

Abstract

It is hard to imagine genocide, war and violence without imagining women. Cruelty against women, or more essentially mothers, represents the darkest aspects of war against a people. To humanize a group, you invoke their mothers – symbols of the capacity of those people to love and be loved. However, in many contexts, women and mothers are not only victims of violence, but its perpetrators as well. During the Sri Lankan civil war, it was Tamil women within the militant separatist organization of the LTTE who disproportionately enacted mass violence against both soldiers and civilians. Women became perpetrators, not victims. And yet, their violence was assigned a maternal virtue – a mother’s divine wrath and extreme urge to protect. The association of women as docile, servile and above all self-sacrificing dispelled any sense of empowerment that female combatants might have gained when they picked up their weapons. Their participation in an extremist movement was attributed to the manipulation of their maternal instincts, not to an active choice fueled by their beliefs. By reducing women to different aspects of motherhood – the mother of a people, the ever-giving mother, the mother goddess – they are stripped of their agency and bound to their “nature”. This thesis attempts to complicate narratives of violent women as only acting upon and being exploited through their most maternal instincts. To this end, this thesis will engage with propaganda about and by Tamil female militants, mythical and religious depictions of mothers within nationalist rhetoric and the bodily autonomy of women fighting the Sri Lankan civil war to assert their identities as militants, not mothers.

Escaping the Birdcage

**Complicating Narratives of Agency and Victimhood through Maternal Metaphors of the
Female Tigers in the LTTE**

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Acknowledgements

As a South Asian person socialized as a woman, I have grown up with narratives of my existence as a form of victimhood. I experienced moments of finding victimhood within the actions of my family members, of my mother, aunts and sisters. But as I grow older, I realize that the victim narrative is a form of disempowerment; it reduces every action or choice a woman makes to a product of her subjugation. I am extremely grateful to have been able to write a thesis like this, which – on top of being extremely interesting and challenging – was also a process of healing.

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Introduction

From the years between 1983 and 2009, the country of Sri Lanka was embroiled in a brutal Civil War between the Sinhalese nationalist government, and the Tamil separatist organization Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Around 100,000 people were killed, with 800,000 people being displaced over the 26 year period of the war.¹ Of these 100,000, around 40,000 were killed in the last few months leading up to the death of Vellupillai Prabhakaran, the founder and leader of the LTTE, and the consequent end of the war.²

Leading up to this violence, the Sri Lankan government and Sinhalese nationalist mobs committed extreme acts of violence against the Tamil peoples in the attempts to establish a Sinhala state. As resentment rose, the Tamil people organized into militant outfits, of which the LTTE gained the most power, ultimately leading to the outbreak of an ethnic armed conflict.

The LTTE has gained notoriety the world over for its use of suicide bombings as a primary mode of attack, the signature *kuppis* (cyanide capsules) which militants wore in case of capture, and the prominence of women militants within the organization. The aggressive extent to which female militants were placed on par with men – socially and intellectually – led to questions about their roles as women within the organization. What were women's experiences within the militancy; why were they recruited; was this militancy a form of true liberation? While these are all important and valid questions to ask, they all stem from the same initial perturbation: that a woman would commit such atrocities. This issue became especially perplexing when taking into consideration the context – in a society as stringent and puritanical

¹ “What Are Black July Massacres That Triggered Sri Lanka’s 26-year Civil War?,” *Al Jazeera*, July 27, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/27/what-are-black-july-massacres-that-triggered-sri-lankas-26-year-civil-war>.

² Manoranjan, Tasha, "Beaten but not broken: Tamil women in Sri Lanka," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 11 (2010): 143.

as Tamil society, how did a woman choose to join a movement and a war which led to the death and displacement of around 5% of the island's population?

The figure of the female militant has always been a source of great wonder, mostly due to the normative assumptions people have towards the figure of the woman. The word “woman” essentially carries the same connotation as the word “mother.” Both women and mothers are thought to be nurturing and gentle, their abilities to create life imbuing them with a kind of divinity. Women's empathy and their tendency towards peace designate them as capable of conflict resolution in a way which men are not capable of.³ And yet, it was a Tamil woman who assassinated the former Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi. And it was Tamil women who committed more than a third of all suicide bombings for the LTTE.

This gender essentialism led to various conversations surrounding agency and victimhood: are women combatants simply “cogs in the wheel⁴” of the LTTE? Or is Prabhakaran a champion of women's rights? Are violent women being coerced into performing this violence, or is violence a form of liberation from their identities and roles as women?

In my thesis, I will explore the essentialism of womanhood as motherhood and its role within conversations surrounding Tamil women fighters. I will study the idea of motherhood in three forms: through the metaphor of the nation, through the theory of economic exploitation, and through the idea of divinity. In the first chapter, “The Heart of the Nation,” I will explore the personification of the nation as a mother within nationalist rhetoric. I will use the idea of the mother/nation to analyze a woman militant's role within the proto-nation of the LTTE. In my second chapter, “The Production of a Movement,” I will unpack the economic subjugation of

³ Kim Elssesser, “Sheryl Sandberg Says Female Leaders Don't Go to War. Here's What Research Says,” *Forbes*, February 20, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kimelsesser/2022/03/08/sheryl-sandberg-says-female-leaders-dont-go-to-war-heres-what-research-says/?sh=18e7f2771fa7>.

⁴ Alison, Miranda, “Cogs in the wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam,” *Civil Wars* 6, no. 4 (2003): 37-54.

women, and their relegation to the privatized home. I will draw connections between the idea of women's bodies as capital to the use of their bodies en masse within movements like the LTTE. In my third chapter, "The Wrath of the Goddess," I will study the role of the female goddess within Hindu mythology, specifically in the context of violence. The Hindu goddess, Kali, has been used to justify nationalisms and anticolonial movements due to her role in the pantheon as the goddess of death. I will unpack the identity of women militants as goddesses of death, specifically in relation to their disproportionate participation in suicide bombings.

My ultimate aim is to challenge the underlying equation of female militants with victims. To this end, I will employ the theory of disidentification first conceived of by the queer theorist José Muñoz. When encountering an identity imposed onto oneself by society, there are different ways to react to it – one can accept the imposed identity – identification; they can reject the identity – counter identification; or they can do neither: they can disidentify with the imposed identity.⁵ Muñoz theorizes this process as a survival strategy – a way of existing within a society which actively disempowers certain groups.⁶ By adopting certain aspects of an identity and recycling or subverting these aspects to their own ends⁷, marginalized groups disidentify with the main narrative to form their own niche identities. Female Tigers are involved in this process of disidentification, finding moments of agency in their roles as mother/militants. They queer aspects of motherhood to carve out new identities which are militant-first and mother-second.

Before I begin, I need to acknowledge that throughout this thesis, the language which I use to describe the gender identity of the "woman" is based solely on those women with wombs. Throughout my research, there is a strong conflation of womanhood and motherhood with the

⁵ Muñoz, José Esteban, *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the performance of politics*, Vol. 2, U of Minnesota Press, (2013): 11.

⁶ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 4.

⁷ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 31.

biological ability to give birth, and vice versa. Although these are not my personal beliefs, the narrative and discourse which I am trying to complicate (such as traditional nationalist rhetoric) relies heavily on this interchange. As such, I will employ this essentialist language in order to challenge it.

Through the following chapters, I hope to continue the work of a few scholars⁸ in the discipline in blurring the binary of agent/victim, and centering militancy in a discussion where womanhood is given most precedence. My aim is to empower women, especially women outside of the Western hegemony, to tell their own stories without automatically being discredited as victims of manipulation.

⁸ Rajasingham-Senanayake, Darini. "Between reality and representation: Women's agency in war and post-conflict Sri Lanka." *Cultural Dynamics* 16, no. 2-3 (2004): 141-168; Alison, "Cogs in the Wheel."

CHAPTER 1

THE HEART OF THE NATION

The air is silent, except for the soft chirps of crickets and the occasional whispering of palm fronds against each other. The balmy air is humid, carrying the strong scent of wet earth mixed with the metallic tang of blood. Suddenly, the shooting starts up again; bullets cut through the viscous air, lodging themselves in the soft trunks of palmyra trees. Feet move quickly and lightly across the damp ground, heavy boots sinking into mud. Suddenly, a voice rings out through the sound of whizzing bullets and the jarring shrieks of hand grenades:

“I’ve been shot! I’m hurt!”

Malathi’s voice echoes hauntingly in the forest as time seems to stand still. She falls to the ground in a thud which is silenced by the earth. She groans and moves her hands to her legs, which have both been struck by bullets. She looks frantically around for her shooter, but the small clearing she has fallen in is empty for now. She tries to stem the bleeding with one hand, the other reaching for her leaden gun, the barrel still warm from the bullets she fired. Malathi’s left arm curls around the gun, holding onto it for stability and cries out again, “I’ve been wounded! Someone, come take my weapon!”

She waits, the warm air turning cold on her wound, the salt in the breeze causing tiny shock waves to travel up and down her legs. She leans on her gun, and frantically reaches for her neck, grabbing the thin glass vial that hangs there. She takes the vial between her teeth, biting down hard and hissing as the glass shards make tiny cuts along her tongue. The bitter taste mixes with the blood in her mouth, and her head grows heavy, and the night grows darker.

Suddenly, the bushes surrounding her rustle and Malathi readies her gun, wincing at the movement. The bushes take painfully long to part, revealing Malathi's comrade, Viji. Viji looks down at her friend, scared and huddled, staring at her with tears in her eyes. "Malathi! Come, let me help you up! Let's get out of here!" Viji moves to Malathi's side, letting her weapon fall and holding Malathi around the waist.

"No, Viji, listen to me: take my weapon! Leave me behind, it's too late for me, just take my gun and go!"

"Yes, I'll take your gun, but give me your hand! Let's go, before the Indians find us."

Malathi shakes her head, the cyanide making her head spin. "Viji, don't make this harder than it needs to be. Just take my gun and leave me."

"Malathi, come on! Get up, let's go. I can carry you!"

"No Viji – it's too late for me! I.. I already bit my *kuppi*."

"What?!" Viji's throat gets tighter, and her voice comes out strained and high-pitched. "Why... Malathi, come on, let's get out of here..."

Viji's voice fades, and Malathi's rings out again, clear and loud. "Viji, leave me and go! Take my gun! I can't serve the movement anymore, but my weapon can!"

Viji tries to carry Malathi, raising her torso off the ground where it had slumped down.

Malathi struggles weakly, reaching for her weapon. "Viji! Listen to me!"

Viji gives up trying to move Malathi, and sits by her side. She holds Malathi in her arms and cries, hugging her friend until her eyes go dim.

"Make sure my weapon is safe. Leave me, but save my weapon."

These are the last words Malathi utters before she stops breathing, and Viji takes both of their guns, her grief snapping her into action. She runs through the bushes to a fellow soldier, grabbing

her arm and pulling her back to the small clearing. A few of the fighters follow behind them, and together they carry the body of Malathi, their commander and Tamil Eelam's first female martyr, back to their camp to give their comrade the memorial she deserves.⁹

Malathi died on October 10, 1987 in battle with the Indian Peace Keeping Forces, who entered the North as mediators with the aim of neutralizing the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.¹⁰ The LTTE, of which Malathi was a member, was the principal Tamil nationalist group in the area and was in a protracted struggle against the Sinhala-nationalist Sri Lankan government.

Although she was not the first martyr of the LTTE's liberatory war, Malathi became lauded as a hero, and her image became synonymous with the cause of the Tamil Tigers. Malathi was buried in Kopay, Jaffna, and October 10th came to be known as Tamil Women's Day.¹¹ A regiment in the Suthanthira Paravaigal (The Birds of Freedom), the women's wing of the LTTE, was named after her: the 2nd Lieutenant Malathi Regiment.¹² Images of Malathi were circulated around the Tamil stronghold, and her likeness was included in newsletters distributed by the organization to commemorate her. In 2004, a statue of her was erected in Kilinochchi, a town in Sri Lanka¹³, to honor the fallen hero.

⁹ This story is my retelling of real events based on an article published in a newsletter distributed by the LTTE: *Birds of Freedom*, "Searching for Freedom," translated by Madhavi Rao, 1993, from Tamileelamarchive, https://tamileelamarchive.com/article_pdf/article_401927541b7a293ab7ce15983e7d9a71.pdf (accessed June 23 2024).

¹⁰ Rupesinghe, Kumar, "Ethnic conflicts in South Asia: the case of Sri Lanka and the Indian Peace-keeping Force (IPKF)," *Journal of Peace Research* 25, no. 4 (1988): 350.

¹¹ "Remembering 2nd Lt. Malathy," *The Tamil Guardian*, October 10, 2019. <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/remembering-2nd-lt-maalathy-0>

¹² "Remembering 2nd Lt. Malathy," *The Tamil Guardian*.

¹³ "Remembering 2nd Lt. Malathy," *The Tamil Guardian*.

Despite being only 20 years old when she was killed,¹⁴ Malathi became one of the most iconic figures of the LTTE. She became the face of the women's movement, and a bastion of courage which soldiers, specifically women soldiers, were meant to strive to. She was the manifestation of the organization's values; more than just an important woman in the LTTE, she became *the* woman of the LTTE.

Malathi's martyrdom helped her embody the sacred role of mother/nation within the movement. The mother is an entity which has long been strongly associated with the nation. The "motherland" is a nation of brethren, bound together in kinship ties, a large family birthed by the same soil. Nationalism often uses the language of the mother as a crutch, as a way of creating an accessible metaphor of brotherhood to unify the pluralities within. While the LTTE was never a nation, it did operate along similar lines, using ethnicity as a unifying factor for its people, and gaining de facto governance in Tamil Eelam (what is known as Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka today). As an entity and the spearhead of a liberation movement, the LTTE needed to produce something worth fighting for. It needed a metaphorical refuge of cultural purity, and it found it, like most nations, in the mother.

In this chapter, I will explore the organization of the LTTE and its incarnation as a nation, particularly through the imagery and ideological arguments it makes to sustain its nationhood. I will explore the traditional nationalist narrative of mothers as victims in need of a strong nation to protect them, and the power of this narrative in reinforcing gender roles in society. I will then go on to explore the figure of Malathi, the mother of the LTTE. Malathi, while embodying the mother, is starkly different from the mothers of other nations – rather than being a source of innocence and purity which needs protecting, Malathi is a protector, whose purity lies in her

¹⁴ "Remembering 2nd Lt. Malathy," *The Tamil Guardian*. Her birth and death dates are also recorded in the essay written about her in an LTTE newsletter.

violence. Lastly, I will study the female combatants themselves, and their relationships to these personas.

When studying this phenomenon of the mother/militant within the LTTE, the academic discourse tends to operate within a binary of agency and victimhood. The narrative often expounded is that even within an organization dedicated to women's emancipation, women faced exploitation. Their struggles were used to legitimize rebel governance; their participation merely increased the ranks of the movement. Even though the LTTE reinterpreted the mother/nation, it still participated in the essentialism of women. In other words, if women are not complete agents, they are automatically victims. Through women militants' writings and interviews, I will challenge the idea of total agency, and argue that they were capable of creating agency within systems that work to oppress them. Women were fighting for the same reasons as men, and against the same injustices as men. Women militants queered the institution of motherhood to create an identity which was militant-first, mother-second.

The Tiger Nation

The ethnic tensions between the Sinhala and Tamil populations escalated during the years following independence in 1948. As Sri Lanka built its new government, the various Sinhalese parties engaged in power grabs, altering their policies more and more to cater to the Sinhalese majority masses and government. Much of this process manifested as ethnic outbidding – the process wherein the Sinhalese majority government catered to the interests of the Sinhalese masses and Buddhist clergy by instituting policies which marginalized Tamils and established a Sinhala-Buddhist state.¹⁵

¹⁵ DeVotta, Neil, "From ethnic outbidding to ethnic conflict: the institutional bases for Sri Lanka's separatist war," *Nations and Nationalism* 11, no. 1 (2005): 141-142.

In his essay ‘From Ethnic Outbidding to ethnic conflict: the institutional bases for Sri Lanka’s separatist war,’ Neil DeVotta argues that the main mechanism of ethnic outbidding was linguistic nationalism. During the independence movement, both Tamil and Sinhalese elites joined together to form the *swabasha* movement, which called for the institution of Tamil and Sinhala as official languages in the place of English during colonialism.¹⁶ However, in 1956, eight years after independence, the Sinhala-majority government established the Sinhala-Only Act, which removed Tamil as an official language of Sri Lanka. This act of linguistic nationalism was a crucial move in the ethnic outbidding process – it solidified the partiality of the government towards the Sinhala population and eroded the Tamil population’s trust in the government.

The Sinhala-Only Act, augmented by various political reforms unequally benefitting the Sinhala people, led to calls for federalism – a movement which was encouraged by the territorial concentration of Tamils in the Northern and Eastern parts of Sri Lanka.¹⁷ Feeling underrepresented and unsafe, the Tamil dissent eventually led to calls for self-rule, and for a separate Tamil state.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were initially a faction of the Tamil nationalist movement, which comprised 37 organizations, within Sri Lanka.¹⁸ The group was created as a solution to the intense discrimination against Tamils by the Sri Lankan government on 5 May 1976, after undergoing many evolutions and name changes.¹⁹ Of the 37 militant groups, there were five which held the majority of the power, what Joanne Richards calls “the big five”: the LTTE, the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO), the Eelam Revolutionary Organization

¹⁶ DeVotta, “From ethnic outbidding to ethnic conflict,” 142.

¹⁷ DeVotta, “From ethnic outbidding to ethnic conflict,” 144.

¹⁸ Richards, Joanne, "An institutional history of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)," *The Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding*, (2014), 13.

¹⁹ Richards, "An institutional history of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)," 12.

of Students (EROS), the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), and the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE).²⁰

Tensions between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil nationalist groups increased as the Tamils began demanding changes to the Sri Lankan constitution, amid claims that the constitution privileged Sinhala and Buddhist groups.²¹ This discontent initially manifested within the political realm, with the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) becoming the principal opposition group to the reigning Sinhala party in the north.²² However, an anti-Tamil pogrom from 24 July to 29 July, 1983 – what has now come to be known as Black July – occurred across the island, resulting in the deaths of around 3000 Tamil people, mostly in Sinhala-majority areas, such as Colombo.²³

Black July led to the radicalization of the Tamil people against the Sri Lankan government and increased their desire for a free Eelam.²⁴ This resulted in a mobilization of Tamil people towards militancy.²⁵ “Youth groups ... saw themselves and persuaded others to regard them as more committed and credible adherents of the separatist cause than TULF.”²⁶ This move towards militancy led to armed attacks on the Sri Lankan government, and the beginning of the Civil War. As the war progressed, the LTTE gained traction over other groups through its tactics of fear and governance, leading to its consolidation of power as the primary opposition to the state.²⁷

²⁰ Richards, "An institutional history of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)," 13.

²¹ De Silva, Kingsley M., *A History of Sri Lanka*, (Univ of California Press, 1981), 674.

²² De Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, 675.

