
Volume 20

Issue 3 *Selected papers from the Fourth, World
Conference on Women's Studies, Colombo Sri Lanka*

Article 4

Mar-2019

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T. N. K. Meegaswatta

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Recommended Citation

Meegaswatta, T. N. K. (2019). Violence as a Site of Women's Agency in War: The Representation of Female Militants in Sri Lanka's Post-War Literature. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20(3), 28-43.
Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol20/iss3/4>

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Violence as a Site of Women's Agency in War: The Representation of Female Militants in Sri Lanka's Post-War Literature

By TNK Meegaswatta¹

Abstract

The increasing visibility of armed women in violent conflicts in the modern world has unsettled conventional beliefs of inferiority, weakness, innocence, and the resultant fragility and victimhood of women. Although in theory it is possible to conceptualize armed woman and violence as empowerment, in practice, the temporal realities that inevitably haunt any discussion of 'terrorism' and 'terrorists' in conflict ridden polarized societies severely curtail the terminology available to frame militancy in general and the 'terror' it generates as 'liberatory'. However, fictional and non-fictional literary work that were published in the aftermath of Sri Lanka's war (1983-2009) between the state forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) seem to push the boundaries of the discourse on women, violence, and terror. This paper analyzes the representation of armed women in *The Seasons of Trouble* (Mohan, 2014), *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (Munaweera, 2014), *Tamil Tigress* (De Soyza, 2013), and *Under the Shadow of a Sharp Edged Sword* (trans.) (Jeyakumaran, 2016) with the assumption that the genres of auto/biography and fiction offer an alternative archive within which seemingly polarized 'truths' entrenched in nationalist conflicts can be explored in their nuanced complexity. This paper assesses how literary portrayals of female militancy *vis-à-vis* violence, empowerment, and victimhood challenge conventional history and narratives and, in doing so, contribute to expand the boundaries of our understanding of female militancy in times of violent conflict. In conclusion, this paper suggests that the location of violence and female militancy within an ambivalent space of agency in narrative literature may also entail an unsettling of conventional figurations of war in gendered terms.

Keywords: Female Militants, Violence, Agency, Sri Lanka, Post-war literature

Introduction

"I am fearless. I am free. Now, I am the predator"
(Munaweera, 2014, p. 176)

In wars and conflicts around the world today, women are increasingly at the forefront.² This growing visibility of armed women in violent conflicts has had numerous implications.

¹ Thilini currently serves as a lecturer in English Language and Literature at the Open University of Sri Lanka. Previously, she served at the University of Kelaniya and General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University. Her research interests include gender, media, conflict literature, postcolonial literature, and cultural studies. She can be reached at thilini.meeegaswatta@gmail.com.

² There are growing numbers of women in terrorist, militant, and military outfits around the world. Reports have revealed that about 10 percent of foreign recruits of ISIS from Europe, North America, and Australia are women (Zakaria, 2015). It has been reported that out of 434 suicide bombings carried out by Nigeria-based Boko Haram since 2011, at least 244 (72 percent) attacks were carried out by women (Warner & Matfess, 2017). Most of LTTE

Firstly, it has brought forth a crisis in meanings associated with women and femininity in patriarchal discourse: the armed woman has unsettled conventional beliefs of inferiority, weakness, innocence, and the resultant fragility and victimhood of women, especially in conflict situations.³ Secondly, even feminist scholarship has been “embattled when faced with the figure of the female militant” (Samuelson, 2007, p. 833). De Mel (2014), for example, points out how the activities of female militants in aggressive right-wing campaigns spelled a crisis for many feminists “who had worked on the premise that women were victim-survivors rather than perpetrators of violence, and that their entry into public, political activity was towards a liberatory politics” (p. 68). In this context, “women’s political violence [becomes] the uncomfortable black hole wherein women’s agency, because violent, becomes a male patriarchal project” and female militants become “pawns and victims in the discourse of nationalist patriarchy” (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2000, p. 9).

On the other hand, feminists have begun to interpret female militancy as empowerment, so that at a glance, the overall interpretation of female militancy in feminist scholarship seems heavily polarized. Samuelson (2007) notes the binary nature of the feminist conceptualizations of the woman warrior: “One finds in war a potential realm of gendered equality and female liberation; another associates women with nurturing and life-giving qualities, linking them to an ethos of peace and pitting them and their interests against war” (p. 833). In her analysis of female militancy⁴ in the context of Sri Lanka’s war, Rajasingham-Senanayake (2000) argues that such polarized perceptions fail to capture the precarious middle ground inhabited by militant women:

LTTE women have been portrayed by Adele Ann, wife of the LTTE spokesman, and Peter Shalk as “liberated” and by Radhika Coomaraswamy as “cogs in the wheel” of the male leadership of the LTTE. The reality of LTTE women is probably somewhere in between. (p. 11)

Rajasingham-Senanayake’s view reflects the current tendency in scholarship to amalgamate both these approaches and perceive women’s victimization and empowerment as simultaneous realities in war.

