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SPEAKING IN MANY TONGUES

ARTICULATION OF VIOLENCE IN POETRY

WRITTEN BY TAMIL WOMEN IN SRI LANKA (1981-2009)



Dr. APARNA ESWARAN

ICSSR Post Doctoral Fellow . Centre for Women's Studies, JNU.
Recipient of KCHR Fellowship to Revise PhD Thesis

Speaker

Dr. V. PADMA (A. MANGAI)

Author, Theatre Practitioner and Associate Professor (Retd),
Department of English, Stella Maris College, Chennai.

Discussant

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SPEAKING IN MANY TONGUES: ARTICULATION OF VIOLENCE IN POETRY WRITTEN BY TAMIL WOMEN IN SRI LANKA (1981-2009)

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 presentation, the author will 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. I 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.



Dr. APARNA ESWARAN

Dr. Aparna Eswaran is currently the ICSSR Post doctoral Fellow at the Centre for Women's Studies, JNU. She combined her research interests in Literature, Gender and International Politics in her PhD thesis on *Women and Witnessing War: Poetry of Tamil Women in Sri Lanka*. She works on incorporating gender as an analytical category in her research and writing, within both academic and popular realms. She is also the recipient of the KCHR Fellowship to Revise PhD Thesis



Dr. V. PADMA (A. MANGAI)

A. Mangai is the pseudonym of Dr. V. Padma. She retired as Associate Professor in English from Stella Maris College, Chennai. She has been actively engaged in Tamil theatre as an actor, director and playwright for almost three decades. Her fields of interest are theatre, gender and translation studies. She has been a recipient of Fulbright Fellowship twice: Post- Doctoral work (1997- '98), Tisch School of Performance Studies, New York and Visiting Lecturership (2004), University of California Los Angeles. She has taught at the King Alfred's College, Winchester, U.K. for two consecutive years in 1999 and 2000 and was given the Rockefeller- Bellagio Residency in 2009. A. Mangai has directed over twenty-five plays so far that deal with women-centred themes and characters. Her work with transgender community over the past two decades has helped form *Kannadi Kalai Kuzhu*. She has also been working with Suriya, a women's collective in Batticaola, Srilanka to create cultural events. She is the author of *Acting Up: Gender and Theatre in India 1979 Onwards* (Leftword: 2017), a monograph on the Tamil writer Krithika is brought out by the Sahitya Akademi, and *Moonru Natakangal* (a collection of plays). She is the co-editor of *Listen to the Flames-* a text book on Dalit Writing published by the OUP in 2016, and has edited a volume of poetry by Sri Lankan Tamil Women Poets titled *Peyal Manakkum Pozhuthu* (2007). She has translated Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Decolonising the Mind (Adaiyala Meetpu)*, Robert Young's *Oxford Very Short Introduction to Post colonialism, Therigatha - Songs of Buddhist Elder Nuns* into Tamil through the English versions, and trans activist A. Revathi's first book *Unarvum Uruvamum (Our Lives Our Words)*.