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SPEAKING IN MANY TONGUES

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BY TAMIL WOMEN IN SRI LANKA (1981-2009)

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NOVEMBER 2021



Kerala Council for Historical Research
Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

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VOL – II, November 2021

SPEAKING IN MANY TONGUES:

The Articulation of Violence in the Poetry by
Tamil Women in Sri Lanka (1981-2009)

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Published by
The Director, KCHR

Publication Assistant
Sandhya S. N

Layout and Cover Design
Jishnu S. Chandran

Copies: 500
Printed @ Kerala State Centre for
Advanced Printing & Training (C-APT)
Thiruvananthapuram

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ABSTRACT

The three decade long war in Sri Lanka fought over competing ethnic nationalisms was a period of grave human rights violations and of ‘unspeakable’ violence for Tamil women. While there were severe limitations in speaking out, women who lived through the violence, inflicted on their bodies and souls, spoke out in many tongues of pain and rage. Poetry was an important mode of witnessing in this period of surveillance and censorship where violence was in many occasions a State condoned act to enforce ethnic supremacy. In this paper, I trace the different articulations of violence found in the poetry of Tamil women, written during the period 1980-2009 and the tentative seeking of justice present in this act of poetic witnessing. Starting with

the first collection of poetry written by women during the war, aptly titled '*Sollatha Seithigal*' (Unspoken Messages), this paper bears witness to the nuanced explorations of surviving and resistance that these texts offer about being Tamil during the war. While the sexually violated Tamil woman was a trope used by the LTTE in its articulations of the formation of the female suicide bomber, the poetry bears a much broader understanding of the violence faced by women and their responses in confronting the experience. The paper will be looking at poetic texts that make visible the sexual violence inflicted by the Sri Lankan army as well as read poetry that puts forward an articulation of the insidious acts of daily violence found within homes, the difficulties inherent in navigating public spaces and checkpoints, the burden of expectations that the society had put on women to be bearers of Tamil cultural purity and the difficulties of holding in remembrance difficult deaths and disappearances.

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Let me at the onset make my positionality visible. I am a researcher from Kerala with very tenuous links to Tamils in Sri Lanka, led to this work by poetry, thinking and forming ideas based on research and writings coming mostly from the vernacular medium which is marginalised in the academia and through thinkers and researchers and academicians still writing from this space of violence pecking at them continuously. I am an outsider of the language and the experience. This work is thus a work of translation, with all its inherent difficulties of translationality, of not just language but of experience as well. The historical period that is held to scrutiny in this paper is bookended by two brutal events of erasure, the years being 1981 and 2009. On June 1st, 1981, the famous Jaffna Public Library was

set on fire by the police forces of Sri Lanka. The library which housed 97,000 volumes, innumerable manuscripts, and invaluable archival material was reduced to a pile of ash. Between a sunset and the next sunrise, an important part of the cultural history of the Tamil people was incinerated. As if to confirm Heinrich Heine's words "Where they have burned books, they will end in burning human beings", a period of much bloodshed and violence followed this brutal act of arson.¹ Terrible atrocities were committed on the civilian population of Sri Lanka, through the next thirty years of civil war, by both parties involved in the war: the Sri Lankan state forces and the LTTE. The scale and nature of this conflict reached its horrific zenith in the period between January 2009 and May 2009, at the end of which the Sri Lankan government declared its victory over LTTE. The final stages of the war which came to a bloody halt in Mullivaikkal², was infamously dubbed by the media as a "war without witness"³.

However, Poetry as a mode of witnessing war can be traced in the works written by Tamils during the period between 1981 and 2009. Since the publication of the widely read '*Maranathul Vazhuvom*' in 1983 (We Will Live Amidst Death) which inaugurated what could be called a genre of

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1. Heinrich Heine, *Almansor: A Tragedy* (1823), trans. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 142.
 2. Mullivaikkal is a village in Mullaitivu District, Vanni, Northern Province Sri Lanka.
 3. Frances Harrison, "Dubbing Sri Lankan Conflict as 'War without Witness' is Simply not True", DBS Jeyaraj Blog, 17 May, 2011, accessed February 28, 2014, <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/6482>.

poetry of political protest which included poets like Cheran, Jayapalan, Aravindan, Thirumavalan and Ahilan⁴, various anthologies and collection of poems have appeared in Sri Lanka written by Tamils. The poetry produced in this period is marked by the important events during the war and the act of writing through it. The important events during the war - the burning of the Jaffna library in 1981; the anti Tamil pogrom of 1983 which started in Colombo and then spread through the island altering Tamil lives forever; the deployment of the Indian Peacekeeping Force in 1987 which quickly exceeded its purpose of peacekeeping and engaged in its own brand of brutal violence leading to also the bizarre act of camaraderie where the Sri Lankan army clandestinely passed over consignments to the LTTE to fight the Indian army; the increase in the violence perpetrated by LTTE targeting the other minority community, the Muslims, leading to the forceful eviction of Muslims from the North of Sri Lanka in October, 1990; the uneasy cease-fire brokered by the Norwegians between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government in 2002; the devastating tsunami in 2004; the resuming of armed conflict which escalated in 2008, and culminated in the official end of war on 18th May, 2009 - are all inscribed in the poetry of witness.⁵

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4. M.A Nuhman, "Ethnic Conflict and Literary Perception: Tamil Poetry in Post-Colonial Sri Lanka," Colombo Telegraph, August 19, 2012, accessed February 12 2014, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/ethnic-conflict-and-literary-perception-tamil-poetry-in-post-colonial-sri-lanka/>.
5. Lakshmi Holmström and Sascha Ebeling, "Introduction", in *Lost Evenings Lost Lives: Tamil Poems of the Sri Lankan Civil War*, ed. Lakshmi Holmström and Sascha Ebeling (Todmorden: Arc Publications, 2016), 9.

Yet these poems are not ordinary records of important events; it is a collection of multiple responses, differing views, different experiences that shun the objectivity of a singular history. It also bears the struggles of confronting a world marked with the brutality as well as banality of wartime violence. My work tries to locate poetry as being in conversation with the various experiences that marks an existence through a war which was fought over “competing nationalisms”⁶ while asking, how does poetry act as a witness to women’s experience of the war in the period 1981-2009, a period which was also crucial to the Tamil nationalist movement? How was the gendered construct of the ‘Tamil woman’ tackled by women living through this period as expressed through the medium of poetry?

However, the past has to be witnessed through the prism of the present, and the present in Sri Lanka is not devoid of violence. Though the war was brutally brought to an end in May 2009, the violence faced by Tamils and Muslims in Sri Lanka still continues. One of the insidious ways in which violence is being perpetuated is through the deliberate acts of erasure of the history of Tamil people’s struggle and through official interdictions on memory and remembering. The wounds have not healed, in fact, it has been not been allowed to heal with intentional insensitive displays of power, bulldozing monuments and memories of the hurt and marginalised.