Although in theory it is possible to conceptualize armed women and violence as empowerment, in practice, the temporal and epistemological realities that inevitably haunt any discussion of ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorists’ in conflict-ridden polarized societies severely curtail the terminology available to frame militancy in general and the ‘terror’ it generates as ‘liberatory.’ In Sri Lanka, especially during the country’s internal war⁵ and in its immediate aftermath, attempts

suicide bombings that targeted high-profile civil and military personnel -- Heads of States and Army Chiefs for instance-- were carried out by female suicide bombers. It has been reported that the LTTE was responsible for more than half of the suicide attacks carried out worldwide (Waldman, 2003), and that “the real “men of steel” for the LTTE have been its female suicide bombers, who account for 40 percent of its suicide activities” (Waduge, 2008, para. 2).

³ Human rights discourse and humanitarian interventions have significantly contributed to the tendency to view women as “victims” in conflict situations (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2000). Even in the aftermath of conflicts, projects targeting young women frequently focus on women as victims, as abductees, as rape victims, or as forced wives with little or no emphasis on women as fighters and killers (Coulter, 2005).

⁴ This paper references Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) throughout in the discussion of female militancy.

⁵ The Sri Lankan civil war or the *Eelam* war was an armed conflict fought from 1983 to 2009, by the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE which aimed to create an independent Tamil state called Tamil Eelam in the north and the east of Sri Lanka. After 26 years of military campaign, the Sri Lankan military defeated the Tamil Tigers through

to explore the socio-political intent of militancy and locate female suicide bombers outside the boundaries of ‘terror’ discourse have been met with emphatic resistance from both state and non-state actors (De Mel, 2007).

It is in this context that storytelling plays an important role. Post-war literary publications –fiction and nonfiction– are chosen for analysis in the paper with the assumption that they offer an alternative archive within which seemingly polarized realities entrenched in nationalist conflicts and the concept of female militancy can be explored in its nuanced complexity. The selected texts consist of a novel, a (triple) biography, and two autobiographies. The novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (ITM; 2014) by Nayomi Munaweera, the regional winner (Asia) of the 2013 Commonwealth Book Prize, departs from most narratives of war in its simultaneous portrayal of both ethnicities implicated in the conflict: the narrative oscillates between a Tamil and a Sinhalese narrator to bring to light the universal tragedy of death and suffering. Rohini Mohan’s *The Seasons of Trouble* (TST; 2014) combines biography and fiction in its narrative of the life stories of three individuals (a son suspected of terrorism, his beleaguered mother, and a female militant) implicated to different degrees in the raging war. Niromi De Soyza’s *Tamil Tigress* (TT; 2013), a memoir written from the perspective of an underage female guerrilla fighter, frames a year of militancy at the age of seventeen. *Under the Shadow of a Sharp Edged Sword* (SES; 2016), is the life story of the former head of the Tamil Tigers’ Women’s Political Wing, Thamilini Jeyakumaran. Originally written in Tamil and later translated into Sinhala, *SES* is an autobiography that recounts the author’s experience as a female militant from the vantage point of a rehabilitated and disillusioned senior fighter.

These primary texts selected for a qualitative content analysis stand alongside history, testimony, and national spectacles as texts through which national collectivity is experienced and past is memorialised and made sense of. The choice of varying genres is also important: fiction’s strength lies in its capacity to concoct plots and characters, and deliver them through a *mélange* of narrative strategies that highlight suppressed concerns and issues surrounding conflict. Auto/biography, on the other hand, expands the boundaries of discourse by intervening with the voice of the individual narrating personal ‘truths’ that may unsettle dominant narratives. At times, these two genres borrow from each other so that fiction, in its portrayal of pertinent issues of the time, may ring ‘true’ and auto/biography, in its attempt to make the life story ‘engaging’ from a literary point of view, may contain a hint of the ‘fictional’.⁶ This paper analyzes these post-war texts with a view to assess how literary portrayals of female militants vis-à-vis violence, empowerment, and victimhood challenge mainstream history, scholarship, hegemonic narratives of war, and social conventions and, in doing so, contribute to expand the boundaries of our understanding of women and violence in times of violent conflict.

Violence as a Site of Empowerment

Rajasingham-Senanayake (2000) has noted that “the troubling figure of the LTTE woman soldier—the armed virgin—stands as one of the few highly problematic exceptions to the

heavy military measures in May, 2009. The war caused significant hardships for the population in all areas of life, with an estimated 80,000-100,000 people killed during its course. (Insight on conflict, 2013)

⁶For example, although Mohan (2014) states that “my goal here is to tell their narrative as honestly and engagingly as they did” (p. ix), she clearly seems to have altered the story she was told in relation to her knowledge, experiences, and other stories told to her during the course of the project. Therefore, a certain element of ‘fiction’ is invariably present in the narrative.

representation of Tamil women as victims” in anthropological, sociological, and literary ethnography (p.9). This suggests that the LTTE woman soldier is a figure of empowerment against a backdrop of cultural subordination of Tamil women. However, as discussed above, the configuration of female ‘terrorist’ as a symbol of women’s agency is far from simple (De Mel, 2007). Nevertheless, literature seems to succeed where history and scholarship fail; the portrayals of female militants in the selected texts maneuver through political and ontological difficulties of positively conceptualizing female armed terrorism to convey the potential of violence and militancy as a site of empowerment for women in times of war.

