women from the majority communities and casted [see Kannabiran and Kannabiran (1998) for a useful discussion of these debates]. Mario Gomez (1998) provides a thoughtful discussion of the constitutional mechanism that could enable such an allocation in Sri Lanka.

The Battle against Cultural and Economic Exploitation

We have discussed so far, the development of a particular public discourse that has sought to debate and transform women's participation in what is most narrowly, and most commonly, called the political sphere—the world of governance. In this section, we explore another formulation of the 'political' which was greatly influenced by feminist struggles in Euro-America in the 1960s and 1970s, and led to the production of a discourse that was encapsulated by a popular slogan of that time — 'the personal is political'. While this slogan is now frequently reduced to a mere catchphrase, the paradigmatic shift it signals cannot be underestimated. It sought to problematise the hitherto rigid separation between the 'private' and the 'public' and insisted instead that everyday activities within the private sphere — which was also primarily defined as the women's sphere — had political relevance; women's domestic roles were as significant as their public roles, and what went on in one sphere informed and changed what went on in the other sphere. Issues concerning women's reproductive choices, their sexuality, and the domestic burden they shouldered thus became as important as issues concerning women's rights to vote and equal employment.

In Sri Lanka, this move towards the extension of the 'political' was particularly well illustrated in the increasing frequency of consciousness raising rallies and discussions and assertiveness training workshops that feminists began to organise across the country—from Jaffna to Hambantota—from the mid 1970s onwards (Jayawardena 1985a).[11] One of the central foci of these meetings and workshops was the identification and critique of patriarchal norms which, manifesting under the sign of cultural traditions, sought to discipline, oppress, and exploit women. To aid their activist work, feminists also began to systematically study an analyse women's status and position within Sri Lankan society. This involved a feminist revaluation of cultural and religious texts and practices, historical myths and legends, school text-books, media representations and advertisements.

Paralleling this strand of cultural critique was also one that was concerned with understanding and protesting against the economic exploitation of women. The

11 Such a project was also enhanced by the visits of leading foreign feminists, such as Dr. Nawal-el Sadaawi, the Egyptian writer, Bella Abzug, the former US Congresswoman, Kate Young of the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, and many others from India, Pakistan and other parts of Asia, who shared their experiences and insights with Sri Lankan women. Similarly, many local women also gained much inspiration and experience through their studies and travels abroad.

latter project in fact was an extension of the first, as it was the argument of many Sri Lankan feminists of this period that that the patriarchal cultural norms of society helped sustain the exploitation, oppression and discrimination of women, be it in the economic, political or cultural spheres. The espousal of such an ideology was also what distinguished socialist feminists from their male colleagues in the left; the latter were willing to protest against the economic exploitation of women but not their cultural oppression. The 1970s and 1980s thus witnessed a concerted effort by middle-class feminists to form alliances with their working-class counterparts. While their primary foci of protest were the exploitation of (predominantly Tamil) women in the tea plantations, and those in the newly set up free trade zones (FTZs) who were barred from forming trade unions, the most significant moment of cross-class solidarity among feminists occurred during the series of strikes that were held outside the FTZs between 1980 and 1984, by over 1,000 women workers at the Polytex Garment Factory. The conscientisation of some of these workers led them to join other feminists in founding the Women's Liberation Movement in August 1982 (which set up the Ja-Ela Women's Centre as a refuge for the now out-of-work and wage-less strikers). The strikers were also supported by a network of other small feminist organisations, who participated in their pickets, distributed handbills, printed posters, collected funds and canvassed international feminist groups on their behalf.[12]

Voice of Women and the EKP

The intertwining of these cultural and economic critiques is best captured in the first feminist magazine that was published in Sri Lanka, *Voice of Women*.[13] The first issue, published in 1980 in English, Sinhala and Tamil, provides an excellent example of the varied issues that were taken up by its founders during this period. The English issue, for instance, contained several articles with a cultural focus,

12 For a detailed delineation of the development of events that occurred at Polytex Garment from 1980 to 1984, and an evaluation of what was gained by the strikes as well as the impact it has had on organising garment workers in the future (see Abeyesekera 1990: 14-21).

13 We must not forget, however, the courageous and pioneering contribution of Mangalammal Masilamany who single-handedly edited a Tamil journal for women in Jaffna –*Thamil Makal* (Tamil Woman)—in the 1920s and 1930s which, unlike several others that were edited by women (e.g., *Kulangana*), advocated the emancipation of women and boldly announced its motto as 'We are not slaves of anyone. We do not fear even Yama' (quoted in Maunaguru n.d.). The journal also supported the granting of franchise for women, and Ms. Masilamany even went to the extent of sharing her views to this effect in the English press. She wrote in to remind 'our own brothers' that they go the right to vote and to sit on representative bodies because they had accrued wealth and status my marrying women with dowries and this should now speak out on behalf of these women (quoted in de Alwis 1998b: 177).

such as the analysis of newspaper advertisements including an account of a protest campaign that was launched against a particularly offensive one; studies of women's representation in local films, radio, comic strips, literary texts and school textbooks; discussions on the persistence of traditional concepts of femininity in contemporary society; and domestic violence. Articles with an economic focus included those on sexual discrimination in the workplace, unequal pay, the exploitation of women in the plantation sector, hazardous working conditions in the free trade zones, a day in the life of a rural activist, and the biography of a woman leader of the working class.[14] Subtitled 'A Sri Lankan Journal for Women's Emancipation', its logo was (and still is) fashioned from a photograph of protesting women workers at the Wellawatte Spinning and Weaving Mills.

The Voice of Women Collective founded in 1978 comprised a group of socialist and other feminists — both academics and activists — who belonged to several different organisations and ethnic groups. These women were adamant about the fact that while they were committed to breaking down the 'oppressive structures that keep women in a subordinate position', they did not perceive this as a conflict between men and women; the emancipation of women was part of the general struggle for emancipation, 'for if the women of a country are slaves, the men can never be free' (Editorial, Voice of Women, January 1980). The objectives of the Voice of Women Collective are reminiscent of those espoused by a previous group of socialist women, the Eksath Kantha Peramuna (EKP) or United Women's Front. The EKP, which was formed in 1947, united women who belonged to the two main left parties at that time, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party (CP), as well as those without party affiliations who were left-wing sympathisers (de Mel and Muttetuwegama 1997). The members of the EKP not only represented different ethnic groups— including some foreigners foremost among them being Doreen (Young) Wickremasinghe and Edith (Gymroi) Ludowyck—but also different classes; though the leadership was almost exclusively middle-class, several of the live wires in the organisation were also rural and urban working-class women, such as the CP trade union Leader Pansinahamy. Since the WFU's meetings were conducted in all three languages, these women received many opportunities to speak at its sessions (*ibid*).

14 In addition, it included a separate section which provided news and views from abroad—the editorial of the first issue of the Indian feminist magazine *Manushi,* an article on machismo in Latin America, and a poetic lament of an illiterate woman in India.

The EKP, which was dedicated to the achievement of socialism and the removal of all discrimination against women, agitated for the inclusion of women in the public services, campaigned for the improvement of living conditions in the slums, and persistently protested against the rising cost of living (Jayawardena 1986). Its work and ideas received much publicity in the press due to its allies in the press corps, such as the editor of the *Times of Ceylon*, D.B. Dhanapala, who was a personal friend of some of the members, as well as through the many articles that the women themselves contributed to the newspapers (de Mel and Muttetuwegama 1997). Indeed, it is especially apposite here to recall one article in particular by Doreen Wickremasinghe, written soon after Ceylon achieved independence on 4th February 1948. She castigates Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake for wining and dining, at public expense, over a hundred guests at the Independence Day celebrations, and for then having the audacity to request the masses to practise austerity and make sacrifices for the common good of the new nation. The people of Ceylon, she warns, 'despite the praise of their "dignity" and "patience" showered upon them by monocled lords, will neither forgive nor forget the circumstances in which, on their money, their so-called freedom was ushered in' (*Times of Ceylon*, 6 March 1948).

Particularly interesting also was the EKP's public criticism of the Lanka Mahila Samiti (LMS) founded in 1930 by Dr. Mary Rutnam, especially since one of the EKP's secretaries and indefatigable organisers was Dr. Rutnam's daughter Helen Gunasekera (Jayawardena 1993).[15] Not surprisingly, the EPA's ideas on social reform differed drastically from those of the LMS, which had become the largest autonomous women's organisation by this time. While the EKP was careful not to openly denounce the LMS, noting, in fact, that they recognised 'the merits' of the LMS's work and that they honoured 'the women whose toil and sweat' had gone into this organisation, they made no bones about the fact that they disagreed with the LMS's ideology as well as practices. The members of the EKP asserted that though they, like the LMS, deplored 'the poverty and degradation of village life', they were not content to merely work within 'a village economy of a slave colony' like the LMS; "we see our duty not merely to help people to make the best of a bad world, but to understand why it is bad and to help them realize, through experience in fighting for their rights, that they can change it" (de Mel and Muttetuwegama 1997: 23).

15 Dr Rutnam, however, was no longer its president in 1947 (having been replaced by Cissy Cooray in 1944), but continued to be an honorary life president (Jayawardena 1993: 29).

The EKP also warned the LMS about the possible ramifications of receiving financial aid from a colonial government, and was quite scathing about the patronising attitude of its middle-class members. The consequences of such a double standard, the EKP warned, was "a tendency for the village woman to conclude that middle-class benevolence is all she should expect or hope for", to accept that the general framework of society was unalterable and the only way to progress was through patronage (de Mel and Muttetuwegama 1997: 24). The EKP's radical critique of social service thus sought to shift significantly the focus of philanthropy as a moral and patriotic project to one that also sought to transform oppressive colonial as well as class structures.

Unfortunately, the EKP did not last more than a year. Its existence had been largely dependent on the active support of the two left parties, and when the CP decided that it could no longer co-operate with the LSSP, the CPP members in the group had to withdraw from the EKP leading to its dissolution. The attempt of some members to form an independent women's organisation, was also unsuccessful (Jayawardena 1986). It is heartening to note, however, that by the late 1970s, the feminists in Sri Lanka had made sufficient inroads into the public sphere to sustain themselves within independent socialist women's organisations, such as the Voice of Women Collective, as well as others that were formed in subsequent years, such as the Women's Liberation Movement in Ja-Ela (which ran the Women's Centre and published the Sinhala magazine *Da Bindu*), the Progressive Women's Front in Ibbagamuwa (an offshoot of the All Lanka Peasants' Congress which focused on the problems of peasant women as well as the broader issues of women's oppression and subordination within Sinhala society) and several other smaller socialist feminist organisations which belonged, along with many other groups, to the women's coalition founded in 1982—the Women's Action Committee. [16]

Roping in the State and the Shift to Research

It is now an acknowledged fact that the increased presence and visibility of autonomous women's organisations in Sri Lanka primarily resulted from the significant attention paid to women and women's issues with the UN declaration of the 'Year of the Woman' in 1975 and the decade for women from 1976 to 1985. Foreign funders, also pressurised by feminist movements in their own countries,

16 For a discussion of this group's contribution towards conscientizing the peasantry, especially women (see Abeyesekera 1990: 713).

began to support local women's groups and projects focused on women at both governmental and non-government levels. Thus, with the formation of autonomous feminist groups (representing various shades of feminism), the state also founded the Women's Bureau in 1978 to promote women's issues and programmes. A similar national institution for the promotion of women's interests had been successfully mooted in the 1960s by the All-Ceylon Women's Conference (founded in 1944), but now a combination of factors enabled the creation of such an institution. Among these were international interest in the establishment of national machineries, the lobbying of women's NGOs — initiative by the Sri Lanka Federation of University Women and spearheaded by the Sri Lanka Women's Conference — and the co-operation of Norwegian women's NGOs who facilitated funding through NORAD— the Norwegian Agency for Development (Jayaweera 1989). In 1983, a Women's Affairs Ministry was established and soon became the token cabinet position that was assigned to a woman.[17]

Due to further pressures exerted by feminist groups, the Sri Lankan government also signed the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1981. In 1992, a Women's Charter was drafted by several academics, members of women's associations, and women's ministry officials as a statement of intent on economic, social and political rights for women.[18] Another innovation was the setting up of the National Committee of Women (which was also stipulated in the Women's Charter) to advise policy makers on women's issues. With the change of government in 1994, the new minister of justice, acting under pressure from feminist groups, framed new laws on rape, the age of consent, and marriage, to replace the obsolete, colonial laws still in the statute book (Jayawardena 1995). [19]

In the north of Sri Lanka, the Jaffna University, founded in 1974, provided an important site for consciousness raising during this period. With the encouragement of many members of the faculty, the Women's Progressive Association (which initially included several male students as well) was formed by women students in 1980 to develop awareness among their peers. In 1981, several members of this

17 This post was usually held in conjunction with other 'soft' cabinet posts such as health, rural industries or the environment. When Mrs. Athulathmudali was appointed the Minister of Women's Affairs, Environment and Transport after the 1994 elections, many expressed their doubts at her being able to 'to tackle a tough ministry like Transport'.

18 Although this radical document does not have legal authority, it can be a basis for campaigning and raising consciousness on women's issues among policy makers and the public.

19 The reform of certain archaic personal laws, however, was unfortunately opposed by Muslim pressure groups. These pressures also led the minister of justice to criminalise lesbianism along with homosexuality.

association, along with others not affiliated to the university, founded the Women's Study Circle in order to extend their influence outside the university. These women held weekly discussions on current feminist literature, including Engels's writings on women's liberation (Maunaguru n.d.). They also identified Tamil cultural values as one of the main mediums through which women's oppression was legitimised, and particularly concentrated on providing a critique of religion by organising several seminars on the topic. Nevertheless, they did not shy away from harnessing the drawing power of religion to their own ends; their first publication, a Tamil translation of *Feminism is Relevant* which had been published by the Feminist Study Circle, Colombo, was launched at a temple festival where it sold like hotcakes (*ibid*). [20]

This move towards forming reading groups and holding seminars, as well as producing translations and disseminating publications, was accompanied by a concerted effort to do original research on women's 'lost histories', to expose male biases and lacunae in the research that had been produced to date, and to promote women studies as an academic discipline. In the 1980s, many Sri Lankan women went abroad to follow courses in women's studies especially at the Institute of Social Studies at The Hague and the Institute for Development Studies in Sussex (Jayawardena 1995). Those studying at other foreign universities but also influenced by the women studies courses they followed as well as by the activities of the feminist movements in those countries many returned home to start their own research organisations. The Women's Education Centre (WEC) formed in 1982 (the precursor of the Women's Education and Research Centre [WERC]), the Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR) was set up in 1984, and the Muslim Women's Research and Action Forum (MWRAF) was revived in 1986. Other non-governmental research organisations, such as the Social Scientists' Association, the International Centre for Ethnic Studies and the Centre for Society and Religion, also began to fund feminist research, as a result of which there exists today a substantial body of literature on a variety of feminist as well as women's issues (*ibid*).

Many of these research organisations have been asked to assist in organising seminars and workshops to disseminate the results of these new studies as well as to encourage debate and discussion.[21] In this regard, the National Conventions

20 It comprised a group of feminist scholars who later started the feminist forum to discuss feminist theory and practice.

21 They publish several books a year as well as a newsletter or journal which also enables the speedy

on Women's Studies that have been organised annually by CENWOR have been particularly productive and stimulating. The launching of a master's programme in women studies in 1991 (and recently a diploma in this field as well) at the University of Colombo, followed by the establishment of women's coursers in the Department of Sociology at the University of Peradeniya, have also enabled the formalisation of a course of study previously conducted at a more ad hoc level by various women's groups and non-governmental organisations.

Academic feminist research in Sri Lanka has always been an extension of feminist activism, and much of the research undertaken clearly reflects the trajectory of economic and socio-political events in the country. It has also exerted a crucial influence on Sri Lankan scholarship in general. The absence of gender awareness in the work of Sri Lankan and Sri Lankanist male scholars both at home and abroad as well as the continuing chauvinism and sexism among sections of the local academic community are now being seriously challenged. At another level, the launching of 'gender sensitising' programmes by women's groups such as CENWOR and WERC which target organisations of both women and men in both the private and the public sectors (including the police) are making participants aware of women's subordination in society and the need for change no matter how small the scale (Jayawardena 1995).

Anti-feminist Backlash and State Hypocrisy

Unfortunately, the increasing visibility of feminist organisations has also produced consistent and concerted efforts to undermine the legitimacy of feminists within Sri Lankan society. The accusations most frequently levelled against them are that they are westernised, belong to bourgeois families, and are against local traditions and cultures. For example, an editorial on International Women's Day published in a mainstream English newspaper in 1984 predictably perpetuated a common myth about Sri Lankan society being matriarchal in order to sustain the argument that 'traditional' women are always already liberated. It is only elite women, estranged from their culture and their traditional roots, who do not realise this (*The Island,* 8 March 1984). Ironically, an editorial in a left-wing Sinhala newspaper which appeared the same day was even more virulent. It referred to feminists as 'bourgeois canneries' who believe that if 'men crept into the kitchen and helped in scraping coconut . . . equality would be achieved' (*Kamkaru Viththi,* 8 March

dissemination of new ideas and research findings.

1984). Commenting on feminist protests against domestic violence, the editorial further noted: 'The relationship between a man and a woman is a complex one. . . To outsiders it may look as if a man is harassing and beating a woman. But if we look closer, it is merely a bit of fun and games between husband and wife' (*ibid).*

In their discussion of the anti-feminism of the left movement in South Asia, Jayawardena and Kelkar (1989) argue that one of the reasons that all men, including those of the left, refuse to support women's liberation is that they do not want to lose the benefits of patriarchy in their homes as well as in society. They further speculate that such an attitude is the result of 'a high degree of conservativism within the Left — perhaps due to the large petty bourgeois origin of many South Asian Left party leaders and cadres' (*ibid:* 2125). As de Alwis (1998b) has suggested, such a backlash against feminism is also intimately tied to the articulation of nationalism in South Asia. Following Chatterjee (1989), de Alwis argues that bourgeois Ceylonese women were produced as repositories as well as reproducers and nurturers of communal identity and cultural traditions in nationalist discourses during British colonial rule in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their seclusion within the domesticated spaces of the 'inner world' and their circumscription within domesticated subjected positions such as wife and mother were perceived to be crucial to the struggle for independence and the subsequent construction of a new and modern nation state (de Alwis 1998b).

A discourse that constructed in opposition to colonialism, de Alwis (1998b) further notes, could also easily slide into one that was anti-Western and anti-modern; any critique of what have now become naturalised as age-old traditions of family and community is thus immediately attributed to western fads, ignorance, elitism and cultural insensitivity. As one Sinhala editorial noted, feminist slogans are not only borrowed from the West, but feminists are also paid by foreign funders to promote sexual licentiousness and thus bring about the cultural decline of the Sinhala nation (de Alwis 1998b). This equation of feminists with tarts and traitors is a new addition to the already existing list of invectives which includes canaries, elitists, home-wreckers, male-bashers, alcoholics, smokers and lesbians (*ibid*).

What is particularly interesting, de Alwis also points out, is that though similar accusations could be levelled at the leftists — after all, Marx and Engels were Westerners and the left in Sri Lanka has also received funding from foreign sources — they are not vouched in the idiom of corruption and moral decay. This

takes us back to de Alwis's (1998b) point above that women are placed within 'culture' in a way that men are not. Thus, while a classed critique may be viewed with trepidation as it lays bare economic and political privilege, a gendered one is simply not tolerated as it is perceived as attacking the cultural core of society—the family—and the protectors and maintainers of the that core—the men (*ibid*).

In light of such a perspective, it is not surprising that the Sri Lankan state could pursue the harassment and intimidation of feminists without undue censure. After the change to an executive presidency in 1978, the state became obsessed with political stability, and any demonstrations or protests by women's groups as well as by trade unions or student organisations were brutally dealt with. International Women's Day celebrations in the 1980s thus became occasions not only for the demonisation of feminism in the media but also for state violence against women. In 1982, women demonstrating on 8 March in Colombo were teargassed and 8 March 1983 became a *cause celebre*; women of the SLFP, CP and LSSP had organised a picket outside the US Embassy against US army bases in Indian Ocean. On their return home, they also protested outside Temple Trees against the rise in the cost of milk foods. The Kollupitiya police removed their banners and arrested a photographer, and when the women went to the police station to inquire after him, they were attacked (de Rosairo 1992). Former LSSP Member of parliament Vivienne Goonewardena recalled: 'A policeman threw me like a sack of potatoes across the room and kicked me twice . . . and stood with one foot on top of my stomach' (quoted in de Rosairo *ibid*).[22] Violence continued in subsequent years; on 8 March 1984, 1985 and 1986, women were teargassed, baton-charged and arrested.