²³ “Black July: A Tamil Genocide,” People for Equality and Relief in Lanka, July 31 2023, <https://pearlaction.org/black-july-a-tamil-genocide/>.

²⁴ De Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, 693-694.

²⁵ The LTTE dated the beginning of the war to 27 November, 1982, the date of the killing of the first Tamil martyr (Richards 2014, 14).

²⁶ De Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, 694.

²⁷ Richards, "An institutional history of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)," 15-16.

Throughout its years as an authoritative body, the militant LTTE was only able to institute what is considered a rebel governance. Beginning in the late 1980s to early 1990s, the LTTE established a *de facto* state command, gaining control over local administrative bodies in Jaffna and other parts of northern Sri Lanka.²⁸ Part of the *de facto* governance included authority over taxation, police and judiciary, and economic development initiatives.²⁹ Yet, the LTTE never developed past rebel governance which, according to Niels Terpstra and Georg Frerks, is classified by three criteria: control, civilian populations, and the use of violence.³⁰ If a state gains total control over a region in which civilians reside, and uses violence against the government and the people as a way of maintaining that control, then the state is exercising rebel governance.³¹

When fashioning a Tamil nation under their jurisdiction, the LTTE had to reckon with the same issues faced by many nations-in-the-making. The LTTE had to navigate the inherent oppositions of “old” and “new,” of “modernity” and “cultural authenticity.” As the Tamil state was based in an ethno-linguistic division, this identity became the basis of Eelam. As it gained power over all of the North and East of Sri Lanka, the LTTE also had to legitimize its rule and gain the support of the people it governed – a legitimacy which represents a “‘tacit social contract’ between state and society, or the ruler and the ruled.”³² In other words, the LTTE had to build the Tamil nation it fought for.

Building a nation entailed fabricating a pre-history of the Tamil people – a cultural and mythological past which bound the people of Tamil Eelam into a fraternity. When defining a

²⁸ Stokke, Kristian, "Building the Tamil Eelam State: emerging state institutions and forms of governance in LTTE-controlled areas in Sri Lanka," *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 6 (2006): 1022.

²⁹ Stokke, "Building the Tamil Eelam State," 1022.

³⁰ Terpstra, Niels, and Georg Frerks, "Rebel governance and legitimacy: Understanding the impact of rebel legitimation on civilian compliance with the LTTE rule," *Civil Wars* 19, no. 3, (2017): 284

³¹ Terpstra and Frerks, "Rebel governance and legitimacy," 284.

³² Terpstra and Frerks, "Rebel governance and legitimacy," 284.

nation, Benedict Anderson stated that it was “inherently limited and sovereign.”³³ A nation had to have a strict boundary (ethno-geographic), and it had to embody a sovereign to whom its subjects were answerable to. To find the sovereign, the LTTE turned to a former stately authority – the Tamil kingdom of the Cholas.³⁴ Even the signature symbol of the LTTE, the tiger, recalls the royal emblem of the Chola kings.³⁵

Comparing the two flags, the first of the Chola kings (Figure 1.1), and the second of the LTTE (Figure 1.2), we can see the difference between their governing styles. While the Chola kings display their royal emblem on their flag, with the tiger leaping forward, there is a simplicity which is not to be questioned. The kings were rulers in their own right, without need for justification. On the other hand, the addition of guns to the emblematic tiger in the LTTE’s flag immediately stands out. The guns behind the tiger are threatening, and represent a claim to the authority of the organization through violence. The LTTE affirmed its governance with the assistance of its guns and warfare. Rather than a born-sovereign, Prabhakaran (the founder and frontman of the movement) earned his sovereignty through violence. The guns are both a promise and a threat; they promise protection for the people of Tamil Eelam, while simultaneously threatening them into submission.

³³ Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

³⁴ Terpstra and Frerks, "Rebel governance and legitimacy," 292.

³⁵ Terpstra and Frerks, "Rebel governance and legitimacy," 292.

Figure 1.1. Chola Flag³⁶Figure 1.2. LTTE flag³⁷

By simultaneously making appeals to the mythological path and positing a revolutionary future, the LTTE faced an inevitable contradiction. It tried to introduce radical social reforms³⁸ while still operating within the framework of the oppressive state it was trying to escape. Partha Chatterjee unpacks this paradox through the “problematic” and the “thematic”; the former being claims of historical possibilities, and the latter being the moral principles used to justify these possibilities.³⁹ In other words, the problematic is the actions which a historic system is capable of performing, while the thematic is the epistemic and moral framework required to justify these potential actions. In the case of colonialism, the problematic is the establishment of institutions of subjugation against the colonial subject, and the thematic is the theory of Enlightenment, that the West is bringing the East progress and modernity.⁴⁰

Chatterjee argues that Indian nationalist thought employs the thematic of colonialism to justify an anti-colonial problematic. The problematic for nationalism is the autonomy and the sovereignty of the newly independent nation. Yet, nationalism simultaneously strives for

³⁶ Vatasura, *Flag of Chola Dynasty*, Creative Commons License BY-SA 3.0
<<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5c/Flag_of_Chola_Kingdom.png

³⁷ Varma, Raja Ravi. *Kali*. Distributed by Anant Shivaji Desai, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c9/Ravi_Varma_Press_Kali.jpg

³⁸ Specifically in the treatment of women and caste-oppressed people.

³⁹ Chatterjee, Partha, “The Thematic and the Problematic,” in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: a Derivative Discourse*, (London: Zed Books, 1993), 36-37.

⁴⁰ Chatterjee, “The Thematic and the Problematic,” 36-37.

“modernity” – a modernity which is rooted in colonial and white supremacist thought.

Postcolonial nations attempt to gain independence and autonomy for their new nations, while still operating within the colonial systems which subjugated them in the first place.

In the case of the LTTE, its problematic was a free Tamil Eelam, where all marginalized groups were liberated. Yet its thematic was the same as the Sri Lankan nation – governance through authoritative rule.

In the case of India, Chatterjee argues that in order to resolve this paradox the nation developed an authentic “interiority.”⁴¹ The outer nation operates within imperialist conceptions of modernity, while the inner nation is culturally authentic and pure. The personification of the inner life of the nation is the woman or, more specifically, the mother. Along with the binary of East/West and interior/exterior emerges the binary of the home/outside. The mother, who is metonymic with the home and interiority, becomes synonymous with the East and a rich, cultured inner life. The nation is, at its core, anticolonial.

The LTTE employed a similar maneuver to bypass their paradox of authority vs. liberation – it fabricated the liberated mother/nation. Upon creating a historical bond between its people, the LTTE had to substantiate this history with a cultural affiliation, one based in an interior moral, sacred purity. The LTTE was outwardly authoritarian and cracked down to achieve its goals, but possessed an interiority which embodied both its liberatory values and its puritanical morals. The LTTE’s nation thus symbolized a pious revolution.

The Victim Mother

In Sinhalese ethno-religious nationalism, Sri Lanka was imagined as a Buddhist mother – a guardian of Sinhalese Buddhist heritage, and a protector of the sacred realm of the home. A

⁴¹ Radhakrishnan, Rajagopalan. “Nationalism, Gender and the Narrative of Identity,” in *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, ed. Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer and Patricia Yaeger. New York: Routledge, 1992.

large player in the propagation of the nationalist moral imperatives of motherhood was Anagarika Dharmapala, a central figure of the Sri Lankan independence movement. Dharmapala cultivated the new national identity and encouraged women to “‘return’ to the purported ideals of Aryan womanhood: they should be chaste and modest, subordinate their needs to those of the members of their households, and submit obediently to their husbands.”⁴² Dharmapala went as far as to legislate the actions and performances of Sinhalese women according to their duties as Buddhist mothers. In the initial days of nationalism, cultural purity was necessary to preserve the “ascendancy of the Sinhala [Aryan] ‘race’.”⁴³

Along with a strong moral and historical interiority, Sinhalese nationalism was also based in the antagonism of the “Other”: the Tamil Sri Lankans. Along with European Christian missionaries and Muslims, the Tamils – though indigenous to the land, and the second largest ethnic group – were conceived of as “foreign threats⁴⁴” who had destroyed Sinhalese and Buddhist culture, and led to the degradation of the nation. In response to these threats, within nationalist discourse, the Buddhist mother was given the duty of saving Sinhalese culture by preserving it. She would defend her nation against Tamil threats by exemplifying the Buddhist mother and affirming her central place within the nation.

The figure of Kannaki in Tamil mythology offers a similar narrative – her virtue is her greatest weapon. Kannaki is a figure from the Tamil epic, *Silappadikaram*, meaning *The Tale of the Anklet*. *Silappadikaram* was written over 1800 years ago, in the second century AD⁴⁵ by a Jain monk, Ilango Adikal, still carrying enormous importance in Tamil culture today; R.

Parthasarathy claims that “it is to Tamils what the Iliad is to Greeks – the story of their

⁴² Maracek, Jeanne. “Am I a Woman in these Matters? Notes on Sinhalese nationalism and gender in Sri Lanka,” in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, ed. Tamar Mayer. London: Routledge, 2002, 143.

⁴³ Maracek, “Am I a Woman in these Matters?” 144.

⁴⁴ Gajaweera, Nalika, “The mothers of the righteous society: lay buddhist women as agents of the Sinhala nationalist imaginary,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 21 (2020): 193.

⁴⁵ Ramachandra Dikshitar, V. R., *The Silappadikaram*, (Oxford University Press, 1939), 9-10.

civilization.”⁴⁶ In the city where much of the epic is set, Madurai, stands a temple honoring Kannaki, the female protagonist of *Silappadikaram*.

To understand the reverence which she evokes, the character of Kannaki needs to be analyzed. The epic follows Kannaki and her husband Kovalan, both of whom are children of affluent merchant families. Kannaki and Kovalan are a perfect match for each other, living in marital bliss, buoyed by Kannaki’s pure embodiment of the perfect wife/woman: “Kannaki in the discharge of her household duties earned a name worthy to be praised.”⁴⁷ However, when Kovalan meets Madhavi, a courtesan, he falls in love with her, and abandons Kannaki to start a life with her. However, Kovalan squanders away his wealth on Madhavi.⁴⁸ When Kovalan suspects Madhavi of infidelity and learns the folly of his actions, he returns to Kannaki; she welcomes him with open arms, even offering up her gold anklets as a way for Kovalan to regain his wealth.⁴⁹

Kannaki is the epitome of the virtues of Tamil society – she is loyal, self sacrificing and pious, worshiping her husband above all others. As the epic progresses, Kannaki’s faith to her husband is tested, yet her virtue and chastity hold true. When her husband is unjustly killed, Kannaki rains fire down on the city of Madurai, becoming a deity in the process for showing her unwavering devotion only to her husband. Although Kannaki does not have children in the epic, she does perform aspects of the mother/nation. She embodies a “purity” and chastity which is treated as essential to the culture of the Tamil nation, while also having the strength and devotion to safeguard her own purity.

⁴⁶ Atikal, Ilanko, *The Cilappatikaram: The Tale of an Anklet*, trans. R. Parthasarathy, (Columbia University Press, 1993), 2.

⁴⁷ Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Silappadikaram*, 95.

⁴⁸ Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Silappadikaram*, 3.

⁴⁹ Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Silappadikaram*, 155.

While Kannaki is the standard which all women are expected to strive to, the mother/nation actually ensures and depends on the failure of women to be Kannaki. Kannaki's ability to defend her virtue, which leads to her deification, is assumed to be absent in the mother/nation. Within a patriarchal nation, women are disempowered to justify their interiority – mothers are an essential, but fragile, part of the national identity which cannot afford to be lost, and must be protected at all costs. This ultimately leads to the relegation of the mother into the realm of the “protected” and the characterization and valorization of the man as sovereign “protector”.

The mother/nation is inherently a victim. Much of the literature published by the LTTE surrounding the nation portrayed suffering mothers. A photo collage (Figure 1.3) in a newsletter circulated in January of 1986 portrays the violence inflicted by Sri Lankan soldiers in Tamil villages near Vavuniya city through images of destruction and crying mothers. The text accompanying the images describes the genocidal acts the Sinhalese army subjects Tamil civilians to, such as mass executions of innocent people (including children), destroying entire families and sexually assaulting and mutilating women. It describes the corpses of “innocent citizens ... the ethnic fraternity of the land of Vavuniya and Tamil Eelam.”

The fraternity of citizens is emphasized through the use of filial language⁵⁰, paired with the employment of various images of crying women. The top and bottom of the collage are lined with images of crying women; the top image depicts a group of women looking in shock and

⁵⁰ Khoja-Moolji, Shenila. *Sovereign attachments: Masculinity, muslimness, and affective politics in Pakistan*. Univ of California Press, 2021.



Figure 1.3. Sinhala Government's Depravity⁵¹.

⁵¹ Liberation Tigers. "Sinhala Government's Depravity." Illustration. Translated by Madhavi Rao. April 1985. From Tamileelamarchive. https://tamileelamarchive.com/article_pdf/article_cf28dcaa79e438aa306460a33f9705e7.pdf (accessed June 23 2024).

despair at the woman in the middle of the photo. Pasted immediately above this large image is a smaller, zoomed out version of the same image, this time depicting what appears to be a dead baby in the woman's arms. The images lining the bottom of the collage are of women, either injured and in shock and pain, or dead as people crowd around them. Yet, the bawling mother at the top of the collage immediately draws the attention of the viewer.

Although the text describes the executions of and violence against men, women and children, when choosing to visually represent this violence, it is only women who are depicted. The women are portrayed to be the principal victims of the genocide; they become metonymous with the horrors inflicted by the Sinhalese soldiers. While all the women appear extremely fearful, there is a notable focus on the mother at the top of the collage – the women around her direct their fear and despair towards her. The woman to the immediate right of the mother stares at her in apprehension and worry, while two girls at the left of the image similarly devote their attention and grief to the central figure. The context for the image is provided only by the smaller image at the top of the collage, the larger image does not depict the child. This framing focuses the viewer's attention solely to the mother, and her emotions. It portrays the horrific image, then zooms into the mother's reaction to stress the pain she feels. In this image, we are not meant to sympathize with the dead child, but with the grieving mother.

Between two blocks of text runs images of the destruction of the villages in which the people resided. The images have words separating them, which read "Sinhala Government's Depravity." By labeling such an act of mass destruction a "Depravity,"⁵² the image portrays the army as an unpredictable, threatening and highly deranged force to protect their women against. The depravity of the army is a direct threat to everything which women represent; by displaying the ability of the Sri Lankan government to commit such atrocities, the LTTE posed itself as a

⁵² In Tamil, "வெறியாட்டம்." This could also be translated as "drunkenness," "frenzy," or "passion."

necessary body in Tamil Eelam. The LTTE borrowed directly from the protected-protector discourse which other nationalisms rely on.

While the LTTE partook in the imagery of the mother/nation as a victim, it simultaneously disavowed the subjugation of women. It borrowed the rhetoric of the nation it was rebelling against and repurposed it in a way which subverted the original function. In other words, the LTTE created a mother/nation which represented its cultural interiority, only to use the concept of authenticity and interiority to center the liberated woman as an essential aspect of its revolutionary objective. The figure which the LTTE uses to accomplish this task is that of Malathi.

Mother of the LTTE

Malathi, the first female martyr in the LTTE, became a symbol of the valor and dedication which the organization held for its citizens. Rather than exemplifying the woman at the heart of the nation who needed to be protected, she exemplified the woman at the heart of the nation who would protect. She embodied the ultimate liberated woman, the antithesis of the victim.

The LTTE's ideological focus on social emancipation complicated the victim narrative. The LTTE, while relying on the metaphor of the victim/mother, simultaneously made women's liberation one of its primary principles. Before trying to understand the figure of the LTTE mother/nation, it is important to begin by analyzing the position of women within and under the organization. When discussing the LTTE's position on women compared to that of other Tamil nationalist groups, Adele Ann Balasingham, the Australian head of the women's wing, stated:

The political discourse of the old leadership suffered severe limitations in theory and in practice to deal with the phenomenon of social oppression of women.

Major social contradictions in the Tamil social formation were subsumed under the slogans of national emancipation from racist oppression of the State.⁵³

She emphasizes the paradox of nationalism – that the framework of the dominant state is employed despite the nationalist group’s aims to revolt against it. Balasingham argues that although the old leadership was attempting to overthrow the current government, they were not planning on instituting a new revolutionary social system.

Balasingham cites Black July, not only as the beginning of the official liberation movement, but also as the beginning of the movement towards women’s emancipation. She goes on to state that after Black July, and upon joining the LTTE, “Young women broke the shackles of social constraints, they ripped open the straight 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.”⁵⁴ As a consequence of women’s desire to fight for their nation’s liberation, she concludes, “The LTTE leadership, committed to the emancipation and equality of women, welcomed such demands and expanded its military programme for training women.”⁵⁵

While at the beginning of the civil war in 1983, women in the LTTE were not placed in combat positions, they still occupied political positions within a group *Viduthalai Pulikal Munani* (Women’s Front of the Liberation Tigers). After being battle trained in India in 1985, and fighting their first war against the Sri Lankan army in July 1986, the women's wing *Suthanthira Paravaigal* (Birds of Freedom) was formed in 1987.⁵⁶ As the war escalated in the 1990s, the numbers of women within the Birds of Freedom grew exponentially.⁵⁷

⁵³ Balasingham, Adele Ann, *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers*, (Jaffna: Thasan Printers, 1993), “Historical Background.” <https://tamilnation.org/books/eelam/adeleann#top>

⁵⁴ Balasingham, *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers*, “Historical Background: Women Join the Armed Struggle.”

⁵⁵ Balasingham, *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers*, “Historical Background: Women Join the Armed Struggle.”

⁵⁶ Alison, Miranda, "Cogs in the wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam," *Civil Wars* 6, no. 4 (2003): 39.

⁵⁷ Alison, "Cogs in the wheel?", 39.

In the separate women's wing of the outfit – the Birds of Freedom – all of the leadership roles were occupied by women, and the women underwent the same training as men, and were placed in combat roles alongside men.⁵⁸ Moreover, through the years of the war, women slowly occupied more political positions. And yet, as Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake argues, there is a disproportionate representation of women in track 1 level political processes in the LTTE, such as during the peace talks negotiated by Norway between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE.⁵⁹

Within the organization and the governance of Tamil Eelam itself, women did take up prominent roles. Rajasingham-Senanayake explains that women within the LTTE gained control of the process of arbitrating violence against Tamil women by Tamil men. She argues, “The possibility of violence that the militant woman represents facilitates wider society's regard of women through a slightly altered cultural lens. What this suggests is that, even if women may not sit at the track 1 negotiations, they would still be actively involved in post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction of the community.”⁶⁰ Thus, women were getting political agency, as well as social agency.

In the documentary “Haunted by Her Yesterdays”, which captures the experiences of female ex-combatants after the end of the war, Komathy, one of the ex-combatants recounted that:

Women joined the LTTE to fight against the oppression of women. In the struggle, we wanted to fight alongside men. [In the LTTE] if a man was wearing a pair of jeans and a shirt, women would wear it too. If a man was riding a

⁵⁸ Alison, “Cogs in the wheel?”, 47.