A cursory glance at the novel *ITM* (2014) shows that fiction offers alternative modes of representation of female militancy which are often subversive. In the novel, the Tamil narrator Saraswathi is a young girl who joins the LTTE after being gang-raped by a group of Sinhalese soldiers. In narrating Saraswathi’s story in first person, *ITM* resorts to subversion at the level of narrative strategies which hint at empowerment in violence. The novel reimagines and recreates symbols associated with marriage, sexuality, and reproduction, which are often sites of constricting women, in a way that is iconoclastic. Marriage, which is at times a system of female subjugation, is subversively recreated in the narrative, with Saraswathi’s initiation into the LTTE resonating with a traditional Tamil wedding. Her family watches, “wet pride shining in their eyes,” as she ‘weds’ the liberation movement and wears a *thali* of cyanide:

The Commandant steps onto the platform where we wait. He is the bridegroom, and we the various brides. I lower my head to receive his thali. Instead of the ancient golden symbols, it is a hard capsule of glass he places in the hollow of my throat. Seven seconds it whispers against my beating pulse. Seven seconds to freedom. (p.176)⁷

Thali, a necklace worn by married Tamil women, confirms their womanhood and bestows elevated status and social legitimacy. It also marks women’s bodies as belonging to men who put the *thali* on them. Saraswathi’s *thali* of cyanide confers on her instead a different type of status and legitimacy: a type that brands her as a member of a ferocious liberation movement that is feared and respected in her community. Further, instead of the burdens of housework and child rearing that golden *thali* places on women, the cyanide capsule grants these young women “freedom” from yokes of history, tradition, and decorum that restrict ordinary women. In the narrative, the young LTTE women who frequent villages to recruit are quick to dismiss the conventional concerns of elders: “Women are good for so much more than getting married and having babies... You must have greater goals for your daughter” (p.142). Such words of confidence clearly convey that social institutions such as marriage are no longer able to confine these young women. They ‘marry’ the movement, within which they are perceived as “fully formed and ferocious as [militant] men” (p. 175).

It is not only symbolism of marriage that is subversively re-created in the novel. Towards the end, Saraswathi, an elite Black Tiger (LTTE suicide squad), is ‘pregnant’ with destruction. The preparation for the final journey is once again compared to the dressing of a bride and the sequence connects seamlessly to pregnancy; what is next expected of married women.

⁷Subsequent quotations followed by only a page number will be drawn from this primary text unless mentioned otherwise.

Then with hands as gentle as Amma's, he pulls the contraption over my head, snuggles it against my belly, beneath my breasts. The Latex runs down my body like water...the secret mechanisms of it hidden in my now heavily pregnant stomach...When he leaves, I turn to my reflection and see what others will see, a young woman, eight months pregnant, green plastic bangles at her wrist, bright orange cloth hugging her belly. She is a ghost from a different time and place. Useless to me. (p. 200 - 201)

Saraswathi's pregnancy is not bringing life, but death. Her protruded belly, considered as a sign of fertility and fecund prosperity in traditional iconography, is designed to cut, maim, and kill. Saraswathi's child, the bomb, does not ensure the propagation of any man's lineage, but her own immortality as a martyr. The mimicry of marriage and childbirth, which are recognized as socially important milestones in a woman's life, is in favour of a brutal and precarious yet strangely empowering and unorthodox alternative. In these narrative episodes, subversive use of analogy and symbolism presents war and violence as alternative sites of empowerment that enable women to overthrow yokes of tradition.

ITM also presents violence as the means through which Saraswathi transcends her victimhood. In the immediate aftermath of the rape, Saraswathi suffers heavily from the psychological trauma of the gross violation of bodily integrity and the overwhelming sense of shame due to social ostracism. However, once Saraswathi is unceremoniously handed over to the LTTE by her family who are eager to erase the 'stain' on family honour, she finds a purpose in revenge and begins to kill and maim with such a blood thirst that shocks many of her own comrades in arms. Her first kill, described in graphic detail in the novel, is a tied up Prisoner of War:

I want him to see me. I straddle him, my boots on either side of his face. When his pleading eyes meet mine, I put the mouth of the rifle against his lips, push them aside so that it clicks against his clenched teeth. I hear that click and I pull the trigger... (p. 175)

With a transformed body, lethal weapon in hand, and a deathly poison hanging around the neck, she realizes that "I am fearless. I am free. Now, I am the predator" (p. 176). As a militant, she redefines herself: "No one will ever again speak of Appa's daughter spoilt by the soldiers. From now on, they will see me as I am, a Tiger with teeth and claws" (p. 183). Saraswathi, earlier shunned due to her rape, is now regarded with pride as well as fear by the villagers. Her walk, her physique, her clothes reveal no sign of her victimhood and trauma. It is violence that transforms Saraswathi from a powerless victim to a powerful predator.

