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Editorial

The January 2023 issue of *Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture* attempts to read the protracted relationship between the nation and gender in the Indian subcontinent, in the time period stretching from the 19th century to the recent past. The key assumption here is that nationalist discourse anywhere in the world is gendered; particularly so in the Indian subcontinent. We have examined how the differential power relations between the sexes were played out in this vast region, from the 1850's when the collective life of the populace was/is under both threat and rapprochement.

We have in this number original papers which present a revisiting of the brutal massacre at Jallianwala Bagh or a reading of the state intervention and militarism that erased thousands from the face of the earth in Sri Lanka or even a critical commentary on the energetic resistance staged by women against the naked power of the state in Shaheen Bagh in recent times. The idea of the nation looms large behind all these confrontations. A close reading of such instances show us that the women participants were not 'feminists' fighting for equal rights with men, but active players in movements defining citizenship or claiming the rights of both men and women, who inhabit a particular stretch of land.

Narratives like these take us to the front line of the struggles for freedom, in the broadest sense of the term. We strongly feel the need to revisit his-story from this perspective, in the light of feminist historiography. We have included papers that look beyond the rhetoric of inclusion and exclusion. We have not insisted on any theoretical analysis, as we preferred to leave it to the scholar to decide how s/he would prefer to structure the paper.

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Chief Editor

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Gender, Nationalism and the Regent Queens in Colonial India

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Abstract: Queens in power are “moments of passage” (Fradenburg 8) and transition. The queen’s rule emanates from an unforeseen circumstance that every dynasty strives to eschew. This explicates the liminality of their political existence. Since queens are upstaged only in times of crisis, they play a significant role in eschewing internal crises and power struggles. Adverting to the idea of saving grace, queens enable the state's transition from chaos to stability in the event of a king’s death. Agency sans official recognition was the mainstay of a queen’s politics. Queens thus acted as a buffer zone that usually worked towards validating the sovereignty of her husband or son. This paper is a comparative study of two regent queens to delineate how nationalist politics reconceptualized the ‘warrior queen,’ to suit their notions of gender and space. In contrast, pro-British queens remained ignored in the national discourses- neither criticized nor acknowledged. The reasons for the divergent reception of anti-British and Pro-British queens in later discourses by looking at the presence and absence of myths and legends about such queens have also been looked into. To clarify this idea, I have looked at Nawab Sikander Begum of Bhopal and Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi, who fought on different sides in the 1857 revolution. This paper tries to analyse how the queens who chose a militant response towards the British incursion could be called ‘warrior queens’ and those who chose a diplomatic strategy could be termed as ‘reformer queens’. The latter could be called so, not because warrior queens did not have reformist tendencies, but because the diplomatic strategies finally helped redefine queenship tradition in a way the former could not carry out successfully. This categorization is not absolute and did not come out from the intentions of these queens, but rather from the mode and consequences of their actions. The

paper works towards the inference that the difference between the warrior and the reformer queens in this respect is that, while Rani Lakshmi Bai, knowingly or unknowingly, was an agent of her culture and the ensuing nationalist discourse, Sikander made religion and culture, her agents, to rule the principality in her own right.

Keywords: Regent queens, Nawab Sikander Begum, Rani Laxmi Bai, Warrior queens, Nationalism, 1857 Revolution.

Unlike the usual suspects of colonial and nationalist enterprise – i.e., the subaltern, the prostitute, or the persecuted wife – the Rani is an elite colonial subject whose refusal to be restrained within the available paradigms necessitates a larger, multilevel project of representation. Neither entirely victim nor agent, the Rani is objectified by colonial and nationalist discourse to perpetuate sexually, culturally, and politically viable modes of traditional femininity (Singh 23).

The Colonial era in India witnessed nationalism and colonialism, the two competing axioms debating over the women question. Even as a trove of scholarship has addressed the myriad ways in which gender was transfigured in this period of conquest and subjection, the ranis in Colonial India attracted minimal scholarship. The reason for such an omission can be construed as stemming from the peculiar intersectional identity India's royal women held- elite, with an unofficial agency in accessing the premier man of the state and inaccessible to the British, owing to their confinement in the Zenana. For the same reason, the Ranis can be safely defined as an unregulated group who were often portrayed as illiterate, scheming, and wicked in the British discourse. But unlike colonialism, nationalism has creatively employed warrior queens in their narrative where the Ranis transgression for and within the tradition was valorized. On the other hand, there were reigning queens in Colonial India who often negated the colonial idea of India's deplorable treatment of women and the nationalist notion of women as only a cultural vessel of the nascent Indian nation. This paper looks at two Indian queens- Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi and Nawab Sikander Begum of Bhopal, to delineate how these queens deployed their agency in the 1857 Revolution and the ensuing representation of their life and politics in later discourses, both national and colonial.

It is easy to imagine why entrenched patriarchal traditions would seek to marginalise women's movements by calling them un-Indian. In fact, such a rhetoric seeks to disguise the indigenous roots of women's protest in India. This is not to argue that Western women's thinking or organisations have not influenced Indian feminists. Cross-fertilisations have been crucial to feminist struggles everywhere. But, given the history of colonial rule, the burden of authenticity has been especially heavy for women's activists in India (Loomba 271-72).

There is a conflict in public aspirations about the representation of queens in cultural discourses. There is a tendency to place women within an intermediary space - between that of tradition and modernity - in all of these narratives. For instance, representation of queens in nationalist discourses, certainly expects women rulers to be a concoction of both the Indian tradition and the emancipated modern selves. For instance, in Mahasweta Devi's biographical work on Rani Lakshmi Bai, she talks about why Rani was important to the people of Jhansi: "The Queen would sit behind a screen to one side of the court with Damodar Rao on her lap. She would carry out a few administrative tasks this way" (56). Devi effectively paints a picture of an able administrator, hidden behind the screen, inaccessible to Europeans and other male members of the Rani's court. Here, an emphasis on *Purdah* and seclusion foreshadow the anxiety of an indigenous female body being husbanded by a colonial male explorer, which became a trope in nationalist discourses. This symbolic significance attached to the queen's body and her chastity is emblematic of the discourse of nationalism. In this paper, I am trying to unravel the reasons and means by which biographers and historians tried to bring in this complex intersection of tradition and modernity in their re-presentation of regent queens.

By the middle of the 19th century, there was a clear emergence of two groups of Indian princes and princesses who shared a porous distinction. Since the Viceroyship of Lord Dalhousie, this demarcation began to make itself concrete in its various expressions of loyalty and rebellion. One of the major colonial laws that broke loose such a division was the Doctrine of Lapse, a carefully designed law to arrest the dynastic continuity of different Indian kingdoms. This law had a part in the evolution and violent performance of the mutiny in 1857. But this mutiny had also seen, maybe for the last time in Indian history, warrior queens fighting against the British incursion into their sovereignty. The likes of Velu Nachiar of Sivaganga and

Rani Chennamma of Kittur preceded Rani Lakshmi Bai, and Begum Hazrat Mahal, a contemporary, fought alongside her in the 1857 revolution. Meanwhile, select princes from across the Indian subcontinent remained loyal to the British to protect their sovereignty. Among such princes was a regent Begum- Nawab Sikander Begum of Bhopal who, despite the absence of a male heir, ensured that her daughter became the next ruler, when she came of age. Sikander Begum's relationship with the British was a strategic diplomatic ploy that ensured continuity to the state of the Bhopal, way up to 1947.

