

## **GENDERED NATIONALISM AND THE SRI LANKAN WAR: READING SELECT REPRESENTATIONS**

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**Abstract:** The Sri Lankan Civil War, spanning more than a quarter of a century, witnessed brutal violence and gross violations of basic human rights in the name of establishing a quintessential ethnic identity. The *raisons d'être* were various, as were perspectives. This paper tries to look at the event from the lens of 'gendered nationalism', in which the role of gender (particularly the feminine) is studied via analyses of its different performances and representations in shaping the concept of nationhood. How female bodies and stereotypes of femininity coincided with the concept of nationalism is studied, reading events and representations.

**Keywords:** *Sri Lankan war, Gender, Nationalism, Gendered Nationalism, Sri Lankan Cinema*

Nation, as a concept, can be defined in multiple ways. A collective of people who shares common cultural elements and belongs to/resides in a common territory can be considered as the foundation of a nation. The boundaries that mark a nation are not just geographical. There is the consciousness of nationhood within the people that makes a region their 'nation'. This national consciousness, or nationalism, is a societal, political and economic system which represents the endorsement of the welfare of a particular nation and is closely linked to patriotism. Nationalism seeks to conserve a nation's culture by striving to achieve and uphold sovereignty and national identity based on communal characteristics, such as culture, religion, politics, language and the notion of a common ancestry.

Nationalism Studies is an emerging interdisciplinary area that studies the concept from an academic perspective. Two schools of thought, namely objectivism and subjectivism, are important in the study of nationalism. Objectivists stress the role of culture, especially language, in the description and creation of nations, while according to subjectivists, nations are formed by popular will and political action. To comprehend the concept of nationalism, the following three paradigms are widely employed. The 'primordialist' perspective is based on the early, primordial essential roots and sentiments. This 'cultural' or 'naturalist' view proposes nationalism as a natural occurrence and puts forth the idea that nations have always been in existence. Nationalism is viewed as something that is ever present in the populace and gets stirred up under political self-consciousness. The concept is based on evolutionary theory which identifies nationalism as a result of the evolution of human beings into identifying themselves with factions, such as ethnic groups. Primordialism offers the framework for the concepts of ethnic nationalism and cultural nationalism. Perennialism, a branch of primordialism, opines that nations have existed since antiquity, though in uncommon and unnatural phenomena happening in crests and troughs.

The second paradigm, ethnosymbolism, is an intricate, historical viewpoint that elucidates nationalism as an evolutionary occurrence instilled with historical significance. It puts emphasis on the significance of symbols, mores, ethics and myths in the conception and continuance of nations and the perception of nationalisms. Ethnosymbolists see nations as modern entities but give importance to pre-modern roots. Thus, this approach is seen as a 'middle-ground' between primordialism and modernism. The third paradigm, modernism, proposes nationalism to be a recent social phenomenon. It argues that nationalism occurs and thrives only in modern societies. Theorists of this school believe that traditional societies, with its lack of a modern self-sustainable economy, undivided authority, and common language, do not possess the fundamentals for nationalism. This idea is reflected in civic nationalism and ideological nationalism.

Nationalism, as it is based on different ideologies or movements, is considered to be a concept which has many categories. It should be noted that this grouping does not warrant mutual exclusivity. There are different categorisations of nationalisms. Cultural nationalism (pan nationalism), civic nationalism (political/progressive nationalism), left-wing nationalism (socialist nationalism) and secessionist nationalism forms the first category. Civic nationalism

is further subdivided into civic-territorial and socio-political nationalisms. Ethnic nationalism, religious nationalism, cultural nationalism, civic nationalism and ideological nationalism is another category. Liberal nationalism, conservative nationalism, expansionist (Eurocentric) nationalism, Anti-colonial (Third-world/postcolonial) nationalism forms the next categorisation. Racial nationalism, democratic (Jacobin) nationalism, traditional nationalism, liberal nationalism, integral (biological/totalitarian) nationalism can all be considered under a single umbrella. Liberation nationalism is an important categorisation, which can be closely associated to Revolutionary/radical nationalism. Economic nationalism is yet another category. Diaspora or long-distance nationalism is very important, especially in the postcolonial scenario.