⁵⁹ Rajasingham-Senanayake, Darini. "Between reality and representation: Women's agency in war and post-conflict Sri Lanka," *Cultural Dynamics* 16, no. 2-3 (2004): 145.

⁶⁰ Rajasingham-Senanayake, “Between Reality and Representation”, 154.

motorbike, we were able to ride the motorbike and even race with them. In this context, women fought side by side with men.⁶¹

By granting militants equal rights with men, the LTTE offered a solution to women facing oppression in Tamil society. In a move which has been categorized by many as a form of propaganda or exploitation of their female cadres, the LTTE posited militants as an antithesis to victims. While instating female militants undoubtedly improved women's social standing, it also created a stark dichotomy. Militancy and violence became the direct inverse to women's oppression. In a newsletter published in May 1984, the LTTE created a collage of various images, one of which was a crying woman with the poem "Well of Sorrow" by the poet Bharathiyar superimposed upon it (Figure 1.4). The poem speaks to the suffering of oppressed mothers in Sri Lanka during the war, "rotting in the isolated forests" of the island. Describing their plights as they are "subject to the atrocities of rape," and "repeatedly [folding] and [dying]," Bharathiyar states that "the women have lost the ability to cry." Directly below this poem is an image of a female militant with the caption, "Tamil woman soldier."

⁶¹ The Social Architects of South Asia, "Haunted by her Yesterdays," Youtube Video (22:38. March 27, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSSv9Kk3tkI>), 05:20.

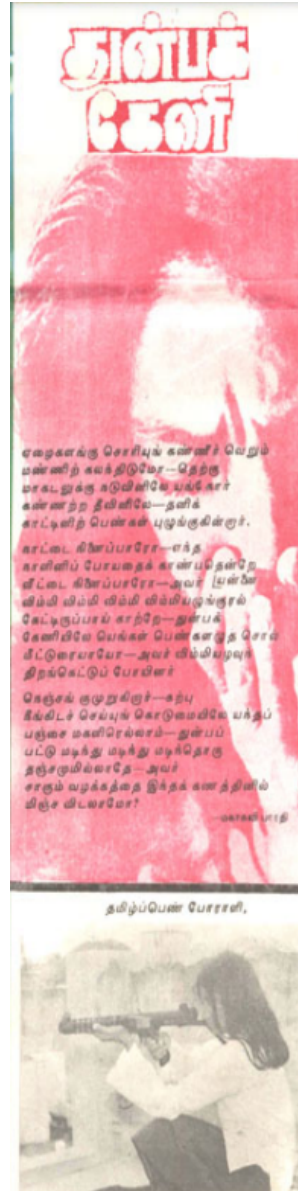


Figure 1.4. Well of Sorrow.⁶²

Through these juxtaposing images, the LTTE posed the female militant as the answer to Bharathiyar’s question of whether we can let these women suffer. The answer to the victimhood inflicted upon women was to enlist them in the movement as a form of liberation. This kind of

⁶² Liberation Tigers. “Well of Sorrow.” Illustration. Translated by Nageswara Rao and Leelavathi Nagarajan. May 1984. From *Tamileelamarchive*. https://tamileelamarchive.com/article_pdf/article_348e2bf986ffb3384c3ce55b8c579d7c.pdf (accessed June 23 2024).

rhetoric has generally been read as a way for the LTTE to build their image as a woman's emancipatory movement, and as a tactic to bolster the organization's legitimacy in Tamil society and improve the logistics of their militancy.⁶³ Alisa Stack O'Connor states, the LTTE "fully exploit[ed] every element (or stereotype) of womanhood from dutiful daughter to mother to rape victim to ferocious fighter."⁶⁴ Rather than being a step toward emancipation, such arguments dub women militants pawns, rather than soldiers.

This reading of women militants is both oversimplified and untrue. Stack O'Connor does acknowledge in her essay, "Lions, tigers and freedom birds: How and why the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam employs women," that these conversations are framed in a way which do not allow women any agency in their roles as militants. They assume a binary of agency and victimhood, where women who are not in positions of complete agency and liberation are inevitably victims.⁶⁵ In all cases, the identity of the victimized woman is invariably put before the identity of the militant.

One of the main reasons cited for labeling this a form of exploitation is the limited equality which women were awarded: there were still many regards in which women were policed in the LTTE. One of the most stark examples is a woman's sexuality. LTTE female combatants have earned the moniker "armed virgins," because of the aggressive desexualization of the women within the organization. In her memoir *Tamil Tigress: my story as a child soldier in Sri Lanka's bloody civil war*, Niromi de Soyza explains, "The Tigers don't believe that women

⁶³ Stack-O'Connor, Alisa, "Lions, tigers, and freedom birds: How and why the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam employs women," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 1, (2007), 44.

⁶⁴ Despite arguing such rhetoric, Stack O'Connor, and many other historians speaking on this issue, acknowledge the way that these conversations tend to place women in the role of victims, both at the hands of the LTTE and by the Sri Lankan army; and create a binary of agent/victim.

⁶⁵ McClintock, Anne, "No Longer in a Future Heaven: Gender, Race and Nationalism," in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat, (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997), 48-49.

can fight alongside the men because it will be like placing a spark of fire next to cotton wool.”⁶⁶ Women were too sexually charged to live in close quarters with men, and any institution which would allow such a situation to occur would be viewed as socially illegitimate. To create an organization which would gain popularity and respect within Tamil society, the LTTE had to dispel any doubts of improper conduct between the men and women combatants. Thus, sexual relations outside of marriage were prohibited in the organisation, and militants could only marry others within the LTTE to maintain the puritanical values demanded by Tamil society.⁶⁷

The aim of such values in traditional nations, however, is the subjugation of women. Given the goal – and in some ways, success – of the LTTE in encompassing women’s liberation into its movement, subjugation is not a sufficient explanation for its inclusion of women militants. In an essay, “Stories of Women and Mothers: Gender and Nationalism in the Early Fiction of Flora Nwapa,” Elleke Boehmer analyzes the role of a woman within the gendered nation. She is cast as the mother/nation, and yet, the woman does not exist past her metaphorical value in this role. As Boehmer explains, “[a mother] is the strength or virtue of the nation incarnate, its fecund first matriarch, but it is a role which excludes her from the sphere of public national life.”⁶⁸ When a woman fights for her nation, she is not fighting for the man’s idealized version of the nation – a national territory and myth which she has no claim to.

Along with the interior/ exterior, home/ politics, Eastern/ Western binaries which bound a mother (and intrinsically, a woman) to her role as guardian of authenticity, Anne McClintock introduces another way in which this binary can be understood. According to McClintock, the association of women with cultural purity has a resulting association of men with the factors

⁶⁶ de Soyza, Niromi, *Tamil Tigress: My story as a child soldier in Sri Lanka’s bloody civil war*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd. 2012), 51.

⁶⁷ Stack O’ Connor, “Lions, Tigers and Freedom Birds,” 50.

⁶⁸ Boehmer, Elleke D, "Stories of women and mothers: Gender and nationalism in the early fiction of Flora Nwapa" in *Motherlands: Black Women’s Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, ed. Susheila Nasta, (Rutgers University Press, 1992), 6.

threatening this purity, which in the case of postcolonial countries are modernity and progress.⁶⁹ Stemming from social Darwinism and scientific racism which posits cultures on a scale of evolution, the mother becomes excluded from any means of accessing the modernity represented by men.⁷⁰ Mothers are, thus, not only passive subjects of the historical, mythical past of the nation, they are also banished from the profits of the future nation.

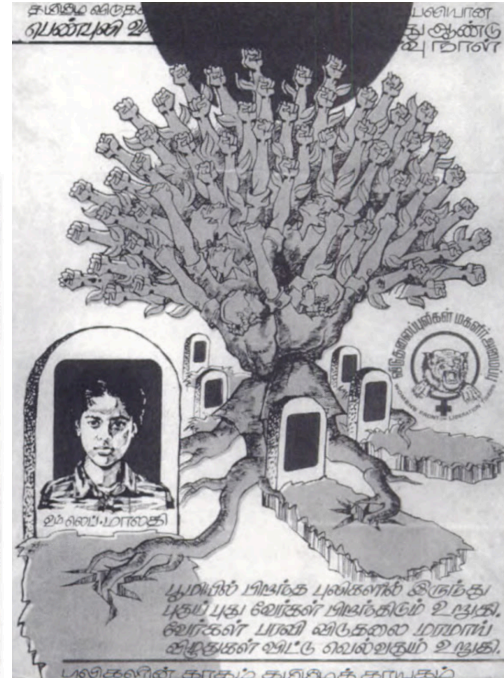
Despite borrowing from the language of the mother/nation, the LTTE recycled it to create a new mother/nation, the “liberated” mother. The LTTE’s mother/nation was not docile, pious and in need of protection. She was loyal and single minded, dedicated to the nation, even at the cost of her life. The LTTE’s mother disavowed the subjugation of women, while still holding them accountable to the moral fate of the nation. Mothers were still in need of protection, but they were now capable of protecting themselves. Women were figured into the future of the nation, while simultaneously being the anchor to its past.

The LTTE’s mother did not fall into the protector-protected dichotomy. She embodied the sanctity and morality of the “traditional” mother/nation, while still having the power to protect herself and her values. She was worth protecting, but did not need protection.

The personification of the LTTE mother/nation was Malathi. Illustrations distributed by Students Organization of Liberation Tigers (SOLT), the youth wing of the movement, depict two illustrations of Malathi.

⁶⁹ McClintock, “No Longer in a Future Heaven,” 92.

⁷⁰ McClintock, “No Longer in a Future Heaven,” 92 - 93.

Figure 1.5⁷¹Figure 1.6⁷²

The first poster (Figure 1.5) depicts a gravestone with a picture of Malathi on it, with her honorific title – 2nd Lt. Malathi. Roots grow from her gravestone and others surrounding it, branching into a tree. The trunk of the tree is made up of women’s bodies, and the branches are arms rising towards the sky, each closed in a fist reaching upwards. Under the illustration of the tree is a poem:

From the tiger born of the earth,
New roots will certainly grow.
The roots will spread into a tree of liberation,
And its branches will conquer all.

⁷¹ The Tamil Guardian, “Remembering 2nd Lt. Malathy,” October 10, 2019, translated by Madhavi Rao. <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/remembering-2nd-lt-maalathy-0>

⁷² The Tamil Guardian, “Remembering 2nd Lt. Malathy,” October 10, 2019, translated by Madhavi Rao. <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/remembering-2nd-lt-maalathy-0>

The analogous connection between Malathi and the earth as both being sources of growth closely reflects the metaphor of the mother as land and the soil of the nation. Whereas the traditional mother/nation metaphor situates men as the exploiters and proprietors of women, women are the fruits of mother Malathi's labor. Rather than a symbol of what they have to lose, Malathi was a symbol of what the nation can gain from women, particularly from women soldiers.

Malathi was also a symbol of progress. She was the beginning of a trajectory of liberation, not only for the nation, but for women as well. In the second poster (Figure 1.6), a militant bleeding to death on the ground hands her rifle to another who is running past her. The text underneath the illustration reads:

You laid the foundation down as the first woman tiger.
 Field-tiger, there are a thousand stories behind you.
 History will speak of your strife and struggles.
 New hands will extend to bear your weapons.

The link between the two militants, a rifle, shows that though Malathi has fallen, her legacy will continue through violence. Militancy allowed women to continue down the path Malathi laid down for them. The mother was not just a protector of the nation, but the driving force behind it. The militant mother, who had been left in the past in traditional nationalist rhetoric, propelled the nation forward. Thus, the mother/nation of the LTTE was not hypothesized as pure and docile, but pure and dangerous: she was Kannaki.

Militant, not Mother

Womenfolk

Womenfolk! You.....

Don't become Kannaki
 Don't be beaming queens
 Don't be Sita lowering herself into the fire
 Don't be Sri Devi from the movie screens
 Don't be intoxicatingly beautiful women
 If you transform into valiant women,
 Protecting the warriors of the Tiger front,
 Restless to see the battlefield,
 That is enough.

– (Poem from a newsletter circulated by the Birds of Freedom)⁷³

The poem “Womenfolk,” which was written and circulated by the Birds of Freedom betrays the group’s expectations and principles for women. The poem implores women not to succumb to their male-crafted characterisations: not Kannaki, the romanticized protector of virtue; not passive figures like queens whose lives are defined by their relations to men, or goddesses who self-immolate on their husbands’ funeral pyres; not the glamorized women depicted in films written by men; nor the sexually enticing women whom men dream of exploiting. The tropes which the women beseech their sisters not to embody – the pure, compliant, passive and readily plundered woman – are all identities which were superimposed onto the mother/nation, by both the “traditional” nation and the LTTE.

This poem represents a queering and a form of disidentification on the part of the female combatants: they recycle the original aspects of the mother/nation assigned to them by the LTTE to create the new identity of the female militant. The characteristics which the poem espouses, such as the women soldiers’ roles as protectors, their liberation from traditional gender roles, and their disavowal of sexual temptation, can all be traced back to LTTE ideology. Yet, the militants

⁷³*Birds of Freedom*, “Womenfolk,” poem, translated by Madhavi Rao, 1985, from *Tamileelamarchive*. https://tamileelamarchive.com/article_pdf/article_9f9a5637188d5d601b3ba8387fadfe97.pdf (accessed June 23 2024).

reject all the characteristics which perpetuate gender essentialism, an ideology which can subjugate women if need be. Rather, they create an identity which puts their militancy first, and their motherhood second.

Female militants did not trace their duty to the nation, but to the people on the battlefield alongside them. They were still protective women, but they protected their comrades and fellow militants, rather than an idealized mother/nation. Rather than being Malathi, who put the safety of her weapon (a symbol of resistance against the Sri Lankan state) above her own life, the female militants embraced the identity of Viji. Viji, the soldier who helped Malathi during her dying moments, put her fellow militant's life first, risking her own to save Malathi and to bring her back to safety. She put the gun second, and Malathi first.

The line, "valiant women, protecting the warriors of the Tiger front," portrays the female combatants' patriotism as an individual choice and promise rooted in their personal experiences with other people; not a characteristic of an identity they must perpetually inhabit. Even though they were expected to occupy a role within a group which exploited them, the militants still had agency within this system. They chose to be militants rather than simply accepting whichever facsimiles of freedom they were offered.

In an analysis of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, the female parallel to the dominant Hindu nationalist party, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Paola Bacchetta outlines two kinds of agency within the right-wing organization: additive and substitutive agency. Additive agency is one where gender agency is added onto an already-complete nationalist project; it is not its main objective. Substitutive agency, on the other hand, substitutes sections of the larger discourse with its own prerogative of gender liberation.⁷⁴ In terms of its imaging, the LTTE was

⁷⁴ Bacchetta, Paola, "Hindu nationalist women imagine spatialities/imagine themselves: Reflections on gender-supplemental-agency," in *Right-Wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists around the World*, ed. Paola Bacchetta and Margaret Power, (Routledge, 2013), 45.

participating in a substitutive way, reconfiguring traditional nationalism to include forms of gender agency. It introduced a woman's agency as one of its principal objectives and a driving force behind its methodology.⁷⁵ However, the Birds of Freedom and women militants were not necessarily participating in these practices.

Dhanu (also known as Kalaivani Rajaratnam, or Thenmozhi) was the militant who assassinated the Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, in 1991 in the first suicide bombing in Sri Lankan history. The assassination was in response to the imminent increase in the IPKF in Sri Lanka, and consequently a heightened opposition to the LTTE. Dhanu was also the leader of the Birds of Freedom until her death at 22 years old. Upon conversing with Dhanu, Rajasingham-Senanayake stated that

[S]he was fighting for the honor and liberation of her people. I had gone to interview her regarding the position of women in the LTTE. She told me that women's liberation was necessary but could only be achieved after the war for Eelam (the homeland of the Tamil people) was won. The woman problem would detract from focusing on the cause and could hence only be sorted out later.⁷⁶

For Dhanu the agency of women was an additive agency – although it was important, it was not necessarily the main aim of the liberation movement. This was in direct contrast with the LTTE's substitutive approach. Dhanu's thoughts might not have resonated with all women militants, but as the former head of the women's organization, her words carry significant weight. Although many women joined the resistance movement in response to their gendered experiences of the war, this did not necessarily make women's emancipation the main goal of

⁷⁵ The contradictions in the LTTE's strategy of substitutive agency – such as the insistence on purity – cause its emancipatory claims to be suspect.

⁷⁶ Rajasingham-Senanayake, "Between Reality and Representation," 153.

their participation in the LTTE. It was, above all else, a Tamil nationalist movement – women’s liberation was a necessary consequence, not a primary driver.

Within this context, neither Kannaki nor mother Malathi reflect the Birds of Freedom’s beliefs. In a newsletter distributed by the organization in 1992, an essay highlights Mrs. Sivakolundu, a Tamil mother from Mullaitivu, a town on the north-eastern coast of Sri Lanka, and her contributions to the organization. Mrs. Sivakolundu was a civilian, and most of her contributions – nursing wounded soldiers and heading the protests by the Mullaitivu chapter of the Mothers’ Front, a peaceful protest movement – embodied the characteristics of a mother as caring, nurturing and peaceful. The essay titled “A Mother in the Liberation War⁷⁷” states, “For a woman to leave behind all her household duties, and to serve her country and her people all day requires a great amount of dignity and tolerance.” Unlike the militant mother, whose duty was to her people, the traditional mother’s duty was to her home and her family.

The essay describes Mrs. Sivakolundu’s bravery while she tended to injured soldiers during the battle of Elephant Pass. “Despite the stress and the breast cancer she suffered, she still felt that her duty was to care for wounded soldiers, even when we yelled at her to leave and take care of herself.” While the militant mother was destined to die and live on in a subsequent incarnation, Mrs. Sivakolundu was a mother who was meant to live – both protector and protected.

By paying tribute to Mrs. Sivakolundu, who ultimately succumbed to breast cancer, the Birds of Freedom undermined the narrative of Malathi as the mother. They outlined the ways in which Mrs. Sivakolundu embodied the ideals of Kannaki, those which the LTE claimed only a militant could – a woman empowered to safeguard her own purity. She was virtuous: the

⁷⁷ *Birds of Freedom*, “Mother in a Liberation War,” passage, translated by Madhavi Rao, 1992, from Tamileelamarchive. https://tamileelamarchive.com/article_pdf/article_3b3f5fb41b86c5c42935cb6fc1be36d4.pdf (accessed June 23 2024).

housewife-caretaker whose main duties were to her home. Yet, she was simultaneously brave, and strong enough to risk her life for those she considered to be her children. She subverted the idea that a mother is necessarily a victim. Despite her role as a civilian, she was not only capable of protecting herself and her purity, but of extending that safety to others.