After the presidential elections of 1989 in which R. Premadasa took over the presidency from his party boss, J.R. Jayewardene, there occurred a further centralisation of state power, now also undergirded by populist ideology; rather than attacking feminists, the state sought to appropriate International Women's Day along with feminist discourses and symbols. Such a projects was especially facilitated through the leadership of Hema Premadasa, the President's wife, who also happened to inherit the mantle of the largest women's organisations in the country, the *Seva Vanitha Movement* (SVM). Inspired by the Dharma Vanitha

22 Even though Vivienne Gunawardena brought a lawsuit against this policeman, and won, the judiciary was slapped in the face by the state, which gave him a promotion (Abeyesekera 1990: 4).

Movement, a brainchild of the military dictatorship in Indonesia, the SVM was founded in June 1983 under the auspices of Elena Jayawardena, the wife of President J.R. Jayewardene. In its heyday in 1993, it was estimated to have over 250,000 registered members. Though the SVM called itself a non-political national movement, it was funded by the President's Fund, and its members were the wives of all government officials from the grassroots level to the ministries.[23] The president's wife was automatic head of the SVM, while the wife of each cabinet minister was the head of that ministry's SVM, and so on.[24]

With its main objective being 'to harness the support of Sri Lankan women in National Development projects through service', the SVM was mainly involved, during its early years under the stewardship of Elena Jayawardene, in promoting charitable projects, such as opening day care centres, training centres and welfare shops, maintaining hospital wards, distributing goods to displaced persons and the armed forces, etc (de Alwis 1995). However, the SVM went through a rapid transformation with Hema Premadasa's assumption of its presidency.[25] She recognised the spectacular and populist potential of her husband's pet schemes, such as Gam Udawa (village upliftment), Janasaviya (poverty alleviation) and Independence Day celebrations, and sought to organise her own versions which paralleled these; the celebration of International Women's Day was among many other celebrations of womanhood that she made her own (*ibid*).[26] The 8 March celebrations were held every year under the auspices of the SVM in different parts of the country. They drew mammoth crowds mainly due to their inclusion of performances by stunt riders and acrobats from the armed forces (who

23 Though Hema Premadasa invited women in the private sector to join the SVM during its 1986 Annual General Meeting, there were no takers [the Elvis 1995: 155].

24 On the rare occasion of a cabinet minister, department head, etc, being a woman, she takes on the leadership of her respective ministry's or department' SVM as well. However, with a change of government in 1994 and the election of a woman president, the leadership of the movement is in question; it is only the SVM of the police and other departments concerned with national security that seem to be functioning right now.

25 In fact, Hema Premadasa's involvement with the SVM was so wholehearted and so well publicised that she often eclipsed the more retiring and less dynamic Minister for Women's Affairs and Health, Renuka Herath. This became such a source of embarrassment to the minister and other officials in her ministry that they began to boycott the events organised by Mr. President during the latter part of her presidency (de Alwis 1995: 147). For s discussion of the demonisation of Hema Premadasa because of the publicity she garnered for such involvements (see de Alwis ibid: 148-52).

26 Hema Premadasa also decided to institute the celebration of a National Women's Day to coincide with Unduvap Poya which commemorates the arrival of Sanghamitta Theri to Lanka bearing the sacred Bo sapling. The fact that Ms. Premadasa chose to commemorate National Women's Day on such a significant day for Buddhists, in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, needs to be analysed in depth in a separate article.

usually performed at Independence Day celebrations), the donation of various goods ranging from umbrellas to sewing machines, and Hema Premadasa's own innovations such as the air drop of cash vouchers to the tune of Rs.100,000 over the stadium in which the celebrations were taking place (*ibid*).

With the change of government in 1994, the state began to focus on issues that it had hitherto ignored. For example, the theme for the 1995 International Women's Day celebrations organised by the state was 'Violence Against Women', and the messages issued on that day by President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, and Minister of Transport, Environment and Women's Affairs Srimani Athulathmudali focused on women workers, violence against women and issues of women's rights, rather than the usual platitudes about motherhood trotted out by their predecessors (de Alwis 1998a).

The Politicisation of Violence

Sri Lanka's history in the latter half of the twentieth century was dominated by much violence — the Sinhala youth (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna [JVP]) uprising in the south in 1971 and a more extended one in 1987-89, several anti-Tamil riots in the 1950s and 1970s, the worst occurring in 1983, and protracted civil war in the North and East fought between the Sri Lankan state and Tamil separatists, spanning over fifteen years. Women's lives continue today to be framed by the contours of war while they also bear the scars—both physical and psychological—from previous events and processes of violence. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to adequately document the events of violence or their repercussions, we will briefly explore several responses by women's groups to different contexts of violence. We argue that no matter how different these responses may be, they nevertheless illuminate how violence has become politicised and that requires, in turn, politicised responses.

Women for Peace

What are the most significant and unfortunate splits that occurred within the feminist movement in Sri Lanka had to do with the 'Tamil question'? After the anti-Tamil riots of 1983, feminists who sought the question the pervasiveness of Sinhala hegemony within Sri Lankan society and began to critique Sinhala nationalism and militarism, diverged drastically from those who refused to perceive these issues as

being central to the conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils. In addition, feminist was suddenly confronted with a refugee crisis due to the thousands of Tamils who were displaced and traumatised as a result of the riots. Over the 1980s this crisis situation expanded in dimension an intensity due to the acceleration of the war in the North and East, which resulted in the increased displacement of Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims from the conflict regions and border zones, and in human rights violations by both Sri Lankan state and Tamil militants.

An excellent example of the new direction taken by feminist activism in response to these transformations in Sri Lankan society is the multi-ethnic group Women for Peace (WFP), formed in October 1984 to agitate for a peaceful and politically negotiated settlement of the ethnic conflict. This group was initially begun as a signature campaign which called for the cessation of hostilities in the north and east of the island. The original petition was signed by 100 women among whom were many feminist activists as well as leading professionals in the fields of education, law, medicine, the arts, etc. By 8 March 1985, the signatories had increased to 10,000 women from all walks of life, religions and ethnicities.

Through the organisation of marches, vigils and pickets and the distribution of newsletters, pamphlets, posters and postcards, Women for Peace consistently spoke out against the increased militarisation of Sri Lankan society. It organised peace education programmes in schools and worked among Tamil women refugees and prisoners. The WFP's committed efforts not only to call for an end to the war but also to highlight the shared suffering of both Tamil and Sinhala women as a result of this war was paralleled by the work of many other activists and research organisations which sought to stress the shared histories and cultures of the Sinhalese and Tamils through articles, songs and videos, as well as to foster greater understanding between the two groups by offering free Tamil classes and organising goodwill missions to the north.

However, Colombo based feminist groups' increased concern with Tamil women refugees, prisoners and detainees, as well as with Tamil women civilians in the North and East who were being raped and abused by the Sri Lankan military, once again invited the censure of the Sinhala press. As de Alwis has pointed out, the extremely nationalist, mainstream Sinhala newspaper, the *Divaina*, has been at the forefront of a campaign to 'expose Sinhala feminists — funded by foreigners and controlled by religious (meaning Christian) organisations — who are publicising

the plight of the Tamil people all over the world, and are thus not only discrediting their own country, but their race and religion as well. The lead article published in the *Divaina* on 25 May 1986 even went to the extent of quoting 'unofficial reports' that accused several feminist organisations of participating in a project to procure funding for 'Tamil terrorists' (de Alwis 1998b).

De Alwis further notes that a feature article also published in this issue of the D*ivaina* sought to document, in detail, the various 'atrocities' that had been perpetrated by Sinhala feminists. The article consistently insinuated the extent of this supposed pro-Tamilsympathies of Sinhala feminists by suggesting that they highlighted only the rapes of Tamil women by Sinhala soldiers.[27], [28] It further accused them of having their own Tamil representatives in Jaffna as well as links with south India, thus doubly jeopardising the Sinhala race, religion and nation-state by forming alliances with Tamils both within and across national borders (de Alwis 1998b: 25). [29] Worse still, these feminists for dishonouring their country by publicising 'private' and local problems internationally.[30] Interestingly, only the few groups that voiced their concern for Tamil women, notes de Alwis, were singled out as feminists and tarred with the brush of treachery. Associating with the 'Other' seemed to be even more heinous than the criticism of Sinhala culture and tradition [*ibid*].

Women in Need

The rapid militarisation of Sri Lankan society has triggered a marked increase in violence against women, be it rape, sexual harassment or domestic violence. While

27 The Sinhala-chauvinist media often followed the troubling tendency of collapsing Tamil civilians and militants together.

28 This was suggested as being particularly treacherous in light of the fact that 'our' (i.e.Sinhala) soldiers were sacrificing their lives for the good of the Sinhala nation.

29 This is usually referenced through the evocative trinity of *rata, daya, samaya* –country, race, religion (See de Alwis 1998a, and Siriwardena et al. 1982, for a further discussion of the mobilisation of such a formulation in Sinhala nationalist discourse, especially Sinhala Language Readers). Such insinuations also play into the common assumption that the Sinhalese have been unjustly accused of denying the Tamils a separate state because, unlike the Sri Lankan Tamils who can find domicile in Tamil Nadu (south India), the Sinhalese have literally 'nowhere to go' and thus have to constantly live under the threat of attacks form Tamils living in the north and east of Sri Lanka as well as in south India.

30 The article pointed out that thought these feminist organisations proclaimed that they published their newsletters in all three official languages of the country, what happened in reality was they printed about 300 issues in Sinhala, and over 1.500 in Tamil and 2.500 in English. While the Sinhala issues were circulated locally, the Tamil and English ones were circulated internationally in south India, Malaysia, England, Holland, France and Germany. While the Sinhala issues dealt with the local issues of Sri Lankan women, the Tamil and English ones dealt with the problems of the Tamils (quoted in de Alwis 1998: 24-25).

one could argue that the increase in the number of complaints to the police and press reportage is a result of feminist consciousness raising and reduced tolerance for such forms of violence, it is an unfortunate and irrefutable fact that many Sri Lankan and Indian soldiers raped Tamil civilian women in the territories they occupied, and that mass rapes have taken place in the context of inter-ethnic clashes in the border villages of the North and East. In addition, many feminist activists now working among Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim internally displaced populations have observed an alarming increase in domestic violence as a result of new insecurities and marginalizations faced by these groups, and by men in particular. What has not yet been adequately studied or understood is the extent of the threat posed by the thousands of military deserters who are both armed and traumatised by war, and the increase in armed violence, harassment and rape of women in areas that have now been transformed into rest and recreation (R&R) zones, such as Anuradhapura.

In light of such troubled and dangerous circumstances facing a large percentage of women in Sri Lanka, be it within or without the home, it is especially disheartening to note the limited resources at their service to help them combat abusive relationships and situations. While the People's Alliance government, which came into power in 1994, has introduced several innovations, such as women only buses (to reduce the harassment of women using public transportation), special sections in police stations staffed by police women (to increase the comfort level of women making complaints of a sensitive nature), framing more stringent rape laws and even appointing (after much pressure from human rights and feminist groups) a Commission to look into the recent rape and murder (by soldiers) of Krishanthi Kumaraswamy, a Tamil schoolgirl, no effort has yet been made to help battered women. Though feminist groups, such as Surya in Batticaloa and the Women's Development Centre in Kandy, as well as trauma counselling programmes and centres initiated by feminist groups including the Family Rehabilitation Centre, have attempted to help battered women while also providing other forms of support and services, there is only one organisation, even today, that deals exclusively with the issue of domestic violence—Women in Need (WIN).

Women in Need was formed in 1987 to deal with the increasing incidents of violence against women and to advise battered women. In its first six years, WIN had 4700 'drop-in' clients who visited its officers for advice, as well as 2530 postal inquiries. While WIN provides free, confidential, listener-friendly services as

well as legal and medical advice, the overwhelming demand for its services has especially hampered its inability to provide adequate shelter for many of its clients. The strategy adopted by WIN with regard to battered women has been to urge them to think primarily in terms of rescuing their marriages rather than leaving such abusive relationships, thus drawing criticism from some feminists.

Birds of Freedom

While women have been the victims and survivors of violence, they have also been its perpetrators. Though many women participated in the JVP youth insurrection of 1971, and to a lesser extent in the JVP insurrection of 1987-89 (see de Mel 1998; Senanayake 1996), the issue of women militants has really come to the fore in the 1990s with the increased participation of Tamil women militants in combat.[31] In fact, the women's wing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—Suthanthirap Paravaikal (Birds of Freedom)—has acquired almost as much notoriety as their male counterparts since a female suicide bomber killed Rajiv Gandhi, former Prime minister of India, in 1993. The increased visibility of these women in recent LTTE campaigns against the Sri Lankan forces has also generated much discussion among feminists in Sri Lanka on the role of women militants in anti-state movements, a familiar question to those who have studied the positioning of women fighters in guerrilla groups. Much of this feminist debate is framed in terms of whether the women in the LTTE are liberated or subjugated agents or victims (Coomaraswamy 1996; M.de Silva 1994; de Mel 1998).

Sitralega Maunaguru's finely nuanced and historicised paper, on the other hand, has been able to transcend such a dichotomising debate by locating women warriors within the broader context of other gendered subject positions in Tamil Society. Maunaguru also complicates this category of 'woman warrior' by marking two distinctive phases of its mobilisation by militant groups. In the first phase, spearheaded by the LTTE, which 'owed more to its militarism than to an ideological allegiance with feminism' (Maunaguru 1995:163), the ideal Tamil woman was expected to be a mother as well as a fighter, thus integrating the subject position of 'brave mother' with that of 'woman warrior', i.e., a 'warrior mother'.[32] The second

31 Women only make up about 8 percent of the Sri Lankan armed forces and rarely engage in armed combat. For an extended discussion f such non-combativeness, see de Alwis (1998a).

32 Such a model is exemplified in the now cliched image that was used by national liberation movements in the third world in the 1960s and 1970s (Maunaguru 1995: 164; cf. di Leonardo 1985: 602-3).

phase, facilitated by the women's wings of the more progressive Tamil militant groups (which have since disbanded or been decimated by the LTTE), such as the Ealam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), enabled a formulation of the 'new woman' who contested 'patriarchal aspects of Tamil culture ideology' and insisted on linking National Liberation with women's liberation (*ibid*).[33]

A later face of the 'woman warrior', which Maunaguru does not discuss but which has been addressed by de Alwis (1994, 1998a), as well as by M. de Silva (1994), Coomaraswamy (1996) and de Mel (1998), can be described as the 'masculinised virgin warrior'. In a context where the LTTE reigns supreme, having exiled, incorporated or killed all dissenters and critics (including many feminists), it is this ideal of womanhood that now seems to be foregrounded within Tamil society (through LTTE propaganda]. As Radhika Coomaraswamy [1996] points out, the 'armed virgin' is a purely LTTE innovation, having no precedent in Tamil literature or culture.

While the LTTE woman's internal makeup is expected to be 'pure', 'chaste' and 'virginal', her outer body is marked as masculine; her hair is cut short and she wears a beret, combat fatigues, boots and a cyanide capsule around her neck (just like her male counterparts), but no makeup or jewellery (Coomaraswamy 1996). The poetry of Vanati, a female 'martyr' of the LTTE, captures the 'woman warrior's desire to transform her biologically as well as culturally marked body (as feminine) to 'heroic' masculinity while simultaneously proclaiming her virginity and chastity — she refuses the red *kumkumum* and *thali* and embraces weapons, not men [quoted in Schalk 1992: 95]. This celebration of 'martial feminism' through extensive LTTE propaganda as well as through its ideologues such as Balasingham (1983, 1993) and Schalk (1992, 1994)—has also been critiqued by feminists, who, in turn, have been vilified by the LTTE.

Women's Action Committee

The numerous violations of human rights by both the state and militant groups in the North and East as well as the South of the island in these past two decades have led feminists to concern themselves with this issue and to be actively involved in monitoring and advocacy work. Feminists have played key roles in many human

33 The 'new woman' was not necessarily a 'woman warrior'. It was primarily a feminist subject position that enabled a critique of both the Sri Lankan state as well as of many militant groups.

rights organisations, including the Civil Rights Movement, formed as a response to state repression during the JVP uprising of 1971, the Human Rights Organisation, the Movement for the Defence of Democratic Rights [MDDR], the Movement for Inter-racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE), the human rights documentation centre INFORM, the Movement for Peace with Democracy, the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Colombo, and Home for Human Rights in Batticaloa.

Of the autonomous women's organisations that have been primarily concerned with human rights issues, the Women's Action Committee [WAC], a coalition of several women's organisations founded in 1982, stands at the forefront. One of the central platforms of the WAC was the establishment of a democratic culture that respected women's rights and human rights. The WAC consistently linked the ethnic conflict and the politics of violence to the deterioration of democracy and its consequences for all ethnic communities and marginalised groups (Samuel 1998). It was one of the many coalitions that welcomed the signing of the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord in 1987 as a right step towards a political solution to the ethnic conflict. As a result of their support for the Accord, however, the WAC came under threat from the JVP which had formulated a violent campaign against the Accord and the government that signed such an Accord. The coalition had to disband, and many feminists went into hiding during the height of the JVP uprising from 1987 to 1989 (*ibid*).

With the increase of both state and JVP violence resulting in extra-judicial killings on a mass scale and the 'disappearance' of thousands of young men in the South during 1987 - 90, the WAC reconstituted itself, with broader participation, to form a new coalition—the Mothers and Daughters of Lanka (MDL). This new coalition strove hard to mobilise women to speak out against human rights violations by both the state and the militants, and launched a signature campaign in 1989 to 'Stop All Killings Now (See *Sun*, 14 September 1989).[34] Many groups represented in the MDL, including Women for Peace, set up trauma counselling centres and programmes to help women and children cope with psychological problems arising from the 'disappearance' of related relatives, the witnessing of various forms of violence, the experience of displacement, and the trauma of rape, domestic violence and other kinds of sexual abuse. Several representatives of this coalition also visited Jaffna in November 1989 to participate in a March protesting the LTTE

34 This campaign was preceded by one that was organised by Women for Peace (a member of this coalition) to coincide with the celebration of the Sinhala and Tamil new Year in April 1989 (see D*ivaina* and *Island* 13 April 1989).

killing of feminist Rajini Thiranagama a month earlier. The indiscriminate arrest of many Tamil civilian women in the city of Colombo due to increased vigilance against LTTE infiltrators into the city in the 1990s was also protested by this group.

Since the 1990s, many Sri Lankan feminists have consistently sought to link women's rights with human rights, in keeping with international feminist trends particularly well captured by the popular slogan 'Women's Rights are Human Rights'. They have campaigned on this issue using posters and pamphlets, the latter including English reprints as well as translations of the pioneering work of US feminist Charlotte Bunch on this subject. The Vienna Declaration in 1993 at the World Conference for Human Rights which proclaimed that the 'human rights of women and the girl child are inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights' provided a great fillip to this campaign.

Mothers' Fronts

The 1980s and 1990s further witnessed the political mobilisation of 'motherhood' in the context of the civil war in the North and East as well as the second JVP uprising in the South. In 1984, the Mothers Front was formed in Jaffna to protest the mass arrest of Tamil youth by the Sri Lankan state. This organisation was controlled by and consisted of women from all classes. Feminist Rajini Thiranagama has documented how these women 'mobilised mass rallies and picketed public officials demanding the removal of military occupation [by the Sri Lankan state]' (Hoole et al., 1990]. It was not only the spirit, observed Thiranagama, but also the enormous numbers that this group was able to mobilise which 'spoke loudly of the high point to which such mass organisations, especially of women [could] rise (*ibid*). Though the members of the Mothers' Front had spontaneously mobilised their maternal identity in the face of state repression, they were also quick to criticise the blatant manipulation of such an identity when Tamil militant groups put up posters inciting women to have more babies in order to further the cause of separatism [quoted in Jayawardena 1985b].