“Feminist historians of India have begun to explore the multiple ways in which women became a crucial site for the political and cultural struggles between British colonialists and Indian nationalists. Each of these groups claimed to liberate women from the bondage of the other” (Loomba 272). Warrior queens are seminal to the nationalist narrative, even though their fight against the British incursion into their autonomy led to losing everything in their possession. Essentially, their single most important contribution remains lore to the emerging discourse of nationalism. On the other hand, the reasons behind the complex relationship that Indian nationalism and its discourses maintained with these loyal queens are not emphasized enough in the history of Independent India. They remain neither villainized nor valorized, thus orchestrating an easy erasure of their legacy. It is precisely at this juncture that this paper looks at these two categories of women rulers who had managed to emancipate and incarcerate Indian women in different ways:

The people of Jhansi realized that they could no longer let go of the precious, ephemeral freedom achieved under their beloved Rani Saheba. A woman whose vermilion bindi had been wiped off her forehead by widowhood, whose *mangalsutra* had been torn off her neck, whose fatherless son was deprived of his rightful inheritance, had not taken to fighting motivated by a desire for her own personal success. Nor was she resigned to her fate. Her self-confidence and conviction led her to take an active role and face the struggle head-on. The people also knew of the Queens boundless trust in them and were therefore inspired by her strength (Devi 175).

Devi's portrayal of Rani Lakshmi Bai is clearly an attempt to idealise Rani as a Hindu queen. Given her Marhatta lineage, it was only logical, though not inevitable. She is venerated

because of her elite status as a chaste widow queen in the Hindu society. One can trace the following patterns breaking down the portrayal of Rani by Devi into thematic units. One day, Nana Sahab and two of Rani Lakshmi Bai's other male playmates went riding the only elephant of Bajirao, and she insisted on riding as well. But they didn't let her. "Upset at her daughter's humiliation, Moropant said, 'It's not in your fate to have an elephant to ride. You're the daughter of an ordinary man! Manu (Rani) proudly replied, 'It is my destiny to have 10 of them'" (25). Myths that make up the story of the warrior queens are replete with hunting- a male bastion. In Hindu mythology, a seminal part of the making of an incarnation of God is his ability to tame or conquer a ferocious animal. Thus, in the case of Ayyappan, it was a tiger; for Krishna, the giant venomous snake. Likewise, Rani Laxmi Bai is also presented as having episodes of brave encounters with wild and ferocious animals.

The pervasiveness of powerful female figures-especially the figure of the mother- in the discourse of nationalism provides an important context for understanding the cooperation and complicity of women with such constructions. The image of 'motherhood', both in cultural representation of the nation as 'mother' and in women's roles as 'mothers of the nation' has been among the most powerful and exalted images of the feminine...(Sinha 331)

These warrior queens became appealing icons because of the ardent fervour with which they committed themselves to the functional role of women as a wife and a mother in Indian society. For instance, in the case of Rani Lakshmi Bai, Devi repeatedly eulogizes Rani for her motherly approach towards her realm and her son. Rani's public appearances were always with her son Damodar Rao. "The queen called for a public audience. She sat on the throne with Damodar on her lap... The Queen would walk around among the wounded and ask about their well-being, her stepmother reported. She would comfort them by affectionately stroking the injured, dress their wounds if necessary" (Devi 131-32). Thus, this quintessentially feminine aspect is an important criterion that qualifies Rani Lakshmi Bai as a representative national heroine. Thus, duty becomes a defining factor that qualifies these rulers to become icons in the nationalist discourse. In the biographical accounts of these queens, duty towards traditional values, customs, family, and the nation is highlighted to be as important as the battles they fought.

Disregarding caste and religion, Rani summoned and organized a women's troop. She would climb a wooden pole on the palace grounds and practice wrestling with women. Marking coconut trees with white for targets, pistol shooting was practiced on the palace grounds: sword-fighting and horse riding was also indulged in regularly (Devi 120). Simultaneously, there are instances recorded in Mahasweta Devi's depiction of the Rani, wherein she compensates for her unfeminine behaviour by constantly chanting the Puranas:

Her longing to go on a pilgrimage and shave off her hair in honour of her late husband was never to materialize because the English forbade her to leave Jhansi... Then she would eat and rest a little, and until three o'clock, write the name of Rama 1,100 times on tiny pieces of paper and stuff them into balls of whole wheat dough to feed to the fish in the sacred pond. Damodar helped his mother with great fervour in this activity. She listened to recitations of puranas and devotional songs until eight in the evening (80).

Another important facet instrumental in glorifying these queens over others is the fact that they fought a racially foreign enemy. According to Hindu kingship rituals, the primary duty of a Hindu king is to protect his kingdom and the social order, including religion and its practices. In those times, battles were fought with Hindu kings on both sides. Hence, the destruction of any state in those battles did not necessarily contribute to any change in the established Hindu culture and religion. It was considered an eternal process of change of guard, not as a threat to Hindu culture and society. On the other hand, a Hindu queen fighting a racially and culturally different colonial enemy signified a recourse to the ideals of Hindu kingship and explicates the popularity of Rani Lakshmi Bai in nationalist narratives.

Rani Lakshmi Bai, for instance, was a figure who simultaneously defied and defined the gendered discourse of nationalism. "Thus, the nation in the form of an abused or humiliated mother appeals to her sons and daughters, albeit often in differently gendered ways, to come to her protection and restore her honor" (Sinha 328). But in the case of Lakshmi Bai, as expressed in the national lore, instead of pleading with her sons and daughters, the queen led the assault against the imperial power. It demands special critical attention, as it reverses the gendered identities that form part and parcel of the nationalist project. The political and military acumen of the national female leader remains secondary to her gendered identity:

As an Indian woman relegated to a life of purdah, the Rani may have garnered sympathy, but as an Indian Queen who came out of the veil in rebellion against the British, she posed an interminable problem of representation and comprehension. As an Indian widow who had become sati or shaved her head and dedicated herself to a life of hardship, she may have excited a chivalric response, but as a royal widow who commanded troops and took British lives, she defied both rescue and reform. Thus, representations of the Rani complicate the often default reading of the native woman as a domestic matter relegated to the colonial context; she poses a real and symbolic threat to the nation, Britain, undermining both material and ideological foundations of the imperial project. (Singh 18).

On the other hand, Nawab Sikander Begum's soft power strategy ultimately helped maintain considerable autonomy in the state of Bhopal. Though the British intervened politically, culturally, and economically in the affairs of both states, these states managed to stay afloat in those politically turbulent times because of the strategies employed by the regent queen in Bhopal. These queens managed to instil regionalism over nationalism and preserved their states from being engulfed by the homogenizing tendencies of both the nationalist discourses and the imperial discourse of the British presidencies. It is owing to this successful strategy of simultaneously remaining aloof from both imperial and nationalist discourses and in making use of the benefits of both the colonial and national projects that this Begum requires special mention in history as the queen who redefined queenship, defying both the nationalist and imperial discourse:

"Indian women personified an Indian culture that had to be protected from the metaphoric rape imposed by colonialism. The British, on the other hand, used the model of the oppressed and abused Indian woman as an example of native depravity that could only be corrected through colonial rule" (Singh 73). So, in the midst of these contending narratives, where can we place Sikander Begum, who chose to write her own life sans the paternal backing of British colonialism and Indian nationalism? Begum defies the conventional understanding that we harbour about Indian Muslim women. Being a woman with agency, she not only dared to upend the patriarchal conventions of those times but also managed to question the colonial claims of the oppression of Indian women. She neither exhibited the gendered functional

identity of the Hindu nationalist project nor helped the British extend the claim that India is hostile to women's liberation. Begum occupied a space of resistance that was conveniently placed inaccessibly for the dominant discourses to tinker with.

“Finally, nationalist projects construct ‘women’ primarily through a heterosexual relationship to men that emphasizes a supposedly natural hierarchy between men and women” (Sinha 332). In the case of warrior queens, irrespective of being exceptional in their military skills, they believed in the conventional hierarchy of men over women, as is evident in their attempts to get the adopted male heir installed as the king. They never acknowledged their inherent right to rule the kingdom as capable queens. But in the case of the Begum of Bhopal, the line of succession passed on from mother to daughter. This unique passage of power was designed and legalized only in 1857 and was the result of the Begum's astute negotiations with the British. It became evident that to be loyal to the British doesn't necessarily mean the complete surrender of one's autonomy. Begum proved that loyalty to the British also initiated an understudied political apparatus of making the British accountable for rulers like Sikander's loyalty and political currency. Besides, Begum never defined herself in relation to males in the family- father, husband, or son. Instead, they managed to be autonomous individuals who flaunted their right to rule as female monarchs. When it comes to the Begums of Bhopal, the 107-year rule of these female monarchs has a fascinating uniqueness. Though they were appointed by the British as regent queens, the four Begums in succession inherited their right to rule from their mothers as opposed to regent queens elsewhere, who ruled on behalf of their minor sons or late husbands.