6. Qadri Ismail, “Constituting Nation, Contesting Nationalisms”, in *Community, Gender and Violence: Subaltern Studies XI*, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan (New Delhi: Permanent Black and Ravi Dayal Publishers, 2000), 223.

A person or a community devoid of memory and history and identity are like walking corpses, already dead. Yalini Yogeswaran, poet from Jaffna writes poignantly;

Ask them if they know
the story which they claim has ended before
many episodes and subplots of it still exist here...
Even if I m dead
give me back my identity alive
and I shall survive”.⁷

The erasure of identity is a violence faced by the Tamils in contemporary post-war Sri Lanka. The end of the war meant a censure of another sort in the name of moving on from the war and rhetoric of development. The burden fell on the Tamils to forget the past, to accept reconciliation and move on so that Sri Lanka can concentrate on rebuilding and economic development. Tamils’ right to remember their suffering and loss was taken away from them; there was also an insensitive and flagrant erasure of any remnants of the violent past which is termed by Sumathy Sivamohan as the ‘aesthetics of triumphalism’.⁸ For example, the massacre ground in the last days of war, Nanthikadal Lagoon today houses a resort called the ‘Lagoon’s Edge’, and soon after the war the bunkers and the home of LTTE supremo Prabhakaran were turned into

7. Yalini Yogeswaran, “Untitled Poem”, Oodaru, accessed Dec 12 2020 <https://www.oodaru.com/?p=10934#more-10934>

8. Sumathy Sivamohan, “Territorial Claims, Home, Land and Movement: Women’s History of Movement and Resistance.” in *The Search for Justice: The Sri Lanka Papers*, ed. Kumari Jayawardena, Kishali Pinto-Jayawardena. (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2016), 369-395.

army sites as well as tourist site. This prompted Gowri Koneswaran, a queer Tamil American poet, performing artist, teacher, and lawyer whose family immigrated to the U.S. from Sri Lanka write a poem titled *How To Enjoy Your Vacation To A Country That Says It Won The War*⁹ which is a scathing criticism of the post-war tourism industry of Sri Lanka which keeps out of sight the violence of the ruling government against the Tamils and Muslims. She also calls out the tourists by writing “Keep your conscience secure in the hotel safe”.

It has to be noted that this systematic destruction was not just of LTTE memorials for martyrs called the *Thuyilum Illams*, but also of the statues, pillars, gardens constructed by local residents to remember civilian deaths, remember their loved one were also destroyed. The latest being the sudden demolition of a memorial in the Jaffna University Campus at the start of this year to remember Tamil civilians killed during the last part of the war bringing up questions of justice and accountability.¹⁰ Their past became a subaltern memory and an ‘antagonist history’. Where does such memory go to rest? One could be in the process of justice and reconciliation. But as Suvendrini Perera had found in her research, the “accountability through the fora of international justice has not only delayed, but is also compromised and deformed by its own

⁹. Gowri Koneswaran, “How To Enjoy Your Vacation To A Country That Says It Won The War”, accessed Jan 2 2021, <https://www.splitthisrock.org/poetry-database/poem/how-to-enjoy-your-vacation>

¹⁰. Sinthujan Varatharajah, 2013. “Possessing Memories, Designing Cemeteries.” *JDS Lanka*. May 18, 2013, <http://www.jdslanka.org/index.php/analysis-reviews/politics-a-economy/317-possessing-memories-designing-cemeteries> Accessed March 23, 2020.

process.” She quotes Randall Williams from his book “The Divided World” to put forth another form of accountability. Williams writes “Our starting point should neither be the law nor any desire for a progressive appropriation of the law, but the mounting dead for whom the law was either useless means of defense or an accomplice to their murder” (Williams 2010 quoted in Perera 2015)¹¹

But even in this moment of erasure of identity, the burden was on the Tamils to make peace. There were widespread ‘concerns’ that the Tamils revisiting and remembering the horrors of their past will lead to a revival of militant Tamil nationalism of the erstwhile LTTE. Recently in an online interview given to Num Tamil Radio Channel of New Zealand, poet Avvai had recited an unpublished poem of hers titled *‘Puthaiyy kuzhikal’* or Burial Pits. She read from her poem- “Roads devoid of people, Dense forest, Thorny bushes, Ditches and Hill valleys, Abandoned wells are all renamed and have become burial pits// The Disappeared, the Abducted, Lovers of Liberation, Dissenters, have become buried bodies.” The poem continues to say that “Those who have lost everything, their curses will slaughter.” A listener immediately responded saying we shouldn’t go back and talk about what happened and thereby escalate violence, to which Avvai calmly responded. “This is our history; We can forgive, but we cannot forget!”¹² The social media and online space also has emerged as grounds to express dissent with

11. Suvendrini Perera, “Visibility, Atrocity and the Subject of Postcolonial Justice.” *Borderlands e journal*, 14 (1) (2015): 6

12. Avvai Vicknewaran, “In Conversation with NUM Tamil Radio Station”, accessed Jan 10 2021, <http://www.facebook.com/NumTamilRadio>

hashtag campaigns such as #RememberResist,¹³ where as reported in Tamil Guardian “hundreds of Tamils and non-Tamil allies took to Instagram to assert their determination to mark Maaveerar Naal and to remember the fallen fighters of the Tamil liberation struggle despite many contemporary obstacles such as censorship, the global pandemic and state crackdowns against memorialisation in the Tamil homeland.”¹⁴

It is here, in a moment of crisis in the present, that I listen to the poetry of witness written by women which are registers and texts of memory which articulate violence not just in its spectacular horrific and bloody excess of killing and murdering, but also in its everydayness, in its banal repetitiveness, in its utter lack of meaning. I put forward an articulation of violence as the structuring, the spine behind ‘being’ Tamil in a majoritarian Sinhala and Buddhist Sri Lanka. Here violence is of course encountered in its debilitating force-annihilating everything in a blink of an eye, but also in its slow eating away at the soul, in the daily defeats it serves. But mostly in this poetry of witness, we can observe that violence is also constituting new identities, leading to the inauguration of new modes of survival, of resistance, determined smuggling of dissent and selfhood by forming new safer spaces, new ways of solidarity.