In her new identity, she is unfettered by gentler emotions. Her inner urge to never be weak prey drives her to commit murder with vicious ferocity:

When the village is found, we want our message to be writ in red. We want to leave dead babies and bludgeoned women...to this end, I have learned to swing my machete through the flesh of babies. I have clutched the arm of a screaming toddler and swung off her head with a single blow as her mother stood with outstretched arms...Now I am not just dancing a part. Now I am the Nataraja, the dancing face of death. Now I am the one with yellow eyes gleaming in the moonlit forest. The one who cannot be seen until she chooses to reveal herself.

In this way I will never again be prey, small, trembling and weak (p. 177)

The graphic illustration of violence perpetrated by the woman in arms is brutal, yet at the same time saturated with the terminology of power and invincibility. The use of the image of Nataraja, a depiction of the Hindu god Shiva the destroyer, is a clear allusion to empowerment. The comparison drawn between the god of destruction in Hindu mythology and Saraswathi not only interrupts gender stereotypes about women as pure, innocent, non-violent, and ‘motherly’, but also violates conventional societal sensibilities with regard to femininity that often banish notions of female violence and destruction to the realm of mythology (e.g. Durga and Kali in Hindu mythology).

The novel posits Saraswathi’s self-detonation as her ultimate transformation from a victim to the predator. The memories that flood her mind when armed soldiers embark the bus recreate the moment of her rape in her mind’s eye, but at the end, it is she that destroys:

... the bus lurches to a stop and I am in another place, a bullet-splattered cement room open to a perfect square of sky, ... **Tiger Bitch**...and I am tearing into shreds and something buried deep is erupting like a landmine, like rage buried in my flesh, something settled *Tiger Bitch* and burrowed under my heart like fetus raising its head. ***Tiger Bitch Tiger Bitch Tiger Bitch!*** (p. 205)

She transcends her victimhood in an ultimate act of violence, which then, however vexed,⁸ becomes a site of agency and empowerment. From within the post-colonial theory of ‘revolutionary violence’ proposed by Frantz Fanon (2004), Saraswathi’s destructive violence can be read as the ‘inevitable’ means through which she could disrupt natural relations of strength (Engels, cited in De Warren, 2006) and reverse the relationship of violence and systematic exploitation within patriarchal structures that equates women’s bodies to land, repositories of culture, and a community’s honour. Indeed, as Fanon argues, Saraswathi’s revolutionary violence allows for recreation of self which had been reduced to the state of an animal—“Tiger Bitch”.

Furthermore, in ITM, violence becomes a means for women to shape the way they are recorded and remembered in mainstream communal history/ memory. Saraswathi’s self-dictated destiny as an elite Black Tiger stands in contrast to that of her friend Parvathi, who, after being raped by soldiers, commits suicide by jumping into a well.

Her face was bloated and waterlogged so that I could barely recognize her...her arms were bent at crazy angles...Later when they burnt her body, only her mother and two sisters were there. Even her father refused to go. She was my friend. But now, I dare not even speak her name. (p.137)

⁸The moment of empowerment is also the moment of death. While death can at times be agentive, positing suicide as only empowerment is complicated. Furthermore, according to Pedahzur (2005), the long-term benefits of suicide terrorism are reaped by established patriarchal powers—the targeted state for instance—when people exposed to mass casualty terrorism begin to display what is called ‘rally around the flag’ syndrome. The targeted population begins to express strong patriotic sentiments, fly flags, attend community events, treat security personnel like heroes, and support nationalist policies and practices, becoming predisposed to “give up some democratic freedoms to in order to enable...governments to protect them effectively from terrorism” (p 185).

Parvathi's complete social ostracism, the ugliness of her death, the unceremonious burial, and the erasure of her existence from the collective memory of the community stand in contrast to the public nature of Saraswathi's death and the value attached to it. Hers is not a mere death, but a 'sacrifice.' Her act is not a mere suicide, but the cosmic dance of Shiva, the destroyer: "I am in motion. Unstoppable and Immaculate" (p. 206). Even for the victims of her destructive anger, she is a "vanquished Medusa" (p. 208); a power to reckon even in death.⁹ Within the system of values established by the LTTE, she is a martyr to be remembered and honored. Saraswathi, minutes away from detonating herself, is fully aware of the pedestal on which she will be placed by the same people who so readily discarded the memory of her friend Parvathi:

They will remember me. All of them. My portrait, miles high will hang
everywhere extolling my bravery, the new cadres will come to stand in front of it,
inhale the scent of my jasmine garland, be inspired by my fearlessness, my
dedication. Amma and Appa will be proud. Luxshmi will be the sister of a martyr.
(p. 203)

In opting to violently end herself, Saraswathi reclaims the meaning of her body, which was earlier denounced as bearing the 'mark' of the enemy, on her own terms. Here, the author represents Saraswathi as dictating the terms on which she will be remembered and archived in communal history and challenging mainstream histories informed by patriarchal narrative practices within which "female participation in revolutionary/freedom movements had been subjected to a gendered erasure" (De Mel, 2014).¹⁰ The novel's portrayal of an armed woman has then recognized women's agency in violence, which is often elided when they are constantly viewed "as merely victims of their culture, war, and patriarchy" (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2000, p. 9).