Most women glorified in the Indian cultural discourses are quintessentially figures who sacrificed their happiness, ambition, and life for their husbands and children. But the second Begum of Bhopal seems to have defied this age-old custom and set a precedent for Indian women. For instance, Begum Qudsia was the regent of Bhopal when Sikander was a minor. Later, Begum Sikander became the regent when her daughter Shahjehan was a minor. It was during Begum Sikander's regency that the rebellion of 1857 happened. Bhopal not only stayed loyal to the British, but also assisted the British in military expeditions with material and manpower:

Sikandar Begum had ruled Bhopal imperiously for sixteen years as Regent, acting on behalf of Shahjehan, the titular ruler. With her loyalty proven, Sikandar now mounted a campaign with the British to have herself recognized formally as the Begum of Bhopal, citing precedence of Muslim women who had been prominent rulers like Hazrat Ayesha and Queen Victoria, the Queen of England. Sikandar's demarche put the British in a dilemma because they could not be seen to renege on their own decision to appoint Shahjehan as the titular ruler while Sikandar acted as regent. On the other hand, Sikandar had proved her loyalty in an extreme crisis and had governed Bhopal into a highly progressive and successful state (Khan 48).

Shahjehan, daughter of Sikander, on whose behalf Sikander was ruling Bhopal, willingly deferred to her mother's decision to become the Queen herself. Thus, Sikander became the titular Begum of Bhopal, and her daughter Shahjehan became the heir apparent. This act of diplomatically wresting power from the British and the conservative Muslim community, although a watershed moment in Indian history, has seldom received the attention it deserves. This revolutionary act on the part of Begum Sikander was a seminal chapter in the history of the women's movement that remained unrecorded and unacknowledged. Sikander brilliantly plotted against the British gendered conception of headship and became the ruling monarch of Bhopal. This Begum not only dared to become the reigning monarch of the state but also managed to set a precedent for Indian women to dream beyond sharing power in a heterosexual familial setting, where women always have a secondary position. The reason why this glorious chapter in the history of the women's movement in India remains unrecorded is neither apolitical nor innocent.

Mahua Sarkar's study has "...argued that modern nationalist and liberal feminist historiographies of colonial India have largely been Hindu centric, and have discursively and materially rendered Muslim women as invisible, oppressed and backward, even while they were exercising all kinds of agency" (qtd. in Gupta10). Thus, including these momentous acts of revolution and liberation of these Muslim women rulers counter the nationalist discourse which favoured the meek Hindu women over the Muslim woman. So, eulogizing a Muslim ruler like Sikander Begum, her female ancestors, and successors, who were in complete control not only over their political and personal lives but also over the destiny of their principality,

defies the nationalist argument that Hindu women, with her traditional functional roles, need no further rescue or reform. Besides, the Hindu nationalist argument that the Muslim dark ages replaced the Vedic golden age of women finds itself baseless in the remarkable life and career of Sikander Begum:

As signifiers of the nation, women needed to be modern, but they could not mark a complete break from tradition. The woman of the anticolonial nationalist imagination, then was not necessarily a 'traditional' woman. She was more likely the 'modern-yet-modest woman who both symbolized the nation and negotiated its tension between tradition and modernity Nationalism constructed the "dynamic public roles" of the women "as a duty to the nation rather than as right" (Sinha 329).

Analysing the levels of dynamic behaviour shown by the regent queens in the public sphere of their state politics would unveil a gendered politics that would question the expected gender performance of these women rulers. For the warrior queen, it was mostly the agency they exercised as dynamic public figures of action, which was under the conception that it was their duty to serve and protect the nation. On the other hand, the Begum was dynamic in her public spheres not because she felt dutiful towards their respective states but because they considered it their right. So, the difference in the agency exercised by these two categories of queens emerges from their underlying driving forces- duty and right. It can be observed that these queens who acted on behalf of their duty were eulogized, or their actions were represented as stemming from a sense of duty. Though these warrior queens had the audacity to go out in public against the British, their actions were considered duty-bound to the time's customs and conventions. In the former case, these queens are portrayed as the selfless heroine of the national struggle for independence. In the latter case, Begum is a woman who was self-conscious of her rights as an individual, on par with her male counterparts. Nationalist projects demand that brave actions emerge from the collective agenda of national freedom and duty towards the state, not from self-assertion.

So, the difference between the reformer queens and the warrior queens in this respect is that when the warrior queens were knowingly or unknowingly agents of their culture and the ensuing nationalist discourse emanating from it, the reformer queens made religion and culture their agents to rule the principality in their own right. Although Begum came out of the *purdah*

at one point, she was quite cautious of the orthodox community she was ruling. After the rebellion of 1857, the British blamed the Muslims for the revolt:

Sikandar, with the wind in her sails, took advantage of British largesse towards her. Money, technical aid and political support poured into Bhopal. With the British ascribing greater blame to the Muslims for the mutiny, Sikandar Begum set forth to recover her own prestige before the Muslim community that had been tarnished by her perceived loyalty to the British. She went to the famous Jama Masjid in Delhi that had been contemptuously converted by the British as a stable for their horses. She ordered the closure of the stable, paid large sums for the renovation of the famous mosque and got down on her knees herself to scrub and purify the mosque. No one, not even the British, dared challenge the Begum in her efforts and she was able to regain her stature, in the eyes of her Muslim brethren, as a pious and courageous defender of the Muslim community (Khan 49).

This magnanimous act of retrieving the mosque lost to colonial vengeance was an attempt to reclaim her identity as a staunch Muslim in a Muslim state. The 1857 revolution was dubbed as a 'Mohammaden conspiracy,' with Bahadur Shah Zafar as the titular head of the rebellion. Being a Mughal successor state and the second most important Muslim state in Princely India, her calculated actions at refashioning herself as a strong Muslim devotee should be recorded as the brilliant employment of a religious card in her favour. Even though Sikander Begum was loyal to the British, she exercised considerable agency and autonomy that was absent in the warrior queens. For instance, even though the state of Bhopal was an ally of the British since its inception, Sikander Begum, who was a powerful ruler, "Once, as a teenager...had administered a public slap to the British Political Agent, Lancelot Wilkinson, when he had ingratiatingly touched her ear-ring" (Khan 44). This audacity to strike back diplomatically and otherwise at the British, nationalist religious, and other internal interventions and interferences makes the Begum a political icon lost to the selective tradition of remembering.

For the nationalists, women were an important cultural signifier. For instance, in the representations of warrior queens like Rani Lakshmi Bai, we find a tendency to place the transgressive acts of these queens to come out of the *purdah* and defend the state in the open,

as an act to protect one's culture and tradition. The warrior queens found their place in national history because they fought a foreign enemy who was depriving them of their resources and freedom and intruding into their culture and tradition. But Sikander Begum is neither valorized nor criticized in national history. So, at this juncture, we have to look at the interminable problem posed by the idea of regionalism in the nationalist narrative. Begum was essentially as committed as a Rani, to their respective principalities. They both exuded the same intention, when one remained loyal and the other fought against the British.

Upon further analysis, these two categories of queens are even more difficult to understand in binary terms of loyal and rebellious queens concerning their association with the British. The warrior queens transgressed the boundary set for women in conservative Indian culture. They questioned the taboos stipulated for Indian women by intruding into the male bastion of war and politics. To use these queens in the national discourse, they essentially had to be re-feminized on the lines of tradition and culture. So, for this, a duty-bound warrior woman was created to represent these queens in fictional and non-fictional accounts of these queens. On the other hand, Sikander Begum posed a more serious problem because her life and policies legalized and normalized women in power. Begum defied the paternal backing of the colonial government and the nationalist discourse. The warrior queen was used in nationalist discourse for the benefit of the nationalists. Begum used the benefits of being loyal to the colonial government to meet her specific political goals.