Let me start with the period between 1981-1987 which saw the Tamils suffer from unspeakable violence of a majoritarian state, including the

13. “#RememberResist – Tamils fight censorship to mark Maaveerar Naal online”, Tamil Guardian, Last modified 28 November 2020, accessed 2 Jan 2021, <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/rememberresist-tamils-fight-censorship-mark-maaveerar-naal-online>

14. Ibid.

horrifying 1983 anti-Tamil riots termed as Black July. This was however also a period of mass joining in the Tamil ‘movements’ (*iyakam*) and hence was marked with a sense of optimism and assertion of Tamil identities. In the imagination of a homeland for Tamils, Eelam, there were active debates and discussion on the nature of the polity, the culture and gender relations in this new construct. Led by the youth, the time was imbued with a vigour and a fearless emblematic of youthful energy and is marked by a reimagination of Tamil society even as it was engulfed in the violence from outside. Women joined these movements with enthusiasm. There were also independent women’s groups which were not affiliated with nationalist groups that sprouted along with national liberation struggle like the Mother’s Front (1984-87), Jaffna University Women’s Forward Group (1980-82), Women Study Circle, *Maathar Marumalarchi Perani* (Women’s New Revolutionary Group), *Theevaka Maathar Ani* (Theevaka Women’s Group), Poorani Women’s Home and Jaffna University Women’s Circle. Many women’s magazines were also published during this period like Penn Viduthalai, Dhagam, Thozhi, Vilak, Senthanal, Nangai, Suthanthira Paraivagal, Nangai, Maruthaani (Muslim Women’s Magazine), Penkalin Kural which carried essays, poems and articles written by women. It seemed like a new eagerness was displayed in writing and reading among women.¹⁵ Debates and exchange of ideas on women’s status and women’s standpoint were discussed and these discussions found an acceptance within the Tamil nationalist groups as well. Many women poets entered the literary fray

¹⁵. Sitralega Maunaguru, “Sivaramaniyin Vaazhvum Kavithayum: Oru Arimukham.” in *Sivaramani Kavithaigal*, ed. Sitralega Maunaguru (Jaffna: Women’s Study Circle, 1993), iii-xxviii.

during this period, including Urvashi, Selvi, Sivaramani, Avvai, Ranga, Sankari, Maithreyi, Mythili, Darshini, Nalayani and Mazeera Majeed. Poet Avvai terms the women as a bridge, discussing among themselves, sharpening their arguments and taking these arguments on gender to the nationalist movements. This period also saw women entering the arenas of art which were not deemed as “womanly” like Modern art.¹⁶ For example, in 1986 Jaffna University held an art exhibition exclusively of three woman painters. This was also the period when artists like Arunthathy Sabanathan and Vasuki Jegananathan gained prominence as artists of promise in Colombo. As Sumathy Sivamohan writes, the national liberation struggle destabilized hierarchical structures of class, caste and particularly gender with engagement of people from different strata of society in the imagining of the Tamil nation which ensured that the period saw the scope for a constructive remaking of Tamil consciousness. Sivamohan traces here the formation of a space for the militant consciousness to emerge which she opposes to the militarism of the mid 1980s when LTTE came into dominance.¹⁷

It was this period that produced in 1986 an important anthology of women poets titled ‘*Sollatha Seithigal*’ (Unspoken Messages) edited by Sitralega Maunaguru who herself is a poet writing under different pseudonyms of Sankari and Chandrika. Sitralega Maunaguru will go

^{16.} Ibid.

^{17.} Sumathy Sivamohan, “The Rise of Militant Tamil Nationalism, its Assumptions and the Cultural Production of Tamil Women.” in *Sri Lankan Society in an Era of Globalization : Struggling to Create a New Social Order*, ed. S. H. Hasbullah and Barrie M. Morrison (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004) , 126-149.

on to be known an exceptional academician, a professor in Eastern University also known for her activism and interventions in peace. Her nuanced exploration of gender and the figure of ‘woman’ in Tamil nationalism has been the bedrock on which this work could even begin. The anthology brought together thirteen women poets, some of them who became very well known in the following years like Urvashi, Selvi, Sivaramani, Sanmarga, Avvai and Ranga. Maunaguru writes in the introduction to this collection that this work espouses a new awareness by women of themselves, their bodies, their lives and their role in society.¹⁸ This literary production was facilitated by the women’s movements attached to the growth of national movements in the 1980’s; the *Penkal Azhvattom* / Women’s Study Circle composing of women in and around the Jaffna University provided an atmosphere of discussion and debate. As V. Geetha writes, in this anthology we can trace an emergence of a “tentative feminism arching its way out of a blasted, yet dramatic space”.¹⁹

Sitralega Maunaguru in her foreword to this collection of poetry points us to the male dominance and patriarchal controls prevalent over women in Tamil society in Sri Lanka. She places the anthology as a necessary corollary, a much needed intervention from the side of the women to a predicament which reduces them to being ‘objects’ under a patriarchal

18. Sitralega Maunaguru, “Arimukham.” in *Sollatha Seithigal*, ed. Sitralega Maunaguru (Jaffna: Women’s Study Circle, 1986), 5-10.

19. V. Geetha, “*Life worlds: War, Desire and Labour in Contemporary Tamil Women’s Writing*” (Occasional paper, Centre for Advanced Study in Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, 2010).

gaze or bodies meant only for reproduction.²⁰ For the purpose of this paper it is important to see how within the framing of the ethnic violence suffered as a community, the anthology reconstitutes violence to include the patriarchal injunction what being a Tamil woman means within the community.

In the poems included in *Sollatha Seithigal*, we can trace an effort in listening closely to the ‘language of silence’, and turning those ‘unspoken’ to active speaking beings. Most of these poems are written in first person, and have voices of women who are speaking of the inconsistencies underneath the deceptive even surface of a Tamil society, united in the purpose of Tamil nationalism. Breaking the silence is also a fracturing of the representations of women, exposing the cracks within the icons of Tamil femininity celebrated within Tamil nationalism and revealing the daily violence hidden within the metaphors that the Tamil society has created to bridle the Tamil women.

The first poem in this collection, A. Sankari’s ‘In Their Eyes’ sets the tone of the collection by placing the gendered violence on women as unexceptional, routine and all pervasive.

I have no

Face

Heart

Soul.

In their eyes-

two breasts

²⁰. Maunaguru, “Arimukham,” 5.

long hair
slight waist broad hips-
is all I have.

Cooking,
spreading beds,
bearing children
are my tasks.