The Mothers' Front also inspired Tamil women in the east to begin their own branch. In 1986, the Eastern Mothers' Front took to the streets with rice pounders to prevent a massacre of members of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) by the LTTE (Hensman 1992). In 1987, one of its members, Annai Pupathi, fasted to death to protest the presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF).

She was subsequently immortalised by the LTTE (it was common knowledge that the LTTE had forced her to keep at her fast), who now offer a scholarship in her memory. It was finally the increasing hegemony of the LTTE, and their suppression of all independent, democratic organisations that did not 'toe the line', that pushed the Mothers' Front in the north and east into political conformism and reduced its wide appeal and militancy. 'It became another Y.W.C.A.,' notes Thiranagama, and its central structure, which was mainly made up of middle-class women, finally began to confine its activities to works of charity (Hoole et al.1990). Many members who refused to work under LTTE hegemony migrated abroad or to Colombo.

In July 1990, a Mothers Front was formed in the south to protest the 'disappearance' of their male kin during the JVP uprising from 1987 to 1990.[35] These women's only demand was for "a climate where we can raise our sons to manhood, have our husbands with us and lead normal women's lives" (de Alwis 1988c: 185). Their mass rallies and *deva kannalawwas* (beseeching of the gods) had a tremendous impact on Sinhala society during the two years in which this organisation was especially active. As de Alwis has argued, the seemingly unquestionable authenticity of these women's grief and their espousal of 'traditional' family values provided the southern Mothers Front with an important space for protest at a time when feminist and human rights activists who were critical of either state or JVP violence were being killed with impunity (*ibid*).

While many feminists in the South celebrated the successful campaign of the Southern Mothers' Front and participated in its rallies, they were nevertheless split on how best to respond to such a movement, for several reasons. For example, while the Front identified itself as the largest grassroots women's movement in the country (with an estimated membership of 25,000 women), it was common knowledge that it was founded, funded and co-ordinated by the main opposition party in the country—the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—whose politburo was predominantly middle-class and male. As members of autonomous women's groups, feminists felt very uncomfortable about working with a political party that not only did not espouse a particular feminist ideology, but in fact was perceived to

35 The other group which was centrally involved in protesting 'disappearances' was the Organisation of Parents and Family Members of the Disappeared formed on 20 May 1990. This group was closely aligned with Vasudeva Nanayakkara, opposition MP and member of left-wing Nava Sama Samaja Pakshaya (NSSP) politburo. Members of this group often attended the Mothers' Front rallies and vice versa though they pursued a much more radical agenda. While this group did not mobilize around 'motherhood', they nevertheless valorised (non-gendered) familial identities (de Alwis 1998b: 37).

be using the Mothers' Front for its own political end (de Alwis 1998b). Feminists were also concerned about the limited agenda of the southern Mothers' Front which precluded it from calling attention to similar issues faced by Tamil and Muslim women in the north and east of the island. Many feminists who had reservations about the Front's mobilisation of 'motherhood' felt that they would have been more willing to compromise if it had been used as a space within which a mass movement of women from different ethnic groups could have united and launched a collective critique of the violence perpetrated by the state as well as by militant groups [*ibid*].

Conclusion

As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, our central concern has been to explore the politically contingent ways in which different women's groups have protested and struggled against particular political, economic and cultural strictures and situations that they have faced during different historical moments. It is a sad fact of our history that the situation in Sri Lanka from the late 1970s onwards has been over determined by the ethnic issue and the war in the north and east. This has had a tremendously adverse impact on women in a variety of ways, as described in this chapter.

In fact, the concerted energies of many women's groups in Sri Lanka have been so focused on addressing issues that arise in a context of continuous violence and carnage, that many other important struggles have had to be abandoned. Other areas needing change include, for example, the persistence of pockets of illiteracy and poverty among women in plantations, urban slums and remote rural areas; the continuance of customary laws which include provisions oppressive to women and the absence of a secular, unified code (based on the Sri Lankan constitution, CEDAW and other international covenants) expanding the choices for women in determining the body of law they wished to be judged by; the glass ceiling faced by women in employment and sexual harassment in the workplace; the absence of adequate laws against domestic violence and marital rape; the continued criminalisation of abortion (except when pregnancy is perceived to be detrimental to the mothers health); and the fining and imprisonment of prostitutes (but not their clients). [36]

36 Marital rape is only recognised in instances where the spouses are legally separated.

Nevertheless, it must also be acknowledged that women have visibly progressed in many areas in the fifty years since independence. Their physical quality of life—as seen from indices of health, maternal mortality, education (including literacy) and life expectancy—is the best in the South Asian region, and compares favourably with other more developed parts of the world. Women's literacy has also had an important impact on later marriage, lower birth rates and access to family planning. While male domination persists in all spheres and bargaining with patriarchy continues, the struggle for women's liberation will be carried into the new millennium and the inspiration for the women's movement of the future will come from the struggles of the past.

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CHAPTER NINE

The "Purity" of Displacement and the Reterritorialization of Longing Muslim IDPS in North-Western Sri Lanka

Malathi de Alwis

Positioning

As Chan Kwok Bun (1991) has noted, the refugee camp is "a unique socio-political artefact of this century" (1991: 284). While several contemporary ethnographies have focused on such camps as technologies of power and sites of transnational displacement (Hitchcox 1990; Malkki 1995a), much less attention has been paid to the phenomenon of displacement and the role of camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in such contexts.[1] In Sri Lanka, for instance, our understanding of the physical topography of the country—a product of colonial knowledge making—must also now be folded into a topography of violence that has produced "front lines," "no man's-lands," "border zones," and "refugee camps" that constantly expand and contract in correspondence to the shifting battle lines between the Sri Lankan state and the Tamil militants (see Map).[2] [3] [4]

1 I use the terms refugee and refugee camp as these are the terms used by the displaced themselves, as well as by most local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as opposed to the more "accurate" term internally displaced person (IDP) used by UN organizations and international NGOs operating in Sri Lanka. The English term refugee is what is most frequently used by displaced and nondisplaced persons in Sri Lanka, though the Sinhala term anata and the Tamil term ahadi are in usage too. The latter two terms also contain the connotations of destitution and orphaning (cf. de Zoysa 1999:5).

2 For an excellent analysis of a particular epistemological field within which such knowledge making took place in colonial Ceylon, see Jeganathan (1994).

3 The artifactual nature of the "border" is well articulated in Rajasingham (1995), while Samuel (1995) exemplifies the use of this category in human rights discourses.

4 A civil war has been raging in Sri Lanka for the past 20 years. Tamil and Sinhala nationalist movements have contributed to the struggles, but conflict between the security forces of the Sri Lankan government and the separatist movement of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has proven the greatest threat to the civilian population of Sri Lanka, particularly in the northern and eastern regions of the country. Members of all three major ethnic groups in the country—Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim—have been and continue to be displaced as a result of this war, though the majority of the displaced in Sri Lanka are Tamil. Ongoing displacement has become a fact of life for many households in the Northern and Eastern provinces, and the death toll from this war now exceeds 60,000. For insightful analyses of nationalist sentiments and ideologies that are at stake in this war [see e.g., Abeysekera and Gunasinghe (1987), Committee for Rational Development (1984), Jeganathan and Ismail (1995), and Spencer (1990)].

These new, constantly fluctuating configurations of space are exemplified by the marginalizing work done by the very terms used to describe them. Lines, zones, and borders mark the tenuous and temporary presence (or even the non-presence, i.e., "no-man's-land") of its inhabitants. The problematization of such spaces in conjunction with those of its inhabitants and producers is central to Henri Lefebvre's (1991) injunction that when we evoke "space" we must "immediately indicate what occupies that space and how it does so" (1991:12). Lefebvre's unmooring of "space" from its previous, mathematical and Euclidean formulation as an "empty area" and his articulation of it in terms of quotidian "social space" point us to, among other things, the co-constitutive nature of people, commodities, and spaces and the central role that is played by spatial practices, along with spatial representations, in the production of space. I use *place* in this chapter as a locative marking of social space and thus envision

a dialectical relationship between these two categories.[5] Doreen Massey's (1994a) work has been especially useful in shattering the binary of space and place that poses one as a site of interaction and the other as enclosure. However, while she rightly notes that there are no pure or essential places, she perceives places and spaces only as products of human interaction and thus misses Lefebvre's insight regarding the co-constitutive nature of spaces and people. I find such problematizations of space and place especially useful when reading the accounts of the displaced who narrate "place" as the site of security, stability, and authenticity in the face of their seeming *temporary* relocation in undifferentiated and unfamiliar "space."[6] The unfamiliar spaces of refugee camps and/or the region of relocation simultaneously imply the in-placeness of those who are already resident in that space. However, the displaced themselves, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, have been able to transform such abstract, and thus threatening, spaces into familiar places or territories through material and representational practices that endow them with value and belonging (cf. Tuan 1977: 6);[7] thus themselves demonstrating the fluidity and dynamism of "place."

My chapter is also centrally concerned with another spatial (which is also to suggest ideological) category, "home," which in many ways encompasses, as well as is encompassed by, the formulations of space and place I have discussed above.[8] Geographers have described "home" as the "exemplar of place" and the "territorial core" (Rose 1993: 53; Porteous 1976). The attributes of "home," exemplified in Porteous's (1976) assertion that it provides the "essential territorial satisfactions" of nurture—"identity, security and stimulation" (1976:383)—and Tuan's (1977:147) descriptions of it as a place of intimacy and well-being were further feminized through the work of Jungians, such as Gaston Bachelard (1969) and Clare Cooper (1974), who equated the self with the home and thus gave it a specific personality.[9]

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5 My shift between "space" and "place" also enables an engagement with humanist and feminist geographers, who mobilize "place" rather than "space" as their central conceptual category. As feminist geographer Gillian Rose (1993) points out, humanist geographers associated "place" with "ordinary people" and thus perceived it as an embodiment of human interpretation and significance, in opposition to "space," which was understood through the language and methodology of scientific rationality (see above) (1993: 41, 43).

6 Such a valorization of "placeness" is exemplified in Yi-Fu Tuan's (1974) treatise on "topophilia"—a word he coined to describe the attachment people have to places (cf. Massey 1994b: 167).

7 I use *territory* here to denote a specific sense of familiarity that is associated with the cognizance of, and belonging within, boundaries (cf. Kaplan 1987).

8 The chapter headings of Rybczynski (1986) provides an excellent map of the material concretization of this "idea" of "home."

9 This further enabled the supposition that a home projected the personality of its central core, the "woman of the house" or the mother, and could be used as a metaphor for her body (George 1996: 23). This equation of home with self also led to a division in geographical discourses between "home" and "nonhome" that

This universalization and idealization of the gendered "home," notes Gillian Rose (1993:56), also produced a "feminization of place"; the construction of "home" as a woman's place resulted in both "place" in general and "home" in particular being produced as sites of nurture, stability, reliability, and authenticity (Rose 1993: 56; Massey 1994b: 179).

What I am especially interested in here is how such formulations of "home" have been naturalized; it has become a space that has already been marked out (in both symbolic and material terms) for a specific kind of occupant (George 1996: 21). More troubling, however, are the sweeping assumptions made about "home" that leave no room for ambivalence or the problematization of this category. There is no accounting here for the conceptualization of "home" as a place of oppression or subversion, where incest and domestic violence take place alongside nurture and intimacy (George 1996).[10] This naturalization and idealization as well as feminization (or often maternalization)[11] of "home" is frequently articulated through nostalgia, a form of melancholia caused by prolonged absence from one's home or country.[11] [12]

I will return to these problematizations of "space" and "place" in general, and "home" in particular, throughout this chapter, while exploring how the very out-of-placeness of Muslim refugees in Sri Lanka has produced particular gendered readings of their identity and in analyzing how the displaced themselves reiterate as well as counter these readings through an articulation with two different hegemonic formations, one local and the other global. I am interested here in

corresponded to the binary of "self" and the "other," thus leading to the "exclusion of women (among others) from the geographical" (Rose 1993: 62; cf. George 1996: 21–22). The historical trajectory of equating the woman with the home has also been extensively studied, documented, and analyzed in other fields, particularly history and literature; see, for a brief sampling, Armstrong (1987), Bloch (1978), Davidoff and Hall (1987), George (1996), Hansen (1992), Jolly and Macintyre (1989), Ryan (1975), and Wilson (1991). For a discussion of this gendered formulation within the context of South Asia, see Chatterjee (1989), de Alwis (1994), and Sen (1993).

10 In fairness to Porteous (1976), he does consider (for a minute) that the "home base" may not be all "home sweet home". "Like an attentive mother with her child, the home may smother an individual who is unable to leave it for considerable periods" (ibid: 387). Ironically, this analogy not only maternalizes the home (see note 11) but also produces the mother as the perpetrator of violence.

11 Massey (1994b) talks about how working-class boys perceive "home" as where Mum is; it is she who is the stable and symbolic center, the anchor for others (180). See also note 9.

12 This new "disease" was first identified in 1770, among Captain Cook's sailors (*Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 6, 1933: 535). See also Robertson (1988) for an extensive and rigorous discussion of the culture and politics of nostalgia in Japan, where the term *furusato*, glossed as "home" or "native place," is motivated by "a nostalgia for nostalgia, a state of being provoked by a dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of a remembered, or imagined, past plenitude" (1998: 494–95).

engaging with Liisa Malkki's (1995a) discussion of how Hutu refugees from Burundi (now domiciled in Tanzania) retain the "purity" of displacement through a nostalgic reiteration of "mythico-history" that reaffirms their ties to a particular "home." I want to call into question her reading of these narratives as subversive in light of my discussion of the idealization of "home" above. I will also argue that this process of "purification" itself is a very gendered project and that it is essential that we interrogate how and upon whose bodies it gets worked out.[13] I find Malkki's (1995a:16) call to problematize the "sedentarist bias in dominant modes of imagining homes and homelands" a provocative one, but I wish to caution against her valorization of mythico-history in the production of cultural identity (within the spaces of displacement) to the detriment of ignoring the material bases of such imaginings.

This chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section, I locate the displaced both nationally and locally by briefly discussing their positioning within the Sri Lankan nation-state and that of the Tamil Homeland (yet to be created), as well as within the refugee camps and new regions of relocation. In the second section, I discuss how the refugees' out-of-placeness is reproduced and gendered through the moralizing discourses of the residents of that region. In the third section, I analyze how particular narratives and practices of the refugees reiterate the "purity" of their displacement through nostalgic reaffirmations of "placeness" and "home." I highlight here how such reaffirmations are primarily premised on the policing of women's bodies and spatial(ized) practices. In the final section, I interrogate a particular practice of refugee women that, in their own way, reiterates a longing for "home" that is both similar to and different from that articulated by their male kin.

Placing the Displaced: Negotiating Identities

The Muslims (Moors),[14] who are the second largest minority, have, until recently, been largely ignored in the dominant construction of the "ethnic problem" in Sri Lanka, which has been constituted as a conflict between the majority community, the Sinhalese, and the largest minority, the Tamils. In response to such a

13 Malkki (1995a) notes that she was unable to speak to the Hutu women in any sustained fashion during her research (1995a: 50–51). Unfortunately, she makes no effort to provide a gendered reading of the male narratives she documents either.

14 The collapsing of what is usually recognized as a religious identity into that of an ethnic identity in Sri Lanka is something that has frequently perplexed outsiders. This very move, however, succinctly captures the constructed nature of identities that are too frequently naturalized (this goes for Sinhala and Tamil identities as well) as primordial givens. For an insightful analysis of the changes in the categorization of Muslim identity in Sri Lanka, see Ismail (1994).

marginalization and in the context of Sinhala nationalism and the hegemony of a Sinhala state, the Muslim elite (who were middleclass and upper-class men from the southern regions) in modern Sri Lanka sought to represent the entire Muslim social formation in their own image "as a peaceful trading community of Arab, as opposed to Tamil, origin, whose presence in Sri Lanka dates back to medieval times, and which traditionally enjoyed good relations with the Sinhalese" (Ismail 1994: 57). Such a representation completely repressed the identity not only of Muslim women (who were not traders) but also of other classes of Muslims, particularly those domiciled in the Eastern Province, who were predominantly farmers, had "strong infusions of Indian Muslim blood into their community," and followed a kinship system that was similar to that of the Mukkuvars of South India (Yalman 1967: 283; Ismail 1994).[15]

The distinctive nature and significant numbers of the Eastern Tamils have enabled Qadri Ismail, who has produced the most rigorous and sustained critique of Muslim identity formation to date, to differentiate them from the southern Muslims, who make up two-thirds of the Muslim population and live in Sinhala-dominated provinces. However, the same cannot be said for his treatment of the Muslims of Northern Sri Lanka, who have pretty much dropped out. The Muslims in the Northern provinces, who make up a much smaller percentage of the Muslim population in Sri Lanka, lived in Tamil-dominated areas until October 1990, when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who had been fighting for a separate Tamil state since 1982, suddenly denounced the Muslims living among them as traitors and demanded that they leave Tamil soil immediately.[16] Some Muslims were given 48 hours to leave, while others were only allowed two hours before the LTTE began to loot their property. The LTTE limited the money and valuables many families could take with them, announcing that "everything you earned in *Eelam* [Tamil homeland] must remain in *Eelam*" (Robinson 1991: 25). Over 60,000 Muslims were transformed into homeless, poverty-stricken refugees within a matter of hours. Many fled to Colombo, though the majority converged in the Puttalam district, in which fellow Muslims already predominated.

15 The matrilineal kinship structures of the eastern Muslims, not surprisingly, have attracted the attention of several anthropologists, unlike the kinship structures of the Muslims of the Southern and Northern regions [see, e.g., Yalman (1967, esp. chap. 13) and McGilvray (1974, 1989)].

16 For useful discussions of the rise of the LTTE and their location within a broader canvas of Tamil nationalist movements and militant organizations, see Guneratne (1995), Hoole et al. (1990), and Swamy (1994).

The identity of the Northern Muslims has had to go through several gyrations over the past decades, due to the extremely marginalized circumstances of their lives. Living under the jurisdiction of a Sinhala state in a region dominated by Tamils, their allegiance has constantly shifted between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. However, many Muslims began to identify more and more with the aspirations of the Tamil militancy movement that dominated the 1980s (when there were multiple militant groups, unlike now), and many youth joined militant groups as well.[17] The sudden decision of the LTTE in October 1990 thus came as a rude shock to many Muslims, who had until then supported the cause of the Tamils. Such an alliance of sentiment and placeness continues to be affirmed, albeit in more muted fashion, post 1990, in the Muslim refugees' narrations of the circumstances that led to their displacement and in their insistence on differentiating the LTTE cadres from the Northern provinces from those from the Eastern provinces.

To briefly summarize the dominant refugee narrative: the LTTE in the east brutally massacred 120 Muslim boys and men while they were praying in a mosque in Kattankudy (in the eastern province) in August 1990. The Muslims in the East were so incensed that Muslim Home Guards (a volunteer, rather haphazardly trained civilian force) joined forces with the Sri Lankan army to prevent further atrocities from being perpetrated on their community. The LTTE in the East, however, became outraged at this move and complained to their counterparts in the North that the Muslims were harassing Tamil civilians in the East. The LTTE political bureau decided to exile all Muslims from *Eelam* (i.e., whatever land that was under LTTE control at that time). The LTTE in the East sent special battalions to oversee the eviction of Muslims because they felt that their Northern counterparts might let some of their friends stay on.[18]

17 Muslim families often gave shelter to LTTE cadres during the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) occupation of the Northern peninsula from October 1987 to March 1990. When the IPKF would conduct house-to-house searches, "a woman would come out with a sari draped over her head and smile demurely, they would see she was a Muslim and go away, thinking that Tigers couldn't be hiding in a Muslim house" (Hensman 1993: 55).