It should be noted that the final episode of Saraswathi's violence challenges gendered narratives that interpellate able-bodied young men as 'defenders.' While violent Saraswathi may fit within the discourse of the LTTE that encouraged militancy in women, at the same time her transformation unsettles the gendered identities even the LTTE attempted to impose on civilian Tamil women.¹¹ At the beginning of the novel, Saraswathi, a demure, young girl with thick, long hair, a dancer's figure, and feminine aspirations to be a teacher and wife, embodies the nurturing woman of the domestic sphere who presents an image of cultural purity and ideal femininity characterised by the 'Four Virtues' valued in traditional Tamil society: modesty, charm, coyness, and fear (Lawrence, cited in Dearing, 2010). However, the portrayal of militant Saraswathi deconstructs such polarized gender identities through disfiguration and lays bare the capacity for

⁹Mythology has that even Medusa's decapitated head could turn beholders into stone.

¹⁰De Mel (2014) illustrates how South Asian women's participation in armed militancy has only been selectively recognized in line with "schemas of intelligibility, naming, and framing that haunt the recognition of the female militant as much as it underscores our reading practices of the archive of militancy itself" (p. 69). The politics of recording agents as well as militants' 'legitimacy' of intent too results in erasures in general (De Mel, 2014).

¹¹ De Mel (2003) refers to a list of '10 commandments for women' that circulated in Jaffna in 1984 by a group that professed to be the guardians of Tamil culture, possibly under LTTE patronage. The list enforced a dress code, specified physical appearance and even dictated appropriate modes of transport. Although the LTTE denied responsibility, De Mel (2003) quotes a document circulated by the LTTE later to suggest that the commandments were in line with the movement's ideology: "It is important for women to take care in their dress, in their *pottu* and makeup we are engaged in a struggle for national liberation. But, the changes which have been taking place in our culture will only demean our society" (p. 64).

extreme violence in women which is acknowledged only by implication even in the revised concepts of womanhood under the patronage of the LTTE.¹²

Although violence and suicide are subversively posited in *ITM* as discussed above, the story of Saraswathi's death can still be located within gendered discourses in a number of ways. On the one hand, Saraswathi's death by self-detonation is a 'productive' act that disrupts the contemporary biopolitical order and its logic (Murray, 2006). On the other hand, Saraswathi's death as a plot device conveys an inability on the part of the writer to imagine women's lives after rape. One is reminded that in society too, rapes are discussed or absorbed into politics only after the death of raped women, which then creates occasions for political communication (De Mel, 2001). The novel also seems to "impose some colonizing vision of causality or reason" on Saraswathi's suicide reflecting the practices of mainstream media that elide the "the terrorist's very ordinariness [that] might be shocking" (Murray, 2006, p.194). When Saraswathi detonates herself, the reader knows "what could have led her to this singularly terrible end? What secret wound bled until she chose this most public disassembly of herself?" (p. 118). The readers are made aware of a very personal 'secret wound' that led Saraswathi down the path of violence and terror. It cannot be ignored that Saraswathi's rape and the subsequent motive of revenge are plot devices that function as tools of narrative fidelity which make the story credible in its sequence (Fisher, cited in Agara, 2015, p. 117). In other words, Saraswathi's capacity for violence is made palatable in a patriarchal society (including the reader) by positing rape as a logical explanation for a 'perverse' femininity. Such attempts at making female militancy and violence intelligible within the narrative resonate with rather short-sighted attempts to understand female participation in terrorism.¹³

While the link between violence and empowerment that *ITM* establishes is mostly subtle and sometimes problematic (due to the bloodshed of unarmed civilians for example), post-war auto/biographical narratives of female militants such as that of Mugil in *TST*, Thamilini in *SES* and Niromi in *TT* link female militancy with empowerment more directly and openly. These female militants offer a contrast to Saraswathi in *ITM*, whose enlistment is the inevitable outcome of events beyond her control. Mugil enlists as a militant so that she could "go to battle with her generation so that her elders and the children of the future would have a country they could call their own" (*TST*, p. 31). Niromi's farewell note is full of patriotic ardour: "I am leaving home, so my people can have a homeland. My duty awaits me..." (*TT*, p. 72). Thamilini in *SES* echoes similar sentiments.

¹²Lawrence records that with the increasing presence of women in the battlefield, the LTTE leadership relaxed the traditional concept of womanhood in Tamil society to encompass "new notions of courage, confidence, and thirst for liberation" (cited in Dearing, 2010, p. 74). Adele Balasingham (1993) has used terms such as 'discipline', 'bravery', 'courage', 'sacrifice', 'comradeship', 'patriotism', and 'devotion' in her unfettered praise of female militants in the book *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers*. It should be noted that these characterizations of female militants of the LTTE refrains from candidly describing them as 'violent'.

¹³It has been observed how "many have tended to link women's participation to something bad that have happened to them such as abuse, rape, use of drug, and loss of loved ones" (Agara, 2015, p. 118). Even when political aspirations are acknowledged as driving women towards militancy, the need to isolate gendered motives seems irresistible. For example, Alison (2003), while recognizing the nationalist aspirations in LTTE women cadres, stresses on 'more personal factors' that operate beneath nationalist fervor: "I view nationalist sentiment as a sort of meta reason for enlisting; beneath this ideological motivation there are also more specific, more personal factors operating" (p. 40). She further states that "some reasons for taking up arms that are gender-specific to women" (p. 42). Patriarchal narrative practices obstinately refuse to link female participation in terrorism to self-aware political devotion to a cause, despite the fact that it is a good enough explanation in the case of men's choice of terrorism (Agara, 2015, p. 118).