They'll talk about chastity
of Kannaki,
and while they
talk so,
They'll keep on looking
at my body

This is habitual
starting from husband
to shopkeeper.²¹

The evocation of Kannaki in this poem is very pertinent considering the cultural currency this figure from the Tamil epic *Silapadikaram* (The Lay of the Anklet) has in the Tamil society. She is the icon of the ideal Tamil womanhood who takes on a Pandyan King and questions him on justice and burns the city of Madurai in revenge for her husband's unjust death because of the power of her chastity. Purity or *Karupp* (*Katpu*) of the woman is the cornerstone of Tamil cultural and moral

²¹. Sankari, "Avarkal Parvayil." in *Sollatha Seithigal*, ed. Sitralega Maunaguru (Jaffna : Women's Study Circle, 1986), 6.

regulation in constructing the Tamil woman. An almost fanatic anxiety thus revolves around the chastity of the Tamil woman, which if violated by men from the 'Other' is equivalent to the castration of the masculine power.²² Sumathy Sivamohan writes that the understanding of *Katpu* in Sri Lanka is mediated and received from various cultural and popular mediums like South Indian cinema.²³ She traces to Kannaki an antecedent to the notion of *Katpu*, which is later used to mobilise women into Tamil nationalism. In Jaffna society Kannaki is not regarded as a real woman, but a saintly figure as well as a goddess. Yet her *katpu* is a characteristic which the unmythical, real women should also emulate.²⁴ Sumathy Sivamohan rightly opines that the martial revenge of Kannaki on the city of Madurai is conveniently forgotten and the mythical power of her chastity is remembered and propagated.²⁵ Sankari's poem also reveals this selective glorification of 'the chastity of Kannaki', a selection of a single aspect from many complexities of the figure of Kannaki which suits the purposes of reigning in of women's sexuality, while still seeing her as an object to be 'looked at'. Hence while Kannaki's attribute of chastity is selected to form an integral part of the Tamil woman's identity, Kannaki as a symbol of righteous anger

22. Sitralega Maunaguru, "Gendering Tamil Nationalism : The Construction of 'Woman' in Projects of Protest and Control," in *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka*, ed. Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 1995), 158-175.

23. Sivamohan, "Territorial Claims, Home, Land and Movement: Women's History of Movement and Resistance," 376.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

is overlooked.

Sankari also deftly collapses the predatory public and the safe private space binary in violence on women by drawing a spectrum of violating men, from shopkeeper to the husband. In a similar register, Ranga's poem '*Unmayilum Unmayaay*' (Truth within Truth) talks of sexual violence of a woman at the hands of a man who belongs to the same *ur*.²⁶ She describes the lack of comprehensibility of such violence within a concept of chastity, which is invoked to demarcate 'our men' from the 'other men'. Hence, when an "*uravan*" or a fellow man from her *ur* rapes a woman, the woman is blamed by her kin. *Ur* which can mean natal village carries the connotations of home as well within it. In Ranga's poem, it is the assumption of the shared love and affinity, the fixity of the *ur* that is dismantled by the woman who is raped. "The truth which is more than the truth", the truth that exceeds the common sense of community is the unspeakability of violence against women that is inherent within the *ur*. In the poems included in the anthology we can also see an engagement of the affective to put forward a feminist articulation. They address inadequate lovers like in Sankari's poem *Idaiveli* where she writes "What can I do, I am a woman liberated, How can you reach the heights I occupy?" The women poets also address the need for women solidarities to emerge, the necessity to understand the golden shackles of praise and acceptance of women who follow the script of the society. We have to marvel at how when one's way of life, culture was at stake from outside forces, Tamil society and its women

²⁶. Ranga, "Unmayilum Unmayaay," in *Sollatha Seithigal*, ed. Sitralega Maunaguru (Jaffna : Women's Study Circle, 1986), 32.

were brave enough to look into their society accept the rotten outdated parts of it while sincerely serious about addressing and changing these.

When after almost 21 years, another more comprehensive anthology of women poets, *Peyal Mankkum Pozhuthu* from Ilankai was painstakingly collected and published at the height of the war in Sri Lanka by A. Mangai, she writes of *Sollatha Seithigal* as putting forward women's voice in its different tonality and the interweaving of the personal with the political.²⁷ So while the women are sometimes talking of deeply personal memories and experiences, they are always simultaneously talking of the outside political violence. In the Afterword to the same anthology, V Geetha terms this as the interweaving of the '*akam*' and the '*puram*'- examining the inner workings of the outer world, and the outer tremors of the inner world. She traces an absence of the same in the writings of women coming from within Tamil Nadu of the same period. The later generation of women writing from Tamil Nadu who wrote about body politics and were deeply political in their poetry has the debt of thanks (*nandri-kadan*) she writes to *Sollatha Seithigal*²⁸.

By the 1990s, with the power struggle between militant groups yielding to the dominance of a single militant group LTTE, the poetry of women also changed in its tenor.²⁹ On the one hand there was the

27. A. Mangai, "Thadam Pathikum Suvadukal," in *Peyal Manakkum Pozhuthu*, ed. A. Mangai (Chennai: Maattru Publications, 2007), 277.

28. V Geetha, "Nandri Kadan," in *Peyal Manakkum Pozhuthu*, ed. A. Mangai (Chennai: Maattru Publications, 2007), 265.

29. Lakshmi Holmström, Subashree Krishnaswamy and K Srilata, "Introduction," in *The Rapids of a Great River: The Penguin Book of Tamil Poetry*.

poetry of woman combatants like Ambuli, Captain Bharati, Captain Vanathi, Thamizhaval, Namangal, Kasturi who wrote poetry about their experiences as a combatant for militant nationalism. This corpus of literature which is marked by the persistence of heroism is interesting as they wrote of what moved them to shoulder guns, of the loss of friends and comrades to the war and the “tragic freedom” that they experienced which was linked to their abilities to wield guns; which as V Geetha observes was “at once enabling and death dealing”.³⁰ We can trace this in the publications brought out by LTTE and Velicham Publications and also in later anthologies of combatant women like *Peridatha Natchathirngal*. There is a very engaging feminist debate on the agency of the women combatants, which is beyond the scope of this paper. But in the reasons given for women turning into wielders of violence especially as part of the elite Black Tiger suicide squad, there were insinuations that it must be because she had gone through sexual violence - the violence embodying the woman with a subjectivity that demands revenge through more violence. I fall back on the nuanced analysis provided by Sitralega Maunaguru on the construct of the raped woman that at once evidences the Tamil society’s moral anxiety protect and police women’s bodies, but at the same time also shows the helplessness encountered by the rampant use of sexual violence as an instrument of war.³¹ When the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was killed in a suicide attack by Dhanu in 1991 in Sri Perumbadur, in

30. Geetha, “*Life worlds: War, Desire and Labour in Contemporary Tamil Women’s Writing.*” 4.

31. Maunaguru, “Gendering Tamil Nationalism: The Construction of ‘Woman’ in Projects of Protest and Control,” 170.

Chennai, LTTE true to their history of not claiming suicide attacks by Black Tigers denied that Dhanu was part of LTTE, but suggested that the assassination might have been carried out as revenge by an IPKF rape victim. Nirmala Rajasingham and Neloufer de Mel have in their work enjoined this to the other controls over women's sexuality and their moral injunctions. Sitralega Maunaguru provides an incisive analysis of LTTE's insinuation that the female suicide bomber was a revenge for rape. She enjoins this narrative to the importance given to chastity in the Tamil moral world. As a woman who has lost the virtue of chastity, the act of self death through suicide bombing is a entwining of two acts: the political act of taking revenge against those who have violated the Tamil nation, as well as an act of self purification.³² Maunaguru sees the act of suicide bombing in the same register as the ancient ritual of *agni pravesham*: immolation and purification through fire.³³ In such a reading, death is a ritual of self regeneration, where the raped woman reclaims her place as a pure subject of the Tamil nation. While LTTE appropriated the raped woman by building narratives of revenge, we can turn to poetry to examine how within the form of poetry women have responded to the rape of women. Poems were written as responses to the rape and sexual violence suffered by women like *Koneeswarikal* written by Kala, *Mannamperikal* written by Aazhiyaal and *Krishanty* written by Vinothini.