18 See Robinson (1991) for a similar reportage framed within a discourse of human rights. Several of the narratives he cites share similarities with as well as differences from the narrative I have set out above. He also notes that several refugees berated the Sri Lankan state along with the LTTE (1995: 25, 28). The Muslims' narratives reported in Hensman (1993: 55–56) emphasize that such an ethnic cleansing took place against the wishes of their Tamil neighbors, with whom they had lived in close friendship. Some of these neighbors also believed that it was only the presence of Muslims in the North that was acting as some kind of a restraint on the armed forces.

While spatial limitations inhibit me from producing an extended analysis of such narratives of displacement here, I would like to draw attention once again to the myriad ways in which Muslims in general and the Northern Muslims in particular have had to negotiate their identities in the face of varied and changing hegemonic formations. As Ismail (1994) succinctly notes, "Identity is about hegemony—not 'community' " (1994: 58). Since their relocation, post 1990, in the North-Western region of Sri Lanka, Muslims have had to contend with an old (but differently experienced) hegemonic formation. This includes the Sri Lankan state as well as new formations such as that of the resident Muslim population in their region of relocation and humanitarian aid organizations, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Negotiating Spaces

Loose sandy wastes of scrubland, salt marshes, and wind-shorn mangrove trees interspersed with coconut plantations lie wilting under the scorching sun as one drives along the rutted macadam road that trails the length of the Kalpitiya Peninsula in the Puttalam district, 150 kilometers North of the capital city of Colombo. This arid soil and searing landscape are now home to over 60,000 Muslim refugees dispersed across the district in over sixty camps.[19] The refugees' presence in the Puttalam peninsula has produced new mappings of the landscape.

Their clusters of *cadjan* (woven coconut palm) shelters are situated within camp perimeters that bear clipped, alphabetized identifications linked to the village that surrounds them as well as to other camps in the village. Each camp is mapped in turn by the benevolent practices of various governmental and nongovernmental, foreign, and local humanitarian aid organizations that work among the refugees, giving each camp a unique identity and a specific relationship with particular aid agencies. For example, Camp A in Village N bears the stamp of the Rural Development Fund, the International Islamic Regional Organization, and the *Jamaat-i- Islami*, who have built their wells and toilets and a clinic, while Camp D

19 The time period I am referring to is 1993, when much of my field research was conducted. The situation of the refugees has drastically changed since then. The majority of the refugees have been relocated in new settlements in the same district, and the conditions in the few remaining camps have been vastly improved, though many of the problems I discuss here, such as tensions within and across communities, scarcity of resources, unemployment, the policing of women, and domestic violence, persist. For more recent studies on the situation in this region, see de Zoysa (1999), Jayasinghe (1995), Wijeyatilake (1994–95), and Zackariya and Ismail (n.d.).

in Village N bears the mark of Oxfam and Redd Barna, who have built their toilets and a Montessori school.

Unfortunately, the foreign and local humanitarian aid organizations' particularized relationships with specific groups of refugees have not engendered a more nuanced notion of "refugeeness." As Liisa Malkki (1995a:8) has pointed out, many such organizations perceive refugees as "a problem"; they are constituted as an anomaly that requires "specialized correctives and therapeutic interventions". The emplacement of the refugee camp as a "standardized, generalizable technology of power…in the management of mass displacement" has its antecedents in post–World War II Europe (Malkki 1995b: 498). While the camps in Puttalam differ considerably from the post–World War II camps or even the Hutu camp described by Malkki—the chief difference being that they are administrated by the refugees (all males) themselves—they nevertheless continue to be sites of hegemony as well as subversion. I will revisit this issue in the final section of my chapter.

Malkki (1995a) has discussed in depth the status of "refugee," which "ordinarily acts to make people interstitial or liminal—and hence polluting" (230–31).[20] While her work has primarily focused on how the "betwixt and between" positioning of refugees can be perceived as a threat to the categorical order of nation-states, I find that such positionings can also be perceived as disrupting categorical orders *within* nation-states and ethnic groups. Take for example, the perceptions of the residents of Village N, who are Muslims. They comprise about 250 families, as opposed to the refugees in the four camps within the jurisdiction of their village, who comprise about 700 families. Despite their commonalities of ethnicity and religion, the residents have constructed the refugees as "other." The refugees are perceived as enjoying the benefits of two worlds while also posing a threat in terms of their numerical strength.

Constant tension and suspicion have begun to take their toll on the residents, who welcomed the refugees with great enthusiasm when they first arrived in 1990—donating land, building materials, food, and other goods; sharing their toilets, wells, and grinding stones; and helping to build the *cadjan* shelters. What they originally perceived to be acts of benevolence that would earn them merit in the eyes of Allah

20 See also Malkki (1992) and Arendt (1973). For a discussion of the invisibility of liminality and the polluting nature of transitional beings, see Turner (1967). For a discussion of the danger of pollution, see Douglas (1966).

have now resulted in what they view as a lifestyle of servitude and deprivation. The residents' decline in prosperity is directly correlated with the practices of the refugees: they catch fewer fish because the refugees are overfishing, they cannot sell their onions and chilis because the refugees are glutting the market, their shops have gone bankrupt because the refugees have opened competing shops, and so on. While many of these complaints are mainly premised on a contestation of "place," they are never articulated as such. Rather, they are subtly legitimized by arguments that present the refugees as a people who have lost their moral bearings. Such a discourse, as I will argue in the next section, continues to be based on an assumption that the loss of bodily connection to "place" produces a loss of moral bearing (cf. Malkki 1992: 32).[21]

Displacing Purity

The residents' predominant portrayal of the refugee men is epitomized by their "corrupting" practices of watching blue movies, getting into fights, and drinking. The threat posed by these refugee men, however, is presented as the need to safeguard the resident women, who can "no longer walk outside [the household compound] after dark."[22] The situation was exacerbated when it was discovered that a male refugee schoolteacher was having a love affair with a female resident school teacher. The female teacher's parents insisted that the couple get married, but the male refugee refused, and the female teacher was bundled off to her relatives in another part of the country.

The residents also point to a similar trajectory of corruption among the refugee children, whom they accuse of teaching "bad language and bad habits" to their children. In addition, the residents note that the refugee children are dirty and unhealthy and infect the resident children with various diseases. This "deplorable" behaviour is read as a direct index of the refugees' parenting practices, especially those of the women, who do not adequately supervise and care for their children. This critique, predominantly made by resident women, is also tied to a deeper conflict that stems from the fact that many refugee women have taken jobs away from the poorer resident men by working in the onion and chili fields for a lower

21 I wish to mark my usage of the term *loss* here as opposed to *absence*, pace LaCapra (1999), who makes an important distinction between the two by linking losses with historical traumas and absences with structural traumas (1999: 699).

22 At one point a nightly curfew that went into effect at 8:00 p.m. was imposed as a precautionary measure.

wage.[23] In addition, resident women perceive refugee women as threats to the harmony of their households, on the premise that many refugee women have become the mistresses of the wealthy landlords for whom they labour. This assumption however, seems to be based on one incident that occurred in an adjoining village, where a wealthy landlord evicted his wife and family and set up his refugee mistress in their residence. The obvious inequality of power in such supposed liaisons is vehemently denied by the resident women, who make the counter assertion that it is the refugee women who are loose and who entice the landlords. As one resident woman scoffed, "These women go out for wage work, they do not live under the authority of their husbands, it is they who support their men....That is why we have so much trouble with the refugees."

This construction of the "looseness" of refugee women can be read in two ways. First, it seems to be premised on an argument that the loss of economic control means a loss of authority and masculinity, which concomitantly means an inability to control the sexuality of one's womenfolk. Second, there is a suggestion that because women go out to work, they can no longer be chaperoned or watched by their husbands or male kin and are thus liable to temptation. Both suggestions, however, are premised on the patriarchal notion that women are inherently loose and that if they are not watched carefully or disciplined constantly, they will revert to their "natural" state of being.[24] Both suggestions also display an awareness of the circumstantial nature of this shift in hierarchy (i.e., it is due to displacement), which shares similarities with the less frequently used and more sympathetic arguments that these women are "loose" because "they have nothing to lose" or that "they have become deranged due to what they have suffered."

The out-of-placeness of the refugee women has been coded here as "looseness," while a similar trajectory of displacement among the male refugees is read through the terms of unruliness and emasculation. Interestingly, while the feminization of the refugee men is openly suggested—that is, they cannot control their wives or themselves, they get drunk, fight, and are overly sexual— there is no suggestion that a parallel process has taken place among the women—that is, that they

23 Most resident men avoided sharing their opinion of refugee women, with the exception of some who noted that these women had stolen their jobs and a few landlords who stressed that the women were very hardworking.

24 A few middle-class resident women managed to distance themselves from this formulation by asserting that "looseness" was a characteristic of lower-class women.

have become masculinized because they are now the wage earners. Instead, the women's identity continues to be read primarily through the terms of sexuality. However, it is a sexuality that, like their male counterparts', is out of control and thus quintessentially feminine as well as dangerous.

If the discourses of the residents could be said to produce the refugee as a site of impurity and categorical disorder, then the discourses and practices of the refugees can be read as countering and "purifying" such a formulation. In the following section, I look at a formulation of this refugee discourse that addresses two hegemonic formations within which they are articulated— the universe of the residents and that of the humanitarian aid agencies.

The Purity of Displacement

Unlike the refugees who live in camps in the border zones, where they continue to be harassed by the militants as well as state troops, the refugees in Puttalam have led relatively stable lives. When I was conducting my research in 1993, almost three years into their exile, their lives seemed to have picked up familiar routines, marriages had taken place, babies had been born and festivals celebrated. Yet the refugees also continued to be gripped by great uncertainty and despair. A day did not go by without their wondering when they could return "home" while simultaneously recalling a romanticized past of plenty and "placeness."[25] This "unfaltering belief in the temporariness of exile" in collocation with a "resistance to putting down roots," notes Malkki (1995a), is central to the affirmation of a collective identity that is "based on the past and on the lost homeland" (1995a: 228, 230). Being a refugee, she points out, not only signals a tie with the homeland and the possibility of eventual return but enables the displaced to retain a separateness and an "antagonistic equality" between themselves and the original inhabitants of a place. Such a formulation disputes the common categorization of refugees as boundary crossers and thus polluters and helps to reframe displacement as a "state of purity" (230–31). In other words, by continuing to stress the "out-of-placeness" of their lives as well as themselves, the refugees attempt to preserve the purity of their refugee status. I will discuss below a particular construction of Muslim

25 There are some refugees, of course, who have managed to purchase houses, have married people from the Puttalam region, or have secured good jobs and who now assert that they would never go back to their former homes, but they are in the minority.

identity that not only retains the "purity" of displacement but attempts to assert both a separateness and a certain equality between the refugees and the residents. Such a constitution, I suggest, is centrally facilitated by the refugee woman, who is produced as a cipher for all that was (temporarily) lost as well as what must be preserved for the future; the purity of displacement has been imbricated in her moral purity.

As I pointed out above, the refugees' constant reiterations of exile are also linked to a valorization of "home." For example, comparisons are often made between the present landscape they inhabit and the one they left. While one is arid and stark and so blisteringly hot that the refugees cannot work in the field's past noon, the other was moist and fertile and forested. These identifications with "placeness" are further sharpened by the refugees' ongoing identification with the village from which they came. For example, not only are many of the refugees in Camp D from the same area, but their camp committee comprises the members of their administrative council "back home." While the humanitarian aid organizations seem to be unaware of such subtle continuities and have bureaucratized the refugees according to a prior rationality (e.g., alphabetization), the residents are aware of the differences and, like the refugees, call each camp by the name of the region it represents back home. These particular configurations of bodies that invoke the "homeland" thus produce yet another kind of mapping upon the land of exile.

While the refugees strive to mark their separateness from the residents, they simultaneously wish to assert their equality in terms of class and status. Such equations are predominantly articulated, once again, through narratives of "placeness"—at a more individualized level—framed by their present circumstances. For example, a refugee man's complaints about his rickety *cadjan* shelter or the miserly nature of a resident would be juxtaposed against his recollections of his own wealth and status, his two-storied, cemented, and tiled house that had to be abandoned, or the fact that his wife and daughters never went out to work. Those who had much of their wealth tied up in immovable property feel the despair of displacement the most keenly, for they have been reduced to paupers overnight. As one man noted wryly, "The only thing that belongs to me now is my wife."

Such shifts in property ownership and the inversion of patterns of income generation within the refugee camps, where many women go out to work while their husbands stay home, have made women's positioning within pre-existing

patriarchal power structures a fraught one. Not only has the incidence of domestic violence increased within the camps, but women's mobility has been drastically curtailed. Their every movement is now open to scrutiny and questioning under the guise that it is they who have to uphold the honour and cultural traditions of their family and community. As one young woman complained, "My husband insists on following me even when I go to the toilet."[26] Thus, what had become naturalized rituals of quotidian life within the home are now fraught with danger and uncertainty and subject to new forms of surveillance.[27] While such a policing of women's bodies is framed by a discourse of security and safety, it also provides an opportunity for their male kin to reassert their authority and masculinity within an unfamiliar space.

This patriarchal restraint of women via kin relationships is also folded into a broader matrix of containment via the all-male Mosque Committees as well as revivalist Islamic groups such as the Jamaat-i-Islaami and Thabliq Jamaat. The Mosque Committees, peopled by the more wealthy and powerful segments of the displaced populations, play a central role in the arbitration of family disputes and the upholding of religious norms and standards. The religious groups, on the other hand, exert a more subtle influence via their women's "wings" (auxiliaries), which run special Quaranic classes for the refugee women and try to teach them "the true Islamic way of life" (Zackariya and Ismail n.d.: 23). The embracing of this new way of life—of moral purity and modest deportment—is most clearly articulated through the increased adoption of the *hijab* or veil. Such reiterations of familiar patriarchal practices and new religious injunctions, I suggest, also reinscribe the space of displacement as "pure" and thus enable the reclamation of at least certain aspects of a lost "placeness" and "home" within the space of displacement.

Indeed, the different figurations of "home" within the space of displacement merit closer scrutiny if we are to better understand a particular material practice of the refugee women that I will discuss in the next section. If prior to displacement, the "home" could extend outward into the "world" as long as its contours retained the

26 The women are similarly chaperoned when they walk around the village environs to pick salad greens or collect firewood.

27 The majority of these women were subject to certain forms of *purdah* in that many of them were forbidden to work outside the home. However, "home" here was a fluid category that was nevertheless always bounded by some patriarchal authority and surveillance. Thus, many women acknowledged that though they were in *purdah*, they used to work in their husband's fields or those of male kin. Some of the poorer women also noted that they would work as wage laborers in fields owned by non-kin as long as their husbands could work either beside them or within hearing distance.

inscription of patriarchal (in the familial sense) authority (cf. Chatterjee 1989), now, post displacement, the material core of the "home" itself becomes fractured. Toilets, wells, and grinding stones that had previously been the central components of a middle-class home are now dispersed across the camps and in the homes of the residents; the participation in the practices of domestication and civility now requires a continuous traversal of the "world."

Re-territorialising Longing

How do women respond to these escalating tensions of displacement? Many of them not only display classic symptoms of trauma,[28] but also inhabit the margins of camp and village life; they do not participate in the administration of the camp or the mosques (they are not even allowed to enter the latter), and they travel outside the camp very infrequently (except for employment). As a result, they also barely register in the discourses of the aid agencies, who consistently lump them together with the children. As Malkki (1995a) has perceptively pointed out, the persistence of aid organizations across the globe to photographically document women with children perhaps stems from a notion that "women and children embody a special kind of powerlessness" (1995a: 10). However, while it might be strategically useful to highlight the universal humanism encapsulated in the nurturant Madonna and child (especially when attempting to procure public donations), it is another matter to reduce woman to child: that is, to infantilize her. This was a frequent practice among aid workers in the Puttalam region, who often spoke paternalistically about the refugee women's ignorance and "backwardness," their docility and helplessness, and their "annoying habit of constantly asking for things."

I would like to consider more carefully the negotiations of identity and "placeness" that frame the refugee women's interactions with the aid organizations that work among them. Why do these women consistently play into a universalized image of the victimized refugee woman? This is despite the fact that they are often the family breadwinners and take great pleasure in subverting many of the policies and projects instigated by various agencies because they perceive them to be ridiculous or unfair. For example, the sanitation policies adopted by aid organizations working in the camps are a great source of contention, especially among the refugee

28 I use this term rather reluctantly, being aware of its rather loose and indiscriminate usage in recent times. For useful problematizations of this term, see Farrell (1998) and Young (1995).

women—although most aid workers do not realize this and, if they find out about it, casually dismiss it as a sign of ignorance and incivility.

In brief, it is a cardinal rule among relief agencies that potable water sources must be safeguarded from groundwater contamination. As a result, the toilets are usually built at one end of the camp and the wells and taps at the other. Such a plan of construction, however, is met with unanimous disapproval by the refugee women for several reasons. At a general level, it is a constant reminder of the fractured nature of their homes that is particularized with the provision of specific reasons that illuminate the congealed value of a basic amenity that we so often take for granted in middle-class homes (Rybczynski 1986). The women point to the inconvenience of having to traverse the entire length of the camp each time they need to use the toilet—this scurrying back and forth between well and toilet being especially trying in "emergency" situations. Such travel, considered to be particularly hazardous at night, requires them to awaken a male family member to accompany them. However, many women noted that what was most degrading was the very public nature of their ablutionary practices. As one woman commented, to the embarrassed merriment of her female companions, "Now every time we go to the other side of the camp with a jug of water in our hands, everyone in the camp knows what we are going to do!" However, instead of confronting the aid agencies with their grievances, the women have devised their own solution. They use the scrubland near the wells and leave all that "backing and forth-ing to younger women who like to display themselves."[29]

It is interesting that the majority of the women's concerns regarding the displacement of what were previously central components of private residences were articulated through several feminized categories associated with "home" and "placeness" that I discussed above: moral purity, privacy, and dignity. However, while a globally accepted discourse of sanitation may have led to the further disruption of these refugee women's familiar conceptions of "home" (i.e., the separation of wells and toilets), I suggest that they also actively participated in practices that sought to refigure certain aspects of "home," as best as they could. It was the exigencies of such a desire (among many others) that required them to maintain and exploit the humanistic and universalized image of the refugee woman as helpless and needy.

29 Ironically, this censure of visibility and the assumption of the pleasure it engenders draw upon hegemonic patriarchal notions that also fuel the criticisms that are hurled at the refugee women as a collectivity by the residents. I thank Cara Ann Mould for raising this question with me.

A common practice among the refugee women in the various camps in Village N is to badger all representatives of aid organizations that visit their camps to donate kitchen utensils, which range from pots, pans, and pails to grinding stones and mortars. Most aid workers (though there have been some exceptions) ignore such requests on the premise that their priority is to provide the refugees with essential goods and services, such as medicines, sanitation, potable water, housing materials, and food. However, the resort to such artificial divisions between essential and luxury commodities and services, in a situation of such scarcity, is not useful here, as what we could even define as luxuries is a moot point in such a context. Rather, I find Arjun Appadurai's (1986) suggestion that we should think of luxury goods as "*incarnated signs* whose principal use is *rhetorical* and *social*" (1986:38, italics in original) useful here because it enables us to move beyond a merely functionalist conception of domesticity, which posits that such goods are essential domestic utensils for women who perceive their primary role to be domestic providers and nurturers. While such an argument is perfectly tenable, I suggest that the refugee women's requests can be read in more complex ways that enable a fleshing out both of the "hypermateriality" of these commodities and of certain sentiments that extend beyond the commodity.[30]

Most refugee women identified their kitchen utensils as the items they missed the most in their present environment—their narratives of displacement invariably involved their complaint that they had been unable to bring their kitchen utensils because they were too bulky and cumbersome.[31] The women attributed the loss of these utensils as contributing to the more prolonged drudgery of their workload in the camps. They also pensively described particular utensils left behind or broken *en route* that had been part of their dowries. These items, which they had carefully used over the years, were for them, material symbols of a marriage that had endured. Such utensils, exchanged at marriage, are thus produced as important markers—along with the scale and quality of dwellings (see above)—of the wealth and status of the refugees (McGilvray 1989: 213).

