

Militiarizing Bodies: Transcending the Female Psyche in Niromi de Soyza's *Tamil Tigress*

Dr. Anuja Raj

Assistant Professor

School of Social Sciences and Languages

Vellore Institute of Technology

Chennai.

Abstract: Women are often marked as the most vulnerable group in any population, simply because discourses on women center around victimhood and economic responsibility. They are branded as a peace-loving population who naturally abhor violence and are often the victims of violation and sexual assault. The intake of female participants as combatants in the LTTE for their fight against the government was a reassurance for women to gain empowerment and break the clutches of patriarchal domination that wrung around them. LTTE was known for its notoriety and the women tigers in its forces. Many female combatants in the rebel paramilitary force were either abducted or forced to join it. The paper is an examination into the role played by female combatants in the LTTE through the memoir of Niromi De Soyza's *Tamil Tigress: My Story as a Child Soldier in Sri Lanka's Bloody Civil War* (2011). The book is an autobiographical first hand narration of a guerilla woman soldier who tries to understand her position as an empowered woman- a sacred virgin for the plight of the nation and later redemption. The paper tries to understand how the acceptance into the group of militant combatants affected the gendered crisis associated to a woman. It is an unravelling of the psyche of a woman soldier in the traumatic throes of a nation burdened by three decade long civil strife.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, LTTE, Tamil, women combatants, empowerment, militant

The Sri Lankan ethnic conflict rose as a consequence of European Imperialism and the internal ethnic fragmentation which distorted the nation's history into a three-decade long war. The root cause of the struggle between the minority Tamils and the majority Sinhalese of the Sri Lankan population was the qualm over the land. Thus, land became a symbol of identity for the nation, which was already fractioned linguistically and politically. The only solution to the question over the rights of the land was the division of the land into a Sinhalese-ruled Sri Lanka and a Tamil-ruled *Eelam*. This helped the nation to build on the lines of certain similar ethnic groups having the same religion and customs in a specific geographical area. Thus, came into effect the minority populated Northern and Eastern provinces and the Southern province where the majority dwelled.

The Sri Lankan Civil War was unlike any other wars in the history of the world. After the oncoming of the genre of 'new wars' soon after the World Wars, several insurgencies and counter insurgencies had swiped and swept nations. The Sri Lankan Civil War is quite distinct from them, as it did not get much international attention it sought. Even though the United Nations had sent its peace emissaries into the nation, the waging war did not lose the momentum it gained. As history only voices the culturally and politically elite, the narrative of Sri Lanka during the times of turmoil is written in the voice of the powerfully elite. There is a need to understand the Civil War from the shrouded perspective. Thus, the voice of the perpetrator comes into play. The Civil War which ended up savouring the precious 26 years of a nation, is not something trivial. When the nation as a whole submerged itself in the Civil War, the question of faith and trust was blown away in the wind. The War had become a social reality to almost all the natives in Sri Lanka. The common features of any war- forced displacement, infiltration, subsequent acts of terror and killings- became a day-to-day occurrence. The war, instead of making the victims fragile, made them stronger, to be what they are at present. After years of failed peace talks and ceasefires, the conflict got arrested due to the interference of Norwegian assistance in February 2002.

Personal memory is a form of storytelling; memory lives and propagates itself through the tales that are told by the experienced. Thus, our story tellers need not be eyewitnesses and we do not know what their own source of the story is. By the act of

‘telling the tale,’ we are also capturing a much greater diversity of memory-acts, that are less restricted by genre than what would be a concentration of memoirs alone. What is most interesting in a civil war memoir is that a narrator who brings forth how a nation built on peace transformed itself into a political and religious question of identity and how in due course of time it transformed itself into a psychological setback of traumatic incidents in the civilian lot, thereby ripping the country violently apart and emotionally unbalanced equal. Consequently, many survivors gave testimonies about their experiences long after they had actually occurred, which casts doubt on the reliability of memory as a source of historical truth. Moreover, traumatic events may produce memories that fragmented, thereby subverting the expectation that the witness should be able to give a coherent account of events. These testimonies are laden with pathos as the survivors sob with shock and anxiety on the frightful destiny that befell them; this produces affective and embodied responses in the audience.

Living through war is a psychological transformation of the mind, as a person on witnessess trenches and mutilated bodies, often creating a nightmarish feeling. The dehumanising effect that the war has on a person is that it is capable of devastating him- especially the horror of losing one’s beloved ones at the reach of a hand. The war thus creates a crevice in one’s memory, making it hard to remember or making happy memories after the war. Personal testimonies are reflections of war experiences- the first-hand experiences of a wounded psyche.

In philosophy and theology, the word ‘transcend’ is often associated with going beyond the otherwise normalised character or body. *Cutantira p-Paraivakal* or the Birds of Independence was the notorious name given to the women fighters who were trained and recruited under the LTTE, to bring about a future society that was built upon peace.