“Women ...had to carry the more complex burden of representing the colonized nation's 'betweenness' with respect to precolonial traditions and 'western' modernity. The nationalist project both initiated women's access to modernity and set the limits of the desirable modernity for women” (Sinha 329). This in-betweenness is nowhere more evident than in the lives and afterlives of these queens. Both these categories of queens had to bargain with tradition and modernity, the colonial government, and nationalist projects to safeguard their kingdom and the dynasty. Rani Lakshmi Bai, by becoming the icon of the nationalist movements, had to somehow concede her agency and status as a woman who dared to transgress the special boundary set for Indian women. She has been eternally caricatured as a woman who dared to transgress for the tradition, thereby arresting her only as a Hindu nationalist icon. She was never an icon of the emancipated woman but a woman who was cautious enough to be

traditional in her transgressive behaviour. On the other hand, the Begum efficiently defied the paternal backing of both nationalism and colonialism, thereby not only becoming a woman of agency and autonomy but also escaping the typical colonial discourse on Indian women as being deprived or plotting, thus becoming a relatively neutral presence in the nationalist discourse-neither valorized nor criticized. When Rani Laxmi Bai was variously used by both the discourse of colonialism and nationalism, Sikander Begum employed the discourse to her favour .

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

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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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Gender and the Nationalist Imagination of Women in Sri Lanka

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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" (*ayale yana*), 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.

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The Multitudes Within: A Thematic Analysis of Anita Nahal's Poetry in *What's Wrong with Us Kali Women?* and *Hey...Spilt milk is Spilt, Nothing Else*

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Introduction: The poetry of Anita Nahal reflects on myriad themes, experiences and life in general. A close reading of her poetry would reveal that they were impacted by experiences she drew from the various roles she took during her own life - citizen, immigrant, academician and single mother and also her travels throughout the world. Anita Nahal has authored four poetry collections and co-edited three anthologies, besides making her contributions to children's literature and flash fiction. She was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2022 and her poems have been widely anthologized.

This paper attempts to analyse Nahal's poetry in two anthologies: *What is Wrong With Us Kali Women* (2021) and *Hey, Spilt Milk is Spilt, Nothing Else* (2018). As a contemporary diasporic Indian woman poet, Nahal engages with themes like racism, sexism, ageism, mental health, immigration, poverty, domestic violence, and the environment, among others. She writes about the endless injustices that abound all over the world.

The titles of both these collections reflect a great deal of optimism. *Hey... Spilt Milk is Spilt, Nothing Else* (2018) takes an uneventful incident and turns it into a metaphor that philosophizes life. The title invites curiosity and instantly reminds us to accept things as they are; instead of crying over spilt milk, one needs to push towards accepting the outcome and moving forward with their life. It is crucial to open up to new opportunities and calmly put our faith in the cycle of life as Gwendolyn Scotton Bethea succinctly observes in her review of the

book: “Nahal has an unusual ability to take a metaphor like “spilt milk” and settle our souls into a calm acceptance of the inevitabilities of our lives. Yet, she encourages and challenges us to create and believe in new opportunities for life, love, and laughter” (4).

Nahal loves to combine words with images and she has creatively included pencil sketches to graphically enhance the poems. *What’s Wrong with Us Kali Women?* is an evocation of the age-old mythology of goddess Kali, her fierce appearance, prowess and overall energy for which she stands. Kali as a noun and adjective has two principal connotations in the Indian culture: a) It refers to the goddess Kali and the legends associated with her and b) It literally refers to a woman who is dark-skinned (mostly in a negative way). By asking this question for the title of her book, Nahal has expanded the word to encapsulate not only powerful women but all people from marginalised communities who face discrimination – racial or for being too liberal. She rings the bell for equality and social justice loudly by summoning the unabashed energy signified by goddess Kali:

We are the *Kali* women.

And all other female, male, androgynous gods.

We don’t distinguish.

We seek...

Between screams and footsteps pining for justice denied.

Justice battered.

Justice flagged

Murdered. Burned.

Their dark skin, their gender, religion, their sandals blood stained, their clothes drenched (Nahal, *What’s Wrong*, 15).

A Call Against “-isms”

“Would you like to try on my Hat Please” ((Nahal, *Hey, Split Milk*, 19) is a poem where Nahal pens down the difficulties of being an immigrant. The poet’s voice resonates with those of all immigrants who are inferiorized in every possible way. The poet speaks of overcoming these challenges by remaining steadfast and showing determination in the face of adversity.

In the poem, “Divorced Indian Wife” (Nahal, *Hey, Spilt Milk*, 19), the poet emerges as the survivor of a broken marriage. She has managed to transform herself into a self-aware person who is not vulnerable to emotional blackmail anymore. She says, “Dear ex-husband, don’t push for more. I don’t keep my feminism for my classrooms anymore” (34). “Hierarchical Puke” (*Hey, Spilt Milk*, 68) and “Snoot & Snout” (*What’s Wrong*, 55) both address the issue of hierarchy that exists everywhere. The poet acknowledges the need to have ranks to maintain the integrity of institutional structures but shuns the way ranks are misused by strongly calling out red tape and autocracy.

In the poem “Sari” (Nahal, *Hey, Spilt Milk*, 93), she is reminded of her mother as she drapes her mother’s sari: “As I age, I recall her in you, and especially love wearing the ones she gave me, wrapping her grace around me” (93). A mundane object acquired a new depth and meaning here; it is a memory that countless Indians familiar with this sartorial might carry with them, but are unable to express. Her conversation with the personified version of “Blame” (Nahal, *Hey Spilt Milk*, 18) is extremely relatable:

Blame is sitting on the matted daybed outside in the sunny courtyard now, fanning its
sweat.

It asks for cold water.

As I hand over the glass, managing a crooked smile it whispers,

‘You two keep fighting while I bask in the glory of your lost opportunities’ (18).

The poet/persona gives a soliloquy regarding the innumerable number of biases human beings perpetuate and practice in the poem titled “No Such Thing as an Ideal World” (Nahal, *Hey, Split Milk*, 21). According to her, an ideal world would be one where “abhorrence, bigotry/ “isms” would not wear benign veneers walking among the norm...” (21).

The poem “Democracy in Decline” (Nahal, *What's Wrong*, 36) deals with the fall of democracy in a country that calls itself a developed nation. In a unique soliloquy-like poem “They Say People Need to Unite,” the poet asks the world: “Are we not one people, one species?” (82). She has also written poems on the Covid 19 pandemic in *What's Wrong with Us Kali Women?* clearly stating that human differences need to be set aside in the wake of a pandemic or any similar global catastrophe.

Nahal explores different styles of writings in her poems. Communicating her sensibilities through her poems, she uses prose-poetry and free verse. In *Hey, Spilt Milk is Spilt, Nothing Else*, Nahal deploys a free verse style which makes it convenient for the readers to construe the intense emotions constituting the poems. On the other hand, in *What's Wrong with Us Kali Women?* she engages in prose-poetry to transcend the boundaries presented by the respective genres of prose and poetry.

Holika, Sita and Sati are figures that she imports from the patriarchal and mythological tradition in the poem titled “*Holika, Sita, Sati*” (Nahal, *What's Wrong*, 69) and reiterates their story from a feminist standpoint. The common thread linking these three figures is the element of fire; fire killed two and tested the third. Nahal fiercely overturns the traditional representation and asks three questions for each of these stories: “Why is evil always shown burning, not reforming?.../Why does a woman only have to walk through fire to prove anything?.../ Why does a wife have to sacrifice her life when her husband dies?” (69-70).