Finally, I want to revisit the multiply layered constructions of "home" that I have been setting out in this chapter to point out yet another figuration of it that has been introduced into my discussion. The domestic utensils under discussion here invoke a particular space within the "home"—the kitchen—which thus gets produced, in

30 I am grateful to Ritty Lukose for suggesting this term to me.

31 See Jeganathan (1998) for an evocative description and analysis of the commodity form in the moment prior to the inhabitants' final flight from their homes during an ethnic riot.

this context, as the ultimate core of the "home." In the relatively public space of the refugee camp, the kitchen (and sleeping quarters) become the only spaces that the refugee woman can claim to control and within which she can retain some privacy. The hypermateriality of these commodities in a situation of hyperscarcity, as it were, can thus be read as reflective of the women's desire not only to recreate a semblance of a familiar domestic world that has been disrupted and to reiterate an understanding of "home" that has been dis-placed—across regions and even across the refugee camp—but to assert the identity tied to that space (the home) and place (the homeland). In this sense then, kitchen utensils become repositories of "congealed longing," to use Judith Williamson's (1986) reformulation of Marx's articulation of commodities as sites of "congealed labor"; they are the "final form of an active wish" (1986:12).[32] These women's requests from aid agencies, then, are not only their way of asserting the "purity" of displacement but an attempt to reterritorialize their longing and identity in the space of displacement.

Conclusion

This chapter has raised several questions about how we can conceptualize the construction of identity and space/place in the context of internal displacement. By focusing on the rhetoric and practices of residents, aid workers, and refugees, I have tried to illuminate how representations of territory and identity are produced within structures of power, how they are gendered, classed, and also universalized while they are simultaneously reiterated and contested. Such a trajectory of analysis has been especially enabled through the theorization of "purity" and "home," loss and longing.

As I have argued in this chapter, the process of "purification" in the context of displacement is particularly gendered. The refugee woman is produced as a cipher for all that has been (temporarily) lost as well as what must be preserved for the future; her community's purity of displacement is imbricated in her moral purity. The mobilization of "loss" within such a context thus also becomes vital. In his impassioned call for a recognition of the crucial distinction between loss (which produces historical trauma) and absence (which produces structural trauma), Dominick LaCapra (1999) notes that "the historical past is the scene of losses

32 I find that Susan Stewart's (1993) extremely nuanced and complicated discussion of the multiple meanings of longing does not, however, capture the kind of longing and nostalgia that I have tried to set out here.

that may be narrated as well as of specific possibilities that may conceivably be reactivated, reconfigured, and transformed in the present or future" (1999: 699–700). It is such narrations and possibilities that I have sought to articulate here while also marking those practices that seek to reconfigure and transform the present as well as the future of lived reality within the context of displacement.[33]

Such lived reality, both in the present and as future projections, I also argued, is framed by various articulations of "home"—as lost possibilities and nostalgic memories, lack of security, absent belongings, mourned relationships, and quotidian traumas. Thus, the fracturing of the material core of the "home" through the disparate dispersal of toilets, wells, and grinding stones across the refugee camp, I noted, produced a concomitant longing for other material markers of that very in-placeness. Through this reiteration of placeness (i.e., "home"), which is frequently maternalized, naturalized, and reified, was also reaffirmed a certain sense of "purity" and moral reordering.

Such a reading of narratives and practices seeks to both problematize and understand the complicated gendered and classed articulation of "purity" and "loss" post displacement. In fact, LaCapra's (1999) notion of "empathic unsettlement" might best capture my analytical trajectory here to avoid "facile uplift, harmonization, or closure" (1999:723). As Gupta and Ferguson (1992) have rightly pointed out, "the idea that space is made meaningful" is a familiar one to anthropologists; the more urgent task is to "politicize this uncontestable observation" (1992: 11).

Hopefully, this chapter is a step in that direction.

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33 It would also be very interesting to consider how mourning and melancholia are mapped onto loss in such a context (see LaCapra 1999: 713–16). Spatial limitations, however, foreclose such an extension of the spatial limitations, however, foreclose such an extension of the argument in this chapter.

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CHAPTER TEN

‘Disappearance’ and ‘Displacement’ in Sri Lanka

Malathi de Alwis

Upon mountain ranges, across scorching plains
Amidst twining lianas, in gurgling streams
Along highways and byways
In all my comings and goings
I trace your beloved face
Always
Adapted from a mother’s lament,
May 1992

Introduction

This article seeks to explore a particular unfolding of the category ‘displacement’ which underwrites yet also troubles the more familiar notions of displacement, that is, ‘bodies out of place’, dispersed, and ‘misplaced’, which are often used by authors published in journals. The displaced bodies of which I write here are doubly fraught as their displacement occurs in a context, i.e., ‘disappearance’, where their erasure is often the ultimate goal. Indeed, ‘disappearance’ is one of the most insidious forms of violence as it seeks to obliterate the body and forestalls closure.[1] I shall place this word within quotation marks, throughout this article, in order to highlight that it is a site of political contestation, to call attention to the inadequacy of the term given the violent circumstances within which it has taken place, and to refuse the project of censoring memory entailed in the insidious practice of making unavailable the violated body as evidence. The lack of an identifiable body of evidence, as it were, not only confounds the investigations of those who seek the

1 Forced ‘disappearance’ may include abduction, torture, secret imprisonment and murder; it is considered ‘the most negative of human rights violations’ in the statutes of the United Nations (Schirmer 1989: 5). ‘Forced disappearance’ became the primary tool of repression of the government of Guatemala, beginning in 1966, Chile beginning in late 1973, and Argentina, after March 1976 (Amnesty International, cited in Schirmer 1989: 5). Marysa Navarro, who notes that this form of social control was also used (in a limited form) by the Brazilian government, nevertheless stresses that it is the Argentinean military that perfected it as a weapon; they ‘widened its scope, and in fact, transformed it into a policy’ (1989: 247).

'disappeared', and thwarts the assigning of accountability but also makes 'chronic mourners' of those left behind (Schirmer 1989: 25).

In this article, I wish to reflect on how such chronic mourners 'reinhabit the world' in the face of continuously deferring loss (Das 2000: 223), and what might be its political outcome(s). This re-inhabiting, I wish to suggest, is a constant tracing of traces given the ambiguous nature of the disappeared status of absence, and thus presence. This may involve, as in the mother's lament I quote above, the simultaneous dis-placement and re-placement of the 'disappeared' within familiar landscapes. Most poignantly, the 'disappeared' is re-presented as 'face', recalling Derrida's evocative commentary on Levinas' formulation of desire, sight, sound, and the face of the other: 'Violence, then, would be the solitude of a mute glance, of a face without speech, the *abstraction* of seeing' (emphasis author's, Derrida 1978a: 90).

I am also much indebted in my exploration of 'disappearance', 'displacement' and 'representation', to Derrida's theorization of the trace — with its multiple implications of mark, wake, track, spoor, footprint, imprint — as an undecidable that is neither fully present nor fully absent. Nonetheless, I remain steeped in a nostalgia for lost presence (i.e., bodies that matter), which is decidedly un-Derridian (Spivak 1974: xvi).[2] Indeed, it seems unavoidable not to valorize presence in contexts of 'disappearance', of fraught absence: Is s/he dead or alive? What proof is deemed adequate to confirm death when nobody is available as evidence? Does one mourn permanent absence of presence or a temporary one which nevertheless carries with it its own anxieties and fears for any moment that absent presence could be made permanent? The terror that one's own feverish search for the 'disappeared', one's own insistent enquiries regarding perpetrators and witnesses, could lead to the termination of his/her existence. A simultaneous horror that one's investigations may be too tardy, that that one missed opportunity to pursue the abductors' jeep, to enlist the beneficence of an influential politician, to track down that elusive witness, to follow up yet another dubious lead, could mean the difference between life and death.

How long does one wait expecting return? One, five, ten, fifteen years? Does it ever end, the waiting?

2 It is also important to keep in mind that Derrida evokes the trace in a very different context: that of writing (see especially Derrida 1974: Part I, Chapter 2).

Sri Lankans have become very adept at waiting. One could visit almost any district on the island today and hear tales of a father, a sister, a teacher, a friend, the postman, the fishmonger .. . who went to the store, got on a train, headed to school, was last seen walking on the beach .. and never returned home, *athurudahan vuna* (Sinhala), *kanamal podathu* (Tamil), *disappeared* ... during an anti-Tamil riot, a militant attack, a youth uprising, an army cordon and search operation, or the tsunami. There are still several thousand people, many of them children, who remain unaccounted for after the tsunami. Another estimated 25,000, predominantly young Tamil men, have been 'disappeared' from the North and East of the island, which has witnessed 30 years of civil war between the Sri Lankan armed forces and militant Tamil groups, now primarily the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam).

However, the dubious honour of recording the highest number of 'disappearances' within the briefest span of years goes to the Southern regions of the island where during the years 1987–1990 around 35,000 predominantly Sinhala youth and men went missing.[3] While the militant Sinhala youth group seeking to wrest power from the state, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), was responsible for some of these 'disappearances', the state mobilized this form of terror and violence on a much more coordinated and extensive scale. "Bodies rotting on beaches, smouldering in grotesque heaps by the roadsides and floating down rivers were a daily sight during the height of state repression from 1988–1990" (de Alwis 1998a: 185).[4] Many of us had stopped eating fish.

How do people continue to have a 'life after atrocity' (Langer 1997: 63)? How do they cope with waking up day after day to ambiguous absence and lacerating loss ... another day rife with memories, of forgetting, of waiting? There exists today an extensive literature on many variations on this theme of abject life:[5] survivor

3 This is an estimate that most local and international human rights organizations have settled on. Journalistic accounts of that period, such as Chandraprema (1991: 312) and Gunaratne (1990: 269), list the number as 40,000. The more accepted figure, however, especially among families of the 'disappeared', is 60,000. This is the figure I have also used in my previous work (de Alwis 1998a, 1998b, 2000 etc.).

4 Of the 7,761 cases that were heard by the Commission of Inquiry into Involuntary Removal or Disappearance of Persons in the Western, Southern and Sabaragamuwa Provinces, the bodies of the victims were found only in 1,513 (19.4 per cent) of the cases. Others had disappeared 'without a trace' and the Commission was quick to point out that in such a context the word a subject, exactly as a cadaver is both an object and souvenir of a subject', nevertheless fails to capture the complexity of 'presence' that is embedded in such 'souvenirs', such as a person's scent or sweat stains (quoted in Mavor 1997: 111).

5 I am using abjection here pace Butler to designate "a degraded or cast out status within the terms of sociality" (Butler 1993: 3, fn. 2).

guilt, psychic numbing (Lifton 1967), *testimonio* (Menchu 1984, Douglass 2003), witnessing (Agamben 1999), a "descent into the everyday" (Das 2000), melancholia (Jeganathan 2005, 2009), but these have primarily focused on how survivors live with death —a permanent loss, an irrevocable absence.

Dominick La Capra, who has made an important distinction between loss (involving particular events and thus specific and historical) and absence (transhistorical, abstract, evacuated, disembodied), has noted that in post- traumatic situations, where such distinctions are conflated, where loss is converted into absence, one 'faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted' (1999: 698). This very conflation, he further notes, 'attests to the way one remains possessed or haunted by the past, whose ghosts and shrouds resist distinctions' (1999: 699). Though La Capra quite rightly seeks to forestall our all too easy descent into such a maelstrom, I, on the contrary, wish to pause a while at this moment of conjuncture between loss and absence; to explore its texture and tone, and to understand the affectual burdens of such a haunting. Indeed, I would argue that we cannot adequately comprehend political outcomes of such 'life after atrocity' if we do not first address and interrogate these moments and spaces of conflation.

Could the uncertainty and anxiety, often even a glimmer of hope, that is produced by 'disappearance', and its concomitant evocation of the temporariness of loss and revocability of absence, structure the re-inhabiting of worlds differently? Does it keep the spirit of resistance alive with the very non-presence of bodies providing an impetus for protests and rebellion (see Schirmer 1989: 5; de Alwis 1998b: 187)? How do such tracings unfold? Does tracing absent presence in the life of objects, albeit abject objects, provide a more meaningful framework for that reinhabiting? A space for a politics?

In the course of extrapolating on the idea of articulation, Derrida remarks that the trace "does not lend itself be summed up in the simplicity of a present" (1974: 66). What he seeks to argue here is that in the same way that an absence defines a presence and a signified is always a signifier in another system (thus meaning is always deferred, dispersed and delayed), the present can be known as the present only through the evidence of a past that once was a present: "Since past

has always signified present-past, the absolute past that is retained in the trace no longer rigorously merits the name "past'" (1974: 66). The temporalities of lived experience, in the wake of 'disappearance', are similarly complex and exemplified in the comment of a staff member of the Asian Human Rights Commission which documented stories of the families of the 'disappeared', in 2003:

> [T]he families' emotional retelling of the disappearance of a spouse or child gave the impression that their loved one had disappeared 15 days earlier rather than 15 years earlier. Their pain had not subsided and will probably never do so. This impression of a tragedy that has freshly taken place is reinforced by the families' recollections of dates, times, places, suspected perpetrators and other details of their loved one's disappearance. The future of that entire family was affected too at that fateful moment. . . . Thus, those responsible for the disappearances painfully touched the past, present and future of these families (Van Voorhis 2004: 128).

Indeed, the mother's lament too (see above), while evoking her endless tracings and re-tracings through both natural and man-made scapes in her quest for her 'disappeared', simultaneously articulates a subtle layering of temporalities through the trace of the 'disappeared'—his face—which appears to her wherever she goes, at whatever she looks. It is as if this very absent presence/present absence of the 'disappeared' is what holds death in check; he is everywhere, always.

This play of past–present, presence–absence in the traces of the 'disappeared' is also discernible in their families' recounting of nightly hauntings: the 'disappeared's' familiar footfalls pacing through the house, the feel of his fingers 'running ants' through an ailing mother's hair (Menike, personal communication, May 1993), an instantly recognizable voice calling out to his mother to make his favourite curry 'almost as if he were in the next room' (Asilin, personal communication, June 1992), the creak of the well's pulley during the disappeared's favourite bathing time. I have also written previously of more complicated, 'umbilical' traces that are re-iterated through mothers, such as Yasawathi, insisting that: 'I gave birth to that boy. Surely, won't *I* sense it if he dies?' (de Alwis 1998a: 187); and Seela interpreting her frequent blackouts as moments in which she was communing with her 'disappeared' son, wherever he was incarcerated (de Alwis 2000: 203). However, when the trail of the 'disappeared' would grow cold and weeks and months

of absence extend to years, it was in tracing traces in specific objects, mementos, that families of the 'disappeared' seemed to acquire greater solace.[6]

Of all mementos, the photograph still remains the quintessential abject object for it takes its shape and poignancy from death and loss and absence (Mavor 1995: 5).[7] Its unique ability to simultaneously encompass both presence and absence — by signifying absence but simultaneously keeping absence at bay by producing a simulacrum of presence — was particularly palpable when I would visit the homes of members of the (southern) Mothers' Front —a large grassroots women's movement which was protesting the 'disappearances' of their kin during the JVP youth uprising—in the early 1990s.[8] No conversation would be complete without the invocation of the absent presence of the 'disappeared', an almost imperceptible tilting of the head or a casting up of the eyes towards a photograph of the 'disappeared', which would be given pride of place upon the hallway wall or upon the single glass cabinet, the repository of prized crockery and knick-knacks. The photograph(s), often garlanded with fresh or plastic flowers and 'brought alive' in the flickering glow of an oil lamp lit every evening, and joss sticks wafting smoke and ash, were accorded reverence equivalent to a religious icon that would be similarly propitiated within the domestic space.[9, 10]

Similarly, the clothes (and importantly, used towels) left behind by the 'disappeared' and to a lesser extent other memento of their life, such as school books, sports

6 For a discussion of other forms of coping strategies, see Argenti-Pillen (2003); de Alwis (1998a, 1998b); Galappatti (2004); Perera (2001); Samarasinghe (1999).

7 In this regard, Metz's (1990) comment that a "snapshot ... is an instantaneous *abduction* of the object out of the world into another world, into another kind of time' is chillingly ironic" (1990: 158, emphasis mine).

8 I am appending a locational qualifier here in order to differentiate this group from a similarly named group that was formed in the north and east of the island, ten years previously, to protest the 'disappearance' of Tamil youth by the Sri Lankan armed forces.

9 There were many tragic instances where a family had lost more than one member to violence: a father 'disappeared' while seeking his abducted son, daughters raped and sons taken in lieu of the father who is later murdered as well, three sons abducted on the same day from different locations, one son killed while fighting the LTTE in the North and the other 'disappeared', a father who died of a 'broken heart' a week after his son was abducted.

10 One of the interns who documented the stories of the families of the 'disappeared' for the Asian Human Rights Commission recalls how once when she asked to see a photograph of the 'disappeared', 'one mother who had lost her son went to the kitchen and brought a towel, with which she carefully cleaned, then polished her son's photo on the table before us. To me, she looked as if she was going to dress her son in his best clothes, tie his shoelaces and comb his hair. "She treated the photograph as if it were her son alive" (Jeong-Ho 2004: 126). Many mothers, as well as children, sought to perpetuate this notion that their 'disappeared' was still alive and his return was imminent by keeping his share of each meal they partook, imagining he was incarcerated in a 'dark, unknown place' or living in another town or city, or gone abroad. Also see discussion in previous section.

trophies, certificates, letters etc., were preserved and treasured items which were lovingly brought out and caressed and commented upon at great length, during such visits. Frequently, the very name of the young man or boy either written in his own hand or in that of another would bring tears to his parents' and siblings' eyes as their fingers gently re-traced the curvilinear, Sinhala script that proclaimed an entity, an identity, now untraceable.

However, for many families, seeing an object that belonged to the 'disappeared', outside the context of his home or being, i.e., displaced, was the most shattering and painful, for it often signalled a decisive break in the tenuous thread of hope which kept alive that absent presence.[11] One mother recalled how she fainted when one young man who had escaped from an army camp brought her the amulet her son always wore around his neck. Newspapers carried similar stories of mothers and wives swooning over segments of sarongs and false teeth they insisted belonged to their sons and husbands, which were unearthed from a mass grave in Suriyakande, in 1993–1994. The parents of Hemantha Chandrasiri who went to a commemoration of murdered law students to meet someone they thought could intercede on behalf of their 'disappeared' son, collapsed when they saw their son's photograph included among those being commemorated (ALRC *et al.* 2004: 13). Most poignant however is the daily torment of 19-year-old Lichchowi Nishantha Weerasinghe's 72-year-old mother, who frequently encounters a man wearing the shoes she had gifted her son and which he was wearing the day he was abducted. She has opted not to report this man, fearful that other members of her family will be harmed (*ibid*: 108).

While such mementoes, and in particular, photographs of the 'disappeared', play almost a sacral role in the everyday life of those who mourn their absence, their function outside the space of the domestic was equally crucial, during a particular moment in Sri Lankan history. Following the example of the Madres of Plaza del Mayo in Argentina, the members of the Mothers' Front also riveted a nation by marching with photographs and other mementos of their 'disappeared' along the

11 This sense of hope is movingly articulated in Dorfman's poem of that very name which describes the joy of a mother and father to hear that five month after their son's 'disappearance', he was being tortured in Villa Grimaldi, one of the most notorious centers of incarceration in Chile which has now been made into a memorial of those cruel times. The poem ends thus: "What I am asking is how can it be that a father's joy, a mother's joy is knowing that they are still torturing their son?" (Dorfman 1988: 11).

streets of the capital city, Colombo, as well as in other regions of the island, between the years 1990 and 1993.[12]

In a context where the state was denying that its armed forces and para-militaries were abducting young men and where local police stations were refusing to record entries regarding abductions, in a context where the site of incarceration was unknown and bodies missing or so mutilated that they were unidentifiable, the often sole photograph of the 'disappeared' that was possessed by his family was the primary document that authenticated existence— in most visually visceral terms. This person was flesh and blood, he lived and breathed. There he stands sweating in his 'Sunday best' at the local studio, here he is accepting a gold medal for athletics, receiving his degree, getting married, holding his first child … he was there! It is this 'evidential force' of the photograph, simultaneously evoking 'the past and the real,' observed Barthes, that bears testimony to time rather than the object (Barthes 1981: 88, 82).[13] Indeed, from a phenomenological viewpoint, Barthes further notes, a photograph's "power of authentication exceeds the power of representation"; it is a veritable "certificate of presence" (Barthes 1981: 89, 87).

