

Gender and the Nationalist Imagination of Women in Sri Lanka

Darakhsha Qamar

Research Scholar

MMAJ Academy of International Studies

Jamia Millia Islamia

New Delhi

Abstract: The paper focuses on how hierarchical gender relations that form the basis of the patriarchal Sri Lankan society allows women a very limited role within nationalist politics. It explores both Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism, exposes their inherently patriarchal nature and their respective nationalist imagination of women. It further sheds light on the myriad ways that Sinhalese and Tamil women submit to or subvert this nationalist expectation of them through their actions.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, Tamil nationalism, gender, Sinhalese nationalism, women, patriarchy.

Introduction

Gender -conceptions of masculinity and femininity- play a very important part in the creation of national identity. Nationalism is a gendered project, even though it often goes undetected and unnoticed. As Bina D'Costa notes, "nationalism, masculine in nature, requires exclusion and silencing within the nationalist discourse- which produces a homogenous, collective identity" (32). Nationalism operates through the process of creating a common history- through the process of selective remembering and forgetting that leads to the 'othering' process. This is important in order to strengthen the sense of solidarity and uniformity within a group, vis a vis, the other. This difference between 'Us' and 'Them' is also gendered in that, the other is often attributed feminine qualities (Peterson 78). In postcolonial societies of South

Asia characterised by a mind-boggling variety of ethnic, linguistic and religious groups, there are bound to be several disparate historical interpretations. Yet nationalism requires that these separate threads be subsumed within one dominant, historical narrative, that of the dominant elite. This leads to the rendering invisible of the experiences of people at the margins- including women.

The postcolonial societies of South Asia are not natural nations, in that they did not develop organically into nation-states as those in the west did. Nationalism is, in many ways, an imposition by and a legacy of the colonial masters, and the aforementioned societies adopted them in their own way. The nationalism that is prevalent in many of these societies, like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, for example, are ethnic and religious nationalisms, which as Joan Nagel says is extremely “conservative and patriarchal” (254). This, she believes is because of the tendency of nationalists to legitimise the nation building project with the help of traditional practices. These practices are inherently patriarchal in nature, entrenched in masculine privilege and subordination of women as they are.

Nationalism as a masculine project

Nationalism and nation-building projects have always had a contentious relationship with the figure of the woman. Cynthia Enloe in *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* draws attention to how in nationalist movements or conflicts, women have been allotted only minor, only symbolic importance. They are seen, therefore “either as icons of nationhood to be elevated and defended or as spoils of war, to be denigrated and disgraced” (Nagel 244). The woman question therefore, is one that has haunted the nationalists for a long time.

Here, nationalism is seen as a masculine project that derives from and builds on behavioural patterns and norms that typically characterise masculinity. There is a clear absence of women and their roles in the narratives about the making of the nation. This is not to say that women don't or aren't allowed to participate in the nationalist movement. They certainly do and in fact their involvement in the movement is often used as a testament to the inclusiveness of the movement. However, what's interesting to look at, is the *nature* of their involvement. Typically, within a nationalist movement, women are assigned a limited space wherein it is permissible for them to operate (mothers in caring, nurturing roles, women

engaging in peace activism and so on). The limits of this space are determined by the traditional expectations of how women are supposed to behave and any transgression in these roles can create a problem for the political elite (the Sinhalese garment girls). Further, a transgression is only permissible as long as it can be harnessed into furthering the larger nationalist cause (women combatants, suicide bombers). Women therefore have been more often than not used as a means to an end. A mere symbol to mobilise the masses or an instrument, to be utilised in pursuit of bigger goals, that the women themselves have no part in deciding.

Women as symbols

The symbolic importance of women to the nationalist project manifests in several ways. Parallels are drawn for instance, between the body of a woman and the physical territory of the nation, whose boundaries must be defended and protected at all costs from alien invasion and violation. Furthermore, it is the job of the 'sons of the soil' to protect the motherland. Here too, the nation is compared to the figure of the mother, making the soldiers then, her sons. In popular nationalist literature, it is either insinuated or stated directly that those who cannot protect the land, are said to have lost all claim to it. This is a popular patriarchal trope that allows men to have absolute control over women's bodies. It is called the 'protection myth' and has served as the rationale for wars between communities and nations since very long ago.