Ethnic nationalism's basic foundation is ethnic association which includes shared language, culture, tradition and lineage. It is intolerant and can lead to conflict. Religious nationalism centres on a religion or doctrine that has a political implication. Considered irrational due to intolerance, it focuses on religious unity by resisting divergent viewpoints. Civic nationalism promotes social unity, individual rights and liberty. Tolerance, choice, social equality and justice are key elements of this form of nationalism. It can cause a weakening of the native values in traditional societies. Ideological nationalism argues for the capability of nations for self-governance. In cultural nationalism, the nation is defined by a shared culture. It is a middle ground between ethnic nationalism and civic nationalism and encompasses the feeling of cultural pride. When, in an ethnically diverse society, common culture gets prominence over a common race or ancestry, it is an example of cultural nationalism. Unification of different races is an advantage of cultural nationalism. Socio-political nationalism is a form of civic nationalism in which a community can represent a nation. Michel Seymour, in his 1999 work —*Plaidoyer pour la Nation Sociopolitique* in *Nationalité, citoyenneté et solidarité*, says that the socio-political nation represents a political community with recognised territorial boundaries within which there is a majority national community that considers itself to represent a nation, and that shares a common language, culture or history. Third world nationalisms occur in those nations that have been once colonised. Resistance is an important aspect of such nationalisms. It also attempts to ensure that the identities of the people are authored by themselves, not imperialist powers (153). Diaspora nationalism refers to the nationalist feeling among a diaspora. Benedict Anderson terms this "long-distance nationalism"(12) and states that this sort of nationalism acts as a "phantom bedrock" for people

dispersed from their (real or imagined) 'homeland' and want to experience a national connection.

A notion celebrated by colonialism and its supporters is that it brought in nationalistic feelings of unity and patriotism to the colonised areas. Garbed in so-called 'modernity', which was strictly a one-sided (Western) way of looking at things, ideas were planted on to the cultural memory of the colonised. It were presented as neutral and universal concepts and theories that it were accepted blindly. Nationalism was not a new concept in India, only the occidental perspective was. Garbed in modernity, colonialism erased the native conceptions of nationalism which were already present in the land since antiquity. *Itihasas* were analysed through Western lenses, translation was made a tool to invalidate the native concepts and propagate an idea of nationalism completely foreign to the land.

The study now warrants a quick discussion of the idea of 'Cultural Memory'. According to Jan Assmann, Honorary Professor of Religious and Cultural Theory at the University of Konstanz and Professor Emeritus at the University of Heidelberg, cultural memory is the faculty that lets us construct a narrative picture of the past and develop an image and an identity for ourselves through its course. Shaped by the symbolic institutionalised legacy present in memorials and other media that acts as mnemonic triggers to instigate meaning into the past, cultural memory can invoke even mythical origins in a community and work as a collective uniting force. He also considers how cultural memory can become a menace to totalitarian governments which may, in turn, destroy artifacts and monuments in an attempt to undermine the memory of the people and make cultural identity a tabula rasa from which a new identity can be forged. Wiping out cultural memory is, thus, a way to destroy the past and future of a community. The transition from collective to cultural memory made memory studies enter the realm of culture. Cultural memory is an umbrella term which discusses the interaction between the past and present in a socio-cultural milieu. Cultural memory selects and reconstructs according to the requirements of the present. It need not be a close replica of the event, as it would be closer to fiction than reality. Data is borrowed from the present in this construction of reality.

Sri Lanka is said to be a nation with different nationalisms. Sri Lanka is a melting pot of different nationalisms. Under the two factions of Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms, multiple 'nationalisms' are in play. It has forged the identities of the residents. Identity politics, also

called identitarian politics, are political arguments that centres on the interest and points of view of societal factions of which inhabitants recognise themselves as a part. Identity politics also deals with the ways in which people's politics may be fashioned by characteristics of their identity. National identity comes under the umbrella term 'cultural identity', which is the sense or feeling of belonging to a group, and it also has many alternate manifestations. The island nation, being a multi-ethnic country, offers the scope for many cultural identities. Ethnic identity, one among those, is of utmost importance in the Sri Lankan scenario.