Likewise, an unforgettable moment at one of the public meetings of the Mothers' Front, in 1992, was when a mother seated in the audience, suddenly disrupted the speech of a politician by holding up a pair of blue shorts and loudly wailing and lamenting: 'They are my most precious possession because they still bear the scent of my child. I won't wash them until he returns and wants to wear them to school again .. . I have been waiting for two years.' The size of this piece of clothing stirred the hearts of all those present for it was very clear that this was a very young boy who had been 'disappeared' (see also *Yukthiya* July 5 1992).[14]

Particularly poignant was how this mother continued to articulate her relationship to this piece of clothing through her maternalized labour of care- taking, of doing laundry. Such a labour also invoked her care-taking of her son—of washing him, of washing his clothes; both tasks which could no longer be performed because of

12 For a detailed discussion of these public marches and meetings and the rhetoric and strategies of protest which were mobilized, see de Alwis (1998a, 1998b, 2000, 2002, 2004).

13 Sontag (1973), in her assertion that photographs 'furnish evidence', calls our attention to the fact that a photograph 'seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects' (1973: 5).

14 The majority of those who were 'disappeared' were aged between 20 and 45. However, there were about 30 schoolboys who were 'disappeared' from the Embilipitiya region (in Southwestern Sri Lanka) supposedly in a personal vendetta against the principal of their school.

his (physical) absence as well as his absent presence (his scent). Physical absence—which, in this instance, is not perceived as finite—makes the identificatory logic of maternity (imbricated in care-taking) particularly traumatic because the mother cannot 'take care' of her son's clothing, i.e., wash it, because it still carries the trace of his absent presence.[15]

Such chronicles of loss and absence reassert the presence of the disappeared and "*publicly* break the state's monopoly over memory" (Schirmer 1994: 202, emphasis mine, cf. Taussig 1992). The very bodylines of mass women in public spaces, which "highlight viscerally the very lack of bodies" (*ibid.*: 189), in the discourses of the state are thus doubly bodied through the traces and markers of other bodies with which they clothe their own bodies.[16] The 'disappeared' who are denied names or identities by the state, who are assumed to 'occupy no space', now 'have a place' (Franco 1985: 420), upon the bodies that birthed them and 'mothered' them.[17] This formulation recalls Walter Benjamin's insistence on the centrality of the photographic caption that "literalizes the relationships of life" (1972[1931]: 25): It is these women's bodies that caption the photographs they carry of their kin, as 'disappeared'. This implication of doubled authenticity, as it were, not only gives credibility to the 'realness' of the 'disappeared' but also asserts the "realness' of the women's relationship to their 'disappeared"; it echoes a previous placeness of the 'disappeared' *within* the bodies of these women—a crucial link in the structuring of sentiment and the engendering of a critique of a repressive state (see de Alwis 2000).

It is such echoes that also produce a *punctum*, that wounding or piercing that Roland Barthes describes so eloquently as being effected by certain photographs (1981: 26–27).[18] An additional gift, "the grace of the *punctum*", Barthes (1981: 45)

15 Boltanski, who has noted the shared heritage of clothing and photographs as "simultaneously presence and absence .. . both an object and a souvenir of a subject, exactly as a cadaver is both an object and souvenir of a subject", nevertheless fails to capture the complexity of 'presence' that is embedded in such 'souvenirs', such as a person's scent or sweat stains (quoted in Mavor 1997: 111).

16 One father of a 'disappeared' who participated in a march also attended by the Mothers' Front, chose to make this statement in a slightly different fashion by wearing a blood-spattered T-shirt which he announced bore evidence of the great fight he had put up in an attempt to stop those who had abducted his teenaged son, two and a half years previously (photograph and caption published in The Island, 31 December 1992, p. 3 and on the front page of its sister paper Divaina on the same day).

17 Schirmer (1994) goes to the extent of suggesting that the photographs hanging from the necks of the Madres in Argentina echo the dog tags worn by soldiers and "demonstrate the nonhumanity of war (appearing as replaceable parts, as luggage)"; these women thus use the "public grammar of war" only to counter it through "intense bodily metaphors" that they wear on their bodies (1994: 189).

18 Interestingly, Derrida playing on the German/English word *Spur*—trace, wake, indication, mark—notes that it is a word "which perforates even as it parries" (Derrida 1978b: 41).

further notes, is also that "additional vision", the "power of expansion" that enables us to see beyond the photograph through "*what is nonetheless already there*" in the photograph (1981: 55–59, emphasis in original).[19] This 'subtle *beyond*' of the *punctum* (1981: 59, emphasis in original), is exemplified in the lament of 70-year old Sumanawathi: '*Aney*, it is not I who should be carrying this picture [of her son]. It is my son who should be carrying pictures … *Aiyo*, he should be carrying *my* picture, at *my* funeral.'[20] A similar poignancy and untimeliness of loss was evoked by the wedding photographs that several women carried around their necks; frequently the only photographic record they possessed of their recently-betrothed 'disappeared'.

Photographs also play a central role at the Wall of Tears, part of the Monument for the Disappeared, in Seeduwa (North-Western Sri Lanka), which commemorates those who were 'disappeared' from the Western region of the island. Built by activists from the Seeduwa area, with financial support from the May 18 Memorial Foundation in Gwangju, South Korea and the Asian Human Rights Commission in Hong Kong, the monument is located at a busy intersection in Seeduwa, on land donated by the Catholic church which abuts it.[21] Designed by well-known artist Chandragupta Thenuwara, who was commissioned by the activists, the monument power- fully captures both the violence and ambiguity of 'disappearance' with a life size, concrete cut out of a human figure sundered in two through which one encounters the Wall of Tears set behind it bearing a patterned layout of uniform, square tiles each containing a photographic superimposition of a 'disappeared's' face.[22]

Ironically, a much larger and more sophisticated national monument to the 'disappeared' entitled the Shrine of the Innocents, designed by another well-known artist, Jagath Weerasinghe, and located *enroute* to the new Parliament in Kotte was erected by the Peoples' Alliance government— which supported the (southern)

19 Benjamin (1972) refers to a similar potency in photographs when he notes, "the spectator feels an irresistible compulsion to look for the tiny spark of chance, of the here and now, with which reality has, as it were, seared the character in the picture; to find that imperceptible point at which, in the immediacy of that long-past moment, the future so persuasively inserts itself that, looking back, we may rediscover it" (1972[1931]: 7).

20 *Aney* and *aiyo* are common exclamations of despair somewhat akin to 'alas!'

21 It also marks the site where the blackened bodies of two trade union activists who had been 'disappeared' some days previously were found smouldering upon tyres.

22 This particular layout, according to the artist, was chosen in order to enable the inclusion of additional photos as more and more families seek to have their disappeared represented on the wall (personal communication, 8 December 2007).

Mothers' Front and routed the regime which perpetrated these 'disappearances', in 1994. This now lies in ruins while the smaller monument in Seeduwa is well maintained, much visited, and also linked with annual commemorative ceremonies on 27 October— declared as Disappearance Day to memorialize the day two key activists from the Seeduwa area were abducted—and World Human Rights Day on 10th December.

A comparison of the 'lives' of these two monuments raise interesting issues about their representational style, reception and ownership. The monument at Seeduwa endures because it is a much more organic memorial; it is part of the local landscape and was built with the active participation of people in that region who continue to congregate there on special commemorative occasions. Most importantly, however, it has incorporated photographs of the 'disappeared' which provide a tangible link not just for the families of the 'disappeared' represented on that wall, but for all visitors to the monument, unlike the national monument at Kotte which is much more abstract in its symbolism and sentiment.

Indeed, Barthes (1981) has written movingly of the 'umbilical' connection between a photograph, its referent and its viewer: "From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me ... light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photo- graphed" (1981: 80–81, also 5, see also Sontag 1973). Barthes' evocation of a shared skin also recalls another kind of skin—the child's clothing—that I referred to above. Thus, the trace of the 'disappeared', i.e., his image, his sent, his touch, takes hold of the be(holder); it becomes a tie that binds.[23] For Judith Butler (2004), grief too is a tie that binds. It is "the thrall in which our relations with others hold us" in ways that we may not be able to account for, and which challenges the notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control: "I am gripped and undone by these very relations" (2004: 23). Unlike La Capra (1999), who is concerned that allowing ourselves to be interminably caught up in the thrall of our grief is intellectually unproductive and psychically debilitating, Butler revels in this relational undoing and insists that to grieve is not to be resigned to inaction.[24] For it is in this undoing, this submitting to a transformation due to loss, that a space for politics unfolds.

23 Mavor (1997) captures well this 'evidence' of bodiliness in clothing and (to a lesser extent) in photographs when she notes: "For me, wearing the clothes of a loved one or a friend, in which their smells come forth, in which their body has worn the cloth smooth or through, is akin to carrying a photographic image with me ... I sense them skin to skin" (1997: 121).

24 La Capra's arguments stem from different political stakes which are equally laudatory but which I cannot go into in this article.

This undoing, for Butler (2004), is both psychical and physical: "[O]ne is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel" (2004: 24). Thus, at the same time as we struggle for autonomy over our bodies, we are also confronted by the fact that we carry the "enigmatic traces of others" (*ibid*: 46), that we are interdependent and physically vulnerable to each other. This unboundedness of flesh and fluids, this corporeal vulnerability, argues Butler (2004), must surely engender an imagining of another kind of political community that implicates us in "lives that are not our own" (2004: 28), and develops 'a point of identification with suffering itself' (*ibid*: 30).

It is clear that Butler's envisioned audience here is primarily those in the United States and First World who, having been made vulnerable through violence (e.g., 9/11), have resorted to war, to defining who is human and deciding whose deaths are grievable and who's not. Yet, there is nothing to preclude such a standpoint being adopted by any dominant group, be they American's *vis-a`-vis* Iraqi's and Afghans, or Sinhalese *vis-à-vis* Tamils and Muslims:

> To be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways. . . . [It] offers a chance to start to imagine a world in which that violence might be minimized, in which an inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for global political community (2004: xiii).

While Butler (2004) acknowledges the fact that she does not yet know how to theorize this interdependency, I find her resolve to rethink political coalitions, in light of this and previous feminist critiques, and her stress on requiring 'new modes of cultural translation', particularly productive (2004: 47).[25] What such translations would exactly entail Butler is unclear on but nevertheless sure that it would differ from "appreciating this or that position or asking for recognition in ways that assume that we are all fixed and frozen in our various locations and "subject positions" ' (*ibid*.).

25 Butler is thinking specifically of international political coalitions, while my primary concern, in the context of seeking a solution to the civil war in Sri Lanka, is to envision political coalitions which can link the three key ethnic groups—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—in the country 'disappearance' was only a euphemism for death caused by extra-judicial killings (Sessional Paper No.V, 1997: 27; see also de Alwis 1998b: 11, fn 1).

Such a formulation pushes me to re-think my previous arguments regarding political communities in Sri Lanka, in the wake of atrocities (de Alwis 1998a, 1998b, 1999, 2000, 2004). While criticizing the ethnically majoritarian Sinhala community for translating their perception of vulnerability to that of further discriminating and waging war against the Tamil minority, I, along with many other feminist peace activists in Sri Lanka, was willing to settle for Sinhala and Tamil women to be politically allied under the aegis of 'motherhood'—using such a subject position contingently of course. However, our conceptualization of such an alliance failed to adequately plumb the depths of this maternalized grief—rather than turning outwards, across communalized boundaries, to acknowledge a common experience of motherhood as well as of shared vulnerability and injury, this grief was turned inward and individualized and Sinhalized. It is clear then that the formation of alliances under the mark of grief, also requires the re-conceptualization of not only the 'political' but also injury and grief. Indeed, political communities of the sorrowing do not and cannot spring forth spontaneously and 'naturally'; they must be made. One could argue that this is too utopian a proposition but for those of us who have tried all else and failed it is such utopian re-conceptualizations and re-formulations, which sustain an optimism of the will.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Interrogating the 'political': Feminist peace activism in Sri Lanka

Malathi de Alwis

Today a hundred and fifty shot Yesterday seventy blasted
Even the poet becomes numerate…
The map erupts with gigantic bubbles of blood
Bursting and flooding the lacerated terrain

- *Jean Arasanayagam*

In their path-breaking volume, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) noted that the contemporary agitations of women, along with racial and sexual minorities and other marginal groups, led to a 'politicization of the social' which was more radical than any known in the past, for it dissolved the distinction between the private and public – 'not in terms of the encroachment on the private by a unified public space, but in terms of a proliferation of radically new and different political spaces' (1985: 181).

This radical refiguring of the 'political', and thus concomitantly the 'social', was further extrapolated in Judith Butler's (1992) suggestion, almost a decade later, that the grounds of politics, such as 'universality', 'equality' and 'the subject of rights' have been constructed through 'unmarked racial and gender exclusions and by a conflation of politics with public life that renders the private (i.e., reproduction, domains of "femininity") pre-political' (1992: fn1).

While such an argument regarding the 'constitutive outside' of politics is not a new one, *pace* Derrida, Butler seeks to make a crucial distinction between the constitution of a political field that 'produces *and naturalizes* that constitutive outside and a political field that produces and *renders contingent* the specific parameters of that political field' (*ibid*: fn1, author's emphasis). The latter formulation thus enables the

conceptualization of political struggles, which put the 'parameters of the political itself into question', an important concern for feminists given the gendering of the 'political' (*ibid*: fn1). Such a 'calling into question', it must be stressed, thus also retains that dimension of antagonism which is indebted to the work of Carl Schmitt (see also Mouffe 1999).

In this post-politically correct, counter-globalization era of the '00s where one can claim to be 'political' merely because one wears *khadi* or sends money to the Maoists in Nepal, it seems apposite to return to interrogating the 'political' in a more rigorous fashion. Indeed, such an interrogation, simultaneous with a self-critique, seems imperative as Sri Lanka slides back into the maelstrom of civil war, in spite of over two decades of anti-war agitation in general and feminist peace activism in particular on the island.

The past three decades has been dominated by extraordinary unfolding of violence in Sri Lanka – an anti-Tamil programme in 1983, a Sinhala youth (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)), anti-state uprising in the south from 1987 to 1990, and a protracted civil war in the North and East, fought between the Sri Lankan state and Tamil separatists – now primarily the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and its breakaway factions – that has limped from one failed ceasefire to another for over twenty-five years.

Women's lives today continue to be imbricated in the contours of war while they simultaneously bear the scars – both physical and psychical – from previous events and processes of violence. While war widows, now ubiquitous across the island, are grim reminders of the destructive capabilities of war, women soldiers and women/girl militants are equally troubling reminders of women's active participation in war. Nonetheless, it is also women, and particularly feminists, who have been at the vanguard of anti-war struggles, and collectively and publicly agitated for peace by calling for a political resolution of the ethnic conflict in the North and East and the cessation of state and JVP-led atrocities in the South.

Undoubtedly, one of the most significant political outcomes of the 1980s and 1990s in Sri Lanka has been the collective mobilization of maternalism as a counter to violence, both in the context of the civil war in the north and east and the JVP uprising in the south (see also de Alwis 1999). In 1984, the Mothers' Front was formed in Jaffna to protest the mass arrest of Tamil youth by the Sri Lankan state.

This organization was controlled by and consisted of Tamil women from all classes, and feminist Rajani Thiranagama, assassinated by the LTTE for her forthrightness and critical voice, documented how these women 'mobilised mass rallies, and picketed public officials demanding the removal of military occupation [by the Sri Lankan state]' (Hoole *et al.* 1990: 324). It was not only the spirit, observed Thiranagama, but also the enormous numbers that this group was able to mobilize which 'spoke loudly of the high point to which such mass organizations, especially of women [could] rise' (*ibid*.: 324). Although the members of the Mothers' Front had spontaneously mobilized their maternal identity in the face of state repression, they were also quick to criticize the blatant the manipulation of such an identity when Tamil militant groups put up posters inciting women to have more babies in order to further the cause of separatism (*Saturday Review* April 1985, cited in Jayawardena 1985: 17).

The Northern Mothers' Front also inspired Tamil women in the East to begin their own branch. In 1986, the Eastern Mothers' Front took to the streets with rice pounders to prevent a massacre of members of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization by the LTTE (Hensman 1992: 503). In 1987, one of its members, Annai Pupathi, fasted to death to protest the presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Forces. She was subsequently immortalized by the LTTE (it was common knowledge that the LTTE had forced her to keep at her fast) through a public memorial and a scholarship offered in her memory. It was finally the increasing hegemony of the LTTE and their suppression of all independent, democratic organizations that did not 'toe the line', that pushed the Mothers' Front in the North and East into political conformism and reduced its wide appeal and militancy. 'It became another Y.W.C.A.', notes Thiranagama, and its central structure, which was mainly made up of middle-class women, ended up confining its activities to works of charity (Hoole *et al* 1990: 324). Many members who refused to work under LTTE hegemony had to flee abroad or to Colombo.

In July 1990, a Mothers' Front of Sinhala women was formed in the south to protest the disappearance of their male kin during the JVP uprising from 1987 to 1990.[1]

1 Women also joined the Organization of Parents and Family Members of the Disappeared, which was formed on 20 May 1990. This group was closely aligned with Vasudeva Nanayakkara, opposition MP and member of the left- wing Nava Sama Samaja Pakshaya politburo. Members of this group often attended the Mothers' Front's rallies and *vice versa* though they pursued a much more radical agenda. While this group did not valorized (non- mobilize around 'motherhood', they nevertheless valorized (non-gendered) familial identities (de Alwis 1998b: 37).

These women's only demand was for 'a climate where we can raise our sons to manhood, have our husbands with us and lead normal women's lives' (*Island* 9 February 1991). Their mass rallies and *deva kannalawwas* (beseeching of the gods) had a tremendous impact on Sinhala society during the two years in which this organization was especially active (see de Alwis 1997, 2000, 2001). The seemingly unquestionable authenticity of these women's grief and espousal of 'traditional' family values provided the southern Mothers' Front with an important space for protest at a time when feminist and human rights activists who were critical of either state or JVP violence were being killed with impunity.

While many feminists in the South celebrated the successful campaign of the southern Mothers' Front and participated in their rallies, they were nevertheless split on how best to respond to such a movement, for several reasons: while the Front identified itself as the largest grassroots women's movement in the country (with an estimated membership of 25,000 women), it was common knowledge that it was founded, funded and coordinated by the main opposition party in the country – the Sri Lanka Freedom Party – whose politburo was predominantly middle class men. As members of autonomous women's groups, feminists felt very uncomfortable about working with a political party that not only did not espouse a particular feminist ideology, but in fact, was perceived to be using the Mothers' Front for their own political ends (de Alwis 1999). Feminists were also concerned about the limited agenda of the southern Mothers' Front, which precluded it from calling attention to similar issues faced by Tamil and Muslim women in the North and East of the island. Many feminists who had reservations about the Front's mobilization of 'motherhood' felt that they would have been more willing to compromise if it had been used as a space within which a mass movement of women from different ethnic groups could have united and launched a collective critique of the violence perpetrated by the state as well as militant groups (*ibid*).

What I found hopeful, however, was that despite the limited agenda, ethnic homogeneity and non-feminist standpoint of the Southern Mothers' Front, this movement had continuously put the 'political' into question (de Alwis, 2004). These women's insistence that they were 'merely' mothers seeking their children's return to the family fold and were thus not 'political' posed a conundrum for the Sri Lankan state and forced a re-fashioning of the state's own counter-rhetoric and practices (de Alwis 1997). Such contingent articulations of maternalized agonism – epitomized in an editorial: 'When mothers emerge as a political force it means that

our political institutions and society as a whole have reached a critical moment' – were particularly effective because it was Sinhala mothers and Sinhala families who were the 'victims' of state atrocities; these calls thus appealed to a certain Sinhala nationalism hegemonic within the country (de Alwis 2000).

