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Goutam Karmakar
University of the Western Cape, South Africa

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Women and War: (Dis)illusionment and Disclosure in Niromi de Soyza's *Tamil Tigress*

By Goutam Karmakar¹

Abstract

Niromi de Soyza's *Tamil Tigress: My Story as a Child Soldier in Sri Lanka's Bloody Civil War* (2011) is a memoir about a year in the author's and her friend Ajanthi's lives when they joined the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) and fought as female militants in the second phase of the Sri Lankan civil war. Soyza's autobiographical account depicts the 1980s when the Tamil Tigers were fighting the Sri Lankan government and the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) in the northern and eastern parts of the country. As teenagers, Niromi and Ajanthi were highly inspired by the revolutionary idealism of the Liberation Tigers and, with great zeal, decided to dedicate their lives to the cause of their community's rights in Sri Lanka. The article reads Soyza's memoir as a powerful depiction of how the Sri Lankan civil war and its gruesome violence affected women and their subjectivities. The article focuses on the psychosocial turbulence of young women like Niromi and Ajanthi, who took up arms with an unflinching hope to combat the Sinhalese atrocities and the Sri Lankan government's systemic apathy towards the Tamils. Unlike men, these female warriors were not valorized; instead, they faced family derision and social derogation at many levels. This article examines how those women who had dreamt of asserting their potency and agency vis-à-vis militancy have finally been left beleaguered and disillusioned. Uncovering the insidious differential treatment in a supposedly gender-equal organization such as the LTTE, de Soyza's memoir provides an intimate glimpse of the gendered discrimination that stereotypes women only as subordinate to their male counterparts, even when they act as equals. The article thus demonstrates that Niromi de Soyza's recollection offers an insightful understanding of the ambiguous predicament of female militants and, through her final disclosure, enunciates that war and militancy can hardly provide avenues for women's empowerment and affirmation.

Keywords: Violence, Militancy, Female warriors, Sri Lanka, War, Tamil Women

Introduction: The Sri Lankan Civil War and Tamil Women

The war in Sri Lanka resulted from the deep-seated ethnic clashes between the Sinhalese and the Tamils following national independence in 1948. The Sinhalese majority began stripping the minority Tamils of their positions of privilege and power. In 1956, Sinhalese was declared the national language, insidiously restricting the Tamils' access to

¹Goutam Karmakar is an NRF Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. He is also an Assistant Professor of English at Barabazar Bikram Tudu Memorial College, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, Purulia, West Bengal, India. His areas of interest are Women and Gender Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Ecological Studies, and South Asian Literature and Culture. His forthcoming and recently published edited books are *Nation and Narration: Hindi Cinema and the Making and Remaking of National Consciousness* (Routledge, forthcoming), *The Poetry of Jibanananda Das: Aesthetics, Poetics, and Narratives* (Routledge, forthcoming), *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature* (Routledge, 2022), *The City Speaks: Urban Spaces in Indian Literature* (Routledge, 2022), and *Religion in South Asian Anglophone Literature: Traversing Resistance, Margins and Extremism* (Routledge, 2021). He has been published in journals, including *Visual Anthropology*, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *Intersections*, *MELUS*, *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, *Comparative Literature: East & West*, *Journal of International Women's Studies*, *IUP Journal of English Studies*, *South Asia Research*, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, *South Asian Review*, *Journal of Gender Studies*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *National Identities*, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, and *Asiatic* among others. He can be reached at goutamkr@gmail.com. His ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9119-9486>.

education and employment. Over time, the Sri Lankan government, dominated by the Sinhalese elites, passed several discriminatory laws against the Tamils, such as introducing a quota system for the Sinhalese and excluding the Tamils from public sector jobs and national development projects (Oberst, 1996, p. 33). Such infringement of rights proved detrimental to the Tamils' social representation and advancement, gradually flaring the ethnic hatred into a cause of nationalist self-determination. While the 1950s and the 1960s witnessed many peaceful protests by the Tamils, by the late 1970s, Tamil armed militant groups started emerging, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) being the most dominant among them. These militant organizations, especially the LTTE, organized various insurgencies and, from the mid-1980s, waged a secessionist war against the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan government. This war continued for almost three decades, jeopardizing the country's socio-economic stability and showing the deadly face of militant nationalism. The protracted conflict, rife with "extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention" ("Sri Lanka: Ongoing Abuse, Hidden Victims," 2017, p. 12) has been catastrophic for the Sri Lankan masses. While Sri Lankan state forces committed heinous atrocities against women and their bodies in Sri Lanka, the LTTE's ardent militarization impacted the psycho-social realities of Tamil women in far more significant ways.