In another poem titled “Fire Couldn’t Stop Laughing”, the protagonist faces the same element- fire -which has consumed countless women before her, but this time she becomes a metaphor for countless women as she marches on unflinchingly: “I will walk through you’, I said./ ‘I have no qualms, nor fears./ But will I come out without feelings this time?” (Nahal, *What's Wrong*, 89).

Major Themes

Some of her significant themes are:

Racism: In “Cacophony” (*Hey, Spilt milk*, 9.), Nahal writes about the bigotry that people show towards darker skin tones. Folks murmur and talk in “hushed tones” or make noises every time they see someone who “appears” different on the outside. At the same time, some white folks

tan their skin to look exotic. She also talks about the bias with regard to her colour in India in “Darkie”: “She is quite *sanvali* (dark).../give her lots of milk it might lighten her” (*Hey, Spilt milk*, 26). She plays on the pun of the Hindi word, “*Saaf*,” which translates as clean, however, is also employed to express that someone’s skin is fair/light.

In the poem “What’s Wrong with Us Kali Women?,” Nahal employs mythology to turn the mirror towards the society itself:

My skin is kali, my heart is gold, my soul is a child, cries, laughs, jumps, feelings flow
like fresh churned cream from cow’s milk.

My skin disgusts you.

Yet you try to tan yours.

My skin disturbs you, yet you find it exotic.

My skin you call *gandi*.

But I am clean. I bathe.

In winters when my skin lightens a bit, you proclaim, I’m looking *saaf*, fair.

I was always clean.

It’s your mind that is dirty. ...

Ma Kali. Ma Kali. Ma Kali. Ma Kali.

Don’t think she’s not watching (15).

Nahal also addresses contemporary racial incidents like the murder of George Floyd that kick-started the Black Lives Matter movement in her poem titled “How Easy it is for a Black Life to be Taken” (*What’s Wrong*, 17).

Ageism: Nahal expresses her struggle to come to terms with the changes that happen in her body through the natural process of ageing. “Dyeing Undying Love of” (Nahal, *Hey, Spilt Milk*, 120) addresses the ritual of colouring one’s hair. Frustrated with the repetition of the activity and the messiness of the ritual, she wants to stop and let her hair grow naturally white. The act

of dyeing her hair acts as a metaphor to remind her to love herself as she is - to age naturally and be more content in life.

Through the poem “Flesh Hanging Loose” (*Hey, Spilt Milk*, 58), Nahal addresses the inevitability of becoming old and accepting it as it is a natural process:

We all will become old
As there is no way out
The normal flow of water
Cannot be reversed
And yet some merrily
Go along destroying
Their own path (58).

The poet had seen a glimpse of old age in her grandmother: As a child, I would stroke, the wrinkles on my grandmother’s hand, mesmerized by the softness of the folds, /And the way they lay like immaculate ripples of water on dry sands./ Wise. Knowing. A bit sad. A bit mocking (“Grandmother’s Wrinkles,” *Hey Spilt milk*, 79).

Mental Health : “Claustrophobia” (Nahal, *What’s Wrong with*, 83) deals with the fragmentary nature of belonging to two lands at once. Prior to leaving India, Nahal’s protagonist and her son sought shelter in Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Delhi, for a few days before shifting elsewhere (*What’s Wrong with*, 66). While looking at the beautiful pictures of the ashram much later in life, the poet-persona recalls the time she was staying there - hurt, anxious, multitasking. An ashram, a place of relaxation, is juxtaposed with the worries in the poet’s mind –what next?

The Covid 19 Pandemic was a time when the importance of mental health shot to focus: “ I suppose the news of their bodies being quickly driven away by body collectors in hazmat suits,/ Never to be seen by their loved ones again made me cry more for their clothes and bedsheets that their loved ones would never see them in again.”(“What Happened to Their Clothes,” *What’s Wrong with*, 18).

Women: In “Maryada and Modern *Draupadi*” (Nahal, *What’s wrong*, 71), she celebrates womanhood not only for herself but every woman who thinks less of herself: “I want to feel

special when I lay down, unforgettable. /So, I chose to be me./ A woman. Earthy and sensual” (72). She loves and accepts her sexuality and individuality as they are.

She writes about her experience of building a new life in some of the poems, one being, “Fallacy of a Single Immigrant Mother” (Nahal, *What’s Wrong with*, 51). In this poem, she also universalizes the single mother/parent experience by making it clear that she can do all for a child that a couple may be able to do. She wishes to debunk the “fallacy” that single immigrant mothers are frail, or helpless or cannot raise well-balanced children.

With the title “Avinash” (*indestructible*) (Nahal, *Hey, Spilt milk*, 23) speaking for itself, Nahal displays her resilience in facing the world. She is:

A woman that modernity and tradition, or things with no labels,
Take turns to visit,
And I may make a heady mix of various cocktails
Or simply a bag of non aromatic tea might go down my throat. (23)

One of Nahal’s strongest poems “Feeling Down, Being Down” (Nahal, *What’s Wrong with*, 33 and *Hey, Spilt Milk*, 21), is a spectacular piece on menstruation and the taboos attached to it. The poet questions the logic behind considering the blood impure when the same biological truth is responsible for bringing new life into the world. It concerns her that folks are alone or lonely and depression is a mental challenge that very few, at least in the Eastern world wish to speak about.

“Devi” (Nahal, *Hey, Spilt milk*, 93), overturns the age-old traditions and moral correctness that an Indian woman stands for. Women are also sometimes addressed as Devi in India, though Devi is also a generic name for a goddess, and placed on a pedestal as it is patriarchal convenience to place pressure on a woman to live up to “high moral standards,” of course set by men. In the poem “Devi” Nahal doesn’t want to be called as such. She is a Devi who doesn’t serve at the pleasure of men, and if there is no man in her life, she can survive and thrive: “This Devi aspires/To dream. To live” (22)

Motherhood : Nahal has explored the theme of motherhood in two ways. On the one hand, she allows the reader to peek into her relationship with her mother as is vividly expressed in “Mother and her Child”:

Your fingertips with mine
Your cheek to mine
The way your eyes look into mine
The way you lead, I follow...I lead, you follow...
Connections from soul to soul
Beyond age, beyond time
Universe to universe, time over time
No endings, just beginnings with cycles of love to love
Even through dimensions unknown (33).

In “I did not say, I love you to my Mama,” her last moments with her mother and her fear of never seeing her again are underlined.

On the other hand, Nahal explores the concept of motherhood through her experience of being a mother. Her poems encapsulate the struggles of single mothers in everyday life where they are subjected to unwarranted questions and mockery. Through her poem, “Fallacy of a Single Immigrant Mom” (*What’s Wrong with*, 51), she depicts the challenges of a single immigrant mother and how she deals with them. However, despite all the struggles and obstacles she had to endure, her unending love for her child is a quintessential example of motherhood as she puts forth in “Why I Usually cry in the Shower” (*What’s Wrong with*, 53):

I cry for lost opportunities,
Lost relationships, status, family jamborees, cultural sustenance,
Lost growing romantic-old together, lost years of youth, lost newsflashes and lost
sentiments that refuse to let go. ..
I’ll accept it as long as in each time frame my child is born to me again (53).

Love: “A Sip of Wine” (Nahal, *What’s Wrong with*, 28), deals with the basic human instinct of desire which consumes people when they are in love:

I seek an illusion of a time long gone.

Bound to delusion, I try to unshackle.

But when a sip or two of wine waltzes down my throat resting and churning with the
juices in my tummy,

I miss you more than always (28).

In “Tenderly” (*Hey, Spilt Milk*, 26), Nahal talks about the tender love that should exist between a couple. Any kind of “pull/push/hurt” will sever that relationship forever.

The poet eloquently expresses emotions that many might feel when leaving a person they used to love and moving on in their life in the poem, “Fresh Start” (Nahal, *Hey, Spilt Milk*, 37); it is a difficult task. She searches for a justification to write to him and maybe ends up meeting him one last time. But she restrains herself and packs memorabilia attached to him. Finally, the process of letting go is complete just as a “fresh start” knocks at her door.