Women are also considered to be symbolic of the culture, values and ideals of the nation- which actually defines the boundaries of the nation viz.a viz, the other (Yura Naval Davis, Floya Anthias). They are, therefore, also the transmitters of this culture and values. These values however, are not decided by women, but men in elite positions who then impose these standards on the women of the nation who have to live up to them. Women therefore, are extremely susceptible to having their sexuality, their bodies, their fertility and relations to others being controlled by men, as strategies to maintain the boundary of the nation (Peterson 80).

It is clear to see therefore that the symbolic importance of women- their representation- has a very important role to play in the nationalist project. That is precisely why there is an overwhelming urge on the part of the nationalist elite to control the image of the women of their nation and to curate a specific nationalist imagination of women. These imaginations of

what the national woman should be, is *allowed* to be, is the central focus of this paper. Along with that, we will also try to understand the ways in which Sri Lankan women- whether Sinhala or Tamil- navigated these nationalist expectations of them.

Nationalism in South Asia

The nationalism that emerged in South Asian societies was anti-colonial in nature, as it originated as part of and was used to spur on the movement for independence in these former colonies. Since then, nationalism has attained different forms and expressions in these countries- secular nationalism, lingua-cultural nationalism, religious nationalism, etc. (Upreti 535). According to Clifford Geertz, there are two types of nationalism that struggle for predominance in postcolonial societies- Civic nationalism and Ethnic nationalism. In civic nationalism, citizenship and nationalism are conceptually differentiated (Oommen 642). Therefore, it provides equal citizenship to all people making up the population of the state, irrespective of which linguistic or religious community they may belong to. This sort of nationalism that doesn't decide one's citizenship on the basis of their allegiance to primordial identities like religion or ethnicity is clearly better suited, according to Oommen, for the multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies of South Asia. That is because it allows space for and guarantees group or collective rights within a sovereign state. Such a nationalism is pluralistic and not only recognises, but celebrates the distinctiveness of the different communities (Oommen 652).

Ethnic nationalism, on the other hand, involves the establishment of the privileged position of an ethnic group over others. It is authoritarian, anti-democratic and in practice, involves denying some people the right to self-determination (Hensman 506). It conceptualises nationalism as something natural to human societies that has always existed and is based on one's allegiance to primordial identities like ethnicity and religion. As T.K. Oommen says, here, "a fusion of citizenship and nationality is the ideal" (438). The states which were guided by this ideal, adopted a single religion or language as official, despite them being multi-religious, multi-linguistic societies. It is fundamentally narrow and exclusivist in nature and one could argue for the flourishing of a democratic political culture in the multi-ethnic postcolonial societies of South Asia.

This kind of nationalism, however, had its roots in the colonial history of these countries. Much has been written about how the British colonialists institutionalised communalism in India in an attempt to keep the people in the colonies divided and unable to form a united front against the oppressors. Further, the imposition of western education, culture, etc. at the cost of the decimation of indigenous language, value systems and beliefs resulted in the cultural revivalist movements which sought to create a version of history that glorifies a particular community- most often the majority community. This was a prerequisite for the creation of an essentialist ethnic or religious identity that demanded supremacy over every other identity. This identity became the basis of ethnic nationalism that emerged during the colonial period among particular linguistic and religious groups and remained a potent force even after independence.