The tragedy of numerous military conflicts and its ramifications impacted every component of the daily lives of South Asians. Regarding the trajectories of the South Asian wars, Swati Parashar (2013) aptly notes,

Wars become a way of living and a daily performance in which there are willing and unwilling participants. Many men, women and children learn to live with war inside its immediate death, destruction and survival. In wars that are protracted and have lasted decades, there is life amidst death, survival amidst destruction, music, drums and celebration amidst sounds of Explosions. (pp. 618–619)

Analogous to military combat in other South Asian countries such as India (in Kashmir and Northeast), Bangladesh, and Pakistan, the war in Sri Lanka too disrupted the nation's stability, putting the "social order at risk" (Meintjes, 2000, p. 8). Furthermore, military conflicts substantially impact women through masculine brutality, sexual violence, economic disruption, and societal devastation, among other factors (Michael, 2022, p. 196). Women in Sri Lanka have been viciously affected by the decades of political violence, for example, by losing family members and breadwinners at the hands of insurgents or the state army (International Crisis Group, 2011, p. 1). While violence takes place in any political conflict "on a continuum alongside the violence experienced by women in 'normal' conditions" (Manchanda, 2005, p. 4739), it is important to note that in the case of the Sri Lankan war, the aggressiveness of the state forces and Tamil militancy affected the status of Tamil women distinctly. The overpowering of the "armed patriarchy" (Singh, 2010, p. 655) of this prolonged conflict affected the trajectories of Tamil women's lives in unprecedented ways. The Tamil women (as members of the minority community) not only became victims of wartime sexual assaults but, with the rise of Tamil nationalist militancy, there happened to be an "erosion of societal norms that disparately impacted the Tamil women" and pushed them to embrace "unconventional societal roles" (Manoranjan, 2010, p. 139). Many young Tamil women joined the passionate revolutionary group of the LTTE and actively participated in the war for their community. While Rohini Mohan's *The Seasons of Trouble* (2014) and Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2014) foreground the passionate journeys and tumultuous experiences of female militants in the Sri Lankan war, Sharmila Seyyid's *Ummath: A Novel of Community and Conflict* (2018) reflects on the difficulties of social acceptance that young female combatants faced in the post-war phase. Likewise, Niromi de Soyza's *Tamil Tigress: My Story*

as a Child Soldier in Sri Lanka's Bloody Civil War (2011) is also a telling memoir of the author's and her friend Ajanthi's intimate experiences of a year (1987-88) when they joined the LTTE as young combatants. Soyza's autobiographical chronicling is about the vulnerabilities of Tamil women in times of political unrest and how those have propelled many to transgress the established social boundaries and expectations for the greater causes of their community. The article demonstrates how de Soyza's detailing of her experience as a female combatant in the LTTE offers an incisive critique of the "liberatory politics" (De Mel, 2014, p. 68) of war and militancy that often attract women to act as heroes instead of victims. This article explores the layered subjectivities and psychosocial turbulences of Tamil female teenagers through the narratives of Niromi and Ajanthi, who broke traditional compulsive barriers and resorted to militancy as a way of asserting their identities as fighters for their community. However, unlike men, women soldiers were not glorified but had to face derision and derogation at various levels. Through Niromi's and Ajanthi's eventual disillusionment in the memoir, the article explicates the problematics that underlie the masculinized structures of the LTTE militancy that promised an equal treatment of gender but stereotyped the female combatants as subordinate and secondary to the male militants. The article thus examines Niromi de Soyza's recollection as an insightful intervention in addressing the complexities and ambiguities of female militancy as a mode of women's empowerment.