The Sri Lankan War is a part of the nation's collective consciousness in multiple ways. The long war has created many generations of memory. The imagined nation-*Eelam*- has become a site for memory for the Tamils, especially after the war. It exists in the collective cultural memory of Tamils who are scattered around the globe. The war generated individual memories of suffering which transcended in scope to the collective. The trauma faced by the common man was a collective phenomenon. Stories were told to represent the pain and individual tales of trauma became a part of the collective. Cultural memory was active in Sri Lanka for a long time. As a multi-ethnic society, the nation always faced the enigma of who came first. The Sinhalese believed Sri Lanka to be their haven while the Tamils claimed equal rights as they were, as they claim, a part of the country since mythical times. *Eelam*, though it does not exist in the physical map of the world, is very much alive in the mindscape of Sri Lankan Tamils. What *Eelam* is for Tamilians is Buddhism for the Sinhalese, but the fact that they were the victors in the war has made a huge difference. Buddhism is an integral part of the Sinhalese psyche. The myth of Simhabahu, fathered by a lion, is their founding myth and the motif of lion has become a vital part of Sinhalese nationalism. Just like the lion, the tiger has become a cultural motif for Tamilians. The tiger was the symbol of the Chola Empire. Thus, both the lion and the tiger are symbols which evoke the cultural memory of the communities. It stores the mnemonic energy of a gallant past which triggers feelings of nationalistic pride in them. Both the symbols are part of the mythmaking process that occurred in the island and invoke cultural memories of gallantry in the members of the respective groups. When the lion takes the Sinhalese mind to its supposed ancestry from Simhabahu or the lion symbol in the flag carried by Prince Vijaya, the tiger reminds the Tamils of their Chola pride. Both thus account for the historicity of the race's existence in the island.

Gender has a very important role to play in the creation of nationalism. Also dubbed ‘gendered nationalism’, this concept studies how the idea of nationalism is based on the socially constructed notions of gender. Gender pervades everything, and in postcolonial societies, it can be viewed from multiple/shared vantage points, like race, class, caste, etc. Performing gender, or gender performativity, is a concept which has been studied at depth by many scholars in the area. This paper looks at how it interacts with the concept of nationalism in Sri Lanka.

The origin myth of the island nation, according to *Mahavamsa*, speaks about Suppadevi, a princess of the erstwhile Vanga Kingdom, who was kidnapped by a lion. The beast fathered a son and daughter. Sinhabahu, the son, who had hands and feet like a lion's paws, escaped the prison with his mother and daughter. He travelled to his mother's land, and later killed his father, the lion, for a reward. He married his sister and fathered thirty two children, of which Prince Vijaya is known to have travelled to Sri Lanka and established his kingdom there. The legend is a celebration of masculinity and the shadow of masculine duties ever present in the society, like protection and establishing spaces for oneself. The notion of slaying obsolete traditions metaphorically comes alive in the legend as fratricide.

When Prince Vijaya came to the island along with hundreds of criminals, banished from his land, he had to face Kuveni, a *Yakkhini*, who tried to devour him. After overpowering Kuveni, Vijaya took her as his consort. Kuveni gave his men food and shelter and with her help, Vijaya defeated the *Yakkhas*. Vijaya established the kingdom of Tambapanni (the land of copper-red soil which coloured the hands) and his followers were later known to be Sinhala after Sinhabahu. To be consecrated the king, Vijaya needed to have a woman of royal lineage as his queen and hence his ministers sent ambassadors to the city of Madhura (Madurai). Pleased by the gifts sent by Vijaya, the Pandya king of Madurai sent to Lanka his own daughter, other women (including a hundred maidens of noble descent), craftsmen, a thousand families of 18 guilds, elephants, horses, waggons, and other gifts. Although Kuveni had betrayed her own people and had given birth to two of Vijaya's children, Jivahatta and Disala, she was banished by the ruler as his citizens feared supernatural beings like her. Kuveni, a traitor, was killed by a Yakkha, and her offspring survived to be the folkloric ancestors (Pulinda people) of the present day Veddahs, an aboriginal people who inhabits the eastern part of Sri Lanka now.

In this legend, it is evident how races and genders come into play in creating a nationalistic narrative. The right of the Veddahs as the original inhabitants of the island are put aside by the tale of a traitor amongst them. The moral question of usurping nations are easily covered up by such narratives which creates villains out of the natives. It thus becomes the coloniser's burden to rule the natives.

Considered as part of the spoils of war, female bodies are always considered to be arenas of war which are tortured and brutally raped to disgrace, control, extract information, scare or celebrate acquisition, masculinity and triumph. Some of the notable cases of murdered raped victims and the massacres associated with rape incidents are that of Krishanti Kumaraswamy, Arumaithurai Tharmalethumi, Ida Carmelitta, Ilayathambi Tharsini, Murugesapillai Koneswary, Premini Thanuskodi, Sarathambal, Thambipillai Thanalakshmi, Kumarapuram massacre and Vankalai massacre. Accused of being LTTE sympathisers, most of them were abducted, tortured, raped and murdered. Some had their bodies dumped in the wells or bushes. A woman had a grenade explode in her abdomen while another was shot through her vagina.