By exemplifying Mrs. Sivakolundu as the ideal mother of Eelam, the Birds of Freedom challenged the idea that militancy was the only solution to women's oppression; or that all women were victims until they were militants. The Birds of Freedom allowed for a more nuanced understanding for why a woman would join the struggle, and made space for a woman to join the LTTE – not as a mother, but as a fighter.

CHAPTER 2

THE PRODUCTION OF A MOVEMENT

Malathi runs along the coastline, her black shoes sinking in the damp mud. Her starched white school uniform gets dappled with sand, the ridged soles of her shoes collecting small hermit crabs. The evening tide slowly advances and the seawater, orange from the horizon it reflects, sprays her face rhythmically. She finally reaches a small wall dividing the beach from the village and runs up to the man resting silently against it. “Hi sister,” he says, perplexed as Malathi huffs up to him. “Slow down! What’s the matter?”

“I .. I heard...” Malathi says, still catching her breath. “I heard that the movement is sending women to India.” The soldier’s brow furrows and his face settles into a frown. “Yes, we are- but don’t get too excited! You’re still too young.”

“I’m seventeen, I’ve almost graduated!” Malathi exclaims, her heart leaping with excitement. She rushed straight out of school when she heard that an opportunity to fulfill her dream had presented itself. She stares in excitement at the soldier who looks at her with uncertain eyes.

“I’m sorry, Malathi, but that’s still very young. I can try and talk to Anna, but it’s really not up to me...” Malathi opens her mouth to argue, when he cuts in- “Why don’t you wait a little longer? You can still help as a student. You already do so much for the movement.”

Malathi nods solemnly, turning and walking back towards her village. It had been a few years since the first LTTE militants had visited Malathi’s village Aatgatti on the outskirts of Mannar. After months of enduring harassment and violence at the hands of Sinhalese government soldiers, the entry of Tamil fighters into the village felt like rain on blazing red skin. A regiment of around five or six combatants had set up camp within the forests of Mannar,

planning guerilla attacks on the Sinhalese army, and spreading the message of the organization to the Tamil people. The militants regularly visited some homes in the villages, including Malathi's, for supplies and food. They would also recruit them to help plan meetings around the village to disseminate LTTE literature and ideologies. It was during their first visit that Malathi had decided that she wanted to fight for Tamil Eelam.

From then on, Malathi and her sister, Mani, attend Tigers' propaganda campaign meetings religiously, spending their free time rifling through the literature or preparing food and drinks for the militants. Malathi imagines the ladle she uses to serve the comrades to be a rifle, the mugs of tea she distributes to be hand grenades. As the Sinhala soldiers stroll through the town, harassing women and looting destitute homes, her head rings with the sound of explosions and bullets. And now that she knows that the LTTE is recruiting female militants, the sounds grow a little louder, and her heart pumps a little faster.

Mani, who is also desperate to join the struggle, unfortunately loses the opportunity when their mother dies after battling a long illness. As the oldest daughter, Mani takes on the role of caretaker for Malathi and her father; her dreams of joining the revolution dimming as the reality of her situation dawns on her. Her duties of womanhood and motherhood drown out the deafening calls for liberation which had hypnotized her before. But Malathi grows more adamant than ever to escape the life of domesticity which has imprisoned her sister. And now that women are being sent to get military training in India, something as trivial as her age isn't going to stop her.

After her first failed attempt on the beach, Malathi visits the LTTE camps every day to ask if she can join the training group. She pesters the militants, refusing to leave until they give in, so much so that they are hesitant to visit her home for supplies. She rides her bike to the

beach every day after school, and spends her days thinking of new arguments to make to the combatants who patrol there. Finally, after weeks and weeks of unrelenting pleading, Malathi is placed on the second boat of women headed to India for training.

As her small boat crosses the Gulf of Mannar, Malathi's mind reels with hope and excitement. She is ready to relinquish her body, fueled by the knowledge that her sacrifices will ultimately benefit the movement. Her body is nothing more than a reminder to herself of the choice she was allowed to make, and a promise to Tamil Eelam that she will protect it to her death.⁷⁸

Before the introduction of female militants, a woman's role in Tamil society was only ever a mother within a home. A mother was a repository of culture and purity, and was thus relegated to the home, a physical manifestation of interiority. Women who left the house to work were seen as immoral and indecent, even if their employment was necessary to support their families. If a woman did go out and work, however, her job would be very similar to the domestic work she did at home – nursing, cooking, cleaning, etc. Both within and without the home, women were subjected to their “motherly” duties.

Malathi's decision to join the LTTE seemed to be, on the surface, an emancipatory one. It afforded her equality on par with the male militants, it allowed her to escape the life of unpaid labor she would have to perform as a housewife, and it gave her a level of body autonomy which she would not have possessed in civil society. However, much of the discourse surrounding a woman's socio-economic freedom within the organization disputes the narrative that the LTTE was a proponent of women's liberation. Rather than freeing a woman from the coerced life of a

⁷⁸ *Birds of Freedom*. Searching for Freedom.

mother and unpaid producer, the LTTE only redirected their labor towards a different end product.

Within the organization, Malathi worked under a male-dominated structure. Initially, her work directly mirrored the work women performed outside the organization, such as cooking and cleaning; she cared for the soldiers in the same way that she would have cared for her husband and children. Her body was not hers, but a site of sacrifice for the wellbeing of her family. Once women were allowed to fight, Malathi's labor took a strong departure from that of the imprisoned housewife. Yet, she still performed unpaid bodily labor to satisfy the desires of Prabhakaran under the guise of patriotism. If a mother within the nuclear family is reduced to her body in the service of a man, a combatant in the LTTE is reduced to her body in the service of her Leader, Prabhakaran.

The two dominant narratives – one put forth by the LTTE and the other by scholars on the topic⁷⁹ – place women militants within a binary of agent/victim. The LTTE, as insurgencies in other parts of the world⁸⁰, posed militancy as the solution to the sexual division of labor. Through the course of this chapter, I will argue that women combatants occupy an identity which exists between the gaps of the binary of victim/agent, or mother/militant.

To make this argument, I will first explore the LTTE's strides to ensure the social progress of women, and the context of Tamil society within which it acts. I will explore the role of non-militant women as mothers and producers, both within and without the movement. I will then return to Malathi, and examine the ways in which a militant continues to perform the labor

⁷⁹ Gonsalves, Tahira, "Media Manipulations and Agency: Women in the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) of Sri Lanka," *The Ahfad Journal* 22, no. 2 (2005): 36.

Loken, Meredith, "'Both needed and threatened': Armed mothers in militant visuals," *Security Dialogue* 52, no. 1 (2021): 21-44.

⁸⁰ Sierra Becerra, Diana, "Insurgent Butterflies: Gender and Revolution in El Salvador, 1965-2015," PhD diss., 2017;

Bloom, Mia, "Female suicide bombers: a global trend," *Daedalus* 136, no. 1 (2007): 94-102.

of a mother under the ruse of emancipation. Finally, I will explore the identities of the women militants, and their queering of the role of mother, housewife and the producer.

The Original Producers

I Want Freedom Too!

Young man, You are rushing somewhere
and leaving me behind.
I was tired of the burden of
the soft bracelets on my hands
and the gold thali around my neck
and the loose silk pressing against my body.
My dreams of a life of intoxicating love
have vanished.
Women, with bindis on their faces and flowers in their hair,
Have been imprisoned
By their beauty – Enough!
I carried the heroic people of this country in my womb.
I toiled with you in your fields.
Can I join you in the liberation struggle for our land?
Oh my love,
I want freedom too!

Poem from Issue 3 of LTTE newsletter⁸¹

The poem “I Want Freedom Too” was published in an issue of an LTTE newsletter distributed in July 1984, exactly a year after the official beginning⁸² of the Sri Lankan Civil War. Although a women’s militant unit did not exist during this time, it was a period of intense recruitment of women as combatants for the LTTE.⁸³ A woman member of the organization at

⁸¹*Liberation Tigers*. “I Want Freedom Too!” Poem. Translated by Madhavi Rao. May 1984. From Tamileelamarchive. https://tamileelamarchive.com/article_pdf/article_1a5ee0a8fc219925db81090ebb0bd379.pdf (accessed June 23 2024).

⁸² Although the LTTE dated the beginning of the war to 27 November, 1982, the date of the killing of the first Tamil martyr (Richards 2014, 14).

⁸³ Alison, Miranda, "Cogs in the wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam," *Civil Wars* 6, no. 4 (2003): 38.

this point would not be fighting, but would likely be participating “in propaganda work, medical care, information collection, fundraising and recruitment.”⁸⁴

The poem, written under the name Vanambadi, is told from the perspective of a mother who expresses her desire for freedom, and her wish to join the liberation struggle for Tamil Eelam. The poem poses motherhood as a physical prison, motherly ornaments – a thali⁸⁵, bangles, sarees, bindis and flowers – as shackles. The speaker dubs the institution of beauty a prison; it is a “burden” which obfuscates her personhood and transforms her into a wife and mother. The idea of a demure, beautiful, “fragile” feminine wife becomes nothing more than another justification for the subjugation of women within their homes.

Economic exploitation is the core theme of the poem. The mother makes reference to the labor she performed for the nation: she “carried the heroic people of this country” who are now fighting for Tamil Eelam. The mother implores the young men of the movement to allow her to labor directly for the nation, rather than for those who fight for it. In other words, the mother asks for her labor to be seen outside of the realm of motherhood, and for her childcare to be seen as a form of work, rather than simply a duty.

She challenges the idea that women are natural caretakers and producers, and poses her labor as productive in spaces outside of the home. She also challenges the idea of love, stating that any hopes that she might have held for the fulfilling promise of love have disappeared. Often, a woman’s work for her husband and her children is seen as a “labor of love.” Maternal love in and of itself is seen as sufficient compensation for her efforts and time. By stating that these dreams have vanished, the poem expresses Vanambadi’s disillusionment with this idea of maternal bliss. She is aware of the prison she has been placed into, and is ready to leave it.

⁸⁴ Alison, “Cogs in the wheel?” 38.

⁸⁵ A sacred necklace worn by Tamil women to signify their status as wives.

The poem not only calls for women's liberation through their participation in the struggle, but poses the specific economic emancipation of women as an essential goal. By including this poem in their newsletter, the LTTE reveals economic exploitation and the sexual division of labor to be the primary barrier to the freedom of women. The economic exploitation of Tamil women has a far-reaching history.

Silappadikaram perfectly embodies Tamil attitude towards women and the sexual division of labor within Tamil society. Kannaki's foil throughout the epic, Madhavi, achieves a level of economic importance which casts her as the impure woman as opposed to Kannaki.

This "purity" is sexual – as represented by Kannaki's loyal monogamy, and Madhavi's infidelious prostitution – and socioeconomic. Kannaki is from a rich merchant family, her social and class status matching Kovalan's perfectly.⁸⁶ She is selfless, serving "her near and dear ones, ascetics and guests, in a manner appropriate to the householder's life."⁸⁷ She is a perfect housewife: rich and doting, such that she does not need to labor outside the home, nor does she want to. Madhavi, on the other hand is rich due to her sex work. She is well respected within society as a dancer, with even the King recognising her talent. Yet, she uses this admiration to attract a suitor – she trades respect for riches. Her labor is not spent in the benediction of others, but on herself and her own desire for wealth.

Kannaki and Madhavi are differentiated based on the material gains they afford to Kovalan. Kannaki is a rich merchant's daughter, who brings wealth to Kovalan's home.⁸⁸ When he loses all his wealth, it is Kannaki's golden bracelet which represents a solution to his mistakes.⁸⁹ Marrying Kannaki awards Kovalan more than just an honorable wife, it also awards

⁸⁶ Ramachandra Dikshitar, V. R., *The Silappadikaram*, (Oxford University Press, 1939), 92.

⁸⁷ Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Silappadikaram*, 95.

⁸⁸ Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Silappadikaram*, 92.

⁸⁹ Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Silappadikaram*, 5.

him endless riches. Madhavi, on the other hand, costs Kovalan all of his money. She, “a false woman who makes every false thing appear like truth,”⁹⁰ steals Kovalan’s money and leaves him penniless. She is not only a dishonorable harlot, she is also a drain on his wealth. Kannaki’s story highlights the proper etiquette for wives as means of domestic production, rather than self-sufficient breadwinners. Madhavi is depicted as an independent woman, though this independence comes at the cost of her virtue.

The Kannaki/ Madhavi dichotomy represents the moral component of the sexual division of labor. The embodied mother, Kannaki, stays home and produces, sacrificing her own wealth for the benefit of her family. Her essence is made for the consumption of others. Similarly, a “good” woman is essentialised into a mother. Her inevitable and predestined fate is to be a mother, due to her ability to give birth and her supposed motherly instincts. “A mother’s love is the purest form of love,” and the bond between a mother and her child is unbreakable. “Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal “instinct” rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others than creation of self.”⁹¹ A woman is no more than a vessel for childbirth, and her worth is tied to her ability to perform this task. Like a faulty machine, if a woman is unable, or refuses, to perform the task she was “created” to perform, she is a “bad” woman. An unproductive woman is an immoral woman.

In his treatise on the family, Friedrich Engels states: “In the family, [the man] is the bourgeois; the wife represents the proletariat.”⁹² As a proletarian worker, a woman is a producer whose sole prerogative is to perform labor for someone else’s benefit – to birth her husband’s heirs. Her only value is her labor power; without being a mother, a woman is unworthy of

⁹⁰ Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Silappadikaram*, 154.

⁹¹ Rich, Adrienne, *Of woman born: Motherhood as experience and institution*, (Virago Press, 1977), 42.

⁹² Engels, Friedrich, "Engels on the Origin and Evolution of the Family," *Population and Development Review* 14, no. 4 (1988): 724.

respect. Despite being instrumental in accumulating the family's wealth, the ideal woman does not spend a penny of it on herself, and is a perpetual producer. Unlike the proletariat, however, a woman is not a wage-laborer as she is not monetarily compensated for the domestic labor she performs.

Silvia Federici challenges this unpaid labor which a woman performs in the name of “love” in her revolutionary manifesto *Wages against Housework*. She states that the “role as women is to be the unwaged but happy, and most of all loving, servants of the ‘working class’.”⁹³ A woman is compensated by her love for her family; if she is not happy performing unpaid, often degrading, labor for her family, then there is something inherently wrong with her, and she is labeled a “bad mother.” Motherhood is a form of manipulation which conflates a worker with their work – the woman with the mother – to create a form of exploitation which cannot be refuted without refuting a woman's identity.⁹⁴

The fundamental philosophy behind the process of turning the mother into the producer is explained through the idea of “naturalization,” or the reduction of human, autonomous decisions into natural, instinctual ones. “[The] view that the productivity of the female body is identical with animal *fertility* ... has to be understood as a *result* of the patriarchal and capitalist division of labor and not as its precondition.”⁹⁵ While men's ability to produce goods is seen as a human process requiring compensation, women's ability to produce children is made a “natural” one which exists outside of the ideas of money and labor.

⁹³ Federici, Silvia, *Wages Against Housework*, (Power of Women Collective and Falling Wall Press, 1975), 3.

⁹⁴ Federici, *Wages against Housework*, 2.

⁹⁵ Mies, Maria, *Patriarchy and accumulation on a world scale: Women in the international division of labor*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 54.

Housewifization

Many essays in the newsletters distributed by the Birds of Freedom centered on women's economic liberation. In an essay titled, “The Position of Women in Today's Society,” the newsletter explains the genealogy of women’s “enslavement,” by asking the questions: “Why are women treated as slaves and commodities? Why are they second class citizens? What is the history behind their current situation? What direction should their true liberation take?”

The essay traces the historical trajectory from ancient societies, where men and women were equal and both reaped the benefits of their labor, to modern society where women are ruthlessly abused and excluded from public life, existing solely within the home. It cites capitalism, and the exploitation of surplus as the origin of slaves and masters; and consequently a division of labor which posed women as slaves to men.

It goes on to explain the current social status of women as “either women are relegated to their homes due to their non-social *prakriti*⁹⁶, or working women have no time to engage in social activities outside of their families.” Women are assumed to be inherently private beings without the ability or desire to participate in public life – such as policy-making – and even if they are allowed into the public sphere to work, the effort of performing additional domestic labor prevents them from effectively partaking in public life.

The essay concludes that the only path to true liberation from these oppressive systems is to dismantle the home – to move women out of the private sphere and into the public. “Women’s emancipation does not happen in courtrooms or college lecture halls, it happens within the home.”⁹⁷ Without demolishing the concept of private life, no amount of judicial change or education will lead to the complete emancipation of women.

⁹⁶ A Sanskrit word meaning “natural state.”

⁹⁷ The essay cites this as being a quote from Leo Tolstoy, but I could not find the source material that it is referring to.

The privatization of the home is not simply a result of the sexual division of labor but, along with naturalization, one of its fundamental tenets. A woman is a mother and consequently a producer, but she is also necessarily these things within the home. The home is a physical manifestation of the ideological interiority which women embody. By placing women within the home, the patriarchal institutions both morally enforce the values exemplified by the mother/nation, and create a steady site of maternal production. The home is an isolated labor system with the aims of producing children and policing women.

Although housewives were initially unique to the upper classes and a symbol of great social superiority, today housewives are ubiquitous. Maria Mies coined the term “housewifization” to understand the process by which women of all classes were transformed into housewives. She theorises that the establishment of the universal housewife required the hidden woman and the nuclear family to become moral necessities.⁹⁸

In the case of the European bourgeois family, Engels states that

[Monogamy] was the first form of the family based not on natural but on economic conditions ... The rule of the man in the family, the procreation of children who could only be his, destined to be the heirs of his wealth - these alone were ... the exclusive aims of monogamy.⁹⁹

Monogamy was the key to the creation of housewives and the nuclear family. Monogamy created a system wherein women became producers of a man’s heirs to his inheritance.¹⁰⁰

Marriage became an economic contract wherein a man acquired capital as a means of production, rather than an equal union between man and woman. To concretise the process of heir production, the bourgeois developed the social and sexual division of labor, through the

⁹⁸ Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, 100-110.

⁹⁹ Engels, “Engels on the Origin and Evolution of the Family,” 720.

¹⁰⁰ Engels discusses polygamy within this system as a luxury of the uber rich, whereas the majority of families within the elite classes practised monogamy (Engels 1988, 719).

privatization of the home.¹⁰¹ Bourgeois women were excluded from the public sphere of politics and economy into the private sphere of “cozy ‘homes’”¹⁰² virtually stripping them of all power.