Diaspora: Nahal’s poem “Know Your Wheel, Homo Sapiens” (*What’s Wrong with*, 27) records the trauma of parting from homelands. When migrating, a person suffers from a feeling of loss of home which transforms/questions the notions of the “self,” “other” and singular or collective identity. Throughout the poem “Paying my Debt to Two Lands,” Nahal looks at her past, remembering every small memory constituting her childhood and creating her identity and roots (Nahal, *What’s Wrong with*, 32). However, the depth of Nahal’s poems clearly reflects the complications and beauties of an immigrant migrating to the promised land of “honey, milk and plenty.”

Nahal’s understanding of migration is developed through her personal experiences. For instance, in one of her poems, “Stacking” (*Hey, Spilt milk*, 24) Nahal writes “...three continents, and/many home bases...” appears to be a reference to her own journey across the world where she established multiple home bases with altering cultures, spaces, and people. However, despite her long journey, the yearning for home is conspicuous in the “Migratory Birds” (*Hey, Spilt Milk*, 35) where she writes “I love you, I will miss you, Mamma.” “Migratory Birds” successfully reflects the contradictions faced by an individual while leaving their homelands as she writes “...I know it’s not easy/ I know you wanted to turn back from each

corner, door and road screaming..." (56). These contradictions highlight the aspects of diaspora where immigrants do not necessarily want to return to their homeland, yet roots and people are not forgotten and an unbreakable link remains.

Human Identity: Through a number of poems in both her anthologies, Nahal has addressed the ultimate human desire to understand mortality. In "Ancient Creation" (Nahal, *What's Wrong With*, 49) Nahal questions the origins of humans and the possibilities as well:

Who am I to say how we humans were created...

Who am I to say from where I came?

Or you. Or them.

Or any identity chosen or shoved upon us (49).

Towards the end of the same poem, Nahal speaks on behalf of Mother Earth and says, "I blindfolded myself so I would not be biased against any of my children"(49).

Humanism and Environment: "Hope" (*What's Wrong With*, 56 and *Hey, Spilt Milk* 71) reinstates the poet's faith in humankind and someday reaching "the promised land." Hope is personified here and is shown as feeling depressed after losing faith in the world. The poet instils courage by evoking Mandela, Martin Luther King and Gandhi. She asks "Hope" to speak up again and again and keep the light burning, even if the abyss seems to be engulfing us all. One cannot abandon hope when the world is failing; the chant should go on.

In "Inconvenience of Poverty," (*Hey, Spilt Milk*, 55) Nahal has tackled the hypocrisy with which charity is practised in our world. It is a guilt-driven act of the privileged population to feel good about themselves. Is the selfless act actually selfless? The poet sees someone familiar roaming the streets in *Homelessness can Happen to Anyone* (Nahal, *Hey, Spilt Milk*, 67) and emotes that although money may provide comfort, no one can predict anyone's fate.

"Earth's Dying Soul" (Nahal, *Hey, Spilt milk*, 76) is a warning to save the environment while we can. Humankind has put extreme pressure on the planet and Earth is dying a slow death:

Please,

Everyone...
Please move away.
Just stop it
Let it rest.
It's weary
Let it recover
Let it (76).

The angst and the helplessness that engulfed humanity when Covid hit, is addressed by the poem "Covid 19s Inverted Triangle" (Nahal, *What's Wrong with*, 42):

When sadness seizes and piles and piles on to Covid19's lunatic inverted triangle.
When murders, accidents, rapes, war, suicide, civil conflicts, law and order losses,
And untold diseases vie for double jeopardy during that very Covid19's irrationality.
When mortgages lay peeved in vaults.
When vaults are empty.
When homes are fumigated.
When poor are dehumanized.
When animals are terminated.
When nature is brutalized (42).

She feels frustrated about the situation the world finds itself in and questions the existence of a higher power; faith in love and God is severely tested and the answers remain unclear.

Conclusion

Nahal's poems clearly have two dimensions - one that revolves around her own turbulent life and then the confusion, bias, injustice and mayhem she sees in the world. By putting into use her distinctive experiences in a thoughtful and empathetic manner, she has undoubtedly painted a large canvas in myriad hues.

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GENDERED NATIONALISM AND THE SRI LANKAN WAR: READING SELECT REPRESENTATIONS

Preethu P

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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Graphical India: The Nation and its Performances in Shaheen Bagh

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Abstract: The paper examines the ways that nation can be represented using the affective qualities of graphic novels. The visual element of the graphic novel, coupled with the ways that the panels can meld, merge or recede mirrors the myriad ways that the Nation peers into its performative aspects. The paper analyses the graphic novel *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* in terms of the ways that it uses memory and the female body to create a Nation. The ways that women-led protest movements have actually led to policy changes on the ground is also discussed here.

Keywords: Shaheen Bagh, Graphic Novel, India, Azadi, Ita Mehrotra, *Hum Dekhenge*

The rise and relevance of the graphic narrative is a well-documented area of study, especially in terms of the flexibility it lends to the stories it seeks to tell. Considered an evolutionary descendant of the comic book, graphic narratives present a very different ethos. The author of the Pulitzer Prize winning graphic narrative *Maus* told the *Comics Journal*, “It seems to me that comics have already shifted from being an icon of illiteracy to becoming one of the last bastions of literacy” (qtd. in Bernard-Donals, 147). *Maus* depicted the Holocaust in all its grit,

misery and inhumanity. The allegorical portrayals of the characters made the work even more potent, in terms of the impact it had on the reading public. Interestingly, the jury of the Pulitzer was in a quandary regarding the category in which *Maus* could be slotted into- finally deciding to award it under the Special Citations and Awards. To the New York Times Book Review that had categorized *Maus* as fiction, Art Spiegelman, the creator of the graphic narrative wrote:

If your list were divided into literature and non-literature, I could gracefully accept the compliment as intended, but to the extent that 'fiction' indicates a work isn't factual, I feel a bit queasy. As an author, I believe I might have lopped several years off the thirteen I devoted to my two-volume project if I could have taken a novelist's license while searching for a novelist's structure (qtd. in Doherty 69).

This statement by Spiegelman opens up very interesting thoughts about the position that graphic narratives occupy. The initial nomenclature of the graphic novel was generally looked upon with disfavour precisely because it did not leave much leeway for a more interpretative treatment of the idea of a text. Hillary Chute points out in *Comics as Literature: Reading Graphic Narrative* (2008) that she uses the term 'graphic narrative,' "instead of the more common term 'graphic novel,' because the most gripping works coming out now, from men and women alike, claim their own historicity—even as they work to destabilize standard narratives of history. Particularly, there is a significant yet diverse body of nonfiction graphic work that engages with the subject either in extremis or facing brutal experience" (92).

The fresh perspective that the graphic narrative offers in terms of reimagining what a text is and expanding the possibilities of the constituent parts of a narrative has very contemporary significations. At a time when communication and narration can happen through the limited characters on Twitter or as TikTok videos, Snapchats, Instagram, Facebook stories, YouTube shorts, the borderlessness and visuality of graphic narratives are a very important cultural discourse. The elasticity of the medium allows the illustrations to be without text as well. The absence of words, thus creating a participative, conversational reader, who is free to fill in the gaps, understand the situation and even move on to the next panel in silence.

Graphic narratives are very tactile and voluble in that they can turn a panel or a page into a riot of colours and collages of diverse objects. The cultural swirl that graphic narratives are capable of, the mimicking of brain processes that can traverse from thinking about one's job to suddenly thinking about platefuls of food can all be presented in the graphic narrative without breaking the conversation. In India, the last decades of the twentieth century saw a virtual proliferation of comics across languages. The *Bobanum Moliyum* comics in Malayalam, the Indrajal comics, Diamond Comics and the *Amar Chitra Katha* series brought a sense of vitality not just to children's literature, but also formed the bedrock of cultural modernity in the cultures it catered to. The social commentary of the Malayalam series, the foregrounding of science, the negotiations of power and the need for an amicable solution as represented by the *Chacha Chaudhri* comics, the need to fight against 'anti-national' and supernatural elements that proliferate the jungles and waterways of the country such as Indrajal's *Phantom*- all grappled with the ideas of a changing world and cultural order.