Sri Lanka, is ethnically composed of two major groups- the Sinhala and the Tamil- who migrated over centuries from different parts of India and settled there, mixing in various degrees among themselves and the aboriginals. The demography was further complicated when in the later centuries, Muslim and Arabic traders as well as Europeans settled there (Jayawardena 119). There are therefore, two dominant threads of nationalism in Sri Lanka- Tamil nationalism, the biggest and most famous proponent of which were, the now defunct LTTE and Sinhala nationalism promoted by the Sri Lankan government. Both are examples of ethnic nationalism- chauvinistic and patriarchal in nature- and the struggle for dominance between which have mired the island in conflict, for most of the time it has been independent. This violent fate, however, wasn't always a given.

After gaining independence, Sri Lanka started out with the ideal of composite nationalism, with the adoption of two official languages- Sinhala and Tamil. It seemed set on the path of becoming a successful, pluralist democracy with a well-performing economy. However, soon after, the Sinhala leaders began pursuing policies that sought to establish the superiority of the Sinhala-Buddhist identity by subordinating the Tamils and attacking their culture and language. The Sinhala leaders operated according to the mindset that Sri Lanka was the Sinhala homeland, unlike the Tamils, who already had a homeland in India- Tamil Nadu. Therefore, everyone apart from the Sinhala-Buddhists were actually akin to visitors- their wellbeing dependent on the hospitality of the Sinhalese (DeVotta 49). It is therefore inherently chauvinistic and exclusionary in nature. The assertion of Tamil nationalist identity in Sri Lanka

started during the 1950's and 60's, as a response, in many ways, to the discriminatory policies of the Sinhala-Buddhist state in power (Satkunathan). It is inherently defensive, yet aggressive in nature, as any assertion of identity in the face of such systematic, planned and direct attacks on that identity is bound to be.

Sinhala Nationalism

Sinhalas are the dominant ethnic community in Sri Lanka. The ethno-nationalism promoted by the Sri Lankan state conflates the Sri Lankan national identity with the Ethno-religious identity of Sinhala-Buddhism. This is to say that it sets a criteria- an arbitrary one- to qualify as part of the Sri Lankan nation. One thread within the Sri Lankan anti-colonial struggle, in an attempt to counter the imposition of the imperial culture, had emphasised a cultural revival of sorts- a project that involved the creation of the Sinhala-Buddhist identity as a superior identity. Part of this was the propagation of the myth that Sinhalas were actually descendants of Aryans from the north of India- a chosen group of people who were tasked with the responsibility of protecting Buddhism. (Jayawardena 148) This served two purposes. It not only proved their uniqueness as a special, chosen group of people, it also distanced themselves racially from the Dravidian Tamils.

This revivalist movement naturally involved, first and foremost, the restructuring of the education system, as that was the easiest way to develop and disseminate a narrative of a glorious Sinhalese past and set an example for the fellow Sinhalese to follow. The field of education therefore, was also where the creation of the ideal Sinhalese woman took place. Educators like Anagarika Dharmapala emphasised the sacred position of women within Buddhism (Jayawardena 148). The sanctity and purity of the traditional Sinhalese woman (representative of the sanctity of the Sinhala-Buddhist identity) was therefore emphasised, which in turn legitimised masculine control over and regulation of how women dressed, acted and how they were educated. This over-emphasis on the sanctity of women however, led to women being acceptable to the nationalist project, in only one way- as a mother figure, embodying the nation itself.

Mothers

The idea of portraying women as mother figures in relation to the nation so as to imply a mother-child relationship between the nation and its people is a popular one. The reason why envisioning the nation as a female is so attractive is because it clearly delineates the nation as belonging to the private sphere that must remain protected and untouched by outside forces. This idea that a woman as a mother plays a very important role in shaping the nation, further gives the masculine state an excuse to exercise control over their bodies and reproductive capacities (D'costa, 2011). Malathi de Alwis draws attention to how in Sri Lanka, education was used to disseminate the nationalist ideology that is based on the roles of women as sacrificing mothers and men as the valorised sons. Stories and poems from the *Mahawamsa* (the Sinhalese epic) are part of the Sri Lankan school curriculum. She takes the example of plays like *King Kavantissa's Palace* and poems like "To my son on the battlefield" (de Alwis 261) to show how the ideal role of men and women that is acceptable to the nationalist elite is spelled out. According to these poems, the ideal Sinhala man is brave and puts his duty to defend and protect his nation before anything else. The mother is shown to have a very important part in shaping and moulding this man who will go on to hold a position of great authority later in life. She is supposed to be a wise woman who knows and accepts her subordinated position in society and who must ultimately be ready to sacrifice her son's life in service of the nation.