The position of a gendered construct and the female domain as being opposed to war, conquest and rebellion was found to be something that the wounded self wanted to reflect. The symbolized women warrior seemed to be justified in the role of an empowered self rather than the positioned status of year long victimhood and suppressed identity. The relocation of the gendered construct of the female from the household to the warfront was claimed as a pious and ardent process to assimilate women into the frontages of war. This act of pseudo- emancipation focussed more on the strengthening

of footholds of the armed resistance, even having the audacity to incorporate child soldiers into a parallel battlefield.

The placement of the females in the women tigers battalion is a big question which needs an answer- whether they were mere instruments in the hands of the patriarchally-positioned males in the arms of the LTTE or if they chose to be weapons of their own accord, finding their ways of emancipation in the armed struggle by using themselves as live weapons.

Niromi de Soyza was born with a mixed Sri Lankan and Indian heritage into a Tamil Christian family in northern Sri Lanka. The escalated ethnic war in 1987 made her join the Tamil Tigers and to become one of the first female tigers to be trained in Sri Lanka and to engage in combat. She resigned from the LTTE, re-joined her family later and penned down her experiences through a series of memoirs which later got published during the final phase of the Sri Lankan war. The book titled *Tamil Tigress: My Story as a Child Soldier in Sri Lanka's Bloody Civil War* (2011) involved the memoirs of a woman who had a first hand experience of the LTTE.

Niromi de Soyza unravels the world of the LTTE, from its inception to its end in her book, by narrating accounts from her own life as a Tamil Tigress. The book is a historical saga that covers the time period from 1987 to 1988 when the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) was stationed in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka, to protect the interests of the Tamils. The Tamil militancy got its initial cause in the anti-Tamil policies adopted by the majority Sinhalese dominated government and the futile Tamil political agendas to protect the Tamil interests. The book takes the readers through the different perspectives of an internal Tamil militancy - from being the facilitators of Tamil independence to becoming a more dominant, agitated and unhumanitarian militant upsurge, which did not even take into account the basic feelings of the Tamils in the nation. The book opens in the middle of a forest where the Tigers were spending their day in hideout from the soldiers who had “just stepped out of the cover of the banana plantation”(Soyza 1).

Sri Lanka: Voices from a War Zone (2005) by Nirupama Subramanian uncovers ‘little histories,’ as she calls them- of children forcibly recruited into the Tiger training camps; of parents waiting for mass graves to reveal their black secrets; of people fleeing

their homes in war zones only to become prisoners in refugee camps; of the families of the missing who still wait and hope; of women in the maid trade bonded in virtual slavery in foreign lands. Human Rights Watch, an international organisation in their report “Human Rights and Armed Conflict” (2004) states that:

In many conflicts, commanders see children as cheap, compliant, and effective fighters. They may be unlikely to stop recruiting child soldiers or demobilize their young fighters unless they perceive that the benefits of doing so outweigh the military advantage the children provide, or that the costs of continuing to use child soldiers are unacceptably high (Becker 230).

Being hailed as an organisation that stood for the freedom of the Tamils, the organisation had many flaws within it - the physical derangement of the members themselves, recruitment of the child soldiers, prohibition from reading newspapers or books and having other social commitments- thereby making them innocent scapegoats lined for the slaughterhouse.

The push and pull factors that led children into armed militancy included a sense of helplessness, hatred of the enemy, virtues of being heroes/martyrs, the novelty of wearing uniform and medals, economic and food security, and the goal of avenging a death in the family caused by the enemy. The subject becomes an object in the cause-effect phenomenon and gains his/her identity only when a certain kind of subjection gets imposed upon them. The Tamil Tigers were subjected to atrocities and policies were made against them. This made them rebel against the government, who in turn curtailed their freedom and individuality.

The employment of all the members of a Tamil family- a man to be part of the militant organisation, a woman as a suicide bomber and the children as child-soldiers was a fear-provoking scenario. The main idea behind this was the involvement of all the minorities in their explicit resistance against the government. Even though this idea was contested with allegations claiming that the women were recruited into the organisation due to the lesser number of young men, it was a brilliant tactical approach by Prabhakaran who was convinced that women forming a group will never arouse any suspicion. The women in the organisation were mainly recruited to avenge the rape and molestation they had to face in the hands of the Sinhala soldiers. They were given a

prominent place in the group and were asked to wear cyanide capsules like a *Thali* around their neck. “Their commitment was strong and genuine, symbolized by the cyanide vial that hung like a talisman on a black thread around their necks. They would rather die than captured alive” (Pratap 71).

Victimisation in the society was found at different levels and that of the ethnic Tamils were most prominent. Men, for instance, were victimised as they were directly or forcefully recruited into the LTTE, for playing the role of a combatant. Women- wives, sisters or mothers who had to face the loss of a beloved-were victimised on the basis of gender. When Prabhakaran gave a stronghold for Tamil women to achieve their revenge by recruiting females into the organisation into the suicide bombing squad, the intensified war phase had created a different sort of victimisation. This being the rape culture that was prominent during a civil war. Many women under the pretension of interrogation were raped brutally and killed without any further evidence. The children were the last group of victimised ones. They were forcefully recruited from their schools by the Tigers for creating a group of child soldiers.