While there were certain similarities between European domestication and the roles of bourgeois women in pre-modern Ceylon¹⁰³ – “[a woman’s] activities were circumscribed by tradition, culture and religion, which prescribed a role which was essentially domestic and secondary”¹⁰⁴ – the social systems in place did not mirror the European sexual division of labor completely. Unlike the monogamous nuclear family, a bourgeois woman was not yet reduced to capital operating solely within the home.¹⁰⁵

Puritanical ideas of chastity and femininity associated a woman’s labor with her social status; women of high class and caste statuses were not expected to engage in work, viewing it as a signification of “social inferiority.”¹⁰⁶ Moreover, as observed through the character of Kannaki, within the Tamil context there was a connection between the domesticity and morality of a woman. Women, particularly bourgeois women, who attempted to leave their homes – to get educated, for instance – were deemed “immodest” and “unsuitable as wives.”¹⁰⁷ With British colonialism in the mid-19th century and the arrival of Christian missionaries in Ceylon, the home, and subsequently the family, was established. Christian missionaries saw Ceylonese upper caste elite women as “the epitomes of bigotry, ignorance and degradation,”¹⁰⁸ and made it their moral imperative to introduce principles of gentility into their society. To this end, Victorian

¹⁰¹ Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, 104.

¹⁰² Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, 104.

¹⁰³ I use the term Ceylon here to describe the pre-independence period, since the country only took on the name Sri Lanka post-independence.

¹⁰⁴ Perera, HE Myrtle, "The changing status of women in Sri Lanka," *International journal of sociology of the family* (1987): 2.

¹⁰⁵ Perera, "The changing status of women in Sri Lanka," 2.

¹⁰⁶ Perera, "The changing status of women in Sri Lanka," 2.

¹⁰⁷ Alagiyawanna, K. L. V. , "The social impact of missionary activities in Sri Lanka in the early 19th century," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka* 36 (1991): 6.

¹⁰⁸ De Alwis, Malathi, "‘Housewives of the Public’ The Cultural Signification of the Sri Lankan Nation," in *Crossing Borders and Shifting Boundaries: Vol. II: Gender, Identities and Networks*, (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2002), 22.

women missionaries instituted schools dedicated to the upbringing of genteel women¹⁰⁹, teaching subjects such as arithmetic, English, British history, needlework, drawing, Western cookery and music.¹¹⁰ The education spent “too much time and attention ... on the ornamental rather than the useful”¹¹¹; the focus was on creating perfect housewives rather than educated women.

The history of the proletarian housewife is starkly different due to their necessary labor outside of the home. In Europe, monogamy was initially disavowed within the proletariat since “otherwise, they would breed too many poor for the scarce food supply.”¹¹² However, as the system of capitalism evolved, it required a steady stream of workers, one which would not be produced without the “proper” home, and the incentive for women to give birth to children.¹¹³ Thus, the proletarian housewife was created to breed workers, rather than inheritors.

In the case of proletarian women in Tamil Ceylon, the identity of producer has a far-reaching past. Nira Wikramasinghe and Alicia Schrikker explain that, “In Jaffna ... in contrast to other areas, slavery and caste-based service labor became closely intertwined.”¹¹⁴ Under the Dutch East India Company, from 1658 to 1795, slavery became institutionalized and cemented within Ceylonese society.¹¹⁵ The appropriation of indigenous slavery practices led to the establishment of chattel slavery, and thus the establishment of a system where slave mothers became valuable commodities, in a manner similar to the “usufruct of cows [and] sheep.”¹¹⁶ Lower caste women were reduced, not to mothers in a home, but to breeders on a farm.

¹⁰⁹ De Alwis, “Housewives of the Public,” 25.

¹¹⁰ Jayawardena, Kumari, “Emancipation and subordination of women in Sri Lanka,” in *Feminism & Nationalism in the Third World* (Zed Books, 1986), 118.

¹¹¹ Lorenz, C.A. quoted in Jayawardena, “Emancipation and subordination of women in Sri Lanka,” 119.

¹¹² Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, 104.

¹¹³ Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, 105.

¹¹⁴ Schrikker, Alicia and Nira Wickramasinghe, “The Ambivalence of Freedom: Slaves in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 78, No. 3 (2019): 503.

¹¹⁵ Schrikker and Wickramasinghe, “The Ambivalence of Freedom,” 505.

¹¹⁶ Schrikker and Wickramasinghe, “The Ambivalence of Freedom,” 505.

Though slavery was abolished in 1844, women in the lower strata of society did not escape their double exploitation. In the mid-19th century, during the beginning of British colonialism, the British government planted tea across the north of Ceylon as a source of export revenue. To pick the tea, the British brought indentured Tamil laborers from Tamil Nadu, India to work on the plantations. The Indian Tamil tea pickers, also known as Estate Tamils, lived on the plantations they picked for, creating a nebulous space of interiority/exteriority for the Tamil women.¹¹⁷

The women performed two kinds of labor – housework and agricultural work – and were paid less than men for it since “Women, in the Indian situation, were considered to be more patient than men.”¹¹⁸ Moreover, both kinds of tasks were labor-intensive, time-consuming and monotonous¹¹⁹; the work which a woman was allowed to perform outside of the home was similar in its nature and intensity to the work she performed within the home. A woman’s domesticity and the institution of motherhood trapped her in her home; even if she managed to escape the physical space of the home, she was still trapped within the position of the housewife.

With the advent of Christian missionaries, lower class girls, too, were educated in mission schools. However, unlike elite girls, this education was limited to the minimum skills required for their roles as housewives.¹²⁰ Unlike genteel women, lower class women’s role in the home was limited to their physical labor; they did not have the moral imperative to uphold traditional customs and values of interiority to the extent that upper class women did. The proletarian woman has always been reduced to capital to be exploited, without requiring any

¹¹⁷ Kurian, Rachel, “Tamil women on Sri Lankan plantations: labor control and patriarchy,” In *Women plantation workers*, (Routledge, 2020), 72.

¹¹⁸ Kurian, “Tamil women on Sri Lankan plantations,” 68.

¹¹⁹ Kurian, “Tamil women on Sri Lankan plantations,” 72.

¹²⁰ De Alwis, “Housewives of the Public,” 23.

moral ideologies to justify her subjugation. When the proletarian woman becomes a housewife, it is an extension of her previous enslavement, not the creation of a new division of labor.

In the early 20th century, female education began to spread rapidly within Ceylon. Between the years of 1901 and 1946, the number of women in schools jumped from 27% to 42% of all women.¹²¹ Upon gaining independence from British rule in 1948, this number rose dramatically, reaching 83% in 1981, two years before the beginning of the Civil War.¹²²

With the proliferation of education emerged a class of working women in the country, specifically in the roles of teachers and doctors.¹²³ Yet, for working women (in the relatively higher stratas of society), their identities as mothers did not disappear once they left their homes to work. Malathi de Alwis argues that these employment opportunities were not truly liberatory¹²⁴; although they were welcomed into the external capitalist system, it was only in vocational roles which mirrored a woman's work in the home. The patriarchal system "[relegated] the majority of women to a continuation of their domestic chores in the 'public' domain"¹²⁵ – manifesting in jobs such as cooking, cleaning, teaching, nursing, secretarial work, etc.

The low wages women earned in their new jobs also reflected the idea that a woman's labor needed no compensation. Their earned income was seen as *supplemental* to their husbands', rather than a stable source of income for their families. Their work was not labor, but an "activity."¹²⁶ Due to such beliefs, women's employment was not viewed as a permanent facet of their lives, but a "necessary stop-gap"¹²⁷ in their roles as housewives and mothers, even if they

¹²¹ Jayawardena, "Emancipation and subordination of women in Sri Lanka," 122.

¹²² Jayawardena, "Emancipation and subordination of women in Sri Lanka," 122.

¹²³ Jayawardena, "Emancipation and subordination of women in Sri Lanka," 127.

¹²⁴ De Alwis, "Housewives of the Public," 18.

¹²⁵ De Alwis, "Housewives of the Public," 18.

¹²⁶ Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, 118-119.

¹²⁷ Perera, "The changing status of women in Sri Lanka," 16.

are the sole breadwinners in their families. Moreover, for women in the lower echelons of society, their liberation made virtually no progress between life under British colonialism and within Independent Sri Lanka. Thus, women across social boundaries remained trapped in the home – whether ideological or physical.

Mothers of the Movement

In line with the conclusion of the essay, “The Position of Women in Today’s Society,” the emancipation espoused by the LTTE greatly centered on the destruction of the home and the family. The promise of the revolution was the entry of women into public life, and the abolition of the privatized home. By joining the LTTE, women would experience public life and escape the shackles of housewifedom and motherhood.

Women in the Revolution

Although I have 9 children, I want to participate in all aspects of the revolution. We (as women) will fight to the largest extent that we can. It is a woman’s duty to devote herself to the movement as much as possible, even if she herself is not part of the struggle.

Raising children is the responsibility of the revolution. The people who carry arms are not the only ones assisting in the struggle. When a child is crying, leaving them behind to participate in the revolution is extremely painful. I have full faith in everything I do, even though my loved ones try to dissuade me from my belief in the revolution. I don’t take what they say into account. Instead, I try to have conversations with them about the cause and to convince them about our struggle. When we work with different women in different walks of life, we should take on their troubles and their sorrows. We should not let their household tasks, such as raising their children, keep them from joining the cause. Rather, we should help them, and address their problems. We should treat them as our sisters, and make them a part of our family. We should help them build their beliefs.

(This statement by a Palestinian woman is taken from our seventh publication, “Women and Revolution - The Participation of Women in the Liberation Struggle for Tamil Eelam”.)¹²⁸

The passage above was published in 1984 and it outlines the ways in which women can still participate in the struggle, even if their social and “motherly” duties do not permit them to do so. The passage claims that the first step towards a woman’s emancipation is the destruction of the mother. A mother’s convictions and beliefs should overpower any impediments she might face when joining the revolution. She should be a revolutionary first and a mother second. The text disputes the idea of privatized motherhood: that motherhood is a task to be performed by a single individual within the home. Rather, motherhood should be a public institution where children are raised by a network of caretakers and by the revolution.

The duty of a mother is not to her biological children – it is first and foremost to the nation, the children of the revolution. While “leaving [children] behind to participate in the struggle is very painful,” it is the sacrifice of a soldier, not a woman. When she joins the revolution, a mother is not a producer, but a comrade-in-arms. Her life is not devoted to her children and engulfed by the capitalist system, it is devoted to the cause and enriched by her ideologies.

The image accompanying the passage is of a woman sitting with her two children, holding a gun (Figure 2.1). The two children are young: one being an infant in her lap, and the other around 8 years old sitting next to her. All three of them are looking at the camera in what seems to be an army camp. What seems to be a soldier’s pack stands in the background. There is

¹²⁸ The name of the publications in Tamil is “பெண்களும் புரட்சியும் - தமிழீழ தேசிய விடுதலை போராட்டத்தில் பெண்களின் பங்கு.” *Liberation Tigers*. “Women in the Revolution.” March 1984. Text. Translated by Madhavi Rao, Leelavathi Nagarajan. March 1984. From [Tamileelamarchive](https://tamileelamarchive.com/article_pdf/article_c8b78dfb5a14f48f56b087ec8fabe428.pdf). https://tamileelamarchive.com/article_pdf/article_c8b78dfb5a14f48f56b087ec8fabe428.pdf (accessed June 23 2024).

a complete dissonance between the subjects and the setting. The eight-year-old is smiling and the infant is sucking on a pacifier. The woman holds the rifle across her body with one arm, shielding the infant in her other arm. The mother seems threatening rather than comforting, her love manifesting as anger rather than affection. Moreover, the somber look on the mother's and baby's face, as compared to the child's face, represents a depth of safety: as the subject gets further away from the viewer, they become more at ease. Rather than feeling afraid between the rifle and the soldier's pack, the little girl feels content and happy.



Figure 2.1¹²⁹

The physical setting of the image is of the utmost importance. When motherhood takes place outside of the isolated institution of the home, it is not a form of subjugation. This imagery makes a distinction between motherhood and mothering. Motherhood is a violently enforced institution; mothering is a willingly performed praxis. In 'Womanist Mothering: Loving and Raising the Revolution,' Melina Abdullah interviews six Black mothers to understand what their modalities of mothering are. Many of the participants agree that one way in which they reject the Western nuclear family is by building "villages" to raise their children in.¹³⁰ The "insurmountable

¹²⁹ *Liberation Tigers*, "Women in the Revolution."

¹³⁰ Abdullah, Melina, "Womanist Mothering: Loving and Raising the Revolution," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 1 (2012): 64.

task of ushering another human being towards their fullest potential”¹³¹ is split within a community of loving family, friends and neighbors. The womanist mothering praxis offers a way of mothering that is not tied to the institution of motherhood.

And yet, this praxis was entirely rhetorical. The support which mothers offer the LTTE was never reciprocal. Returning to the figure of Mrs. Sivakondulu, her participation within the movement was an addition to and an extension of her motherly duties, rather than an escape from them. Instead of performing unpaid labor within the home, she performed unpaid labor within the barracks. The physical site of the home had shifted to that of the camp, but the institution still remained.

Just as motherly duties are not a form of compensated labor, neither is patriotic fervor. A mother helps her nation out of her duty to it, and the labor she performs for the nation is a “labor of love.” Mrs. Sivakondulu’s labor is not recognised as labor; it is simply her duty to her nation. Like a worker is conflated with her work¹³², a patriot is conflated with her patriotism. A person does not sacrifice their life to the nation; their lives are the nation. The LTTE did not abolish the institution of motherhood, it simply repurposed it under the language of revolution. Mothers within the institution of motherhood performed labors which were assigned to them as “natural,” and militants within the militancy performed labors which were assigned to them as “duties.”

There are many similarities between the family as an institution and the LTTE. The LTTE constantly used filial language to create kinship bonds between its fighters – calling male militants “annay” meaning brother, and the female militants “akka” meaning sister.¹³³ In the context of this family network, Prabhakaran embodied the role of the father; “*Anna* is just like a

¹³¹ Abdullah, “Womanist Mothering,” 65.

¹³² Federici, *Wages against Housework*, 2.

¹³³ Herath, Tamara, “Women combatants and gender identity in contemporary conflicts: the case of the LTTE,” *London School of Economics and Political Science*, (2007): 126.

father to us,”¹³⁴ de Soyza’s friend Akila states in *Tamil Tigress*. As the father, Prabhakaran enjoyed the fruits of his soldiers’ labors – labors which he dictated. In *Tamil Tigress*, de Soyza explains that only a few ranked militants “had permission among the women to ask Prabhakaran a simple question without antagonizing or undermining his authority in any way.”¹³⁵ Militants in the lower ranks of the organization had to follow orders unquestioningly in service of their patriarch.

Within the LTTE, women were still capital for production. This fact became especially true during the period of forced child conscriptions into the movement. “In a situation of patriarchal militancy and violence, Sri Lankan women are ... expected to sacrifice their bodies and the products of their bodies - their children.”¹³⁶ The conscriptions were a result of the growing desperation of the movement in the last years of its regime.

In 2002, a ceasefire agreement was negotiated between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE after years of brutal warfare and countless civilian deaths.¹³⁷ However, due to the fundamentally different goals of both parties – with the Sri Lankan government wanting a unified state and the LTTE wanting a sovereign Tamil Eelam – this agreement did not result in lasting peace.¹³⁸ In 2004, due to fear of losing its legitimacy in the political sphere, the LTTE broke the ceasefire agreement, leading to defections within its ranks on a large scale. With these defections came a loss of fighting force, and the forced conscriptions of men, women and children into the militancy.¹³⁹ During this time, the LTTE “routinely visit[ed] Tamil homes to

¹³⁴de Soyza, Niromi, *Tamil Tigress: My story as a child soldier in Sri Lanka’s bloody civil war*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd, 2012), 120.

¹³⁵ de Soyza, *Tamil Tigress*, 126.

¹³⁶ De Alwis, “Housewives of the Public,” 35.

¹³⁷ Ganguly, Sumit, “Ending the Sri Lankan civil war,” *Daedalus* 147, no. 1 (2018): 83.

¹³⁸ Ganguly, “Ending the Sri Lankan civil war,” 83.

¹³⁹ Ganguly, “Ending the Sri Lankan civil war,” 85.

inform parents that they must produce a child for the ‘movement’.¹⁴⁰ Women living under the regime of the LTTE became producers of a new kind of product, still performing unpaid labor. Rather than producing workers for a capitalist system, mothers produced bodies for a revolution.

For the figure of the female militant, they played the role of both producer and product. However, unlike civilian women who performed unpaid labor in addition to their “motherly” duties, the militants’ motherhood existed completely within the movement. Rather than physically producing soldiers for the LTTE, the female combatants participated in a process of ideological reproduction. The figure of Malathi most accurately represents this process. In 1993, an issue of the LTTE newsletter published a memorialism of Malathi through the poem “The Epic of the 400 New Women.”¹⁴¹

The poem sings praises of Malathi whose death led to the creation of a battalion of 400 women soldiers. As in her previous praises, there are comparisons of Malathi to seeds planted in the soil, giving birth to new female soldiers. However, in this poem, there are also several references to fire. A couplet in the poem reads, “Entering into fire to create a new epic/ Her womanhood rose like a wave.” The imagery of fire in reference to creation evokes the image of a phoenix burning only to rise from the ashes – she is created in her own self destruction. Her ability to produce in a moment of sacrifice is what imbues her with womanhood.

Another couplet reads, “To change a life which was like fire to a stove/ She burned and fell to the earth.” The first line, which compares a woman’s life to fire in a stove, expresses the vitality of a womanhood to living itself. Women are the source and sustenance of life, the original producers. To transform this life, Malathi burns and falls to the earth. By sacrificing her

¹⁴⁰ Becker, Jo, “Sri Lanka, living in fear: Child soldiers and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka,” *Human Right Watch* Vol. 16, no. 13, (2004): 2.

¹⁴¹ Appendix 1.

body in the initial death of the phoenix, she “came forward as a Tigress.” Malathi’s sacrifice produced 400 new tigers.

The metaphor of the phoenix alludes to Malathi’s role as the perpetual destroyer and producer. Her destruction was a process of production. Malathi is the mother/producer of the LTTE in that she produced a new battalion of 400 female soldiers. And she was simultaneously the destroyer/product of the LTTE in that she committed the ultimate act of labor for its benefit.

Path to Liberation

Of the many women who joined the LTTE, the majority of them were from the lower-middle class, and predominantly all of them were from lower castes.¹⁴² As the victims of stringent double exploitation, the LTTE promised these women a radically better life than the ones they led. Cecile Van de Voorde argues that the eagerness of women to prove their equality to men meant that it was easy for the organization to exploit these sentiments to their own advantage.¹⁴³ This argument states that due to their desperation for equality women would be manipulated into compromising on the extent of their liberation. At the end of her memoir, *Tamil Tigress*, de Soyza becomes disillusioned with the organization which she had blindly followed for the majority of her teen years:

Little had I realised then that following the lead of a totalitarian male and volunteering to become suicide bombers was not women’s liberation. There is no doubting that these women were brave and heroic, but they served a master, never achieved equal status to or the recognition of their male counterparts, and had marriages arranged by Prabhakaran himself.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Van de Voorde, Cecile, "Sri Lankan terrorism: Assessing and responding to the threat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)," *Police Practice and Research* 6, no. 2 (2005): 185.

¹⁴³ Van de Voorde, "Sri Lankan Terrorism," 186.

¹⁴⁴ de Soyza, *Tamil Tigress*, 300.