Idealism and Illusion: A Call for Freedom

Niromi's decision to become a female combatant is one of the most pivotal aspects of this memoir. A young woman's aspiration to enunciate her identity via fighting for her community might seem exceptional but happened to be a striking feature in the history of the Sri Lankan armed conflict. Tamil women as militants have been most conspicuous in the LTTE organization. Reports on the LTTE's recruitment strategies claim that women were accommodated in a large number, and later, even children were taken in when the LTTE started confronting the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) in the 1980s. It is worth noting that "thirty percent of the LTTE's fighting cadre were women. It is estimated that, between 1987 and 2002, 4000 women had been killed in combat" (Braithwaite & D'Costa, 2015, p. 371). The inclusion of women and children marked a decisive phase for women in northern Tamil communities (Alexander, 2014). In *Tamil Tigress*, Niromi's idealization of the militant struggles of Tamils stems from an intersection of entrenched socio-political factors related to the marginalization of the Tamils at the national level as well as to the inherent conservatism of the Tamil community. As the memoir states, in the 1980s, Niromi, as a teenager, was an unfailing witness to the political massacre and ethnic malice that had ripped the country's normative fabric. Niromi's father sent her to study in Jaffna, as Jaffna was considered to have the best schools in Sri Lanka then and because staying in Norton Bridge, where her father was posted, had become unsafe. The lumpen Sinhalese elements had been encroaching upon, plundering, and threatening the homes and neighborhood where Niromi lived with her parents.

Niromi's coming to Jaffna, however, makes her encounter the ethnic brutalities of the Tamils by the Sinhalese in more gruesome ways. Niromi's readings of Tamil literature, interactions with Tamil friends, and the claustrophobic atmosphere in Jaffna gradually instill in her feelings of communal love, a desire to commit to a greater cause, and an affiliation with revolutionaries. Niromi feels that she is living an insipid life in Jaffna, with its curfews and emptiness, which "inspired the brave and frightened the weak" (de Soyza, 2011, p. 32). Conditions deteriorate in Jaffna as the animosity between the Tamils and the Sinhalese exacerbates. The Sinhalese detain and harass the Tamil boys, prompting Jaffna to declare an "indefinite state of emergency" (de Soyza, 2011, p. 29). For Niromi, Jaffna becomes an adverse and hostile place to live in with its "anxious citizens, frightened refugees, arrogant military and furtive militants" (de Soyza, 2011, p. 31). The arrests and killings of Tamils by the state forces

also continue incessantly, creating an eerie atmosphere of “death, violence and terror” (de Soyza, 2011, p. 33) for the collective community of Jaffna. This “institutionalized culture of impunity and excessive violence committed by the state against its own citizens” (Thiranyagama, 2014, p. 163) intensified the precarious condition of Tamil women and girls, also precipitating a dormant fury in them against the authorities. Niromi ruminates how the random army raids, the murder of the Tamil boys, cruel rapes, and stories of torture “struck real fear in [their] hearts” (de Soyza, 2011, p. 32). Assaults on women in ethnic conflicts as well as masculinist aggrandizements provoke hatred and power on the women’s bodies of antagonist camps (Allison, 2007, p. 80). So, young girls and women in Jaffna and other aligned areas in the north of Sri Lanka lived in perpetual fear of losing their honour at the hands of Sinhalese or the Sri Lankan army. The hideousness underlying the cultural glorification of Tamil women as repositories of communal honour can be seen in Niromi’s conviction that “if we were raped, we’d immediately commit suicide because it would be too shameful to have lost our virginity to the enemy and fall pregnant” (de Soyza, 2011, p. 32). While the outside world was thus plagued with horrific violence that restricted scopes for freedom and mobility for the Tamil girls, the community’s social norms were also no less suffocating for them. Niromi’s profound desire to exert her agency and dedicate herself to more significant things thus takes shape from this sense of powerlessness produced simultaneously by an undiminishing political discord and the inherent suppressive ideologies of the traditional Tamil culture.