These militant women are also united in their admiration of armed women. How young Mugil considers the female cadres of the movement clearly convey her positive perception of female militancy: “the girls rode motorcycles and wore jeans; they could stand up to any man” (Mohan, 2014, p. 28). Mugil’s admiration resonates with Thiranagama’s (1990) impressions of women in arms:

One cannot but be inspired when one sees the women of the L.T.T.E., two by two, in the night, with their A.K.s slung over the shoulder, patrolling the entrances to Jaffna city. One cannot but admire the dedication and toughness of their training...(Women and Arms, para. 2)

Even in retrospect from a rather disillusioned vantage point, Mugil acknowledges the new lease of life the LTTE bestowed upon her: “She believed that being in the Tigers had given her the kind of experience a girl like her could only dream of” (*TST*, p. 38). Thamilini’s narrative supports this view: she is given leadership positions and extensive opportunities to work with her community, politicians, administrators, and scholars in different contexts. Both Mugil’s and Thamilini’s stories reflect the radical change that took place in the Jaffna Tamil community with the emergence of the Tamil liberation movement spearheaded by the LTTE (Maunaguru, 1995). Although the initial call for women to take up arms in the mid-1980s might have been purely a tactic in war, which later extended to children as well, it certainly marked a turning point in the role of women in northern Tamil communities (Alexander, 2014). Women’s traditional roles were reframed out of the domestic sphere in tandem with the demands of the liberation movement. Hair cut short, celibate, and in trousers, almost an entire generation of Tamil women took up arms beside men to fight for a homeland. These militant women could opt for celibacy (which was mandatory at the beginning but was optional after the LTTE Leader’s own marriage) without facing the stigma attached to such status within the traditional Tamil community.

In *TST*, female militancy is also portrayed as allowing women to push boundaries of prescribed conduct and appropriate self-expression. For example, the cutting of her hair spells liberation for Mugil: “Newly bobbed, Mugil felt she had truly come into her own. Her parents would have never let her wear her hair this short” (*TST*, p. 32). She enthusiastically discards social and cultural trappings that mark her as a socially viable woman. Mugil’s willing assumption of a look that unsettles the artificial gender dimorphism enforced in society in terms of attire and appearance is best understood from within the analytical framework provided in transgender and intersex theory which “question[s] not only traditional concepts and binaries, but also our very modes of thinking” (Horlacher, 2016, p. 1). Just as transgender and intersex theories challenge a cultural system that “postulates the existence of two, and only two, sexes and...presupposes an identity between a felt or experienced gender identity and a non-contradictory notion of biological sex” (p. 2), female combatants’ appropriation of an appearance connotative of masculinity (if willing) can be read as a “practice of decolonization” (Stryker and Currah, cited in Horlacher, 2016, p. 2) that unsettles the socially produced gender binary. Mugil’s actions can then be interpreted not as woman ‘becoming’ man but a reflection of the existence of a continuum between the socially constructed gender binary of male/man and female/woman. Once the gender binary is repudiated in her capacity as a fighter, Mugil continues to push boundaries and discard markers of conventional femininity even after her injury-induced early retirement from active duty at the age of twenty-one.

‘If you mean plait my hair, wear flowers and bangles and prettily wait for a husband, you should know better,’ she replied. ‘Housework is not what I was born to do.’ Too much had changed. She could not go back to sitting in the kitchen. (p. 34)

Even when active militancy comes to an end, Mugil chooses to inhabit the interstices of the arbitrary gender dichotomy which is constructed as natural and immutable (Butler, cited in Horlacher, 2016).

The empowerment that militant women achieve through militancy is not limited to unconventional self-expression and subversion of gender roles and identities. The militant experience seems to shape independent and confident women capable of critical thought. When Mugil (in *TST*) realizes that the dream homeland is no longer a viable goal and that the LTTE has begun pursuing policies destructive to her own people, she refuses to remain a blind follower of the movement. In *SES*, we see Thamilini during the last stage of battle refusing to carry out the orders of male command which she perceives to be detrimental to the people on behalf of whom she is fighting. When all hope is lost during the final offensive, she takes a practical decision to set the female fighters under her command free, so that they can join their families and escape to safety if possible. She realizes that the tyrannical decision making of an authoritarian individual has spelled the devastation of an entire community. Niromi (in *TT*) at first overlooks the murder, torture, expulsion of non-Tamil populations, and even the annihilation of rival Tamil militant groups by the LTTE and continues to believe that “Tigers are our heroes” (p. 48) and “if one faction was to remain it had to be the Tigers” (p. 49). Later she leaves on her own volition, realizing that she can no longer justify to herself the action of the LTTE. These women challenge interpretations of female militants as misguided pawns of a male patriarchal project. In spite of the youthful malleability they exhibit in their response to LTTE ideology at the early stages of their membership in the LTTE, they have evolved with experience to emerge with a strong sense of individuality and critical thought independent of the dominant rhetoric of the movement.