Like Van de Voorde, de Soyza sees the participation of female combatants in the movement as a form of deception and as taking advantage of subjugated women. While this was definitely the case for many female militants, this reading of their participation is limited and reductive. In the documentary “Haunted by her Yesterdays,” one of the ex-combatants, Kumudini, states:

The women combatants were more eager to complete a task than male combatants. This could be constructing a building or capturing a territory. We were eager to prove we could do it better because we were women. Sometimes male combatants used this to their advantage. But we ignored it and continued to work. We were not their slaves.¹⁴⁵

Although the men attempted to exercise their power over women within the organization, the women militants were not unaware of the situation. Returning to the idea of agency, crafting an argument in a way which frames women as victims is not productive. It simply creates the binary assumption that if women are not complete agents, then they are victims by default.

The women who joined the movement were as ardently patriotic as the men. While their bodies were used as means to an end, this end was one which the women were in support of. If a woman chose to exploit her own body to be of most use to a movement she dedicated her life to, this is still an act of agency within larger structures of domination. Although there was a clearly gendered aspect to sacrifice, suicide bombings and martyrdom, this did not mean that every woman who partakes in these acts was a victim.

Female combatants in the LTTE disidentified with motherhood, an institution they could not escape even through their militancy. The combatants appropriated the essentialist idea of “twisted maternalism” – the idea that even acts of extreme violence are results of a woman’s

¹⁴⁵ The Social Architects of South Asia, “Haunted by her Yesterdays,” Youtube Video, 22:38. March 27, 06:28. 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSSv9Kk3tkI>

innate motherly instinct¹⁴⁶ – to create the female militant. The women took on tropes of twisted maternalism, such as violence being an essential part of a woman’s identity, and reinterpreted them in a way which best benefited the movement. Rather than simply accepting motherhood as a process of exploitation by the LTTE, the fighters understood it to be vital to the realization of their own beliefs. They were not militants only because they were mothers; the Tamil women adopted aspects of motherhood to best embody their militancy.

In an issue of the *Birds of Freedom* newsletter distributed in 1994, Special Commander Jana was interviewed about her experiences within the LTTE. Jana spoke about her decision to join the LTTE, her parents’ reactions to her enlistment and her experiences in battle among various other topics. In one instance in her interview, Jana states:

Although training was initially quite difficult, the constant thought that “this training is going to be the solution to so many issues, and will release so many people from oppression” was our driving force. When we first carried our guns and put on our cyanide capsules, we thought “we value freedom above our lives, and we value our weapons above our bodies.”¹⁴⁷

Jana’s claim that the female militants valued the liberation struggle over their individual lives echoes Dhanu’s claim from the last chapter, that the freedom struggle was more valuable than women’s liberation. For the militants, their participation in the LTTE was not an escape from the oppressive systems of capitalist exploitation, despite the LTTE positing it as such. Rather, the female combatants’ main objective as Tigers was to liberate Tamil Eelam. As such, being producers did not necessarily make the female militants victims; it was part of a larger sacrifice they were making to the revolution.

¹⁴⁶ Gentry, Caron E, “Twisted maternalism: From peace to violence,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 11, no. 2 (2009): 242.

¹⁴⁷ *Birds of Freedom*, “Interview with Special Commander Jana,” Interview, translated by Madhavi Rao, 1994, from Tamileelamarchive. https://tamileelamarchive.com/article_pdf/article_0c989c0d260b07953bc4f48b9e75b74b.pdf (accessed June 23 2024).

CHAPTER 3

THE WRATH OF THE GODDESS

The air is red with waving flags, the ground slippery with flower petals. The sounds of laughter and tears mingle with the loud beat of drums. A crowd of students, soldiers and people from the surrounding town of Kopai all buzz around a red tent encircled by an armed guard of LTTE militants. A voice on a loudspeaker blares, “2nd Lt. Malathi shall forever be remembered for her bravery when facing the Indian army...”

As the day goes on, music plays over the loudspeakers, interspersed with messages from commanders of the LTTE, and recollections of Malathi’s spirit. A long procession of people move steadily towards the tent, each dressed in red and yellow, the colors of the Eelam flag.

A large image of Malathi in her militant uniform looks over the people, set in an arch framing the entrance to the grounds. The words, “Tamil Eelam Women’s Upliftment Day,” spill out of each side of the portrait. Malathi’s solemn but youthful face glazes over the ceremonies, her eyes set past them to an imagined future. The drums beat on, accompanied by a piercing trumpet.

Suddenly, the haze of the festivities are dispelled by a shaking voice over the speaker. “When I...” the voice begins, quivering softly. “When I first learned that Malathi had left to train in India, I was devastated.” Staccato sobs crackle over the hastily quieting crowd. “She was my baby daughter. What kind of father was I to have- to have let her face any harm?” The crowd slowly draws to a halt, all eyes on a small man standing in front of a tall statue set directly in front of the tent. The statue is made of granite, scorching in the rare heat of the monsoon season; carved into the stone is a stocky woman in a uniform, unadorned and holding a rifle.

“I spent the days blaming myself and the nights anxiously waiting for her to come back. And then...” the voice trails off for a few minutes before continuing, “And then I heard that she had died. My daughters, Mani and Malathi, are my entire heart. Malathi had a blazing spirit inside of her. Anybody could see it. She was the smartest in school, she was so energetic and so kind. When I heard the news, all I could think was that she had gone too soon...”

The air stills, each word landing heavily on the stagnant crowd. The man draws a shaky breath: “But now I know that she did not die in vain. Malathi is the first female hero of this war. She represents all of the people of Tamil Eelam, and the liberation which they deserve. I know that she would not have had it any other way, and that with every victory, her memory grows stronger and stronger.

“Pulikal Thagam Tamil Eela Thayagam!”¹⁴⁸

The crowd breaks out in cheers, and the music resumes. At her statue, the commander of the female wing of the Sea Tigers, the naval unit of the LTTE, dresses Malathi with a garland. The mother of another female martyr, Major Sothia, the first leader of the female wing of the organization, lights a tall golden lamp in memory of all fallen women heroes. As the procession passes by her statue, its feet grow heavier and heavier with the dozens of fragrant garlands laid upon them.

The line continues snaking its way around the tent towards the statue until a young girl reaches Malathi. The girl, who looks to be around nine to ten years old, gets up onto the dais, her parents standing behind her, and places a garland of jasmines around her neck. Still in her school uniform, the girl leans over and kisses Malathi’s feet, her pigtailed swinging against the cool granite. She stands back silently for a few minutes, staring into Malathi’s young face before wiping her eyes and moving on, her expression a mask of stoic resolve. Her parents stop by

¹⁴⁸ The slogan of the LTTE, meaning “Tigers thirst for the motherland of Tamil Eelam.”

Malathi's memorial as well, joining their hands in prayer and respect, their hearts sinking a little as they watch their daughter walk out into the light.¹⁴⁹

The anniversary of Malathi's death has been observed in the Northern and Eastern provinces of Tamil Eelam for several years.¹⁵⁰ People gathered in crowds and processions in towns across Eelam to pay their respects to Malathi and to pray for the prosperity of their land. Her anniversary is celebrated with speeches, music and ceremonies in remembrance of her brave sacrifice.¹⁵¹ As the war progressed, Malathi moved from the status of martyr to the status of goddess. She was revered across Jaffna, with people decorating pictures of her with flower garlands and lamps, a treatment usually reserved for Hindu goddesses. Malathi's loyalty, courage and virtue made her worthy of divine praise in the eyes of the Tamil people. She became the ultimate mother – the goddess – by killing and dying to protect her people.

While most Hindu goddesses are associated with traits such as dignity, purity and kindness, these characteristics are not universal to all female deities. In *Tamil Tigress: My story as a child soldier in Sri Lanka's bloody civil war*, Niromi de Soyza speaks about her experiences as a teenager, in 1985, during the initial years of the Sri Lankan civil war. She explains her jealousy towards male members of the LTTE who were allowed to participate in the militant movement, unlike women who would only gain that privilege in 1987. de Soyza qualifies her frustration by making reference to the Hindu goddess Kali:

¹⁴⁹ *Birds of Freedom*. "Searching for Freedom."

¹⁵⁰ I found the following articles documenting these ceremonies in the years of 2002, 2003 and 2004:

"NE Observes Fifteenth-death Anniversary of 2nd Lt Malathi," TamilNet, October 10 2002, <https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?artid=7615&catid=13>.

"LTTE Commemorates First Woman Martyr," TamilNet, October 10 2003, <https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=10084>.

"Jaffna Observes Malathi Death Anniversary," TamilNet, October 10, 2004, <https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=13109>.

¹⁵¹ "Jaffna Observes Malathi Death Anniversary," TamilNet

Female university students were becoming part of the political movement, but they were not enlisted to be combatants. It didn't seem fair to me that, once again, women were denied equality when they were just as capable. The great Hindu Tamil poet Subramanya Bharathi had said so in the previous century and yet nothing had changed. The Hindu goddess Kali was the most valiant god of them all and yet women were expected to remain docile. I disliked this hypocrisy, but as a fifteen year old girl there was little I could do to change the society's attitude.¹⁵²

Kali is most often portrayed as naked, adorned only with the heads of her victims around her neck, in a battlefield or cremation ground. While most goddesses are benevolent and life-giving, Kali is insatiable and life-taking.¹⁵³ Ruthless and fierce, Kali represents the antithesis and necessary counterpart to the “good mother” goddess – the “bad mother”¹⁵⁴ goddess. As such, she seems to represent half of an inherent duality within all women: the ability to give life, and to take it away. Along with divine bounteousness comes divine wrath.

By invoking Kali, de Soyza is affirming that all women have the potential to adopt the murderous rage she embodies. Even in her most un-motherly attributes, a woman is demonstrating the divine feminine traits within her in the form of the goddess-mother Kali, who exemplifies death, and yet is still mother to all her devotees. Being the goddess of death and time, Kali represents a certain dark truth about the universe and the earth – that life feeds on, and inevitably leads to, death. As David R. Kinsley states, “Even though the child's mother may be fearsome, at times even hostile, the child has little choice but to return to her for protection, security, and warmth.”¹⁵⁵ Her devotees, like children, have no choice but to accept such truths about their mother/earth.

¹⁵² de Soyza, Niromi, *Tamil Tigress: My story as a child soldier in Sri Lanka's bloody civil war*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd, 2012), 36.

¹⁵³ Kinsley, David R., “Kali,” in *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, (University of California Press, 1986), 126.

¹⁵⁴ Ditrich, Tamara, “Human and divine mothers in Hinduism,” in *Motherhood: Power and Oppression*, ed. Marie Porter, Patricia Short, and Andrea O'Reilly, (Toronto: Women's Press, 2005), 141.

¹⁵⁵ Kinsley, “Kali,” 126.

Tamara Ditrich places all Hindu goddesses on a spectrum “of divine mothers who range from ambiguous, fearful and non-motherly goddesses to benevolent, submissive, divine wives, mothering primarily their divine husbands.”¹⁵⁶ On one end of the spectrum lie “good” mother/goddesses, such as Sita and Parvati, and on the other lies Kali, the “bad” mother/goddess. To be a Hindu goddess is to inevitably be a mother. And in much of Tamil and South Asian culture, womanhood is tied inextricably to the femininity of goddesses. Every woman is a goddess, and every goddess is a mother.

The conflation of the mother with the goddess is not strictly limited to Hinduism. The idea of divinity is tied to the idea of the mother/nation and the mother/producer in many aspects. All three conceptions of motherhood – as nationalist, capitalist and godly – depend on the essentialist idea of women, and their bodies, as “natural” and tied to the earth. Women are often inherently seen as goddesses by virtue of their bodies.¹⁵⁷ In non-religious contexts, wombs are still equated with the earth, analogous in their ability to give life, and their bounteousness. Betty Roszak argues that there is a branch of feminism which relies on this essentialism to challenge the patriarchal, male-dominated society. By conflating women with the earth, and nature, women become stewards of the earth, and regain (symbolic) control over their land and societies.¹⁵⁸ Similarly, by dubbing women as goddesses, they are bestowed with certain traits and a symbolic strength over men.

Yet, the divine power which is bestowed upon a woman still serves the purposes of men. Gender essentialism always runs the risk of allowing the “truths” ascribed to a gender to be manipulated for the benefit of men, the dominant group.¹⁵⁹ Though harnessing Kali’s powers

¹⁵⁶ Ditrich, “Human and divine mothers in Hinduism,” 149.

¹⁵⁷ This is not to say that all women are biologically female, or all people with wombs are women. I am only arguing that the rhetoric of the “goddess” is often based on biological essentialism.

¹⁵⁸ Roszak, Betty, “The Spirit of the Goddess,” in *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, ed. Theodore Roszack, Mary E. Gomes, and Allen D. Kanner, (Sierra Book Club, 1995), 289.

¹⁵⁹ Roszak, “The Spirit of the Goddess,” 298.

bestows women with the ability to unleash ungodly terror, in Hindu scriptures, Kali's terrible powers are nearly always tamed by a god manipulating her motherly instincts towards her children.¹⁶⁰ Within the larger narrative, even when a woman is given the omnipotence of a goddess, she is still answerable to the fundamental aspects of her womanhood which subjugate her.

When women joined the LTTE, the narrative of twisted maternalism emerged, viewing women militants as channeling their maternal love into rage and violence.¹⁶¹ Even when women partook in the most un-motherly acts, such as suicide bombings, their motivations were maternal; a motherly instinct of sacrifice to protect their people. This brings us back to the discussion of agency – rather than creating a space of women's liberation, the LTTE were argued to be exploiting the rhetoric of divine wrath and maternal instinct.

Although Kali is subjected to attempts to tame her and to neutralize her powers, she manages to create and sustain a separate identity outside the fold of subjugated Hindu goddesses.¹⁶² Similarly, although they were placed within and adopted the role of angry goddesses for the ends of the LTTE, this did not necessitate that women militants' power was conditional or limited to their motherly nature; the combatants managed to put their militant identities before their mother identity.

In this chapter, I will explore the identity of the mother/goddess by looking at historical and religious depictions of Kali, specifically within the context of the nation. I will then go on to examine the goddess of the LTTE through the deification of martyrs, specifically Malathi. I will also analyze Kali and the militant/goddess through the act of suicide bombing, and through the

¹⁶⁰ Ditrich, "Human and divine mothers in Hinduism," 140.

¹⁶¹ Loken, Meredith, "Both needed and threatened": Armed mothers in militant visuals," *Security Dialogue* 52, no. 1 (2021): 24.

¹⁶² Kinsley, David R., "The Sword: Kali, Mistress of Death," in *The sword and the flute: Kālī and Kṛṣṇa, dark visions of the terrible and the sublime in Hindu mythology*, (Motilal Banarsidass Publication, 1995), 86.

lens of grief. Finally, I will look at a woman militant's own motivations for her militancy, and study how she queered normative ideas of the goddess to create agency within the patriarchal system of the LTTE.

Imagery of the Mother/goddess

The Brahmacharin said, "Look on the Mother as she now is."

Mohendra said in fear, "It is Kali.

"Yes, Kali enveloped in darkness, full of blackness and gloom. She is stripped of all, therefore naked. Today the whole country is a burial ground, therefore is the Mother garlanded with skulls. Her own God she tramples under her feet. Alas, my Mother!"¹⁶³

During the tail-end of the 19th century, at the beginning of nationalist sentiment in India, the Bengali Hindu revolutionary, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee wrote the novel *Anandamath* in 1882. The novel follows a man, Mohendra, who joins the Sannyasi uprising in Bengal during the British manufactured famine. As part of the effort to convince Mohendra to join the resistance, one of the Sannyasis, or spiritual leaders, takes him to a Hindu temple to show him the Mother of the nation. Here, he is shown three deities – the goddesses of the past, present and future of the nation; the goddess of the nation at present is Kali.

Kali, who is "stripped of all," is a transformation of the goddess of the past, Jagaddhatri who represents wealth, bounteousness and prosperity; the land before the famine. Kali represents the outrage of the land at being exploited and destroyed, she is the "the naked Shakti [strength] of destructive force."¹⁶⁴ She is raw anger and raw force, unwieldy, unpredictable and insatiable.

¹⁶³ Chatterjee, Bankim Chandra, *Anandamath*, trans. Sri Aurobindo and Barindra Kumar Ghosh, (Auro e-books, 2016), 37-38.

<https://auro-ebooks-in.s3.ap-south-1.amazonaws.com/book-uploads/Bankim-Chandra-Chatterjee-Anandamath.pdf>

¹⁶⁴ Sarkar, Tanika. "Birth of a Goddess:'Vande Mataram'," *Anandamath*, and Hindu Nationhood." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2006): 3966.

During the late 19th century, colonial officials became extremely worried about the Hindu worship of Kali, seeing it as a symbol of their antagonism towards the British. Kali, whose primary function in the Hindu pantheon is the destruction of her foes, caused the colonial officials to think “that the ferocious bloodsucking goddess had switched her attention from some cosmic demon of the universe to white folks in India.”¹⁶⁵ Kali represented the nation, not as an interiority in need of protecting, but as the bubbling resentment which preceded its conception.

In a report of his experiences as a member of the Indian Civil Service, James Ker [I]nsisted that “the Muzaffarpore bomb outrage,” which claimed the lives of two Englishwomen on April 30, 1908, was “the first revolutionary sacrifice to the goddess Kali”¹⁶⁶ since it had been enacted on the night of a new moon, which was deemed by nationalists such as Bipin Chandra Pal to be the most auspicious time to appease the goddess.¹⁶⁷

Kali was not simply an embodiment of the sentiments of the Indian people, she was a separate figure within the Hindu imagination who actively incited their emotions. Even as a specter of religious imagination, Kali held the power of immense destruction. The very idea of the goddess was dangerous in and of itself. As such, Kali represents the stark opposite to the traditional soothing and nurturing characteristics of the mother (Figure 3.1).

[Kali] is dark as a great cloud, clad in dark clothes. Her tongue is poised as if to lick. She has fearful teeth, sunken eyes, and is smiling. She wears a necklace of snakes, the half-moon rests on her forehead, she has matted hair, and is engaged in licking a corpse. Her sacred thread is a snake, and she lies on a bed of snakes. She holds a garland of fifty heads. She has a large belly, and on her head is Ananta with a thousand heads. On all sides she is surrounded by snakes She

¹⁶⁵ Ramaswamy, Sumathi, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2010), 110.

¹⁶⁶ Ker, James C., *Political Trouble in India, 1907–1917*, (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1917), 50-51, quoted in Ramaswamy, Sumathi, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2010), 111.