Staying in Jaffna and growing up with an orthodox grandmother was challenging for Niromi. Tamil society in Sri Lanka had been rigid in maintaining the hierarchies of caste, creed, and religion. Niromi recollects her annoyance with the misogynistic cultural norms of orthodox Tamil families like hers, which constrained girls from having free lives or articulating their choices. Girls were raised with a strict training of conventionalities and were expected to abide by the rules set up by the family elders. Inquisitiveness or disobedience of family norms was intolerable, and as Niromi states, “romantic relationships” (de Soyza, 2011, p. 23) were considered disgraceful for the family. It is worth mentioning that “society did everything to discourage friendships between boys and girls from a very young age, and the whole town kept a close eye on our everyday behaviour in public” (de Soyza, 2011, p. 23). Like most South Asian communities, the preservation of female honor has been conceived to be supreme in traditional Tamil families. This becomes evident in Niromi’s grandmother’s exertion of enormous control over her movements, desires, and expressions of free will so that Niromi’s psychological and physical conditioning takes place along the established gendered lines. Niromi’s remembrances of her authoritarian grandmother’s training on the ethics of arranged marriages, ideal wifehood, and female duties exemplify the patriarchal strictures that operate on South Asian women’s psychosexuality and determine their positionality within family and marriage (Anitha & Gill, 2011, p. 47). Niromi’s feelings of being disempowered and subjugated in her home and school escalate in these conditions of gendered socialization, according to which she is expected to behave in subordinate ways. The conservatism of the Tamil social structures in which men have always been championed as protectors and women ensconced in the roles of wife and mother can be related to the ingrained patriarchal ideologies in South Asian culture that perceive women as symbolic objects of honour and shame (Kallivayalil, 2010, p. 800). Such strict gender demarcations make her feel suffocated, as Niromi recalls that “it was our responsibility as girls to uphold our virtues” (de Soyza, 2011, pp. 23-24). She thought that “cultural traditions have always oppressed women while freeing men” (Patel, 2003, p. 249), and that to be true to herself, she had to reject the social rules that were imposed on her.

Given the repressiveness of the Tamil families and culture, Niromi’s fantasizing about war and heroism can be well understood. Suffering from a crippling sense of vulnerability, the

stories of Tamil bravery in militancy evoked in young girls like Niromi an earnest desire to affirm themselves. Niromi wanted to dismantle the culturally induced sense of inferiority and docility that prohibited young girls and women from exhibiting their choices in life. Girls in Tamil families were raised under rigid guidance and, while the Tamils supported the nationalist agendas of the various Tamil militant organizations, they would consider joining militancy a matter of social humiliation (de Soya, 2011, p. 23). In this memoir, Niromi depicts the predominance of casteist distinctions in the Tamil families who considered militancy appropriate for less educated and low-caste boys, as the upper caste Tamils preferred being educated and migrating to other places for a healthy living. Accordingly, these privileged Tamils did not appreciate their children joining militancy. In one of her moments of self-reflection, Niromi mulls that even if she aspires to come out and join any of the Tamil freedom struggles, “it wouldn’t be easy” for her because she “was not a man” (de Soya, 2011, p. 35) and belonged to an orthodox family. Despite such constraining factors, Niromi’s romanticization of the Tamils’ liberation struggle triggered in her a zeal to enlist as a combatant. Among all the militant leaders, she revered Prabhakaran, the charismatic figure of the LTTE. Militancy as championed by the LTTE appeared to Niromi as a way to appropriate a sense of power that she missed in her ordinary life, which was governed by regimental norms of gender binaries. For Niromi, the war was featured as having a “potential realm of gendered equality and female liberation” (Samuelson, 2007, p. 833). So, when she visualized the young Tamilians returning after military training and flaunting their bravery, she “could only watch with envy” (de Soya, 2011, p. 36) and feel a dire need to exercise her own agency. As a militant, Niromi felt that she would be able to establish her autonomy like men on the warfront and thus repudiate the “dominant image of women as losers—as victims” (Manchanda, 2005, p. 4739). Niromi’s yearning testifies to the feminist zeal to de-objectify the ruling social stereotypes of submissive and passive womanhood and to denaturalize the overwhelming assumption that “war is a male practice” (Ferguson, 2021, p. 112). Niromi wanted to prove that women can be equally courageous and feisty in moments of violence and crisis and can sacrifice themselves to the nation’s call just like men.