The Armed Woman: The Simultaneous Victim and the Agent

The texts discussed in this paper do not stop at establishing a link between female militancy and women’s empowerment, but rather shed light on the ambivalent space of agency the armed woman occupies in conflict. In other words, the texts capture the space of simultaneous empowerment and victimization conceptualized in scholarship by narrating stories of violent empowerment interspersed with subtle indications of victimization.

For example, *ITM* not only identifies subtle moments of agency in the most unlikely situations but also sees victimization in places where it is least visible or expected. In the narrative, with empowerment comes loss. Joining the ranks of the LTTE has given Saraswathi a new lease of life, yet loss is at her heels. Her femininity is taken away from her and along with it, her early longings for a future with a husband and children.

I imagine this, a young man, as straight and slim as a sapling, the taut muscles of his arms wrapped in the winding tendrils of my hair, thick ropes binding him to me. A man who will hold me and keep the terrors outside far away as I rest my head over his beating heart. (*ITM*, p. 140)

While such a vision for future can easily be seen as concocted by internalized social expectations, the type of power vested in women who take up arms denies them choice at the same time. The price to be paid is “a loss located in significant ways within the domains of gender constructs and, in particular, the forms of female sexuality and reproduction that are valued within it” (De Mel, 2003, p. 56).

In fact, the representations of female militants in literature indicate that the empowerment of women in arms is dependent on them appropriating a certain ‘masculine’ standard. Scholarship observes that in both non-conventional and conventional armed groups, women tend to integrate themselves into masculinist military cultures.¹⁴ In *TST*, female militants with short hair, trousers, guns, and the capacity for violence assume an identity that is socially seen as ‘masculine’, and thereby gain permission to trespass societal boundaries. In a particularly telling incident that Mugil in *TST* remembers, Divyan, her husband-to-be, reminds her of a verbal jibe she aimed at him during training and adds: “I did think that’s not how a woman should talk...But then I also thought, she’s not an ordinary Tamil woman, no? You’re a *puli*, a Tiger” (*TST*, p. 62). It is clear that transgressive gender fluidity is the arena of women who, by virtue of joining a ‘male enterprise’, have already assumed a precarious masculinity sanctioned by male command. The precarity of this assumed masculinity is due to two reasons: firstly, its premise is militancy rather than an inherent perception of self allowed to freely oscillate along the continuum of gender, and secondly, the possibility of this performance of ‘masculinity’ is in the hands of others in its dependence on social approval and acceptance within a particular context. Empowerment in female militancy thus appears to be volatile as female militants cannot be subversive as ‘ordinary Tamil women’ and are under pressure to train themselves in violence, be less of a ‘woman’, and constantly measure up to male colleagues in arms. Furthermore, since the armed women who gain independence and empowerment do so by assimilating to men, preserving the empowerment becomes a challenge in a post-war setting as the characteristics they learned to embody clash with the stringent gender stereotypes in civilian society (McKay, 2004).

The female militants are also desensitized to violence and the fear of death, not necessarily as a means of self-empowerment, but as means to an end as stipulated by the revered leader: “I will be our Leader’s weapon, his most perfect and precise revenge” (*ITM*, p. 186). Saraswathi’s self-portrayal as a ‘weapon’ that carries out the Leader’s revenge bears out and extends De Mel’s (2003) observation of the historical “instrumentality with which nationalist/militant patriarchies have enlisted women” (p. 56). As armed fighters, women are pawns in the game, at the disposal of their beloved Leader. This latent awareness could be why in Saraswathi’s nightmares rapist soldiers are replaced by the Leader.

... night after night, the faces of the soldiers change into the face of the one I love the most in this world...it is not the soldiers who rip me apart, but our Leader himself...The Leader is our Father. He has done everything for us. He has devoted his life for us and yet I cannot rid myself of this grotesque nightmare. (p. 179)

¹⁴Bernal (2001) observed that the female fighters of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) often became like men, rather than gaining recognition as women. Bahdi (2003) and Sasson-Levy (2003) see a similar tendency in the Israel army and other ‘halls of power’ where women come to share in the existing masculine military culture rather than reforming it. There is little doubt that models of hegemonic masculinity that bolster militarism subsume alternative values. Thus, female combatants may often feel the need to “live up to the same masculine ideals as their male counterparts in order to prove their suitability for combat” (Saferworld, 2014, p. 15)

Saraswathi is torn with guilt and shame because she cannot reconcile the rhetoric and the lore of heroism and sacrifice that surround the Leader and her nightmare in which he is the rapist that is “claiming [her] body, inhabiting it”, “drip[ping] its slow pollution onto [her] skin” (p. 179). In the narrative, Saraswathi’s inverted nightmare is the only indication of the terrain of simultaneous victimhood and empowerment that women in arms inhabit in war. The conflict, the rhetoric behind each belligerent, the commitment and sacrifice demanded by the leadership have claimed their entire being, denying them choice and voice. Furthermore, in line with Samuelson’s (2007) reading of the depiction of sexual violence in Wicomb’s *David’s Story*, the inverted nightmare can also be indicative of the fragile boundary between friend and foe and lover and torturer in conflict. The narrative blurs the boundary between coercive sexual violence and consensual ‘love’ for the Leader and seems to depict both as abuses of power that is engraved on bodies in numerous ways. In casting ‘love’ for the patriarchal nationalist cause as a violation of self, *ITM* problematizes the definition of rape and gendered experience of conflict and in doing so illuminates the space of victimization inhabited by belligerents in war, both male and female. In embracing a militancy that pursues a patriarchal nationalist ideology, they have at once become agents as well as victims.