¹⁶⁷ Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation*, 111.

has a snake-girdle and an anklet of jewels. On her left is imagined to be Siva in the form of a boy. She has two hands and has corpses for ear ornaments.¹⁶⁸

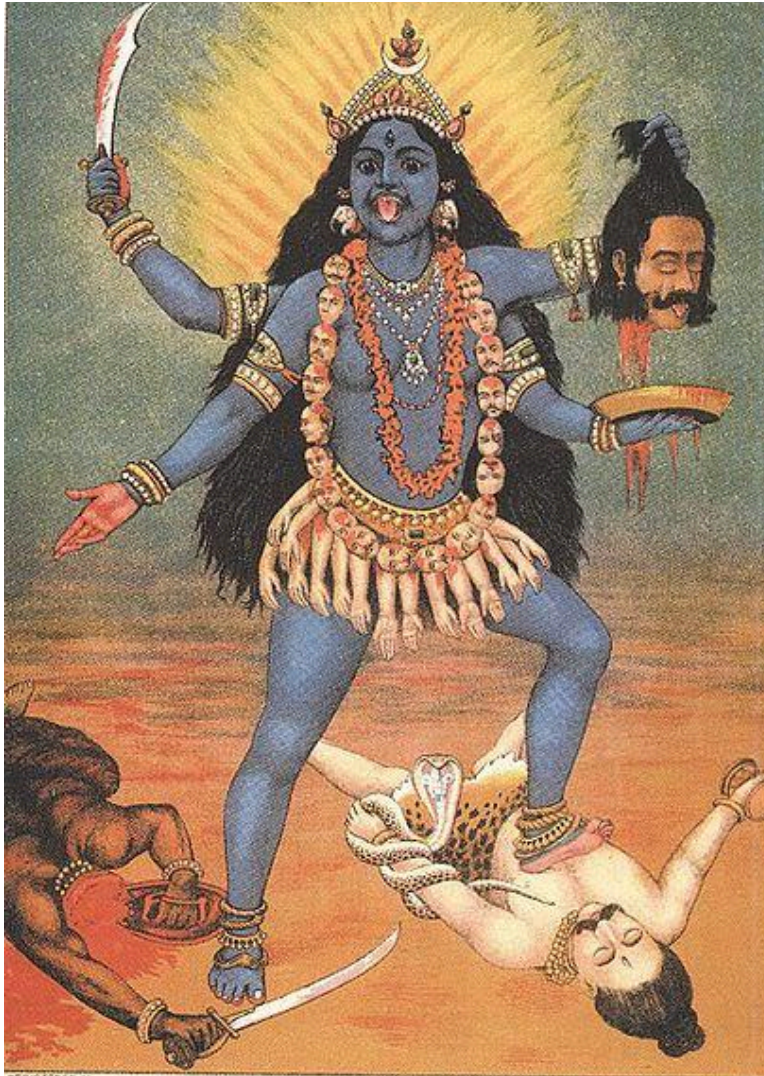


Figure 3.1¹⁶⁹

While the woman/goddess is associated with life, fertility and docility, Kali is associated with death, violence and ruthlessness. This description of Kali “licking” and wearing “a snake-girdle” is heavy with sexual connotations, a personification extremely different from the

¹⁶⁸ Kinsley, “The Sword: Kali, Mistress of Death,” 81.

¹⁶⁹ Varma, Raja Ravi. *Kali*. Distributed by Anant Shivaji Desai, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c9/Ravi_Varma_Press_Kali.jpg

dominant “virtuous” Hindu goddess. Yet, she is also a personification of a latent aspect of every Hindu goddess: wrath.

In the Hindu text *Devi Mahatmya* which describes the “Great Goddess” or Mahadevi, Kali is depicted as springing forth from the goddess’ brow. “Kali proceeds from the Goddess and is finally withdrawn into the Goddess.”¹⁷⁰ She represents the potential power to destroy and ravage which lies dormant within all women. Moreover, she is often depicted as sexually dominating her male counterpart, Shiva, thus representing another carnal instinct of women – desire. Her inability to control these instincts, however, support the narrative that it is not in women’s nature to be constantly wrathful. True balance and peace can only exist when women are controlled.

In many myths involving the goddess Kali, she is often called into battle when other gods and goddesses are facing near-defeat. Her bloodthirsty nature, and her ferociousness make her a formidable opponent, and she conquers all who come before her. Once she has conquered her enemies, Kali becomes intoxicated with the blood of her enemies, loses control of her instincts, and threatens to destroy the world around her.¹⁷¹ In one such tale, Shiva, her male god counterpart, turns himself into an infant to pacify her, and to engage her motherly instincts and quench her wrath. “[H]er disguised husband provoked her motherly feelings.”¹⁷² In this myth, Kali is placed into the subjugated role of mother and wife simultaneously to neutralize the threat of the goddess. Kali is the ruler of death, and yet, she is tamed and confined by male gods who invoke her duties as a woman. She puts her identity as a mother and as a wife before her identity as the goddess of death, time and the primordial.

¹⁷⁰ Kinsley, “The Sword: Kali, Mistress of Death,” 93.

¹⁷¹ Ditrich, “Human and divine mothers in Hinduism,” 140.

¹⁷² Ditrich, “Human and divine mothers in Hinduism,” 140.

By tying the woman/goddess to the idea of the earth, life, fertility and even death, she is equated to nature, while men, who represent the rational ability to control her, are equated to mankind.¹⁷³ Ultimately, this association reaches the conclusion that the universe, like nature, is something for men to overcome and gain control over. Kali represents the necessity for the duties of the mother to neutralize the potency of the goddess.

Despite her volatility, the evocation of Kali in moments of nationalism is due to the righteousness which drives her anger. Although she runs amuck during battle, she is still under the service of the gods to slay the demons. The figure of Kannaki in the Tamil epic *Silappadikaram* exemplifies this righteous anger. In the tale, Kovalan is framed for a robbery he did not commit, falsely convicted and executed. Upon learning of her husband's fate, Kannaki enters a fit of "agony which she could hardly endure."¹⁷⁴ Driven mad, and raving with grief, Kannaki cuts off her left breast and curses the kingdom of Madurai to be wreathed in flames: "If these things happened truly, and if I am also a chaste lady, I shall not allow this city to flourish but will destroy it along with its sovereign."¹⁷⁵ Her chastity becomes a tool for justice. Moved by her story of unwavering loyalty and piety to her husband, as well as the sacrifice of her breast, the Hindu god of fire sets the kingdom ablaze.

Destroying the kingdom is an act of vengeance and a way for Kannaki to seek justice. She destroys the kingdom of the King who failed her and killed her husband, destroying all the impure and deceitful people who were complicit in Kovalan's death. In her grief, she undergoes a physical transformation from the "good mother," to the "bad mother" – she cuts off her breast, the part of her anatomy which nurtures and feeds and which houses her innate ability to give life.

¹⁷³ Mies, Maria, *Patriarchy and accumulation on a world scale: Women in the international division of labour*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 54.

¹⁷⁴ Ramachandra Dikshitar, V. R., *The Silappadikaram*, (Oxford University Press, 1939), 6.

¹⁷⁵ Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Silappadikaram*, 253.

Upon burning down the kingdom, Kannaki ascends to heaven on a chariot driven by her husband. In heaven, she finds a seat alongside other deities: “Because it is a fact that gods will worship her who worships not God but worships her husband, Kannaki, that jewel among the women of the earth, became a goddess and the guest of the ladies of heaven.”¹⁷⁶ While it is Kannaki’s wrath and murderous rampage which grants her divine power, it is ultimately her moral fortitude which results in her earning the status of goddess. For a woman to be a goddess, she must embody the entire spectrum of the mother/goddess; she must simultaneously be both dangerous and good. Given this range of power and strength which a woman contains, she is only justified in her anger when it fits the mold dictated by men.

Mother/Goddess of the LTTE

She saw the baby through the window. What compelled her to go away...
Releasing herself from the grasp of the tender finger that recognised her touch?
What awaited her in her own country? Duty? Her husband? The war? Who
knows? Her cheeks wet with tears, her breasts heavy with milk, she had to leave
her baby as soon as it was born. This cruel act can never be justified. She turned
back once, to look.¹⁷⁷

The passage quoted above is from the Indian Tamil film, *Kannathil Muthamittal*, by the transgressive director Mani Ratnam. The film, which was released in 2002 in the midst of the Sri Lankan civil war, follows Shyama and her daughter Amudha. Shyama has Amudha during the height of warfare, in a small Tamil village in the north of Sri Lanka. Shyama’s husband leaves to fight for the Tamil opposition but goes missing. Shyama and her family flee as refugees to South India, and Shyama gives birth to Amudha in a refugee camp. After giving birth to her, Shyama leaves Amudha in an orphanage and goes back to Sri Lanka to join the militancy.

¹⁷⁶ Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Silappadikaram*, 271.

¹⁷⁷ Ratnam, Mani, *Kannathil Muthamittal*, (India, Madras Talkies, 14 February 2002), 46:01.

The film follows nine-year-old Amudha as she travels to Sri Lanka to find her birth mother. The quote above is from an article which Amudha's father, a distinguished Indian Tamil author, writes after seeing Amudha and adopting her. The passage explores Shyama's possible motivations of giving Amudha up for adoption. Rather than sympathizing with Shyama and her experiences in war-torn Sri Lanka as a Tamil woman, the film explores the moral dilemma of her leaving her "duty" as a mother behind to join the fight for liberation. Even at the height of her motherhood, at a moment when her breasts are still "heavy with milk," Shyama chooses one aspect of her motherhood over the other.

At the end of the film, Shyama and Amudha are reunited, despite Shyama's initial refusal to meet her daughter. After their reunion, as Shyama turns to leave, Amudha calls out, "Amma!"¹⁷⁸ (meaning mother). Hearing this, Shyama says, "Don't! If you call out to me like that, I cannot go."¹⁷⁹ When Amudha implores Shyama to move back to Chennai, India, with her and her parents, Shyama declines, stating that she has work to attend to in Sri Lanka. However, she goes on to say, "Someday, there will be peace in this country. Come back to me then."¹⁸⁰ While the intention of the film is to highlight the atrocity which caused Shyama to commit the "cruel act" of leaving her daughter behind, it also makes an essentialist argument about women and their roles in society – in every emotion she acts on, a woman is a mother.

Shyama takes on the persona of Kali in *Kannathil Muthamittal*. At the outset of the film, she is portrayed as the perfect wife: demure, loving and caring. The first few scenes of the film depict Shyama and her husband in marital bliss. When her husband asks her what she likes, Shyama states, "I like bits and pieces of all sorts of people,"¹⁸¹ listing various men and their

¹⁷⁸ Ratnam, *Kannathil Muthamittal*, 2:12:02.

¹⁷⁹ Ratnam, *Kannathil Muthamittal*, 2:12:21.

¹⁸⁰ Ratnam, *Kannathil Muthamittal*, 2:11:48.

¹⁸¹ Ratnam, *Kannathil Muthamittal*, 0:06:36.

attributes before declaring, “But more than all these people, I like you!”¹⁸² Similar to the goddesses whose brows Kali springs from, Shyama’s primary self is devoted to the men in her life. It is only when her husband and her people are threatened that Shyama takes on the violent qualities of goddesses; like Kali she becomes a symbol of death and destruction as a militant in the LTTE. Similarly to Kannaki, it is Shyama's grief which is the conduit for her anger. It is ultimately her husband’s death which fuels her desire for armed resistance.

Furthermore, as Kali is tamed by appealing to her maternal instinct, Shyama’s resolve for militancy too is destroyed when Amudha calls her Amma. Despite her cruelty in betraying Amudha, in her essential nature, Shyama is a loving mother. The very name, Shyama, meaning “dark,” is an epithet of the goddess Kali. Kali, in this case, is not a permanent identity; she is a transitory state which ceases to exist once it reinstates the patriarchal order. Even when given all the power in the world, the militant, like the goddess, is always a mother first.

The patriarchal order in the case of the LTTE was the liberation of Tamil Eelam, and the cessation of women’s oppression, both of which are threatened by the Sri Lankan government. A poster circulated within an LTTE newsletter published in April, 1985 records the plight of Tamil refugees whose homes and villages were destroyed during the war (Figure 3.2). The poster, titled “Our People, Exiled from their Birth Land,” depicts images of victims of displacement packing their belongings into boats. The most notable aspects of the image are of an aerial view of a boat being loaded with items, a row of mothers lining the bottom of the poster, and of two young women at the top of the poster.

The mothers at the bottom of the poster, along with an image of the mother surrounded by her family, are all in despair, sobbing at the camera and staring in distress at the viewer. They are portrayed to be the principal victims of the displacement, echoing much of the traditional

¹⁸² Ratnam, *Kannathil Muthamittal*, 00:07:06.

mother/nation rhetoric. The aerial image of the boat also evokes the connection between motherhood and the nation. The image, which represents the fate and plight of the Tamil people, is in the shape of a vulva, recalling femininity. While the boat represents the difficulties facing the victims of the genocide against Tamil people, it is also a form of protection, and a symbol of hope.

The two women at the top of the collage, however, disturb this narrative. The two women are cut out of an image where they are huddled together, presumably in a refugee camp in Tamil Nadu. The intact image is pasted above a block of text describing the displacement. On either side of this text, enlarged versions of the two women stare directly at the viewer. And above the title of the poster are two small cut outs of the women's eyes. In all, there are three versions of the women's eye looking back at the viewer.

In contrast to the wailing mothers, while despondent, the two younger women are more composed. Their graceful dejection seems to embody a quiet rage. The emphasis of the women's eyes challenge the viewer, and confront their inaction. The two women subvert the spectatorship of war imagery to depict their disappointment. Rather than simply being examples of victimhood, the two women ask for something more from the viewer than simply sympathy. Revisiting sacrifices to Kali, the women symbolize a divine wrath which requires violence to appease. The mother of the nation is no longer a damsel in distress, but a goddess awaiting sacrifice.

The block of text in the collage describes both the harm inflicted on Tamil people, but also the potential freedom and happiness they could enjoy in an independent Tamil Eelam. The last sentence of the text block reads, "The responsibility for creating this bright future belongs to

A woman's desire for violence is almost always reduced to a maternal quality. In an essay, "Twisted Maternalism," Caron E. Gentry states, "Women's participation is seen as based solely upon belonging, familial and friendship ties and nurturing, and less about her political motivations and beliefs."¹⁸⁴ In other words, a woman's violence within political movements is always reduced to a maternalised emotion; a woman can never not be a mother. Like the mother/nation, when a woman commits violence within a political context, this violence is done on behalf of her child, who in this case takes the form of the nation.

This narrative of twisted maternalism is utilized by some women tigers when justifying their participation as well. Arasi, a female combatant, told Tamara Herath, "if a hawk comes down to catch one of the chicks. [sic] The mother hen will immediately jump up and fight with the hawk to protect her chicks. So the strength she gets to fight with the hawk comes from her gentleness and her motherhood."¹⁸⁵ Gentry argues that it is not only her motivations, but the method in which a woman commits violence which is also maternalised. "It is from a woman's supposed relational qualities that she participates in political violence – and she participates in a decidedly nurturing maternal manner."¹⁸⁶ This idea can manifest itself most potently in the act of ultimate maternal sacrifice: suicide bombings.

Suicide bombing had become a *modus operandi* of the LTTE.¹⁸⁷ The LTTE created an elite group of militants in 1987, called the Black Tigers, who exclusively participated in suicide bombings.¹⁸⁸ Although a third of the soldiers in the LTTE were women, they disproportionately

https://tamileelamarchive.com/article_pdf/article_883b5a9078de95c6646f34d6bf1e0e03.pdf (accessed June 23 2024).

¹⁸⁴ Gentry, Caron E., "Twisted maternalism: From peace to violence," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 11, no. 2 (2009): 240.

¹⁸⁵ Herath, Tamara, "Women combatants and gender identity in contemporary conflicts: the case of the LTTE," *London School of Economics and Political Science* (United Kingdom), 2007, 144.

¹⁸⁶ Gentry, "Twisted Maternalism," 241.

¹⁸⁷ Kumar, S Y Surendra, "Suicide Bombers in Sri Lanka," *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 9, no. 3 (2005): 97.

¹⁸⁸ Kumar, "Suicide Bombers in Sri Lanka," 99.

participate in suicide bombings, with 30 to 40% of all suicide activities being committed by women.¹⁸⁹ This statistic is commonly attributed to the tactical advantage provided by women, who are less likely to be suspected of militant behavior, or to the assumption that women were more eager to prove themselves, and thus being exploited.¹⁹⁰ As such, women became vital to suicide bombings, and were associated heavily with this type of attack.¹⁹¹

In 2006, a female suicide bomber detonated a bomb killing herself and eight others and injuring 27 people, including the target of her attack, Sri Lankan Lieutenant General, Sarath Fonseka.¹⁹² In order to get close to her target as he was leaving army headquarters, the suicide bomber pretended to be pregnant, entering the army complex under false pretences of visiting the army hospital for a prenatal check-up.¹⁹³ The instance of this attack is maternal both in its method, and in its tactic. Suicide bombing in and of itself is a form of “twisted maternalism,” it is an extreme extension of the sacrifices which Tamil women are expected to make every day.¹⁹⁴

As many theorists have pointed out, within the Tamil Sri Lankan context, twisted maternalism was not an extension of a woman’s love for her children, it is the manifestation of a woman’s grief of her inability to have children.¹⁹⁵ In a parallel to Kannaki, a Tamil woman’s self-destructive tendencies have been attributed to rape or sexual violence at the hands of Sri Lankan soldiers, i.e., her ability to perform the role of the chaste loving wife.¹⁹⁶

¹⁸⁹ Van de Voorde, Cecile, "Sri Lankan Terrorism: Assessing and Responding to the Threat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)," *Police Practice and Research* 6, no. 2 (May 2005): 186.

¹⁹⁰ Van de Voorde, "Sri Lankan Terrorism," 186.

¹⁹¹ Van de Voorde, "Sri Lankan Terrorism," 187.

¹⁹² "Suicide attack on Sri Lanka's top military commander leaves 8 dead," *New York Times*, April 25, 2006.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/25/world/asia/suicide-attack-on-sri-lankas-top-military-commander-leaves-8-dead.html>

¹⁹³ "Suicide attack," *New York Times*.

¹⁹⁴ Gunawardena, Arjuna, "Female black tigers: A different breed of cat?" *Female suicide bombers: Dying for equality* (2006): 84.

¹⁹⁵ Gentry, "Twisted Maternalism," 241.

¹⁹⁶ Bloom, Mia, "Female suicide bombers: a global trend," *Daedalus* 136, no. 1 (2007): 95.

Dhanu, the suicide bomber who assassinated 16 people including the former Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, was a victim of rape, according to statements issued by the LTTE.¹⁹⁷ Rape is a violation of a woman's chastity, and her loyalty to her (future) husband – two of the most important aspects of a mother. It also holds the implication that a victim will never be permitted to get married or have children.¹⁹⁸ Moreover, it is also a form of violence specifically targeting a woman's body, i.e., the source of her maternal power. Thus, in immolating her body, the suicide bomber is committing a maternal act – one which is dictated by her “socio-biological role as mother.”¹⁹⁹ As with her role as a producer, such narratives confuse a woman's body with her purpose.