Bhanubharathy, an ex combatant's poems *Vedi Kond Pisahum Pandavar*

^{32.} Maunaguru, "Gendering Tamil Nationalism: The Construction of 'Woman' in Projects of Protest and Control," 171.

^{33.} *Ibid.* 171.

and Kala's *Koneeswarikal* are very difficult reads that make us come face to face with the violence we are capable of in war-time. Koneeswari was a Tamil woman, gang raped and murdered by security forces in 1997 in the Amparai District. She was visited by security forces at her house and after the brutal rape, was killed by throwing a grenade into her genitals. The incident led to an outpouring of rage within the Tamil community and media, while the Sinhala and English press kept largely silent. The publication of the poem elicited polarizing opinions from the readers of the newspaper Sarinikar. Prof. M. A. Nuhman has chronicled the responses that the poem elicited from the Sri Lankan women as appeared in the comments section of the newspaper which is beyond the scope of this paper.³⁴

But I am drawn to Aazhiyaal's poem *Mannamperikal*. Mannamperi in the title of Aazhiyaal's poem "Mannamperikal" was a former beauty queen who was the head of the women's wing of the JVP insurgencies. On April 16 1971, she was arrested paraded naked, sexually abused and killed by the Sri Lankan army. In Aazhiyaal's poem, the woman protagonist of the poem talks about the violence meted out to women and recognizes the sexual thirst and the violent language that Mannamperi and Koneeswari must have suffered from. But the volta of the poem is presented in the final couplet where the reader realizes that the language of violence which she recognizes with both Koneewari

³⁴. M. A. Nuhman, "Ethnic Conflict And Literary Perception: Tamil Poetry in Post-Colonial Sri Lanka." *Colombo Telegraph*, August 19, 2012. accessed February 12, 2014. <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/ethnic-conflict-and-literary-perception-tamil-poetry-in-post-colonial-sri-lanka/>.

and Mannamperi, is perpetuated by her husband sleeping beside her.³⁵ Aazhyaal's this poem is emblematic of poems where the rape of woman has led to a speech which cannot be simply accommodated in the registers of revenge. Instead of the exclusion and a spectrality of the lone raped woman, the multiplicities of violence and responses are highlighted. In the poetic medium both the rage and the inclusion of the woman is evident. In these poems, the women identify themselves with the raped woman, they embody and become them. I want to read in along with Tamizhini's memoir, who had headed LTTE's Women's Political Division, imprisoned after the war and died following her battle with cancer. She wrote her frank memoir titled *In the Shadow of the Sword*. There has been an acknowledgment in international fact finding mission reports of human rights organizations about the rampant use of sexual violence in the torture of the surrendered Tamils in the immediate end of the war. Tamizhini however denies that she had to go through it in imprisonment, and instead talks about the ill effects of the insinuation that women under detention had to go through sexual violence. She also writes about the hurt at the society which can't come to terms with surrendered combatant, constantly asking why didn't she bite the cyanide capsule after "what she had to go through".³⁶

35. Aazhyaal, "Mannamperis", trans. Lakshmi Holmström, in *Lost Evenings, Lost Lives- Tamil Poems of the Sri Lankan War*, ed. Lakshmi Holmström and Sascha Ebeling, (Todmorden: Arc Publications, 2016,) 75.

36. Tamizhini. *Oru Kuurvalin Nizhalil*, (Nagercoil: Kalchuvadu Publications, 2016); Tamizhini, *In the Shadow of the Sword*, trans. Nedra Rodrigo, (Delhi: Sage Publications, 2021).

I had first read this as vestiges of being an organization that put so much focus on chastity and morality. However as Sumathy Sivamohan writes, silence or denial of sexual violence is not always victimhood. Sumathy Sivamohan terms it as the ‘untelling of the act’, a choice that reveals the violence committed by society on women before and after the act.³⁷ She looks at very interestingly with her own interactions with the survivors of the war, reading it long with *Oozhikalam*, a novel, by Thamilkavi, which talks about women recounting the last days of war, the journey from what was their home to the enemy’s territory. Women have talked about walking naked, relieving themselves on the seashores, as an act of survival, of gazing back. An act of owning the gaze, gazing back, an act not of shame- but of survival. Sivamohan contrasts this speaking in opposition to the trophy videos taken and circulated by the Sinhala army of sexual violation and mutilation of bodies at the end of the war, like that of Isai Priya who was a part of the LTTE’s media wing.³⁸

On the other hand starting with Sivaramani, Selvi and Avvai, a tract of poetry recognized the tragic and violent turn of the nationalist struggle in its militant phase. In a turning away from the rhetoric of heroism, their verses did not signify a celebration of military valour, instead it fronted an uncomfortable and anguished questioning of the struggle, implicit in it a critical approach to the construct of nation as well.³⁹ As

37. Sivamohan, “Territorial Claims, Home, Land and Movement: Women’s History of Movement and Resistance,” 382.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Geetha, “*Life worlds: War, Desire and Labour in Contemporary Tamil Women’s Writing.*” 8; Sivamohan, “The Rise of Militant Tamil Nationalism, its Assumptions and the Cultural Production of Tamil Women.” 31-35.

mentioned this was the period when militant tamil nationalism was emerging into its dangerous phase, the phase of 'the brother killing brother' which ended in LTTE emerging as the self proclaimed true representative of Tamils. An erasure of dissent was a tactic of LTTE in its efforts towards the establishment the ideal Tamil homeland, the Eelam. Even though the expression of dissent and differences from LTTE's politics of Tamil nationalism was fraught with danger, the political situation also led to conceptualizations of alternate ways of being and feeling Tamil. Art was an important platform to do this. Writers, artists and activists who expressed their discontentment with the militant form of nationalism also had to pay a heavy toll. Most of them had to go on exile or were summarily disposed of. The list of artists and activists who died includes Rajani Thiranganama, Sabalingam Sabarathinam, Neelan Thiruchelvam, Selvy Thiyagarajah, and indirectly Sivaramani Sivanandan.