Feminist peace activists in Sri Lanka have had to contend with this kind of insular, ethno-nationalist valorizing of Sinhala maternalism, on the one hand, and the vilification of any critique of militarism and ethnic chauvinism, and the advocacy of a political solution to the ethnic conflict as being pro-Tiger (as the LTTE are commonly referred to) and thus un-patriotic, on the other (see de Alwis 2002). As a matter of fact, a significant and painful split within the feminist movement occurred between those who condemned the anti-Tamil riots of 1983 and those who condoned them. Women for Peace, an autonomous, Colombo- based, primarily middle-class, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious group, founded in 1984 and of which I was a member, was frequently censured by Sinhala nationalists who labelled us 'Women for Pieces' – that is, those who seek to divide the country by advocating the devolution of state power as a solution to the ethnic conflict on the island.

Despite having to constantly negotiate the minefield of anti-patriotic accusations, Women for Peace's primary strength lay in its heterogeneity and the willingness of members to accommodate dissent and ideological differences among themselves; every plan of action was a negotiation. The organization's loss of direction and eventual disintegration, in the 1990s, I see as symptomatic of the gradual shift in feminist political practices more generally in Sri Lanka. I will try to extrapolate this shift while simultaneously interrogating the 'political' in the ensuing sections.

Many early feminist interventions against militarism and ethnic chauvinism, which were launched as long term, oppositional campaigns in the early 1980s have gradually become dispersed, diluted and fragmented today into projects and programmes focused on 'women's empowerment', 'gender sensitization', 'mainstreaming gender', 'violence against women', 'good governance', 'conflict resolution' and 'conflict transformation', documenting human rights abuses, campaigns to change legislation on domestic violence and increase women's political participation and, more recently, tsunami relief and rehabilitation.[2]

2 For an analysis of some of these interventions see Jayawardena (1995) and Jayawardena and de Alwis (2002).

Today, there exists no autonomous feminist peace movement in the country, and the voices of feminist peace activists are rarely heard nationally. This does not mean that feminists are not involved in anti-war activism but rather, that it is no longer the primary and sole focus of feminist organizations. And this, in a country that has been at war for over twenty-five years!

One of the central reasons for this lack of visibility and voice, I would argue, is the complexity of the political and social situation within which feminists in Sri Lanka live and work; they are simultaneously stretched in so many different directions resulting in a general exhaustion within the movement: it is the same pool of feminists who march on the streets calling for peace talks; who protest against rapes at checkpoints, the conscription of child soldiers and the proliferation of nuclear weapons in South Asia; who agitate for better legislation against domestic violence and the removal of punitive legislation against gays and lesbians; who campaign for women's political representation in the Parliament; and who, most recently, highlight the harassment of women tsunami survivors in refugee camps and lobby for more equitable gender representation in state-supported tsunami relief and rehabilitation processes and mechanisms. This has led to a decrease of energies and the dissipation and non-sustenance, over the long term, of many protest campaigns.

Another reason, I suggest, is the institutionalization and professionalization of feminism. With the flood of international humanitarian and development aid to Sri Lanka, one can now find employment as a full-time feminist. Obviously, this has lent a certain stability to feminists' lives, made their work more efficient and enabled them to concentrate fully on their activist work. One could also argue that the institutionalization of feminism supported by a continuous source of funding has enabled the sustainability of feminist organizations.[3]

However, my concern is that it can also produce new 'comfort zones' and sometimes the need to sustain such institutions becomes the primary concern of feminist activists at the cost of the activism that they may have originally sustained. This

3 The institutionalization and professionalization of feminism is an issue that has begun to be much debated among feminists, in different parts of the world (see, e.g. Lang 1997; Alvarez 2000; Menon 2004). My grateful thanks also to members of many women's organizations in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, who shared their disillusionment and frustration regarding this new "turn" with much wit and honesty, during the time I was research this topic in 1999-2000. I am indebted to Mahnaz Ispahani and the Ford Foundation, New York, for supporting this research study.

was sadly the case with Women for Peace, which in its last few years struggled to maintain its small office and staff, with the international funds it received, to the detriment of its anti-militarist and anti-chauvinist campaigns. In such a context then, the very appellation of 'activism' – actions produced within particular ideological framings and oppositional practices that place one 'at risk' – to such practices becomes moot. Nivedita Menon, who remarks on a similar trend in India in the 1990s where very few of the autonomous women's groups of the 1980s remain non-funded, puts it even more starkly: 'feminism need not be a political practice any longer, it can be a profession' (Menon 2004: 219–220).

The most obvious fall out of the professionalization of feminism is the now too well-known ilk of temporary, careerist, 'nine-to-five feminists'.[4] But as Menon warns us, the implications of professionalization are far deeper than the production and promotion of activists who have no clear feminist perspective: 'The compulsions of taking up and "successfully" completing specific projects has meant that that there is hardly any fresh thinking on what constitutes 'feminism". It is as if we know what "feminism" is, and only need to apply it unproblematically to specific instances' (*ibid*: 220).

Such a 'codification' of 'feminism' has also circumscribed our ability to conceptualize and participate in political struggles, which seek to question the very parameters of the political. This is particularly clear when one reflects on the strategies of protest that feminist peace activists, myself included, have mobilized in Sri Lanka, this past decade. I have sought to characterize this as a shift from strategies of 'refusal' to strategies of 'request'.[5] Strategies of refusal would include forms of non-cooperation which encompass the more risk-prone, vulnerable terrains of strikes, fasts, go-slows and other forms of civil disobedience, while strategies of request would include making demands through legal reforms, lobbying, signature campaigns, charters, or e-mail petitions and other forms of 'virtual resistance', to use a term coined by Arundhati Roy (cited in Chaudhuri 2007).[6] Such a formulation is underwritten by the distinction that Etienne Balibar (1994) draws between insurrectionary politics and constitutional politics. In other words, an insurrectionary or oppositional

4 This is very apt term was used to describe professional feminists by a 'women's movement veteran' in a personal communication to Nivedita Menon (Menon 2004: 242 fn31).

5 I am grateful to Pradeep Jeganathan for providing me with this useful short-hand.

6 The two extremes of these two axes of course are participating in armed struggle and joining government bureaucracy, of which feminists in Sri Lanka have done both.

political practice would be distinct from a democratic practice, which is reformist, regulatory or philanthropic, that is, indistinguishable from projects of governance.

This of course is not to deny the fact that there have been many instances in the political history of Sri Lanka where people who made requests to the state or militant groups for the restitution of their rights have been arrested, disappeared or killed. What I wish to re-iterate rather is that there is a crucial political distinction to be made here between making requests of or demands from the state and militants, which acquiesce to a pre-existing framing of the political and the defending of pre-constituted identities, to refusing to acknowledge the pre-given framings of the state or the militants; where in fact, the very parameters of the political are put into question and thus made contingent, where identities are constituted through process (Butler 1992: fn1; Mouffe 1999).

By increasingly mobilizing strategies of request, feminist peace activists in Sri Lanka have primarily shifted to appealing to and making requests and demands of the state. Not that I wish to posit that there is only one way to agitate for one's rights or that one should not grab any space or platform that one can find;[7] what I am vehemently opposed to is the presentation of one set of practices as the norm or best solution to the problem so that radical, socialist as well as liberal feminists start mobilizing the same strategies. This coalescing of strategies – signature campaigns, petitions, charters, etc., I suggest, is strongly influenced by a common funding source that supports most feminist organizations in Sri Lanka, be they radical, socialist or liberal – international donors, such as CIDA and HIVOS, who are seen as 'gender sensitive' funders (meaning their liberal agendas are less questioned).[8]

It is also worth considering how influential the processes adopted by the UN have been in circumscribing feminist practices this way. UN-sponsored World Conferences on Women (in conjunction with the UN Decade of Women from 1975

7 A rights-based approach of course has its own limits, which I will briefly address below; but for a complicated and nuanced critique of such as an approach see Brown (1995).

8 The limited social reformist agenda is exemplified in the catchwords that I listed above: 'good governance', 'mainstreaming gender', etc. Even the term 'civil society' thus takes on a particular value in such a context (see below for a brief discussion of this in terms of the work of Chatterjee (1997) and Menon (2004). Arundhati Roy extends this critique with a comment that even mass demonstrations are now funded: "Meetings against SEZs (are) sponsored by the biggest promoters of SEZs. Awards and grants for environmental activism and community (are) given by corporations responsible for devastating whole eco-systems" (quoted in Chaudhuri 2007).

to 1985) in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995) have propelled a great deal of local feminists' energies into disseminating information about these conferences and their outcomes, nationally, outcomes, and petitioning governments and holding them accountable to international declarations, charters, plans of action, etc., that are promulgated at these meetings. Here, I wish to distinguish between the political efficacy of internationalizing issues – for which the UN is undoubtedly a crucial and powerful platform – from what happens after that within the UN framework – the bureaucratization of initiatives and the frequent disjunctures that arise between international and national agendas.[9]

Not surprisingly, this kind of critique, albeit a self-critique, of feminist peace activism is rarely appreciated, as it is often perceived as a form of disloyalty and breaking of ranks, and especially in today's context, both nationally and globally, of knee-jerk NGO bashing – the discrediting of such organizations merely on the grounds of their being foreign-funded and thus presumed to be anti-national and pushing 'Western' agendas. However, my central concern is that we are losing our critical, or if one wishes, radical edge, in this shift to professionalization, to political initiatives that are driven by compulsions of funding.

One could also argue that my definition of the 'political', which is primarily formulated in oppositional and antagonistic terms, as taking risks, as seeking to put into question the very parameters of the political, is too narrow or too radical or too utopian. Yet, is it so? Constantly questioning what is political about our practices, consistently seeking to push those boundaries, seems particularly imperative in an era where the "field of emancipatory possibility", to use David Kennedy's (2002) apt phrase, is dominated by human rights discourses: "alternatives can now only be thought, perhaps unhelpfully, as negations of what human rights asserts – passion to its reason, local to its global, etc" (2002: 112).

Such a critique is particularly ironic given the battle 'won' by liberal feminists in the early 1990s to link women's rights with human rights. The paradoxical unfolding of rights discourses – the recognition of rights on the one hand and the infringement of freedoms on the other – has been a topic of debate among feminists for quite some time now (see, e.g. Petchesky 1984; Brown 1995). However, it is Indian

9 For an innovative argument regarding the production of "subalterns" within the UN system, see Spivak (2003).

feminists, such as Nivedita Menon and Nandita Haksar, who have come out most forcefully to argue that human rights discourses may have reached their limits at this historical juncture. Recourse to the law, while offering temporary and short-term redress, should not be considered a 'subversive site' notes Menon (2004), while Haksar foregrounds the contradictory relationship between law and feminist politics by positing that feminists' and human rights civil society' (*ibid*.: 217). Indeed, it is because we are primarily caught up with the 'common sense of civil society' (steeped in constitutionalism and marked by modernity), notes Menon, that we are unable to conceptualize or recognize emancipatory alternatives within political society whose democratic aspirations often violate institutional norms of liberal civil society (*ibid*.: 217).

This search for an alternative vision, or more precisely, new forms of political engagement in realms not previously considered, leads Menon to engage with the now well-known postcolonial distinction that Partha Chatterjee (1997, 2001, 2004) draws between 'civil society' and 'political society', which I will not rehearse here.[10] Suffice it to say, that when Menon speaks of the 'political' it is in reference to potentialities "to subvert, to destabilise, not just dominant values and structures, but ourselves" (2004: 217); it is a 'realm of struggles' to produce an alternative to the "common sense of civil society" (*ibid*.: 217). Indeed, it is because we are primarily caught up with the 'common sense of civil society' (steeped in constitutionalism and marked by modernity), notes Menon, that we are unable to conceptualize or recognize emancipatory alternatives within political society whose democratic aspirations often violate institutional norms of liberal civil society (*ibid*.: 217).

Such initiatives, Menon further argues, may not necessarily conform to our understanding of what is 'progressive' or 'emancipatory' – they could be struggles of squatters on government land seeking to claim residence rights or the decision of a village panchayat to kill a woman accused of adultery (*ibid*.: 218). However, what is important here is that:

> [A]ny project of radical democratic transformation would have to engage and collide with the ideas, beliefs and practices in *this* sphere Feminist politics then,

10 Partha Chatterjee returns to the old idea (i.e. of Hegel and Marx) of civil society as bourgeois society to nevertheless address its working out within a different form of modernity, that is, one encountered through colonialism. This civil society of citizens, shaped by the normative ideals of Western modernity is only a small, elite group, which assumes a 'pedagogical mission' of enlightenment towards the vast, excluded mass of the population which Chatterjee places within 'political society'.

> will have to surrender its reliance on the certainties offered by civil society, and acknowledge the uncertainties and unpredictability of attempts to wage a struggle in political society (Menon 2004: 218–9, author's emphasis).

This is a very provocative and radical rendering of the 'political' and opens up an entirely new terrain for discussion. However, I am concerned that this challenge posed for us by both Chatterjee and Menon is nevertheless dependent upon a sociological category – an entity called 'political society'. However, what are the political consequences of seeking the constitution of political subjectivities through political practices, not social groups? Does not such a formulation fall back on *a priori* notions of social identity and rule out contingent articulations? Is not Butler's call for a constant destabilizing and contesting of the 'political', as delineated at the beginning of this article, a more radical alternative? Is this not where the emancipatory potential of any society lies?

Yet, why have we in Sri Lanka been unable to sustain such a destabilizing and contesting of the 'political'? Have we, as political activists, been unable to address a far deeper malaise which is afflicting our compatriots? A malaise akin to that of 'psychic numbing' (Lifton 1967), after several decades of living with unrelenting violence and atrocity upon this 'lacerated terrain', to borrow a phrase from the poet Jean Arasanayagam quoted above? Perhaps the need of the hour rather is to interrogate the 'political' *via* more affectual categories, such as grief, injury and suffering (de Alwis (2008).

Judith Butler's more recent writings seek to push us in such a direction through her formulation that grief is a tie that binds. It is "the thrall in which our relations with others hold us" in ways that we may not be able to account, it challenges the notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control: "I am gripped and undone by these very relations" (Butler, 2004: 23). Discounting more commonsensical arguments that it is intellectually unproductive and psychically debilitating to be interminably caught up in the thrall of our grief, Butler revels instead in this relational undoing and insists that to grieve is not to be resigned to inaction. For it is in this undoing, this submitting to a transformation due to loss, that a space for politics unfolds.

This undoing, for Butler, is both psychical and physical: "[O]ne is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel" (2004: 24). Thus, at the same time as we struggle for

autonomy over our bodies, we are also confronted by the fact that we carry the "enigmatic traces of others" (*ibid*.: 46), that we are interdependent and physically vulnerable to each other. This unboundedness of flesh and fluids, this corporeal vulnerability, argues Butler, must surely engender an imagining of another kind of political community that implicates us in "lives that are not our own" (*ibid*.: 28), and develops "a point of identification with suffering itself" (*ibid*: 30).

It is clear that Butler's envisioned audience here is primarily those in the United States and First World who, having been made vulnerable through extraordinary acts of violence, such as 9/11, have resorted to war, to defining who is human and deciding whose deaths are grieveable and whose not. But there is nothing to preclude such a standpoint being adopted by any dominant group, be they Americans *vis-à-vis* Iraqis and Afghans or Sinhalese *vis-a `-vis* Tamils and Muslims:

> To be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways ..... [It] offers a chance to start to imagine a world in which that violence might be minimized, in which an inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for global political community (Butler, 2004: xiii).

While Butler acknowledges the fact that she does not yet know how to theorize this interdependency, I find her resolve to rethink international political coalitions, in light of this and previous feminist critiques, and her stress on requiring 'new modes of cultural translation', particularly productive (*ibid*: 47). What such translations would exactly entail Butler is unclear on but nevertheless sure that it would differ from 'appreciating this or that position or asking for recognition in ways that assume that we are all fixed and frozen in our various locations and "subject positions"' (*ibid*: 47).

Such a formulation pushes me to rethink my previous arguments regarding political communities in Sri Lanka, in the wake of atrocity, which I have set out above. While criticizing the ethnically majoritarian Sinhala community for translating their perception of vulnerability to that of further discriminating and waging war against the Tamil minority, I, along with many other feminist peace activists were willing to settle for Sinhala and Tamil women to be politically allied under the aegis of 'motherhood' – using such a subject position contingently of course. However,

our conceptualization of such an alliance failed to adequately plumb the depths of this maternalized grief – rather than turning outwards, across communalized boundaries, to acknowledge a common experience of motherhood as well as of shared vulnerability and injury, this grief was turned inward and individualized and Sinhalized. It is clear then that the formation of alliances under the mark of grief also requires the re-conceptualization of not only the 'political' but also injury and grief. Indeed, political communities of the sorrowing do not and cannot spring forth spontaneously and 'naturally'; they must be made. One could argue that this is too utopian a proposition, but for those of us who have tried all else and failed it is such utopian re-conceptualizations and re-formulations which sustain an optimism of the will.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

The Tsunami's wake: Mourning and masculinity in Eastern Sri Lanka

Malathi de Alwis

Introduction

On December 26, 2004, a tsunami of unprecedented proportions decimated 2/3^{rds} of Sri Lanka's coastline, densely populated with primarily lower-income housing as well as many hotels and guesthouses located along the Southern and Eastern coast. It left 33,000 dead, 4,000 missing and 21,000 injured. It reduced 98,000 houses to rubble and damaged even more, leaving over a million people displaced.

The Muslim-dominated, densely populated coastal areas of the Eastern Province, the first point of landfall for the tsunami, sustained the greatest amount of devastation with 10,000 dead and more than ten times that number rendered homeless. Both the Eastern and Northern Provinces peopled primarily by minority populations of Tamils and Muslims experienced a disproportionate percentage of death and displacement while reeling from over two decades of civil war that had already decimated families and destroyed their homes and lands.

The tsunami killed three times more women than men and more than a third of the victims were children, thus irrevocably transforming family structures and kin networks; in some instances, entire families were wiped out and it was not unusual to hear people saying that they had lost sometimes 30, 56 or 82 relatives within 15 minutes. The death of an unprecedented number of women introduced a new demographic in the war zones of the North and East with a large number of widowers and young, single fathers joining the extensive ranks of widows and young single mothers in these regions. Many of the widowers married within a year after the tsunami, often citing difficulty in looking after their children by themselves. Widows, on the other hand, have been reluctant to enter into a second marriage, fearful that their children would be ill-treated by their stepfathers (Hyndman, 2009).

The acute grief, constant mental trauma and daily suffering the tsunami engendered defy even these staggering series of enumerations. We can only briefly sense it, perhaps, when we sit with 60-year-old Yogendran in his brand- new, empty, two-story house in Navalady, Batticaloa, in the Eastern Province, listening to melancholic Tamil film songs, which he plays every day at dusk, as light bounces hollowly off the photographs of his wife, four sons, mother-in- law, father-in-law, sister-in-law and best friend, in the shrine he has built to his deceased family. Sixty-five-year-old Sellamuttu's loss is painfully palpable as he lovingly brushes the dust off the imprint left by his daughter, then a toddler, when she accidentally stepped onto the kitchen floor that was being cemented. That tenderly inscribed foundation is all that remains of his old house, and his daughter, who died along with her husband and two children as well as her mother. Sellamuttu now lives alone in his brand-new, empty, two-story house that abuts the foundation of his former house, about half a kilometer down the road from Yogendran. None of Sellamuttu's three sons, who all fortunately survived the tsunami, wishes to return to his village, especially now that they have young families of their own. In fact, there is barely a child to be seen in these picturesque villages, sandwiched between the ocean and the lagoon, now peopled predominantly by ageing men. Yet Sellamuttu insists that they are very much present, in spirit, and that their joyful laughter keeps him company at night. He cites this as one of the primary reasons he will not abandon his village and move in with his sons, who live in town.

One could shrug off such statements, as many are wont to do, as the sorrowful fancies or drunken hallucinations, or both, of a man who is unable to "move on" with his life or "come to terms" with his grief. Indeed, alcoholism is not uncommon among these men, several of them having frittered away all their compensation money on cheap, illicit alcohol. Many NGO practitioners, on hearing me speak of men, such as Yogendran and Sellamuttu, have been quick to comment that if they had had proper "psychosocial support" they would no longer need to cling to spirits—of either kind.