Soyza takes the reader into the historical account of the formation of the Tamil militant organization as a protector of the interest of the minority Tamils, gaining the trust of the people for its spontaneous usher. There are times in which Niromi de Soyza explains how the militant organization enriched the patriotic in her and also her individuality, thereby asserting the fact that she was dragged into this wholesome spirit of being a hero in the militant organization. For her, “Fighting was something men did, not girls, especially middle-class girls. Such actions would certainly ruin our reputations forever. No one in my family had any military alignment, I had to wait till the Tigers enlisted females.” (44). The mode through which the organization inculcated a regional nationalism was, for the Tamils, a way in which someone “stood up against tyranny” (Soyza 45).

The book also traces a trajectory from the formation of a kind of sub-nationalism and patriotism within the minds of the Tamils by making them feel wanted and by helping them to stay and fight for their own. The militant organization later created an oligarchy and suppressed or erased their rival militant organizations. The transition of

the organization into one that bred supremacy over other military factions and the resultant attack on the TELO camp is detailed in the narrative.

Women have always assumed the role of a participant in local revolutionary movements. Adele Balasingham, also known as Adele Ann, wife of the LTTE's chief political advisor, Anton Balasingham argues:

Young women too experienced the horror of the racial riots. ... The forces of social constraint which had obstructed their deeper participation earlier, had left them exposed and defenceless in the face of violent racist hatred and State terror. Deepening genocidal oppression now propelled them out of their established social life into a new revolutionary world. Young women broke the shackles of social constraints, they ripped open the strait jacket of conservative images of women. The militant patriotism of Tamil women finally blossomed as they entered into a new life of revolutionary armed struggle. The credit for providing and creating the facilities and opportunities for women to complete a comprehensive military training programme has to be given to the leader of the Liberation Tigers, Mr. Velupillai Prabhakaran. (Balasingham 15)

Earlier, People's Liberation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) and Eelam People's Liberation Front had started recruiting females for their immediate disposition. The strict rules administered in the group, preventing sex and other rights for women was necessary to create an indomitable spirit in the women, to arm themselves as virgins and detached from other familial ties. The attempt by the organization was to create a genderless and disciplined force which would not draw suspicion from the enemies. The creation of a genderless construct of a superior, respected women army needed an abandonment of the basic characteristics that stood for a native female- long hair, colourful attire, *mullappoo* (jasmine garlands) on their hair. Moreover, they were treated on par with men and definitely above how a normal female would be placed and respected. The motivations for females to join the militant organization mostly stemmed from a previous history of victimhood, rape or subjugation, thereby seeking revenge and not curtailed by civil laws. The elatedness with which Niromi met the leader of the group, Prabhakaran and their conversation made her blindly fascinated into the motives put

forth by the organisation. She says , “I walked into the room as if I was about to meet God; there was no doubt Prabhakaran was our saviour, our hero. He was going to save the Tamils from destruction and gain for us an independent homeland” (Soyza 114).

She found herself to be one of the first two SLOT members to attain training and set an example for other females who were willing to dedicate their life to the organisation. The *Makkal*, as they were called, received training in the outskirts of the forest which were guarded by the males. The book takes the readers through the memories of the IPKF and its friendly terms which later turned soured into contempt. The very first instance of suicide bombing sent a shiver down her spine, though she understood the aim of suicide bombing - mass destruction through self-destruction. “I could understand the benefit of a suicide bomber- one militant could kill many soldiers, minimal outlay for maximum outcome. It also avoided unnecessary civilian casualty” (122). Though the thought was gruesome, the question of being brave to self-destruct oneself created an underlying element of mere fascination and not blind assimilation to the ideology of the organisation. The suicide squad was named as *maaveeran* (hero of the heroes) and the members were handpicked for their duty. The elite and courageous members of the army found themselves to be self-willing to do the maximum for the benefit of the entire Tamils and the organisation. The onset of peace through the joint accord of the Tigers and the IPKF had made the writer return home during the onset of a peaceful period. The peace in the society did not last long; unrest unleashed itself once again.

Conclusion

Although the nation faced its worst times during the internal conflict, the idea of a female war combatant was totally new to Southern Asia. The women associated with these ranks held a new perspective, of an androgynous female counterpart who assumed and tasted the privileges of being in a society. The transition of the female psyche, from her gender construct of being shy and poised and circumscribed by cultural conventions, got transformed into an instrument of power and aggressiveness. The war provided these women a means of escaping the traditional societal norms and creating a new world of altered gender identity that created new societal gender norms. Women were used for the selfish motives of Guerrilla warfare and as human bombs . The intellect behind using

women combatants created an illusionary world of gender fluidity while the militancy gained more notoriety for its unfair and brutal means for asserting their presence in the society. The enlistment into the LTTE gave them new roles which provided them with emancipation, security and a control over their survival.

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