Dissent is sometimes most poignantly articulated through a language of disillusionment. Such a language of disillusionment is evidenced in the poetry of Chelvy Thiyagarah, a student of Drama and Theatre Arts in Jaffna and a former member of PLOTE. She was the recipient of the International PEN award in 1992 and wrote under the name 'Selvi'. Selvi was engaged in the cultural space of Jaffna very actively and founded the Tamil magazine Thozhi. She also articulated through dramatic plays and engaged deeply with issues like dowry and rape in her plays. Selvi was arrested on August 30, 1991 by the LTTE and disappeared without much evidence. It is believed that she was executed along with another dissident Manoharan, a day before she was supposed

to act in a play on Palestine Intifada. Her poem 'In Search of Sun' is an important portrayal of the time she lived in.

In Search of Sun, My Soul,
 Full of despair, yearns for life,
 Primitive humans yellow toothed, ugly mouthed, thirsting blood slit
 flesh, saliva a dribble
 Cruel nails and horrifying eyes,
 Bragging and jubilating over victories are not new,
 Legs lost from long walks
 for miles and miles in search of a throne,
 Days wasted waiting for a full moon,
 Only boredom lingers.⁴⁰

Another powerful voice of critique of the concept Tamil nation was Sivaramani Sivanandan, a young poet from Jaffna who also used the language of disillusionment to articulate the futility of the tactics of militant nationalism. Sivaramani was an active member of the Jaffna Women's Group and participated enthusiastically in the literary and political debates and discussions in the 1980s. A feminist activist and an associate of Poorani Ilam and Santhiham, the psychiatric centre for women in Jaffna, Sivaramani held progressive views about women's position in the Tamil society. But the society at the time couldn't keep pace with the independent and electric thinking of brilliant women like her and continued to raise obstacles in her way. The militant struggle for dominance among Tamil groups and the IPKF War with LTTE in 1987

⁴⁰. "In the Traditions of a Six Yard Cloth." *Lanka News Papers*. June 1, 2008, http://www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2008/6/28682_space.html

killed independent expressions and sought to extinguish feminist debates. A retreat into misogynist thinking was also evidenced in the space of education and in the University of Jaffna where Sivaramani was also a student.⁴¹ During this period of degeneration and retrogression which sought to reverse the feminist gains from the earlier period of active discussion and debate, misogynist posters came across the University campus trying to police the dress code of women students. Wall posters were put up condemning feminists and feminism; Sivaramani was also personally targeted and harassed.⁴² Sivaramani who in the early 1980s of heady feminist activism had written, “Come Friends, Let’s Win the World”, in 1989 wrote with dejection;

...We got up,
not to change the world,
But to enter another darkness.⁴³

The fatigue and boredom that marked Selvi’s poems can be witnessed in Sivaramani’s latter poems. In her words, there is a discernment of defeat that awaits them as well as the Tamil project. For example, in the poem, ‘My Lineage and Me’, Sivaramani writes of an “ageing of her time” that doesn’t wield itself to straightening.⁴⁴ She writes:

41. Maunaguru, “Sivaramaniyin Vaazhvm Kavithayum: Oru Arimukham,” iii-xxviii.

42. Ibid.

43. Sivaramani, “Come Friends, Let’s Win the World,” in *Sivaramani Kavithaigal*, ed. Sitralega Maunaguru (Jaffna: Women’s Study Circle, 1993), 13.

44. Sivaramani, “My Lineage and I,” in *Sivaramani Kavithaigal*, ed. Sitralega Maunaguru (Jaffna: Women’s Study Circle, 1993), 17.

In this extraordinary initiative,
 among those who keep sleeping and dying,
 I keep losing a battle with my beliefs...⁴⁵

The poem is not just recognition of personal defeat at the hands of her beliefs, but is a social commentary on the mores and conventions of a time where independent expression is rendered impossible, and if possible only through a language that bears the wounds of defeat. In understanding the language of dissent as articulated through boredom, it will be helpful to turn to an observation made by Valentine Daniel with newly freed victims of terror in Sri Lanka. In his interactions, he finds that there is a level of unshareability about experiences of torture. While these men shared in detail about their capture, the cells they were kept in, they spoke very little of torture. Even when they were asked to, “Brutalities were wearisomely enumerated...in flat toned recitations devoid of conviction” and further attempts to elicit information were met with listlessness. Daniel argues that it is actually not boredom that weighs the victims down, but “the overwhelming sense of sheer worthlessness of all attempts to communicate something that was so radically individuated and rendered unshareable”.⁴⁶ This unshareability is what is evidenced in the poetry of Selvi and Sivaramani as well; the fatigue and boredom are indications of the sheer incommunicable nature of the frustration they feel. The images of horror and savagery that saturates the poem of Selvi is an attempt to convey the desperation,

^{45.} Ibid.

^{46.} E. Valentine Daniel, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 143.

a desperation that is mostly met with defeatism, with boredom.

On May 19th, 1991, Sivaramani committed suicide after burning all her poetry. In her suicide note she says that her act of suicide is a well thought out decision and that she still is in awe of life and living. For her, death is throwing her flaming grief and rage to wind. She writes “Till my hand’s reach/ I have erased all my identity”. She pleads to the survivors to destroy everything that they might own about her.⁴⁷ Her suicide is a text of defiance in itself; her burning of poetry has to be read not just as a destruction of identity, but also as a continuation of her self- expression. When she is burning her words and erasing her self, she is in a way protecting her identity. She is holding to her beliefs and ending existence before it will be claimed for appropriation. As Sumathy Sivamohan reminds us, Sivaramani committed suicide a few days before Dhanu committed suicide in an entirely different way by blowing herself up to assassinate Rajiv Gandhi. But as Sitralega Maunaguru astutely comments, Sivaramani and her death did not receive the same attention as she did not bite on a cyanide capsule.⁴⁸ Her death lies outside the script of the nation, like the death of Rajani and Selvi.

There is a refusal to forget her strong and clear headed opposition to the construct of the Tamil nation in these poems. In short, her act of suicide has enabled an unending conversation with us. She is remembered in

47. Maunaguru, “Sivaramaniyin Vaazhvum Kavithayum: Oru Arimukham,” iii xxviii.

48. Sivamohan, “The Rise of Militant Tamil Nationalism, Its Assumptions and the Cultural Production of Tamil Women,” 129.

the realm of words of remembering, as evidenced in the following poem written by Sumathy Sivamohan at the end of the conflict in the May 2009. Witnessing death and remembering death which was invisibilized in the trohi construct of LTTE, where traitors epitomized the “betrayal of the intimate by the intimate”.⁴⁹ Sharika Thiranagama argues that the traitor is for Tamils not the “other”, but a potential self that has to be guarded against. Hence the Tamil community was conceptualised by LTTE as “a community of potential traitors” and the figure of the traitor is “simultaneously both inside and outside the community”.⁵⁰ Differing from the concept of the brave deaths of martyrdom as celebrated within the discourse of Tamil nationalism forwarded by LTTE, poetry gives attention to those deaths deemed invisible by this discourse. We can read the lives and death of poets and activists as an owning up of the category of traitor, and this his subject position is creatively used to forward difficult and hurtful truths about living through war. The led to dissent articulated through poems, a continuation of the literary device alerted to us by A. Mangai and V. Geetha, of the intermingling of akam and puram where deeply personal ruminations, with all elements of a lament is written, but always attendant to the violence of the time and the politics behind it. The remembrance of dissent has found articulation in feminist solidarity building as well.