In 1994, Orijit Sen created what is possibly the first graphic narrative in India, *The River of Stories*. Sen, who has become one of the best-known names in Indian Graphic narratives, illustrates the vital issue of the cost of development by taking up the issue of the building of the Narmada Dam, locally known as the Rewa dam in Ambarkhan. The Rewa Dam, a thinly veiled reference to the Narmada or the Sardar Sarovar dam has impacted the lives of thousands of tribals and rendered them homeless and in a precarious state. Sen employs mythology, in this case, the tribal narrative of how the world came into existence, to bring a connect between the Universe and the Earth and the idea of co-existence. The goals set by the Nation and its dreams for a brighter tomorrow mean nothing to the tribals. This developmental 'anxiety' experienced by the nation that it wishes to extend to all people in lieu of considering them its citizens can only end in further alienation.

The graphic narrative in India has grown out of the chaos of the postmodern, globalised, and now post-truth space that public discourse finds itself in today. The political and narrative consciousness that the graphic narrative radiates makes it a very important segment of Indian

Writing in English. In *The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, History and Critique*, Pramod K. Nayar views:

...the graphic narrative as adding to the existing corpus of texts in IWE a new representational mode that re-invigorates the canon, the form and the themes. The Indian graphic narrative demands a new literacy, a new pedagogy and a new interpretive frame. Further, the graphic narrative takes the tensions, dilemmas and concerns of traditional IWE and discusses these in a popular medium, offering, therefore, not only a democratizing of forms of socio-political commentary but also a democratizing of the language of cultural analytics (7).

He feels that the possibilities of presenting different ways of telling the story- as a documentary, a sarcastic autobiography, a traumatic reality all adds to different ways of seeing as well. The graphic narrative also provides a break from the various narrative stages that Indian Writing has been going through and the influence of which has continued to resonate through the ages. Nayar continues:

In the nation's longing for form, the graphic novel represents a whole new formal apparatus that mixes and matches multiple strategies.... The graphic narrative, with its verbal-visual and critical literacy, is the medium India needs to address contemporary concerns and provide a politically edged cultural critique. 'Critical literacy' embodied in the graphic narrative enables us to see texts as situated within unequal social fields of caste, patriarchy, capitalism and demands that the reader becomes alert to the position he or she takes vis-à-vis not just the text but the social domains represented in it (8).

The ontological and epistemological situatedness of the graphic narrative allows it to interrogate vital questions of history, identity, modernity, capitalism, and the tool of narration itself. Space is one of the fundamental aspects of the graphic narrative. It is not only the space that the text as a physical entity occupies, the space that resides within and outside the text also is a relevant participant in the narrative. In *The River of Stories*, the river, while not being an active component in the narrative, flows into and out of the narrative through the contemporary and cultural value of sustainability and mythology. The spaces depicted in the graphic narrative need not be

monochromatic or even polychromatic; they can be blank spaces that mirror thought, speech, emotion or absence. As Sonya J. Nair points out, “The form of the comic book when deployed as a narrative, has an immense potential for generating subcultural spaces. This signifies the spaces between the panels or the very absence of white spaces with immense subcultural value” (558).

Critical literacy is what informs the graphic narrative and also entrusts the reader with a degree of awareness to catch on to the relevance of the narrative at hand. The presentations in works such as *Tianmen* (1989) by Morgan Chua, *Persepolis* (2000) by Marjane Satrapi and Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* (1993) require an interactive reading involving interrogating identities, histories and ideologies. The presentation of human and non-human rights, climate refugees, political violence, human trafficking, the challenges of loneliness, legal rights and disability- ask the reader to determine their position within and outside the text. These interrogations cause ruptures at fundamental levels of textuality, semiotics and ideology. The spaces created by such ruptures renders the seemingly monolithic structures of nation, society, rituals, customs and ideology unstable. In short, the Nation is rendered fragile through the many subnations that come to be portrayed and presented.

This instability is what is generally feared regarding the graphic narrative- the incomprehensibility, not just of the genre, but also the very contemporary modality of its presentation. It is like graffiti on paper. It can be called better than graffiti, as it is certainly more mobile and like graffiti, it can take on more meanings, though it cannot be painted over.

Perhaps, it is the mediated presentation of History that often creates such opposition to graphic narratives. The histories presented in graphic narratives are rarely populist. They deal with the less familiar, the little-known. The lines of the personal and the political histories are often blurred. But what is to be inferred from such a presentation of history is that there is no such thing as an official history and that history is always narrated and represented. In *Comics as Literature: Reading Graphic Narrative*, Hillary Chute points out:

The graphic narrative accomplishes this work [of the textualization of context and contextualization of text] with its manifest handling of its own artifice, its attention to its

seams. Its formal grammar rejects transparency and renders textualization conspicuous, inscribing the context in its graphic presentation...The most important graphic narratives explore the conflicted boundaries of what can be said and what can be shown at the intersection of collective histories and life stories (458-59).

The graphic narrative genre in India is a very vibrant one, with the subcultural vibe extremely dominant. There is a sense of the forbidden and underground that many graphic narratives such as the *Mixtape* series exude, with their brown covers and deliberately stapled book binds. Such books draw inspiration from the Zines, yet another variation of the graphic narrative that emphasizes creative content like poetry and short story, or sometimes, a set of illustrations. Graphic narratives also come as Zines and their appeal lie in their limited editions, which are often produced by hand and cost very little. These Zines, of course, took their inspiration from the Little Magazines that often published lesser-known voices. These publications have immense subcultural value for the interim space they occupy between kitsch, art and collectibles. More often than not, the Indian graphic narrative is a psychedelic, schizophrenic space that is occupied by a series of characters seeking to narrate their histories and constantly bending and breaking the various versions of history narrated to us since school or by our neighbours or national television. This mediated aspect of history is made obvious by illustrating the impact events of 'national' importance such as the Partition, the Emergency, the CAA on the lives of individuals. For instance, in Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2010), the character listens to the radio and understands that an Emergency has been declared.

There is a case to be made for the female character whose perspective of the city and its spaces must be a vital point of articulation. *Kari, Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back* (2015) – an anthology and *Shaheen Bagh* (2021) by Ita Mehrotra (which this paper discusses in detail) are vital presences in the visuality of these narratives. The narrative in *Drawing the Line* literally draws lines around the characters so as to show the precarity of public spaces that do not seem to understand the notion of a female outside her house. Artists such as Kaveri Gopalakrishnan draw their concept of a world without boundaries that does not take notice of women going to office without a bra or having the luxury of simply scratching in public or constantly checking her

appearance. These liberties in themselves seem negligible especially in a megacity that is attractive for its anonymity. However, this anonymity is always mythical as there are always people who know you or keep tabs.

In her essay, *Graphic Novels and Delhi: Contested Spaces in the Popular*, Sangeeta Mittal points out:

The Graphic Novel with its legacy of negotiating trauma, nostalgia, marginalisation, memory, and identity makes possible the representation of the relationship of the city-zen with the lived space of the city in its characteristic de-centred and irreverential manner. Whether it is a city grappling with oppression and exploitation or a site of postmodern trials and tribulations, Graphic Novels make and represent the counter-city of non-touristy, non-privileged and non-conformist spaces (137).

The stories that the city feeds its citizens is symbolized in the name of Kari's building, Crystal Palace like a pit stop in a fairytale. She imagines it to be a place "Where gold trees with silver boughs bear pomegranates with real ruby seeds. Floors of marble, ceilings of brocade. Place where twelve dancing princesses dance through the night until the soles of their shoes wear out" (Patil 6).