These patriotic roles and responsibilities of men and women are inculcated into the minds of the young pupils to the extent that they start identifying themselves with such roles organically and ultimately become defenders of the patriarchal nationalist ideology underlying this identity. De Alwis also points out that these stories present patriotism to be loyalty to this nexus of "Country, Race and Religion" (259) where the Sri Lankan identity is synonymous with the Sinhala-Buddhist identity. Further, these stories always present the Tamils as the enemies and so the loyalty to the Sri Lankan nation is to be manifested through an opposition to the Tamils (de Alwis). It is interesting to note that the process, through which the nationalist identity is created, is the same one through which the identity of the "other" or the enemy is also created.

Garment Girls

The acceptance of women in only one role (the pious mother or the submissive wife), performing certain activities, behaving in a way determined by the patriarchal elite, then, makes way for the vilification of women who don't fit within this narrow categorisation. One example is that of the Garment Girls of Sri Lanka. These are young Sinhalese women working in the garment factories in 4th free trade zones that had been set up in Sri Lanka as part of the structural adjustment programs in the late 70's. Many of these 'girls' had migrated to the cities from rural areas in search of employment and were often the sole breadwinners of their family (de Alwis). These women work under very exploitative conditions- long hours for meagre wages- and are an easy target for sexual harassment. However, their dismal working conditions are far from being the most pressing concern the Sri Lankan state has regarding them. These women, having lived their whole lives in villages and used to the simple, slow, idyllic ways of rural life are considered to be especially susceptible to being morally corrupted by the big city life. They are single women who live without any male protection or regulation; they earn money and spend it any way they want to without having to answer to anyone. The subject of much slander and local gossip, they are known locally as "free-living women" (*ayaleyana*), lacking any sense of shame-fear (*lajja-baya*) and therefore a great disaster (*mahavinasayak*) for the society (Hewamanne129). They are, therefore, a major challenge to the ideal of the Sri Lankan woman who is demure, dependent, silent and subordinated and the idea of the Sri Lankan nation that they are supposed to embody. They are after all, as mentioned above, symbolic of the culture, the honour of the national community and therefore any transgression on their part is seen in a severe light, as it attacks the very idea of the Lankan nation.

It is clear then that their presence creates a major dilemma for the nationalist elite to deal with. Despite highlighting and denouncing their 'liberated' and 'empowered' behaviour, there is an inability on the part of the state to view them outside the traditional framework of roles that is permissible to the Sri Lankan woman. Therefore, even when talking about their transgressions, the mainstream media presents these women as victims at the hands of unscrupulous men like factory owners, military personnel etc. The idea that they may be engaging in this 'transgressions' of their own volition, that they might actually be in control of their bodies and their sexuality, using it as they please is not something that is acceptable or even comprehensible. Therefore, even when denouncing them, their position is still cemented within this patriarchal structure of society. This is however, not to say that these Garment Girls

aren't especially vulnerable to exploitation, but to emphasise and understand that the reason that they are exploited is precisely due to the hypocritical nature of nationalism. The same patriarchal logic of nationalism, which elevates women- as long as they embody all the ideals of a 'good' woman as decided by the male elite – to the status of icons to be respected and venerated, also allows the denigration of the woman who have fallen from this pedestal. These women are seen as 'loose', immoral and 'easy' women, thereby justifying predatory and violent behaviour towards them, because they are, simply put, 'fair-play'.