Recently, The FemCon Sri Lanka Collective, an online/onground

^{49.} Sharika Thiranagama, “In Praise of Traitors: Intimacy, Betrayal, and the Sri Lankan Tamil Community,” in *Traitors: Suspicion, Intimacy, and the Ethics of State-Building*, ed. Thiranagama Sharika and Kelly Tobias (Philadelphia: University Of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 127-49.

^{50.} Ibid.

platform for facilitating intersectional and inter-generational feminist conversations held a panel discussion on 30 November to pay tribute to notable Sri Lankan feminist personalities of the past titled very aptly as ‘Looking Back Looking ahead’. Noted activist Sarala Emmanuel who works with the Suriya Women’s Development Centre, a collective of women activists and feminists working to promote women’s rights in the Batticaloa District in Eastern Sri Lanka in her presentation on the remembrance of Rajani, emphasized on Rajani’s everyday interventions in a war as a doctor and an activist as well as her work in solidarity, friendship and trust. Rajani Thiranganama was a doctor, a professor in Jaffna University, a human rights activist and an ardent feminist. She was killed while she cycled back home from Jaffna University on 21st September 1989. This was the period when armed confrontation between LTTE and IPKF was at its peak and any form of dissent was not tolerated. Both Rajani and her sister Nirmala were early supporters of the LTTE who parted ways with the organization in the mid 1980s as they both had disagreements with the way the organization was functioning, and also because it was at odds with the socialist principles they supported.⁵¹ Rajani was also harassed by the Sri Lankan army and the IPKF. Though Rajani knew her life was at risk, she refused to be cowed down or leave Jaffna. She co-authored the book ‘Broken Palmyra’, which brought forth the atrocities of the IPKF, but also

⁵¹. D.B.S. Jeyaraj. “Rajini Rajasingham Thiraganama: Unforgettable Symbol of Sri Lanka’s Tamil Tragedy,” *dbsjeyaraj*, accessed November 21, 2014. <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/33112>. Rohini Hensman, “A Tribute to Rajani Thiraganama,” *EPW* Vol. XLIX, no. 49 (December 2014): 4.

provided a scathing critique of the LTTE. The Palmyra was a symbol of the Tamil Jaffna society and the book reflects the deep agony that she faced at its deterioration and the eventual breaking up. The chapter in *Broken Palmyra*, 'No More Tears, Sister', is a feminist appraisal of the conflict by Rajani. She co-founded the University Teachers for Human Rights-Jaffna (UTHR-J) which published reports, bulletins and testimonials throughout the conflict and also co-founded the Poorani Women's Shelter in Jaffna for women affected by the conflict. Rajani had written that she wanted to prove that ordinary women like her also have the courage to fight alone and hold her inner selves together. Her assassination is intolerance to such independence where a woman shows the courage to express her convictions. She was dangerous because she set an example of dignified defiance sans violence and she rooted herself in the realm of 'ordinary' day to day life of a woman.

In Sarala Emmanuel's remembrance of Rajani, she chalks from this lineage the work of sisterhood and solidarity of feminists like Sitralega Maunaguru, Shanti Satchidanandan, Women's Media Collective along with the shared politics and determinations coming together in 'Kootru' of Sooriya Development Centre. From her remembrance, she talks about her own work with the solidarity group Tamil Muslim Sinhala Sisters and their interventions after the widespread violence against Muslims after the Easter Sunday attack. She talks of how in the wake of rumours that there was infertility drugs being put in food, they cooked together, made buttermilk and offered to devotees to Mamangam Temple, emphasizing interventions in how people lived their everyday.⁵²

⁵². "Looking Back Looking Ahead", FemCon Sri Lanka Panel Discussion,

The period of militant nationalism in Sri Lanka was marked also by displacement which led to the emergence of women's writing from the Diaspora. The poetry written by women in Diaspora, talked about the difficult middle passage, the violence at the hands of middle men as they make difficult journeys fleeing from war. The different experiences of leaving at different times of the war show leaving are differently gendered for women. The poetry also contrasts the splintering of identity categories as one travels within one's homeland, to the possibility of inhabiting of one's original identity as one migrates, as seen in the beautiful poem by Aazhiyaal titled as Adaiyalam.⁵³ The poetry also marks how women are still burdened with the responsibility to represent Tamil culture even in a foreign land. The nation has followed the migrant Tamil woman as she moved across continents. The violence involved in the restrictions placed on the behaviour of Tamil women and the continuous monitoring of her sexuality is vehemently criticised in the poems. In my thesis I have analysed of the difficulties of return which does not prescribe to the nostalgia for the home/homeland. The experiential category of return is complicated by looking at the difficulties for a daughter to return back to her father's home which for her will forever be marked with the restrictions placed on her, as well as by looking at the experiences of mothers whose sons have become strangers to her either because of the changes militancy has brought forth in them or because of the mother's incomprehensibility

accessed 2 Jan, 2021, [youtube.com/watch?v=gVka8nFLb0M&t=6533s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVka8nFLb0M&t=6533s)

53. Aazhiyaal. "Adaiyalam (Identity)." in *Peyal Manakum Pozhuthu*, ed. A. Mangai, (Chennai: Maatru Publications, 2007), 38.

of the nostalgia felt by sons who have returned home on vacation as the mother occupies the position of those left behind with no choice of leaving. The period also saw the forced exodus of Muslims from their homes in Northern Sri Lanka, termed as traitors, leading to poetry of displacement and hurt coming into its full force in the 2000s. In the Sri Lankan war, there were impossibilities of return for the Muslims from the North created by LTTE's brand of militant Tamil nationalism. In October 1990, LTTE had forcefully evicted about 70,000 to 80,000 of Muslims from the north in their efforts to create Tamil Eelam as a homeland only for Tamils. These Muslims were displaced from their homes to eke out an existence in the refugee camps set up in Puttalam in the north-central part of Sri Lanka. The East also was mired in violence between Muslims and Tamils. The losses suffered and the impossibility of return are poignantly noted in the poem 'Keys to an Empty Home' by Sharmila Seyyid. She writes with pathos;

There. That was my home,
 the house where my mother gave birth to me
 where my father carried me on his shoulders
 and played with me.
 They broke up this house;
 we don't know why.
 Yet the keys to the house we locked up
 are still with us.⁵⁴

⁵⁴. Sharmila Seyyid, "Keys to an Empty Home," trans. Lakshmi Holstrom, in *Lost Evenings, Lost Lives- Tamil Poems of the Sri Lankan War*, ed. Lakshmi Holmström and Sascha Ebeling, (Tadmorden: Arc Publications, 2016), 143.