The process of this presentation also presupposes seeing the visuality of the graphic form which is at the crux of its creative identity. The graphic novel is a terrain that reflects the culture of visuality that is integral to the South-Asian culture, as the idea of line of sight is crucial to modes of worship and so is the idea of the evil eye. These visuals that narrate stories thus are significant participants in the narrativizing of histories, especially those histories that have been ignored or not presented in the way they deserve to be. Marianne Hirsch feels that graphic narratives complicate:

...clear differentiations between word and image. With words always already functioning as images and images asking to be read as much as seen, comics are biocular texts par excellence. Asking us to read back and forth between images and words, comics reveal the

visuality and thus the materiality of words and the discursivity and narrativity of images (1213).

The politics of nation and nationalism stands out in Ita Mehrotra's *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* which presents the narratives that sprung from the protests against the CAA in India. Coming out of a nondescript settlement comprising mostly of Muslims, the protests from Shaheen Bagh found resonance across the country and the narrative surrounding the protests mirrored much of what passes off as public and official rhetoric in the country. All across the world, students and women have led protests against oppressive governments that have gone on to cause regime changes. The grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the protesting women in Iran, Sudan and Turkey, the indigenous women protestors of South America, the resistance of the women of Manipur- have gone on to be iconic symbols of protests against totalitarianism, toxic, hegemonic and sectarian ideologies. Women-led protests movements have been largely fuelled by an intense historic consciousness and present a solidarity that comes out of a shared and lived experience. They tend to be across spectra and largely deal with the aftermath of violence.

The protestors of Shaheen Bagh were generally Muslim women who have come out initially, to meet and discuss the implications of the CAA on their lives and gradually, these discussions grew larger in scope in keeping with the way that the Government of India went about implementing its plan, putting people in camps and cracking down on student protests against the rallying cry of 'Azadi,' which actually means freedom, is inextricably linked to the separatist calls in Kashmir. The commonality of the call, led to the students in Jawahar Lal Nehru University (JNU) being branded anti-national. The similar protests in Jamia Milia University were also met with brutal resistance.

Just as the demonetisation in India made a huge dent in the agency afforded to women, who ran an unofficial economy of sorts, the CAA also affected their own standing in the country as did it affect those of their families. Many women, especially Muslim women from some parts of the country, may not have papers to show as they might have been lost in conditions of extreme precarity- natural or man-made calamities, riots and similar acts of violence. What they do have is a large repository of memory from which they can narrate genealogies, personal and local histories

and the trickle-down impact of progress. Their narration of these is what constitutes the micro-history of the nation. It is in them that the Nation is represented and performed.

Ita Mehrotra opens her graphic narrative with two panels depicting the act of serving and distributing tea. The trope of tea as a unifying, rallying agent in South Asian cultures is a well-known one. So is the act of congregating around a tea stall, which is a largely male performance. The panels depicting tea shift to a group of women which thus shows the shifting of political agency to women. It is they who are the speakers and the motivators of the movement. It is through their memory, their acts of everyday performances that the nature of the Nation becomes apparent.

The authorial voice takes us through the pathways of Shaheen Bagh where at various stages we can discern the sit-in happening at the background of the panel. Mehrotra first introduces us to Shahana, an architect (thus introducing yet another stereotype breaker of the Muslim woman as only a biryani maker or a home-bound woman) who lives in Shaheen Bagh. Through this young Muslim woman's memory of her ancestors who had to give up their tiny parcel of land in Bihar in anti-Muslim riots, one comes to understand the reason for the tendency of Muslims to ghettoise. The idea of security in numbers is what kept two generations of Shahana's family in Shaheen Bagh and now, looking at the prevalent sentiment of the government, Shahana as well.



The preceding panels show the violence Shahana's grandparents faced in the riots and an annoyed Shahana as a little girl pestering her mother to live somewhere else. The mother kindly explains that this is the safest place for them. The panels then shift to focus on Shahana's face in close-up. The face runs through a gamut of expressions such as tired realisation, alertness, alarm and finally, exasperated understanding. There is a gap that comes into narratives that are purely words. The presence of the illustrated character is essential to fully bring out the affective potential and to make one realise what afterwards becomes clear as day. Charlotta Salmi points this out:

It is precisely when prose fails, or there are no words to be had, that the intermedial text bears witness to its failure and presents alternative avenues for confronting state force...Protest movements today increasingly operate within, or in accordance with, the system they seek to challenge. The graphic narrative, similarly, combines complicity and critique in its narrative style and structure. The form's particular history in both commercial art and in countercultural movements, gives it a simultaneously dominant and emergent position in popular culture (171).

The narrative continuously focuses on the idea of unity through numbers, people coming together, protests happening with the participation of a large number of people. It is not only a representation



of the popularity of the cause, but also the ways that people are sticking up for each other. The fight is not just for the Nation, it is also for the individual. These congregating crowds create intermedial spaces that start to represent the nation in our minds and then seek the answer to the question, “If this is the Nation, then what does one call those who oppose them? Ita Mehrotra’s panels occupy this intermedial space, as they attempt to create a historic context for a movement that seeks validation for a significant section of the country. It uses memory as well- drawing on the words of nonagenarian grandmothers who feel the cold in their bones and yet turn up to the protest site to protect not just their homes, but also their country as well. The acidic humour also serves the purpose of de-demonising and de-alienating the Muslim, when a protestor’s placard reads, here, we cannot find last year’s winter caps and they want us to find papers from 1970? (28)

The graphic narrative takes on a documentary, journalistic style as it travels across the country, to places such as Mumbai to look at the way the CAA has started changing attitudes and mindsets. The impact of COVID and the lockdown did nothing to dampen the spirits of the people who left their footwear at the protest site as a mark of their continued presence. Mehrotra lets the vibrancy of the site of protest come through, as she presents words from various songs sung at the site float overhead in the panels.

In her article *Shaheen Bagh (2021): Gender, Affects, and Ita Mehrotra’s Graphic Narrative of Protest*, Pujarinee Mitra points out the significance of the songs in the protest movement.

We see the refrain of Grover’s song floating above a crowd of protestors (Mehrotra, 2021: 86) as the graphic narration informs how Shaheen Bagh’s impact spread far and wide like in Bihar, tracing the reach of empathy. This song, while expressing defiance as one of its affects, is centred on an expression of self-suffering as an acceptable alternative to violence, in order to differentiate oneself from the government’s character. The women are protecting lives and engaging in non-violence by not doing what the opponent are inflicting on them. While the Hindu rightwing seemingly does not value their lives, the protestors do not replicate such sectarianism (11).

Of course, one of the most popular songs to emerge from the Shaheen Bagh protest sites called *Hum Dekhenge*, composed by Faiz Ahmed Faiz- a Pakistani. Yet another is the Varun Grover poem *Kaagaz Nahi Dikhayenge* (We will not show the papers). This creates a carnivalesque location that represents what the Nation is actually like- a free-flowing space where polyphony prevails and where voices speak their mind. The protest had to come to an end at the end of 100 days as forces of the government move in and cause a shut down. The momentum is kept up by Mehrotra through the signs of movement in the panels, the people in motion, their gestures suggesting action, the lyrics floating in the air- as though the Nation is caught up in the heady fragrance of freedom and liberty.

Reading the Nation, especially a nation like India in the present century is no easy task. The multiplicity of stakeholders, the cacophony of ideologies, the relentless drive of the Ultra-Right have created a precarity of sorts for liberal thought and Critical Race Theory which seems not only endangered but also outmoded. This is where “intermedial texts,” as Salmi names them, like Shaheen Bagh make their presence felt as they present a Nation being performed. The various histories contributing to this one moment- such as in the case of the nonagenarian or Shahana- present the nation in great clarity. The protests at Shaheen Bagh and the farmer’s protests in Delhi where, again, women were present in large numbers, present a narrative of the nation which is recorded by women- where their experiences are what construct the Nation. It is on their bodies and their minds that the Nation is inscribed. It is only fitting that the last panel of *Shaheen Bagh* shows women with their arms raised and fingers pointed singing “We will not forget! We will not let you forget! We will not bow down! (117). The Nation is a Memory. Memory is a Nation.

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