Tamil Nationalism

Coming to the topic of Tamil nationalism, as promoted by the militant Tamil organisation Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, we see that it was not any less chauvinistic or patriarchal. As Rohini Hensman points out, it was by nature "totalitarian" and exclusionary (502). The LTTE wanted to build a Tamil state where there would be no place for ethnic minorities and this was evident in the mass killings of Tamil Muslims and an unwillingness to tolerate any rival Tamil outfits or any criticism or dissent from Tamil civilians. As Rajani Thiranagama in Hensman says, since the Sri Lankan society is a hierarchical, patriarchal one and the ideology underlying the struggles in this society is extremely parochial, the only way for women to liberate themselves is to fight against this aggressive nationalist idea (503).

Joke Schrijver in the 1990s wrote about the ideal behaviour expected from Tamil girls. Typical of any patriarchal society, they were expected to play subservient roles as obedient daughters, sisters, wives, widows etc., who were throughout their lives expected to obey a male figure like their father, son, husband, brother etc. Apart from that, they were also expected to embody -through their behaviour and activities- chastity, care and sacrifice. Finally, they had to, at the time of conflict, be willing to send their husbands and sons away for the cause of defending the nation (Schrijver)

As far as writing about women's involvement in the Tamil nationalist struggle goes, several writers have observed that there was a blurring of lines between the domestic and public spheres, as is often the case during conflicts. Motherhood was mobilised for political purposes, but by different parties, in two seemingly disparate ways-on one hand to legitimise war and on the other, to organise women for peace.

The Brave Mother & Social Mother

Sitralega Maunaguru in Uma Chakravarti (n.d) talks about the brave mother on one hand and the social mother on the other. The brave mother- much like her Sinhala counterpart 'Moral' mother as discussed by Malathi de Alwis- is brave, selfless and sacrificing, who understands that duty towards the nation is above all duty and therefore is happy - and considers it her responsibility- to send her sons to war (11). This image of the ideal mother is the one used to mobilise women for the cause of war. There are accounts about there being 'homes of women' that served as sanctuaries for people to stay at, have a meal or even hide in. Mothers were known to have assisted their sons fighting the war in different ways including hiding their explosives and weapons and seemed willing to take risks, of their own volition, in order to shelter those fighting and thereby contribute to the Tamil nationalist cause. (Satkunanathan)

The social mother, on the other hand, is the one who talks of peace. Here, Tamil women used their identity as mothers to demand that their missing children be returned to them. This is an example of how during conflicts, we often see women, if not subverting the traditional roles and identities assigned to them by the patriarchal society, then using them as instruments to forward the agenda of peace. The Mothers therefore understood the importance of their social legitimacy and used it to obtain political gains. These efforts have manifested in the coming up of several Mother's fronts in Sri Lanka. The (Northern) Mothers Front was formed in 1984. They demanded the truth on and justice for the disappearances. Their protests were peaceful and non-violent in nature and they operated by sending petitions and appeals to the state, political parties and concerned organizations. A similar mother's front emerged in the south as well in protest of the deaths and disappearances of men and women at that time due to political violence. It was a movement inspired by an aggrieved mother, (Dr.)Mrs.Manorani Sarvanamuttu, following the loss of her son, which later developed into a powerful opposition political force (Govt. of Sri Lanka, 2015)

While this is an example of women contributing to the Tamil nationalist movement whilst remaining within and utilising in ingenious ways the limited space allowed to them, the case of the female combatants of LTTE seems to pose a direct challenge to the image of the ideal Tamil woman.

Female Combatants

The LTTE understood the need for militarisation of women from the outset. It recruited women (for its women's front) by putting together the goals of gender equality and women empowerment with the demands for a separate homeland. They promoted the goals of the Women's Front of LTTE as:

i) secure the right of self-determination of the 'Tamil *eelam*' and establish an independent democratic state of Tamil *eelam*.

ii) abolish oppressive caste discrimination and division and feudal customs such as dowry system.

iii) eliminate all discrimination and secure social, political and economic equality (Alexander 2014).