Such victimization is sometimes not the consequence of self-aware decision to commit oneself to a cause, but the reality of violent conflict. The iron-regime of the LTTE that at times senselessly murdered their own at the slightest of offences traumatizes Niromi (in *TT*). She witnesses firsthand the killings of Vellai, a young militant accused of treason, and Shanthan, another young boy who fell in love with a fellow female combatant. Niromi is psychologically traumatized when three of her closest comrades die in front of her within a day. In *SES*, Thamilini recounts how during the last stage of the war, female militants such as herself who committed their lives to the movement were abandoned as male command concocted plans to flee the fight. She remembers in her memoir how following orders was the only option available to them even till the very end. In *TST*, the rapidly deteriorating conditions at the front lines spell increased victimization of new recruits who are forcibly recruited and pushed into battle with minimal training. Under such fraught conditions, the symbols of empowerment that Mugil cherished earlier undergo a complete revision. When forced conscription is in full swing in LTTE-held territory, Mugil concedes that in the case of terrified new recruits, the bob she herself proudly wore is no longer what it meant for her; “the bob had become a sign of imprisonment, rather than personal freedom” (p. 38). Especially in the case of female recruits, their bodies are ‘branded’ with chopped hair that would only serve to make them conspicuous among civilians and make them vulnerable to violence by both friend and foe, if they choose to defy command and abandon the movement.

Even in the case of the female suicide bomber, who represents the ultimate repudiation of all values and beliefs that are traditionally associated with femininity, the secrecy associated with the life, identity, motives, and politics of these women (De Mel, 2007) effects an inevitable erasure of individual selves. In *ITM*, to Saraswathi’s victims, she is yet another nameless bomber who will be etched into their memory in the form of a bloodied head blown away from the torso. The reality of the loss of individuality in militancy for both male and female is such; “for the militant’s individuality can only be creatively fictionalized” (De Mel, 2003, p. 56). Further, in view of Hannah Arendt’s argument that acts of violence are substitutes for the failure of speech, expressions of frustration, and signs of life in a petrified existence (cited in De Warren, 2006) forces one to consider Saraswathi’s suicide bombing as emerging from impotence and vain hope, as a “strategy of escape from a situation with no exit” (De Warren, 2006, p. 3).

Conclusion

The novel and auto/biographical narratives chosen for analysis in this paper posit militancy and violence as a potential site of empowerment for women in conflicts. These texts explore violence committed by women in pursuit of goals that are by majority standards 'illegitimate', without the high-handed moral judgment that often shadows such subject matter. The narratives, however, do not glorify armed militancy but present a nuanced portrayal of the terrain of simultaneous victimhood and empowerment that armed women inhabit in war.

Further, auto/ biographical narratives present powerful and 'truthful' accounts of female militants with distinctively individual personalities, histories, tragedies, joys, and aspirations. In giving at least a handful of female militants a voice, these narratives interrupt the veil of secrecy and myth that surrounds armed women. What is accomplished in doing so can be located within the gambit of peace building and reconciliation through sharing of memory across ethnic groups. These narratives free the readers from dominant frames of understanding militancy by forcing them to confront their own prejudices and view in a new light the nameless and faceless 'other' in statist narratives that render wars 'just'. Hence auto/biography and fiction seem unite in their capacity to transcend the epistemological limitations of dominant discourses surrounding conflict and resultant impact, political or affective or both.

The armed woman rendered visible and vocal in literature constitutes a threat to patriarchy and war; 'violent' women in arms subverts figurations of women as 'delicate' symbols of hearth and home that frame decisions to go to war. This 'unframing' invites critical attention to the call to arms to men to 'defend' their women, children, and a fragile 'mother' land. At the same time, however, the violent potential of the armed woman can encourage oppressive practices that aim to contain women.

Hence, the image of Medusa evoked in *ITM* seems apt in encompassing the myriad of implications of female militancy and empowerment through violence. Etymology reveals that her name bears marks of authority and power; she carries in her name multiple meanings: ruler, guardian, protector. A formidable foe of male power, she also evokes a terrible fear and represents the power of the female to effect impotence or castration of the male. She challenges conventional figurations of the 'feminine'. At the same time, mythology has that decapitated Medusa was used to further fortify the dominion of the male over the female: her head was mounted on the shield of the goddess of war Athena, the representative of Greek masculine justice. Fittingly, the 'vanquished Medusa' in *ITM* is a female suicide bomber whose image has been long used in conflict-ridden Sri Lanka to advance the cause for military solutions for war and encourage the containment of 'perverse' femininities.

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