Tamil speaking Muslims from the East as well as Muslim refugees forcefully exiled from the North produced a distinctive corpus of poetry. Muslim women like Penniya, Anar, Sharmila Saeed and Faheema Jehan wrote about the predicament of being a woman within a minority community which faced violence also from the LTTE.

This strand of poetry of displacement and diasporic experience also brought to the fore questions of sexual independence in foreign land, different conceptions of home linked to ‘a literature in transit’, and different articulations of displacement, some of which are devoid of a nostalgia for the Tamil homeland. This also led to the emergence of different solidarities like *Penkal Santhippukal* in Diaspora starting in 1990s and the rich literature of criticism, poetry and prose written by women in diaspora being published in *Penkal Santhippu Malar*,⁵⁵ the publication they brought out. The publication brought forth a solidarity based on the common threads of having survived violence. As Aazhiyal wrote- “I recognize in the marks and bruises on all women, the whiplash scar on my ancestral mother’s back”⁵⁶

Through this all, there were also the official regimes of identity production through documents and surveillance mechanisms tried to produce recognizable citizens of the state. In Sri Lanka, living in the midst of war as an everyday reality meant negotiating both the state structures of surveillance and quasi state mechanisms of LTTE. The poetry written during war also registers these difficult negotiations of living with documentation. The carrying of an ID card while entitling

^{55.} Deva, “Suvadukalin Meelparvaikal,” *Penkal Santhippu Malar*, October 2004: 7.

^{56.} Aazhiyaal, “Pathil,” *Penkal Santhippu Malar*, 2001: 12.

one to certain kinds of mobility, also produces constant anxiety, which Pradeep Jeganathan has termed as an “anticipation of violence”.⁵⁷ While state authenticates the identity in the ID cards, this condition of “anticipation of violence” gives way to the production of “a repertoire of practices” by the Tamils, which Jeganathan terms as “tactics of anticipation”.⁵⁸

Unspeakable agonies at the checkpoints

Tell us tales

Looks that check

Your face against the space

(in your ID card)

Where your address is noted

Looks looks

That scrutinize

Your real and reel images

Clandestine looks

that separate your wear

from the body you bear

Dubious looks

that tear your parcels and food apart

57. Pradeep Jeganathan, “On the Anticipation of Violence,” in *Anthropology, Development and Modernities: Exploring Discourses, Counter Tendencies and Violence*, ed. Alberto Arce and Norman Long, (London: Routledge, 2000), 111.

58. Pradeep Jeganathan, “Check Points : Anthropology, Identity and State.” in *Anthropology in the Margin of State*, ed. Veena Das and Poole Deborah. (Oxford: School of American Press, 2004), 67-80.

Revolting looks
needing to touch and feel your femininity
To confirm your identity

Looks upon the identity cards
Seeking to affirm your identity.⁵⁹

The poetry also bears witness to the Abductions and Disappearances - The difficult predicament of no closure, of still waiting for information. Malathi de Alwis in her article 'Tracing the Absent Presence' suggests that a "reinhabiting of the world" in the context of forced disappearances is a constant tracing of traces given the ambiguous nature of the disappeared's status of absence and thus presence.⁶⁰ She compares La Capra's and Butler's idea of grief. La Capra is concerned that allowing oneself to be caught up in the thrall of one's own grief is intellectually unproductive. Butler, on the other hand traces a space for politics in the relational undoing in grief. As de Alwis notes in this essay, this undoing for Butler is both physical and psychical. For Butler, "at the same time as we struggle for the autonomy of our bodies, we are also confronted

^{59.} Aruljothy Ramaiyah, "Identity" in *Let the Poems Speak*, ed. and trans. Thava Sajitharan (Batticaloa: Suriya Women's Development Centre, 2010), 29. (Sourced from Malathi de Alwis, "Laments from a Lacerated Terrain," *Journal of Postcolonial Cultures and Societies*, Vol. 4, no.2, 2013.)

^{60.} Dominick La Capra, "Trauma, History, Memory, Identity: What Remains?," *History and Theory*, 55 (October 2016): 375-400; Malathi de Alwis, "Tracing Absent Presence: Political Community in the Wake of Atrocity," in *States of Trauma: Gender and Violence in South Asia*, ed. Parama Roy, Piya Chatterjee and Manali Desai (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008), 240.

by the fact that we carry ‘the enigmatic traces of others’”.⁶¹ Malathi de Alwis following her reading of Butler points to the possibility of reconsidering her earlier work on political communities being formed under the aegis of motherhood and look at how political communities can be formed around the grief.⁶²

The formation of political community around grief is seen in the Mothers of the Disappeared and the Families of the Disappeared. The families of those who went missing as still protesting. The situation has been exacerbated by the coming to power of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa in 2015, who has consistently opposed the demands of justice, including commitments made to the UN Human Rights Council. With Mahinda Rajapaksha assuming the post of the Prime Minister, the power is firmly and disturbingly consolidated between the brothers. With the increase in government surveillance, the Mothers of the Disappeared group has reportedly been unable to hold a public protest. When the new administration asks these mothers for information about who were part of their meetings, these women remind us of their right to information about missing persons. As a mother says;

“These are children who were taken by white vans from our houses or who surrendered [to the army]. These are the children we are talking about. I want to know what happened to my son – whether he is dead or alive, and if he is not alive, what happened to him and who did it; whether he was beaten, whether they broke a limb.”⁶³

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. “Sri Lanka: Families of ‘Disappeared’ Threatened,” Human Rights

I would like to conclude by urging all of you to follow the work of the website of Pearl Action which documents the missing, but also those who passed away waiting for information of their loved one. Remembering the disappeared, is the only way to rage against the violence of erasure. Let me end with the poem by Yalini, powerfully translated by Geetha Sukumaran.

The Smell of Corpses Spreading like Smoke (2016)

You may encounter it
At any moment
Story of wasting bodies,
Hair bristling,
Wandering in the village
Buried under the reddened quicksand of time,
A corpse covered
Lay spread out, on my bed
A poem ingested
The body
Entered my throat and sifted my words
Flicking off fingers that extend in the
dense drizzle of failed northern rain,
You keep walking past
My corpses that lay frozen within
Unwritten words.⁶⁴

Watch, last modified February 16, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/16/sri-lanka-families-disappeared-threatened>.

⁶⁴. Yalini. "The Smell of Corpses Spreading like Smoke," trans. Geetha Sukumaran, *City: A Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 5 (Bangalore: First City Press, 2017).

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