The number of widows continued to escalate exponentially. With widowhood came the socio-cultural stigma of being 'unlucky'. In rural Asian societies, widows were marginalised as bad omen by the members of their own community. The radical alteration in identity, coupled with grief and humiliation, pushed those young women into depression. They suffered 'social deaths' at the hands of their own people who discriminated as well as abused, branding them the bearer of ill-luck. With no support from family and the thoughts of their husbands having suffered violent deaths, women were pushed into long-term depression. Economic conditions forced some women to take over the role of the breadwinner, which, in the highly patriarchal society, made them more vulnerable.

The anthology film *Flying Fish* (2011) by Sanjeewa Pushpakumara, the story of a mother and son, portrays the life of a young Sinhalese widow. The fact that the Sinhalese faction won the war does not mean that the Sinhalese civilians did not have their share of woes. Here, in the movie, the woman is in extreme poverty and tries to make both ends meet by selling curd. She falls in love with a man and the news of the affair reaches her son, who stabs her and his siblings. The psychological, physical and economic needs of a widow are not

considered sympathetically in a patriarchal society. The son is enraged at his mother who had to take charge of the family after her husband's death. The burden on his shoulder is no less. The boy, still a child, works at the fish market to support the family. He cannot stand the humiliation he has to suffer due to the rumours about his mother's affair. When he witnesses her having sex with her lover, his mind reaches the breaking point of sanity.

The horrors of rape were portrayed in *In the Name of Buddha* (2002), a film by Rajesh Touchriver. The controversial scene in which soldiers brutally rape a woman and place a grenade between her legs that blows her up is very haunting. To realise that it is not just a figment of fiction increases its magnitude. In the film, the protagonist's lover is shown to be raped by the soldiers of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) after stuffing her mouth with soil. Those who came to protect the soil and its people thus became foes. The film shows how the Tamils welcomed the IPKF with garlands and slogans. They considered the Indian soldiers to be their protectors. Women are often associated to land, as the metaphor of 'motherland' suggests. Here, the woman is raped after stuffing soil inside her mouth, which counts as the double oppression on the land.

In *Ira Madiyama* (2005), by Prasanna Vithanage, the plight of Chamari, the young wife of a Sinhalese Sri Lankan Air Force pilot who was shot down during flight, is featured. She believes that he has been taken captive by the Tamil Tigers and goes in search of him. Her quest is a reflection of the Indian myth of Savitri who chases death to get her husband back. In the movie, we see Chamari, a young woman, seeks the help of a journalist Saman Gunawardena in locating her soldier husband Niroshan who has gone missing. They travel to the northern areas of the country. Through the narrative, it is revealed that Chamari is not legally wedded to Niroshan. His parents were against the match and hence the young couple lived together without marriage. Chamari believes that Niroshan is alive and cannot rest without finding him. She needs closure to move on in life. She describes how Niroshan's parents blame her for bringing bad luck to their son. Chamari is ready to go to any extent to find her husband and even tries to seduce Saman, falsely professing love to him. When Chamari talks about how Niroshan's parents consider her a bad luck, Saman rubbishes the thought as 'stupid'. The concept of good and bad luck associated with women is common in patriarchal societies and it is this established norm that Saman challenges with a line.



Another concept that forms an important part of women performing gender is motherhood. *Kannathil Muthamittal* is an Indian movie which portrayed a child's search for her biological mother. Amudha was discarded by her mother Shyama, a refugee, who returned to Sri Lanka and took up arms. The child was reared by her adoptive parents with love and care. The movie features how they take her to Sri Lanka, against all odds, to meet her mother. The movie has marked itself as the most established visual Indian perspective of the Sri Lankan war. With its melodrama of a fabricated 'what-if' tale with clichéd ideals of motherhood, it is a commercially successful movie. Shyama is a strong woman who initially wanted a normal life but was later thrown into the violence of the war. She is shown to be a patriot. She became a rebel after leaving her new born child back in India. She breaks down when she meets Amudha and the softer side of the mother is revealed in her.

The war was a time for women to break out of traditional roles too. In Sri Lanka, there was a massive change in the self-confidence of women when the rebel outfit LTTE began recruiting females. Unlike the Army which initially assigned only clerical duties to women recruits, LTTE urged them to be equal to men. The image of the traditional demure Tamil woman was shattered when female bodies were militarised. They joined the organisation for fighting for *Eelam*.

In Sri Lanka, the war was a time when different types of nationalisms came into play. Gendered roles were challenged in the patriarchal society, and at the same time, certain stereotypes continued to find expression in war literature/ movies. Masculinity always fought, while femininity mostly witnessed and bore the brunt of war. Intersectional spaces emerged, where race, gender, history and postcolonial politics merged with cultural memory. Different expressions of nationalism manifested, which continued to play within the loop of race and gender.

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