Grief over the loss of relatives was also cited as a maternal driver for becoming a suicide bomber.²⁰⁰ Within the family, the woman inevitably took on the role of the mother – not just to her children, but to her husband and other male members of her family as well. In losing one of these members, a woman lost the subject of her maternalism. Like Kannaki, she had no reason to live if not to mother.

The LTTE evoked the image of the maternal fighter often in its literature. In a newsletter distributed in May of the same year (Figure 3.3), the LTTE published an article describing the liberation movements across Asia, Latin America and Africa, specifically Mozambique. The article, titled “People's War and Revolutionary Ideology” describes the ways in which a people's liberation movement begins, and the ways in which people's support transforms into an active participation in the armed uprising. It speaks of the need of awakening the national consciousness of the people through Marxist-Leninist ideology and through imbuing revolution

¹⁹⁷ Herath, “Women combatants and gender identity in contemporary conflicts,” 150.

¹⁹⁸ Gentry, “Twisted Maternalism,” 242.

¹⁹⁹ Gentry, “Twisted Maternalism,” 235.

²⁰⁰ Gentry, “Twisted Maternalism,” 235.

within the culture of the nation. However, two images accompany the text in the article, both images of Mozambican women carrying children and guns. In both images, the women are smiling, with one of the women holding her gun high in the air as she leads a group of revolutionaries.

Although the text makes no specific allusion to women or motherhood, the exclusive use of the images of mothers creates an association between motherhood and revolution. The article speaks of the need to inject everyday life with the drive to revolution and resistance. These images thus encourage the inclusion of revolution within the home, and within motherhood. The militant mothers become an intrinsic part of the revolution, and vice versa. While their militancy is maternal, this kind of imagery also asserts that their maternalism is militant.

By placing maternalism within the centre of a woman's violence – even with acts as destructive and horrific as suicide bombing – the divine feminine did not need to be destroyed, since she was not a threat. If Kali did not threaten to destroy the world, then even when committing the most brutal acts, she was still under the thumb of the gods. By asserting that, not only were women performing the will of the male-dominated LTTE, they were also performing the act in an intrinsically patriarchal way, suicide bombing became a completely disempowering act. The goddess of the LTTE was, first and foremost, a mother.

Glory in Death

In 2003, a year before the construction of a statue of Malathi (Figure 3.4) in Kilinochchi, a town in the Northern province of Sri Lanka, the LTTE issued a statement which read: “Liberation does not mean just freedom from foreign domination and tyranny, but also freedom from religious and gender discrimination and oppression of women.”²⁰² The statement was issued on October 10, the anniversary of Malathi's death. Despite this impulse for secularism, the statue of Malathi, as with various memorials for martyrs, was treated with the veneration usually afforded to Hindu and Christian idols.²⁰³ The 27th of November is celebrated as the “Day of

²⁰² “Remembering 2nd Lt. Malathy,” *The Tamil Guardian*, October 10, 2019. <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/remembering-2nd-lt-malathy-0>

²⁰³ Roberts, Michael, “Saivite symbols, sacrifice, and Tamil Tiger rites,” *Social Analysis* 49, no. 1 (2005): 86.

Great Heroes” (*Mahaveerar Naal*) to memorialise the death of the first suicide attacker, a man named Vallipuram Vasanthan, or Captain Miller²⁰⁴. Captain Miller, too, was commemorated with a statue²⁰⁵ (Figure 3.5), though his statue received much less fanfare and idolatry than Malathi’s.



Figure 3.4²⁰⁶



Figure 3.5²⁰⁷

Where Malathi’s statue was impassive and dignified, Captain Miller’s statue was vivand animated. One of his arms was raised in a peace sign, denoting victory and pride. Malathi’s statue, on the other hand, was reserved, displaying the quiet grace and omniscience fit for a goddess. Malathi occupied a special place in LTTE imagery. She took on the role of the goddess. The LTTE goddess personified not only the divine anger and righteousness which Hindu goddesses like Kali and Kannagi do, but also a sacred will to die. She was representative of the

²⁰⁴ Fuglerud, Oivind, "Aesthetics of martyrdom: The celebration of violent death among the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam," in *Violence expressed*, ed. Maria Six-Hohenbalken and Nerina Weiss (Routledge, 2016), 76.

²⁰⁵ "Remembering the Black Tigers," *The Tamil Guardian*, July 5 2023, <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/remembering-black-tigers-1>

²⁰⁶ The Tamil Guardian. "‘Captain Miller’ originally based on LTTE’s Black Tiger, suggests director." January 11 2024. <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/captain-miller-originally-based-ltte-s-black-tiger-suggests-director>

²⁰⁷ *The Tamil Guardian*, "Captain Miller."

LTTE's claims of women's equality, that women too had the power within them to participate in the scale of violence men did.

More importantly than her courage, however, was the symbol of the martyr as a seed of future militancy.²⁰⁸ Michael Roberts states that in martyrdom, each hero declares, "My death ...has not been in vain: the struggle continues and transcends my demise."²⁰⁹ In dying, each hero performed an act of reincarnation living on in the future violence that they inspired. Dying was not simply an act of sacrifice, but one of selfish pride as well. In becoming a martyr, Malathi gained the ultimate glory.

In a eulogy published by the Birds of Freedom, Malathi is honored through a poem. The poem, titled "The First Line of the New Epic,"²¹⁰ was a tribute to Malathi and the precedent she had set for the women joining the Birds of Freedom. The poem recounts the path which Malathi had laid down for future female combatants, and the hope which she had given the movement in a dark period of time. The poem was published in 1994, seven years after Malathi's death.

The poem uses very similar language and metaphors (including the idea of a new epic) to the poem I analyzed in Chapter 2. Like the poem in the last chapter, there are various references to fire. Malathi's exhale is described as "a breath of fire"; the air around her is said to have "caught on fire," and she is likened to an "outburst of light dispelling the darkness" of lost faith. While Malathi did commit suicide, she did not die in a suicide bombing. She ingested a cyanide capsule after being wounded in battle²¹¹, seeing death as the better alternative to capture.²¹² Despite this discrepancy, her death was associated with the imagery of suicide bombing,

²⁰⁸ Roberts, "Saivite symbols," 86.

²⁰⁹ Roberts, "Saivite symbols," 86.

²¹⁰ Appendix 2.

²¹¹ "Remembering 2nd Lt. Malathy," The Tamil Guardian, October 10, 2019.

<https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/remembering-2nd-lt-maalathy-0>

²¹² This was a requirement of all LTTE soldiers. The soldiers would wear cyanide capsules (*kuppi* in Tamil) around their necks, and bite down on them if they were detained by the Sri Lankan or Indian armies.

explosions and flames. Her death was seen as intentional not incidental, as it was in truth. This intentionality offers her a heightened sense of heroism, turning her from the martyr to the goddess.

The poem also has a line describing the thousands and thousands of women soldiers following in her path of martyrdom as “bearing torches following behind [her] footsteps.” Such imagery evokes the idea of reincarnation – every soldier following behind her is carrying a flame from the initial fire she set. Her spirit and her glory resides in the souls of thousands, and will grow stronger with every death she inspires. Malathi’s death did not only ensure that the movement continued, but that her spirit did as well.

The documentary, *My Daughter the Terrorist*, directed by Norwegian filmmakers, Beate Arnestad and Morten Daae, echoes the rhetoric of glory and reincarnation. It follows the lives of two women combatants: Dharsika and Puhachudar. Both of the women are Black Tigers. The film documents the relationship between Dharsika and her mother after she ran away from home to join the LTTE. The documentary also explores Dharsika and Puhachudar’s motivations for joining the militancy, and their journeys as they reflect on the decisions they have made by becoming Black Tigers.

Towards the end of the documentary, Dharsika and Puhachudar are at a graveyard paying their respects to their fallen comrades, and explaining the process of memorialization which will greet them if they die on a mission. Dharsika states:

Say we conduct a blast somewhere. We would be reduced to pieces there. If we go on a mission and blast ourselves they will not be able to find even a small piece of our bodies. If the battle is won there, they will build a tomb at the site.²¹³

²¹³ Arnestad, Beate and Morten Daae, dir., *My Daughter the Terrorist*, 2007, 00:54:38. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBdNX0OEzQI&t=514s>

Puhachudar adds, “If that area is within our territory. Otherwise, they will build a small memorial over there. Or maybe just a picture.”²¹⁴ There is a hierarchy of graves and of martyrs – those militants who contribute to the movement the most are the ones who are most well remembered. As the scene continues, Puhachudar states, “We always try to perform better than the other cadres.”²¹⁵ Dharsika adds, “And we want to do the [suicide] mission together.” “Because then they will look at us differently and remember that we were Black Tigers,” Puhachudar concludes.

Similarly, in *Tamil Tigress*, when asked if she would like to be a Black Tiger, de Soyza states, “I knew that there was no Black Tiger within me; I was not brave enough.”²¹⁶ She goes on to express that she “felt somewhat disappointed, knowing that [she] could never be a member of Prabhakaran’s hand-picked, elite group.”²¹⁷

While Dharsika and Puhachudar had reasons for becoming Black Tigers which fit the maternalism narrative (Dharsika’s father was killed in a bomb blast in the beginning of the war), the two women also displayed very non-normative reasons for joining the militancy. They wanted to serve their country, but they also wanted to be remembered in death. Similarly, de Soyza’s source of regret was not that she could not serve her country to the fullest – it was because she lost out on the status of being a Black Tiger. In these instances, the militants’ lives were not sacrificed solely for the good of their nation/child, their suicides also had self-serving rationales. The women disidentify with the idea of the self-effacing deadly goddess, instead priding themselves on their violence and thirst for blood.

²¹⁴ Arnestad and Daae, *My Daughter the Terrorist*, 00:55:03.

²¹⁵ Arnestad and Daae, *My Daughter the Terrorist*, 00:55:36.

²¹⁶ de Soyza, *Tamil Tigress*, 122.

²¹⁷ de Soyza, *Tamil Tigress*, 122.

CONCLUSION

“I am what I am because I grew up there [with the LTTE]. Otherwise I would not be here... I am only here today because I studied there.”²¹⁸

- Ex-combatant, Kumudini

In May of 2009, after an intense and brutal attack by the Sri Lankan army, Prabhakaran was killed in action, leading to the dissolution of the LTTE. During the final years of the war, as the LTTE began losing its consolidated power, support and ability to fight against the Sri Lankan government, it began turning to violence against Tamil civilians as a last resort, ranging from forced conscriptions²¹⁹ to the use of civilians as human shields.²²⁰ Thus, after the end of the war, both Tamil and Sinhala society viewed ex-combatants with great hostility.²²¹

However, there was a difference between the treatment of male and female ex-combatants based on their gender. As one ex-combatant told Fazeeha Azmi,

[Women] are affected by the war in many ways from the beginning. During the war both men and women participated. But when it comes to the social acceptance of female ex-combatants, it is very difficult. Men are accepted by the society easily. This is very unfair and this is not what the LTTE leader wanted when he talked about women’s involvement in the movement and the related empowerment.²²²

²¹⁸ The Social Architects of South Asia, “Haunted by her Yesterdays,” Youtube Video (22:38. March 27, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSSv9Kk3tkI>), 06:16.

²¹⁹ “Trapped and Mistreated: LTTE Abuses against Civilians in the Vanni,” Human Rights Watch, last accessed March 23, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/12/15/trapped-and-mistreated/lte-abuses-against-civilians-vanni>

²²⁰ Ganguly, Sumit, “Ending the Sri Lankan civil war,” *Daedalus* 147, no. 1 (2018): 84.

²²¹ Azmi, Fazeeha, “I want my wings back to fly in a new sky: Stories of female ex-ltte combatants in post-war Sri Lanka,” in *Female combatants in conflict and peace: Challenging gender in violence and post-conflict reintegration*, ed. Seema Shekhawat, (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 210.

²²² Azmi, “I want my wings back to fly in a new sky,” 209

By choosing to join the militancy and perform in the queering of normative gender roles, when those new roles fail to protect her, the militant is seen as complicit in her ill-treatment and failures. According to Azmi, the female cadres' extended time fighting the Sri Lankan army, as well as Tamil society's own experiences with the army, led many to believe that the ex-combatants were sexually assaulted.²²³ By placing themselves in the position which many believed would facilitate these acts, Tamil society saw these women as colluding in their own ruination.

In "Haunted by her Yesterdays", an ex-combatant named Nalini expresses the sexual violence which Sri Lankan soldiers and government officials inflicted on her upon her rehabilitation into civil society: "When they come to my house and subject me to sexual abuse, I feel like a dog."²²⁴ She explains that the soldiers are arresting around 12-13 ex-combatants a day²²⁵, and laments that, though they are civilians now, they receive no protection from the state nor their society.²²⁶ "Even now, I am expecting someone to protect me. I want someone to protect me [...] Who will give me life? Who will speak for me?"²²⁷ By taking on the role of the mother/militant, upon re-entering civil society, female militants lost their status as the woman, and the alleged protections the nation was meant to grant them as such.

Given their extreme subjugation upon returning to civil society, it is tempting to revert to the rhetoric of agency and victimhood; to say that the combatants lost agency when reintegrating into society, or that any sense of agency the combatants experienced within the LTTE was fraudulent. And narratives following post-war Sri Lanka do tend to follow this line of thought.

²²³ Azmi, "I want my wings back to fly in a new sky," 209

²²⁴ "Haunted by her Yesterdays," 14:10.

²²⁵ "Haunted by her Yesterdays," 19:54.

²²⁶ "Haunted by her Yesterdays," 14:01.

²²⁷ "Haunted by her Yesterdays," 20:11, 20:38.

An article published in 2018 titled “From Soldiers to Housewives” published in the Washington Post reads:

Lured by an intoxicating promise of a Tamil homeland and female emancipation, women were recruited to the Tigers in large numbers and made up nearly one-third of the separatist organization.

But once the war ended, most found few options available to them aside from reverting to traditional roles. After years of equality with their male counterparts, they were suddenly expected to marry, have children and tend to household chores.²²⁸

The language used in the article places women in a role of double-victimization. They are victims for being “lured” into the LTTE, and they are victims when “reverting to traditional gender roles.” Like so much of the language surrounding women in “developing nations,” the character of the victim looms in the foreground of debates on the women militants even years after the end of the war.

Under the guise of descriptive accounts of women’s experiences, gender essentialist ideas of women as perpetual victims mirror the ideological roles which circumscribe their identities. The LTTE created an intrinsic association between the female militants and the heart of the organization, meaning that the actions of one reflected the actions of the other. The three roles which the LTTE placed women in (nation, producer and goddess) were all points for their ostracism upon rehabilitation into Tamil society.

The woman militant is posed as the mother/nation, a fierce virtuous protector of her people. As the war waged on for more than 20 years, the militants stopped being Tamil Eelam’s protectors, instead becoming the very nation which abused them.

²²⁸ Holly Robertson, “From Soldiers to Housewives: Women Who Fought as Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka Are Forced Into Traditional Roles,” *Washington Post*, June 7, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/the-women-who-fought-for-the-tamil-tigers-in-sri-lanka-are-being-forced-into-traditional-roles/2018/06/06/6894df7a-681a-11e8-bea7-c8eb28bc52b1_story.html.

As the mother/producer, the militant was posed as a creator who would help the nation, and usher Tamil Eelam into a new age of freedom and modernity through her own destruction. However, in truth the militants were viewed, particularly in the 21st century, as preying on their people, destroying the very people they were meant to serve.

As the mother/goddess, the militant failed to commit the sacrifices she vowed to for her people by choosing her own welfare over that of Eelam. As with the mother/nation, the militant becomes a protector who, at the end of the war, failed to protect her people. The ungodly display of power and anger a militant displayed was not justified as sacred, but simply transgressed social norms.

In truth, the militant exists between all of the binaries and identities imposed upon her – nation, producer, goddess, victim, agent, mother, woman, Kannaki, Malathi. While it is important to consider the aspect of womanhood within the act of militancy, by centering a militant's gender, we run the risk of essentializing her into a singularity. As women, the combatants were subjected to many challenges which men were not; and as combatants, the women were subjected to many challenges which civilians were not. However, it is also important to center the women's militancy, and their desire to fight in the war. There were women who recognised the ways in which they were being manipulated, and women who refused to comply with the standards being imposed upon them. While agency was not ubiquitous in the matter, there were still many militants who managed to find rays of light, joy and freedom within the matrix of oppressive forces they inhabited.

When studying the heroic and abominable actions of these militants, it is important to not get sidetracked by their identities, nor to lose sight of what the women were fighting for – a free Tamil Eelam.

APPENDIX 1The Epic of the 400 New Women

She is the daughter of the nation

Yearning for the dawn.

Putting the country before herself,

Joining the forces of the Leader

to create the battalion of 400,

She came forward as a Tigress.

She devised plans

To stop the atrocities of the oppressors.

An Indian demon went berserk

As a thunderous sound reverberated in Eelam,

to immobilize our freedom struggle.

To strengthen our women

She appeared as a striped tiger.

She tread the righteous path, creating history.

To change a life which was like fire to a stove

She burned and fell to the earth

She is the pearl of the Gulf of Mannar,

She is the treasure of women's hearts,

She became the seed in Koppai

for the liberation of the motherland.

Entering into fire to create a new epic
Her womanhood arose like a wave.
We worship the feet of the new world
Women who laid the seeds for newness and revolution.
She eliminated the sentiment expressed in poems
where women were referred to as tender creepers.
She is the pioneer who made our tribe respected and elevated
She became the pinnacle praised by poets and orators²²⁹.

²²⁹ *Birds of Freedom*, "Epic of the New 400," poem, translated by Nageswara Rao and Leelavathi Nagarajan, 1993. From Tamileelamarchive. https://tamileelamarchive.com/article_pdf/article_401927541b7a293ab7ce15983e7d9a71.pdf (accessed June 23 2024).

APPENDIX 2The First Line of a New Epic

The salty sea air hits my eyes,
setting them on fire.

Standing and walking yesterday,

Narrating good stories today,

When the air stands still, you flood my memories.

A moment yesterday —

Your long exhale was like a breath of fire.

The wind blowing over the dusty land,

Which we will always call our own,

Is like your dying breath

You are the first seed in the blood-soaked land.

You are the first sentence in a new epic.

Our guns follow behind your bloody footsteps.

When the circumstances were bleak,

And our faith was lost,

You were an outburst of light,

Dispelling the cover of darkness.

The air around you caught on fire

A dawn's new fragrance

In your breath.

The path of clear ideals

Shown by our leader

Is lit by 1000s and 1000s of soldiers bearing torches

following behind your footsteps

Shocked eyes see the battlefield sing

Tomorrow at dawn,

We keep our eyes peeled

Beyond the boundaries of the surrendering enemy forces

Breaking our shackles²³⁰.

²³⁰ *Birds of Freedom*, "First Line of a New Epic," poem, translated by Nageswara Rao and Leelavathi Nagarajan, 1994. From Tamileelamarchive. https://tamileelamarchive.com/article_pdf/article_ff6672ea7a55c63130cc4bf735cce2e3.pdf (accessed June 23 2024).

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