Women, therefore, saw this as a chance to work towards a society where they would not be discriminated on the basis of something over which they had no control and therefore would be able to attain anything their male counterparts could. Many saw it as a chance to break free from the constraints of domestic life that the conservative Tamil society put on women and live independent, empowered lives with full control over their own bodies and reproductive capacities. The acknowledgement of the female Tamil combatant is important here, because her very existence turns the protection myth on its head. It makes it clear that a woman is not always a passive victim, in constant need of protection, as the nationalist imagination of women would have us believe. Rather, she can also be a perpetrator of violence, actively participating in war. The female combatant therefore, seems to be that rare example of a woman subverting the role of the ideal nationalist woman and yet being accepted within the nationalist movement. No doubt, that does seem empowering and could be evidence that the gendered division of roles within a nationalist movement, don't always hold. Unfortunately, this example needs a more nuanced understanding as many scholars have tried to achieve, by questioning the nature of this 'empowerment'.

The LTTE, for all its acknowledgement of the role of power and patriarchy in the subordination of women and their apparent attempts at empowering women seems to ultimately

have operated something like a militant, rigid, somewhat more progressive microcosm of the larger patriarchal Tamil society. The reason for such an analysis being that according to some accounts, the chief of LTTE had almost a paternal and protective attitude towards the woman cadres. He was sympathetic to the plight of these women who were going against the traditional roles assigned to them by society in order to become militants and fight for the nationalist cause. And while he was the apparent ‘patriarch’ of this group, the LTTE in general was viewed as a mother figure that protected and cared for those it had borne (Satkunanathan). Clear parallels can be drawn therefore between the LTTE and the notion of the larger Tamil nation which is imbued with stereotypically feminine characteristics yet is organised and operates within a rigid patriarchal structure.

The LTTE, far from being a bastion of freedom and equality, actually had a very conservative attitude regarding matters of sexuality. The manifestation of a woman cadre’s sexuality through transgressions such as affairs with fellow cadres was simply unacceptable and there are famous cases where cadres were either ousted or killed when the chief became aware of their affair. Speaking about the female suicide bombers, feminists have pointed to the construction of images like that of the ‘virgin warrior’, who sacrifices herself not within the oppressive relations of marriage but for the country (Chakravarti 12). Therefore socio-cultural expectations regarding women’s sexuality for example and her right over it, remain quite the same. She is still considered to be representative of the honour of the national community and any transgression is viewed with trepidation, lest it tarnish the image of the same. As such in the name of national interest, the actions of these cadres are still subject to “patriarchal surveillance”(De Mel 79)

There was also awareness within the LTTE that violence against women is essentially about power and the patriarchal thought process that considers women to be naturally subordinate. Yet their way of dealing with it was like a law and order problem. It called for stringent punitive measures to deal with it, instead of seeking to change the underlying patriarchal beliefs and values that could bring about meaningful, long-lasting change. There was also reluctance to acknowledge the existence of violence against women in the LTTE controlled areas (Satkunanathan).

Turning our attention to the female suicide bombers of the LTTE, we find that not only is there stress on her being a chaste and innocent virgin, her sacrifice too is appropriated by the patriarchal society. Neloufer de Mel (2004) says that the idea of suicide bombing carries symbolic meaning of life and death. The sacrifice of life is considered “life-giving” to the community (77). So the idea that a woman can give her life away in order to ‘give life’ to the nation very easily plays into the narrative of a woman as a mother- the ultimate life giver.

The LTTE was also willing to use the figure of the Tamil woman that is subjected to sexual violence by and therefore is in need of protection from the enemy to awaken nationalist sentiments. Feminist scholars like Sitralega Maunaguru have drawn attention to how a patriarchal society draws parallels between the rape of the woman and the symbolic rape/violation of the motherland (Chakravarti 12). The LTTE also engaged in massive propaganda during the later stages of the conflict about instances of mass rape of Tamil women by Sinhala soldiers. Women’s bodies, their sufferings and experiences therefore continued to be appropriated for national interest and for the LTTE, the issue of woman’s empowerment was always subsumed within and therefore subordinated to the larger nationalist project.