This chapter seeks to disrupt and decentre a particular formulation of Tamil masculinity—alcoholics and wife beaters—that has been produced through humanitarian and development aid discourses in Sri Lanka in the wake of the December 2004 tsunami, a discourse I have critiqued elsewhere, on other grounds (de Alwis 2009b, 2015). It has been well documented that alcoholism and domestic violence did increase in the aftermath of the tsunami, especially in the camps for

those displaced by it (APWLD 2005; de Alwis 2005; Fisher 2005; van der Veen and Somasunderam 2006). What I wish to disrupt here is the assumption that this was a predominant form of masculinity, along with that of the ruthless yet heroic militant, in Sri Lankan Tamil society. I wish to argue that there were other, less negative masculinities and masculinized practices that also came to the forefront during this period but were rendered invisible by hegemonic narratives. Many men wrestled daily with overwhelming grief and loss, and, in a context where the gender demographics were up-ended by so many more women than men dying, they struggled in their new role of primary caregiver. Many men also initiated and participated in designing and building both private and collective memorials to their deceased kin. By tracing the fragility and precariousness of the latter enterprise, I hope to push the parameters of humanitarian and development aid discourses to take cognizance of the fact that masculinity is an "ambivalent complex of weakness and strength" (Chopra *et al* 2004: 8), which involves "an interplay of emotional and intellectual factors" that directly implicates women as well as men and is mediated by other social factors such as ethnicity, religion and class (Berger *et al* 1995: 3).

"Dangerous individuals"

Neither Yogendran nor Sellamuttu received psychosocial support despite the existence of many international, national and local NGOs that offer such assistance in the Batticaloa district. This reflects a central assumption underlying such therapeutic interventions, though frequently not articulated as such, that women and children are most in need of psychosocial therapy. Vanessa Pupavac, who makes a similar observation, notes that such a "bias" is prevalent "irrespective of whether men in the target recipient community have actually been exposed to greater distress as soldiers on the front line or prisoners of war" (2001: 363). This bias also ignores the fact that women and children are more capable of adapting to their circumstances: "Women may maintain purposefulness in their traditional role as primary family carers. Children can escape into play in even the most adverse situations or, in more fortunate circumstances, may become integrated into new communities through schooling" (*ibid*: 364).

I suggest such an assumption—women's and children's greater need for psycho-social therapy—stems from a prior sociological assumption that has been made about societies in which these interventions are most often conducted; that is,

being a woman or a child is in and of itself a psychological hardship due to the marginalized and vulnerable status inhabited by both. The flip side of such an assumption of course is that it is men who are always dominant and aggressive. Among NGO practitioners, this "always already" notion of masculinity was further concretized through post-tsunami increases in alcoholism and domestic violence, as noted above. This conceptualization of masculinity is also buttressed by a psychosocial model of war-torn and disaster-prone societies as being susceptible to traumatic symptoms that cause dysfunctionalism, which in turn may lead to abuse and violence (Pupavac 2001). International mental health consultants for WHO, UNICEF and other relief agencies, notes Summerfield (1997: 1568), "claim that early intervention can prevent mental disorders, alcoholism, criminal and domestic violence, and new wars in subsequent generations by nipping 'brutalization' in the bud". Alcoholics Anonymous groups and drug rehabilitation programs clearly sit well with this kind of rationalization as they target "dangerous individuals" who usually tend to be men. Most often, such interventions are framed within the contours of "addiction" and "violence" rather than "suffering" or "mourning" or "melancholia," and are primarily focused on "treating" a very specific "character defect" or aspect of a man's persona.

The contours of mourning and melancholia

In Sigmund Freud's now classic essay of 1917, "Mourning and Melancholia," he argues that the process of mourning enables a working through of grief by gradually severing the libido's attachment to the lost object. He juxtaposes this state of being with melancholia, an aberrant form of mourning, where the ego denies the loss of the loved object and withdraws into itself while simultaneously withdrawing a memory trace of the lost object into itself (1948). Such a process is charged with ambivalence as the ego both rages and loves, hates and desires itself as well as the love object. Sometimes this state of torment can transpose into mania which is accompanied by a completely different symptomology of high spirits and uninhibited action, though the melancholic does not realize that any change has taken place in him (Freud 1948: 155). Ironically, Freud likens alcoholic intoxication to this same group of conditions: "a relaxation produced by toxins of the expenditure of energy in repression" (*ibid*: 165).

The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are "a profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to

love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in delusional expectation of punishment" (Freud 1948: 153). Interestingly, the same traits are met with in grief and mourning, with one exception: the fall in self-esteem is absent in grief. "It is easy to see," notes Freud,

> that this inhibition and circumscription in the ego is the expression of an exclusive devotion to its mourning, which leaves nothing over for other purposes or other interests. *It is really only because we know so well how to explain it that this attitude does not seem to us pathological* (153, emphasis added).

I am emphasizing this final sentence as especially prescient given the heated debates that currently coalesce around the classifying of those who have experienced unimaginable horrors, as "traumatized," rather than as suffering or distressed or grieving.[1] (Melancholia is also an unconscious process for "he knows whom he has lost but not *what* it is he has lost in them," unlike that of mourning "where there is nothing unconscious about the loss" (Freud 1948: 155, emphasis in original). However, Judith Butler, in a thoughtful rereading of Freud's essay, has argued that the temporal logic of Freud's own terms leads to an undoing of the distinction between "normal mourning" and melancholia because the inward-turning ego could not be said to securely pre-exist the lost object. "Melancholia defined as the ambivalent reaction to loss, may be coextensive with loss so that mourning is subsumed in melancholia" (Butler 1997: 174; see also Jeganathan 2008). Such a re-reading illuminates the "work of melancholia" that produces the psyche as a distinct domain but cannot obliterate the social occasion of its production. It is through this ambivalent interplay between the social and the psychic, mourning and melancholia, life and death that I seek to offer my own, brief reading of three different unfolding of masculinized mourning that struggle with extraordinary loss.

"Sipping his way to oblivion"

Daya Somasunderam's work on the psychological impact of the civil war on Tamil civilians in the Northern Province offers a haunting case study of what he terms a "Grief Reaction." A middle-aged engineer, whose three children and mother-in-law had been pulled out of their home and shot dead on the street "for no apparent reason" by the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF), suffered recurrent nightmares

1 For a discussion of some of these debates, see de Alwis (2017).

about the suffering they had undergone. He was particularly anguished about his pretty little daughter, whose frock had been lifted up by a soldier and shot through the groin. She had had to drag herself on the road and had bled to death due to the lack of medical attention (Somasunderam 1998: 233). This engineer spent his days "in deep sorrow" alternating between seeking to avenge the deaths of his children — "I will personally kill these soldiers"— and bouts of crying (*ibid*: 233). "Previously an occasional drinker, he had now started drinking heavily and was in a state of intoxication most of the day and night" (*ibid*: 234).

I often recalled this nameless engineer when I encountered Sivanesan, a middle-aged fisherman who was Sellamuttu's neighbour. The first time I met Sivanesan was when he stopped by Sellamuttu's house, his sarong hiked up over his knees, swaying from side to side like a coconut tree in a storm and announcing to all and sundry that he was trying to find some insecticides to put an end to himself. During more sober, lucid moments, Sivanesan and I would discuss the texture of the goat hide he was stretching across a drum (a very caste-marked occupation), the lack of women and children in the neighbourhood and his desire for, yet inability to find, a second wife.

It was Sellamuttu who informed me that Sivanesan had lost his wife and two daughters in the tsunami. Only his eldest daughter had survived, though she had lost her husband and two babies. Sivanesan had managed to arrange a second marriage for her and she had got pregnant right away unlike many other women, such as one of Sellamuttu's daughters-in-law, who had ingested "the black water" and become infertile. Though the baby boy was somewhat sickly, this new life amidst all the devastation was considered to be a good omen until disaster struck again. Sivanesan's daughter died due to complications that arose during the birth of her second son. That was the day Sivanesan had come in search of insecticides.

This fresh tragedy precipitated discussions of what people perceived to be Sivanesan's greatest and original tragedy. Four years before the tsunami, Sivanesan's only son had been forcibly conscripted by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) while he was cycling home from school. Sivanesan had spent many months tirelessly searching for him, pursuing whatever tenuous lead he could ferret out, to no avail. Three years later, the LTTE had suddenly had Sivanesan a certificate attesting to the fact that his son had died in battle. After his daughter's death, Sivanesan's drinking got steadily worse and he started "becoming a nuisance" in

the village, singing loudly at night and picking quarrels picking with neighbours. Things finally came to a head one night when Sivanesan tried to stroke the head of a young woman on her way back home, apparently mistaking her for his daughter, and he was chased out of the village. A prediction made by one villager, some years previously, that Sivanesan was "sipping his way to oblivion" seemed to have been proved correct.

"The amman is now my protector"

Imbued with ecstatic devotion, Murugaiah was shaking and spinning and lunging at the crowds of devotees who thronged the Kannaki Amman temple, when two women standing near me, who turned out to be his wife and daughter, began speaking about his miraculous transformation. Murugaiah's son had been shot in front of him, along with his cousin, during a Sri Lankan army cordon and search operation. This boy had been the apple of his eye. Murugaiah had devised an ingenious way to hide him from the LTTE conscriptors because he could not bear to send him away to Colombo. As a result, Murugaiah blamed himself for his son's death. After the funeral, he had stopped going out to work as a day labourer and gradually lapsed into silence, barely noticing the rest of his family or what was going on around him and "eating as if he could no longer taste his food." His daughter's eyes filled with tears when recounting this "time of sadness" when her father was lost to her.

Murugaiah's condition was immediately recognizable to those around him as the affliction of *tanimai*, glossed as "aloneness" by anthropologist Valentine Daniel (1969) in his Piercean analysis of this state of malaise (1989: 69). Its symptoms are very similar to those of melancholia discussed above as it is experienced unself-consciously and involves being "disconnected from other human beings with whom one ought to be connected" (*ibid*: 78). While thus afflicted, Murugaiah suffered a bad attack of chicken pox, popularly understood to be an illness brought on by the amman (mother goddess). Murugaiah's wife and daughter were visiting him in hospital when the tsunami struck. His mother and younger daughter were alone at home and were swept away along with their house. Their bodies are missing to this day.

Murugaiah's wife and daughter decided not to tell him what had happened to their house or the rest of his family, until he was discharged from hospital. Yet,

when they next went to visit him, Murugaiah was fully aware of their calamity. He professed that Kannaki Amman had appeared in a dream to him and said: "You have lost all but I will always protect you. Go and look after the two you have remaining." Murugaiah returned to his village a new man. He rebuilt their home single-handedly and now even works on weekends in order to collect money for his daughter's dowry. Whatever free time he has he spends at the Kannaki Amman temple in his village and frequently goes into a trance (a sign that the amman has entered his body) during special festivals at the temple. Murugaiah still doesn't speak much; though he did confide in me once: "I couldn't touch my mother's feet [a sign of respect] before she died . . . The Amman is now my protector."

"Generations to come must remember"

Sellamuttu was one of the first people to return to his village after the tsunami. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, he lost his wife, daughter, son-in- law and several grandchildren. Though his three sons, who survived, constantly urge him to come and live with them, he keeps rejecting their invitations saying he is happiest where he is closest to the dead. He has tried nine times to keep a dog to assuage his loneliness but each puppy has wasted away and died after a few months, a sign that there are too many troubled spirits in the neighbourhood, according to Sellamuttu. He built a small extension to his house and rented it out to a long-distance bus driver but when that man returns to his quarter, he is too tired to chat with him and goes straight to bed. Sellamuttu's chief companions are a few other aged men in the village and his three sons, who stop by to check on him regularly. Most of his other relatives are too scared to visit, he noted forlornly, as they are fearful that another tsunami could envelop his new house. Nonetheless, he commands great respect in his village and many seek his advice and guidance.

After supervising the building of his new house (funded by a Christian INGO), Sellamuttu focused his energies on building a large, public tsunami memorial facing the sea, beside the coastal road abutting his village. Because the proposed site was on state land, Sellamuttu had had to expend a great deal of energy to get permission to build on it. Work was begun a year after the tsunami as he and the rest of his village felt it was imperative that "generations to come must remember this great tragedy that befell our village." Sellamuttu is very proud of the fact that the entire enterprise was supported by financial contributions as well as labour from his village, and that "every family in the village made a donation, even if all

they could afford was Rs 100." The Memorial Building Committee also jointly composed the poem that appears on the granite panels along with the seemingly endless list of the names of the dead.

Sellamuttu faithfully switches on the lights that illuminate the memorial every night, when he returns home with his meagre meal comprised of offerings to a Hindu deity at a temple in a neighbouring village. However, this nightly ritual will probably cease soon as it is only a matter of time before the Electricity Board shuts off the electric supply due to non-payment of bills. The Memorial Building Committee's coffers are empty and there is talk of misappropriation of funds, but Sellamuttu's greatest worry is that there will be no one to continue maintaining the monument when those of his generation die out. The last time I met him, he talked enthusiastically about his new project to build a fence around the memorial and urged me to help him find funds for it.

Sivanesan's, Murugaiah's and Sellamuttu's lives reflect three very different trajectories. All three have struggled to live with extraordinary loss and grief: Sivanesan has sought solace in alcohol, Murugaiah in religion and Sellamuttu in memorial building. While Sivanesan's alcoholism eventually led to his ostracization and eviction from his village, Murugaiah and Sellamuttu have succeeded in reconnecting with society, in different and distinctive ways. While the resort to religious devotion and spirit possession to deal with extraordinary loss and grief has been substantively explored by several anthropologists working on Sri Lanka (de Alwis 1997; Lawrence 1999; de Alwis 2001; Perera 2001), the resort to memorialization has received less attention (Jeganathan 2008, 2010; Simpson and de Alwis 2008; de Alwis 2009a, 2009b). In the section that follows, I wish to ponder more deeply about the building of memorials as a work of communal mourning and memorialization.

Communal mourning and memorialization

Sellamuttu's public endeavour of memorial building is clearly apprehensible under the category of "community activism" or "community welfare work." The notion of "community" at play here is a complicated one; it is an articulation of colonial and postcolonial reformulations that Pradeep Jeganathan (2009) has usefully traced for us. British colonial administrators, Jeganathan argued, sought to transpose English village structures onto Sinhala villages, guiding them into a "patriarchal system"

led by the "natural" leaders of the "community" (2009: 67). Nationalist revivalists and reformists, such as Ananda Coomaraswamy and Anagarika Dharmapala, also contributed to subsequent romanticizations of "village community," leading to the formation of Village Protection Societies and Rural Development Societies across the island, thus actively engaging with, appropriating and indigenizing colonial ideas and policies (*ibid*: 70–71).

Sellamuttu as well as Vishnupillai and Balendran, live wires in the neighbouring village tsunami memorial committees, used to be members of their respective Rural Development Societies and Kovil [Hindu temple] committees but they have "no taste" for that any more. In fact, Vishnupillai swears he will not "lift a finger" to help rebuild the Murugan Kovil as he has lost all faith in religious deities, after his entire family was wiped out by the tsunami.

"Community" is a ubiquitous term today. No tsunami reconstruction project proceeds without "community participation" and "community consultation." However, as Jeganathan (2007) has observed, there is a universalization of "voice" in such processes, while de Alwis (2009b) has criticized the assumption that such a "voice" is transparently available through focus group discussions or Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). Community, it must also be remembered, is hierarchically and politically constituted and always exclusionary (de Alwis 2009b). Indeed, the "community" which was involved in building memorials, along the eastern coast, from Batticaloa to Thirukkovil, was comprised solely of men. Most groups comprised Hindu Tamil men, such as in Sellamuttu's, Vishnupillai's and Balendran's groups, the exception being the Dutch Bar memorial committee, which was composed of Tamil-speaking Burgher men (descendants of Portuguese and Dutch colonizers) who were Catholics.

The collective memorials are now an organic part of the post-tsunami landscape of Eastern Sri Lanka. They are not merely markers of the sensitivity and largesse of each village collective whose members generously contributed to erect them irrespective of whether they had lost someone in the tsunami or not. They are also not merely the markers of the sweat and toil of the memorial committee members who not only planned and coordinated the work but also often laboured to build the memorials. Neither are they merely markers of those who lost their lives so tragically in the tsunami. They are also reminders to all those who participated in designing and building them and others who merely observed the process from afar

of much strife and negotiation and compromise as a variety of male egos battled it out on the turf of tsunami memorialization.

There were several occasions when I would seek out the leader of a memorial committee to discover that he had been summarily thrown out and replaced by a rival. Committee members often accused each other of rampant corruption and of bowing to political pressure, the latter aspect coming to the forefront during annual tsunami commemorations when heated debates would take place regarding which local dignitaries and militant groups should be invited to the event. Noncompliance with militant diktats could turn violent as one memorial committee discovered when all the bulbs on their memorial were smashed one night "by unknown elements." However, this long-drawn-out process of domination and subordination, fisticuffs and embraces, failures and triumphs, I would argue, did enable a certain working through of loss, grief and suffering for a majority of the men involved in this process.

Conclusion

I have offered a multi-layered glimpse into a particular post-tsunami context on the East coast of Sri Lanka in order to illuminate how a reading of that context must contend with a variety of assumptions about gender, humanitarian aid, trauma, power and grief—and turn them on their heads. The tsunami not only devastated lives and livelihoods but also social relationships and ways of being. It also engendered certain humanitarian aid discourses that often-reinforced gendered stereotypes about "traumatized" Third World peoples. I have sought here to problematize resorting to such stereotypes and to probe more deeply into different kinds of masculinities that struggled with sorrow and loss in very different ways. In this regard, I found the building of public tsunami memorials of particular interest as they seemed to enable men's "work of melancholia" in productive ways.

Memorialization is a familiar process in Sri Lanka. Its landscape is strewn with myriad statues, buildings, parks and streets commemorating British colonial administrators, nationalist patriots, local politicians, generous philanthropists and fallen soldiers. However, what made these tsunami memorialization processes so striking to me, in addition to the monumentality or uniqueness of the design of some, was that their very abundance marked the absence of any civilian-initiated, collective memorials to the greater number of civilians who died in the civil war. The primary reason for this, I would argue, is that "natural" disasters have a very

different moral framing than man-made disasters, such as civil wars. Disasters are often exacerbated by human interventions, such as deforestation, sand and coral mining, and settlement in coastal conservation areas, as was the case in tsunami-affected Sri Lanka. However, the majority of the Sri Lankan populace perceives disasters as "acts of God" that lay waste to lands and peoples irrespective of ethnicity, class, caste, religion or gender, while those who die in civil wars are rarely perceived as innocent. Thus, to commemorate their death(s) publicly was surely to bring on the wrath of either the Sri Lankan state or Tamil militant groups.

I recall vividly the terror etched on the faces of some of my friends who were members of a small women's group in Batticaloa, as they described how they would creep out at the dead of night to paint roads or place markers in public spaces where civilians had been killed, either by government forces or militants. The only permanent public memorials that remain in the Batticaloa region today are a few to slain comrades built by the breakaway faction of the LTTE who aligned with the Sri Lankan government and two that were built by the LTTE to commemorate Sri Lankan military massacres of civilians in Sathurukondan and Kokkadicholai. Surprisingly, these two memorials remain despite the systematic bulldozing of all LTTE-built monuments, memorials and cemeteries in the Northern Province (see de Alwis 2010, 2015).

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Notes on Editors

Caryll Tozer: Feminist, activist, environmentalist and sportswoman based in Sri Lanka.

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Chulani Kodikara: Feminist and legal researcher based in Sri Lanka.

Sonali Derinayagala: Feminist, economist and writer based in the U.K. and U.S.A., with connections to Sri Lanka.

Radhika Coomaraswamy: Feminist plus Under Secretary General of the United Nations and currently chairperson of ICES, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Vraie Caille Barthalemouz: Feminist, activist and future feminist political leader of Sri Lanka.

How lucky we are to have had Mala – taking on the big concerns of our time, examining them with love and care. She concludes her essay on the Sigiriya frescoes by conjuring the uncontainable power of these painted women - their "smile lingers', as she says. We hope the reader of these essays will see- as we do- that Mala's vast humanity and Mala's irrepressible smile, lingers.

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