Conclusion

Nationalism is a potent force, appealing to people’s sentiments, conjuring up images of invisible bonds based on shared values, historical experiences, at times culture, language and a common vision for the future that holds disparate groups of people together. It appeals to a fundamental desire in human beings to be a part of something bigger than them. To serve the nation, is to serve a purpose much greater than what their mundane, everyday existence allows. It is from this that people derive their primary political identity- membership of the largest political community possible- the nation-state. Nationalism requires that this overarching identity based on a sense of belongingness to this “imagined community” (Anderson), be the most important one that undermines all other identities at the individual or group levels. This process is aimed at inspiring unconditional loyalty and loyalty is important because nationalism demands sacrifice; it makes heroes out of ordinary people. That is its power. In order to facilitate this sacrifice, it uses certain carefully curated symbols and images. These images are obviously constructed and as such, anything but neutral. A deeper examination is therefore required. There is a need to deconstruct these images in order to understand the hierarchical

power relations behind it. Feminist scholars working on nationalism believe that these constructions are gendered and reflect the unequal gender relations in a patriarchal society. The two dominant strands of nationalism in Sri Lanka- both ethnic in nature- are the Sinhala nationalism and the Tamil nationalism. Both of these extremely gendered projects have created gendered images that assign particular spaces to the roles of men and women in the nationalist sphere. It delineates the role, behaviours etc. that are acceptable to the nationalist elite. It creates a standard that everybody must live by. And since it is gendered, it is based on and enforces the hierarchical power relationships between men and women in society.

The nationalist imagination of women in Sri Lankan societies has been a subject of much interest among feminist scholars like Malathi De Alwis, and Neloufer De Mel and they have written extensively about it. From analysing much of the literature, 3 major categories of women come to attention that engages with (in some cases, conform to and in others, challenge) the dominant nationalist imagination. The most commonly accepted nationalist image of women is that of *The Mother*. Several variations of this image exists- like the Moral Sinhala Mother that Malathi De Alwis discussed or the Brave Tamil Mothers elaborated upon by Sitaralega Maunaguru. These mothers are brave, patriotic and understand the value of sacrifice for the nation and as a matter of national duty urges her sons to go to war. The nation too is seen as a woman/the motherland whose honour must be preserved by her 'brave son'. The parallel between the mother-son relationship and the relationship between the nation and its citizens is an old trope. A notable way in which Sri Lankan women have engaged with this image is by using the social leverage they have as mothers as a political tool for forwarding the agenda of peace. They have organised into mother's fronts and demanded that their relatives- missing because of the conflict, be returned to them.

The categories of the Sinhala Garment Girls and Tamil Female Combatants of LTTE pose a direct challenge to the accepted nationalist imagination of women as mothers. The reason that the nationalist imagination of women is so important is because women are seen as symbolising the nation itself, embodying the qualities that the nation is recognised by. That is why the regulation of women and their bodies is such an important part of the nationalist project. The figure of the garment girls- independent, (seemingly) sexually liberated women, not living under any male's supervision, is completely antithetical to the traditional image of a woman in the patriarchal Sinhala society. Then, there is the case of the female combatants of

LTTE, that seems to turn the protection myth on its head and therefore challenges the notion that it is the brave man that must protect the helpless, peace loving, unarmed woman. Far from making appeals for peace and the end of war, these women were active participants, contributing to its continuation.

However, the literature available makes it clear that even when these women are seemingly breaking away from the traditional notions of how women are supposed to behave, they are not bringing about any kind of structural change. They just did their best to survive within the already existing structure, however their circumstances allowed it. In fact there were also attempts made by the nationalist elite to co-opt them within the traditional imagination of women's roles. There were attempts to present the garment girls as simple, innocent girls from villages who were morally corrupted by the city and its immoral influences. This- as an innocent, pious victim of moral corruption, with no minds of their own was the only way that these women were acceptable to the nationalist elite. When it comes to the female combatant, she is only acceptable as a soldier and later a patriot in the nationalist struggle when she's stripped of all indications of femininity. She is supposed to be a man in a woman's body, embodying all the characteristics typically associated with masculinity. She's also viewed as asexual and therefore above denigration, unlike the garment girls.

Nationalism, therefore, is undoubtedly a gendered project which assigns separate spaces for men and women to occupy. While all forms of nationalism are based on some sort of other-ing process, the ethno-nationalist variation observed in Sri Lanka is especially exclusivist, parochial and masculine in nature. This kind of nationalism creates others not only outside the group but also within the group. It is a natural conclusion then, that exclusivist, narrow concepts of nationalisms like these, which are based on and derive power from a patriarchal social structure are fundamentally incompatible with the interests of women. That is because a nationalist ideology, that depends on the patriarchal structure- which is responsible for the continued subordination of women- will always have women at the periphery, in their imagination of the nation. That is of course unless we develop a more inclusive version of nationalism or replace the nation-state altogether with a different imagination of a political community that doesn't involve a violent other-ing process in order to consolidate group identity.

REFERENCES

- “The Role of Women in Peace-Building: A Sri Lankan Perspective - Sri Lanka.” *ReliefWeb*, 8 Apr. 2015, <https://reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/role-women-peace-building-sri-lankan-perspective>.
- Alexander, E. “Women of war: the female fighters of LTTE.” *Cornell International Review*, Vol.7, No. 2, 2014
- Chakravarti, Uma. “Archiving the Nation-State in Feminist Praxis (2008 Edition).” *Open Library*, Centre for Women's Development Studies, 1 Jan. 1970
- D’Costa, Bina. *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia*. Routledge, 2011.
- De Alwis, Malathi, “Moral Mothers and Stalwart Sons.” *Women and War Reader*, edited by Lorentzen, L.A & Turpin, J.E, New York U P, 1998.
- De Mel, Neloufer. “Body Politics: (Re)Cognising the Female Suicide Bomber in Sri Lanka”. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol.11, no. 1, 2004, pp. 75-93.
- De Mel, Neloufer. “Gendering the New Security Paradigm”, *IDS Bulletin*, Vol. 40, No.2, 2009.
- Devotta, Neil. “Sri Lanka at Sixty: A Legacy of Ethnocentrism and Degeneration”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 44, no. 05, 2009.
- Enloe, C. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. U of California P, 2014.
- Hensman R. “Feminism and Ethnic nationalism in Sri Lanka.” *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1992.
- Hewamanne, S. “Pornographic voice: Critical Feminist Practices among Sri Lanka's Female Garment Workers”, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2006, pp. 125-154
- Jaywardena, Kumari. *Feminism and Nationalism in The Third World*. Verso, 1986

Lorentzen, Lois Ann, et al. *The Women and War Reader*, New York University Press, New York, 1998.

Nagel, Joan. "Masculinity and nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol.21, no. 2, 2010, pp. 242-69.

Oommen, T.K. "Nation and Nationalism in South Asia." *The SAGE Handbook of Nations and Nationalism*, edited by Gerard Delanty and Krishan. Sage, 2006

Peterson, Spike V. "Gendered Nationalism." *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 77–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659408425777>.

Peterson, V.S. "Gendered Nationalism." *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, vol. 6, no.1, pp. 77-83. DOI: 10.1080/10402659408425777

Satkunanathan, Ambika. "Whose Nation? Power, Agency, Gender and Tamil Nationalism." *SSRN*, 27 Jan. 2013, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2206804.

Upreti, B.C. "Nationalism In South Asia: Trends and Interpretations." *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 67, no. 3, 2006, pp. 535-54.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, 1991

Ganguly, R. & Phadnis, Urmila, *Ethnicity and Nation-Building in South Asia*, Sage, 2001.

Walker Conner. "A nation is a nation, is a state, is an ethnic group is a ..." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol.1, no.4, 1978, pp. 377-400.