Disillusionment in War: False Promises of Empowerment

Niromi’s desperation to join militancy and fight for the Tamil community’s emancipation was tainted by an ambivalent fascination with self-assertion and masculinist power, which eventually proved disillusioning. Her narrative here echoes Kim Jordan and Myriam Denov’s argument that “the LTTE movement appears to simultaneously uphold and reinforce prevalent patterns of gender constructions through the reproduction of conventional cultural standards, preventing women from attaining meaningful levels of empowerment” (2007, p. 44). Niromi saw militancy as a place where she could validate her inherent individual capacities, something she could not do in gendered Tamil culture. But her conceptualization of militancy and war happened to be erroneous, as in reality they had been inordinately anchored on the ideals of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 1995; Barrett, 2001), namely that of aggressiveness, authority, and risk-taking. The brave feats of the Tamil Tigers, which fascinated suppressed young girls like Niromi, were representative of the “hegemonic masculinity” that sanctions only heroic/violent displays of manhood and “marginalizes” and “subordinates” (Barrett, 2001, p. 79) any other behavior as feminine. Only later, when Niromi witnessed the excessive violence perpetrated unjustifiably by the LTTE on the battlefield, did she feel demystified and disappointed. Niromi could later relate the frenzied violence of the LTTE to their megalomaniac mindset that was exhibited in their monopolization of the Tamils’ struggle in Sri Lanka. The LTTE had been instrumental in obliterating the militants of rival Tamil groups, such as the Tamil Elam Liberation Organization (TELO), People’s Liberation Organization of Tamil Elam (PLOTE), and Eelam People’s Revolutionary Liberation Front

(EPRLF). The merciless behavior of the LTTE toward the boys of other Tamil militant groups, as Niromi remembered, made her feel wary but still could not deter her from worshipping the LTTE's one-upmanship.

Despite the coercive temperament of the LTTE on other Tamil groups, Prabhakaran's nationalist rhetoric and mesmerizing persona ultimately bolstered a pervasive belief in the community that "without the Tigers, there was no hope for the Tamils" (de Soyza, 2011, p. 57) and that all their actions were for salvaging the community. This enthrallment with Prabhakaran and his group reflects how conventional societies cognitively develop and unwittingly yield to the presumption that "masculinity and war are in some sense either causal or constitutive" (Hutchings, 2008, p. 390) and hence find no fault with it. Chenoy (2001) notes that in South Asian societies, this association of militarism and masculinity is also pervasive. Spearheaded by Prabhakaran, the Tamil Tigers eventually established themselves as the most invincible of all Tamil militant groups, and they could go to any extreme to fulfil their ends. With their fierce and indomitable tactics, as Niromi stated, the LTTE was able to create awe among the ordinary Tamils and "justify everything they did" (de Soyza, 2011, p. 51). So, those who admired or joined groups other than the LTTE were ridiculed as the weak ones and became Jaffna's "laughing stock" (de Soyza, 2011, p. 51). The LTTE paraded themselves as the only fighters and heroes of the oppressed Tamils. For Niromi, who had been longing to break free of the shackles of her family rigidities, the heroism of Prabhakaran and his LTTE thus seemed a befitting avenue of self-empowerment and the only mode through which she could contribute to recuperating her community's lost prestige. Niromi appears to be motivated by "martial feminism," an ideology that connects her concerns for women's civil and human rights with those for the liberation of her homeland (Schalk, 1994). Ironically, she failed to perceive that such an ostentatious appropriation of heroism and violence was steeped in skewed masculinist power dynamics.

Blindly adoring the visionary doctrines of gender and caste equality propagated by the Tamil Tigers, Niromi waited for her chance to be a part of the LTTE. In the memoir, Niromi shares how the "hope that the Tigers would soon recruit women" (de Soyza, 2011, p. 61) would alleviate the stupefying feelings of frustration and agitation. And not much later, with the news of the LTTE permitting women to join their cadres, Niromi, with her friend Ajanthi, enlisted in the Students Organization of Liberation Tigers (SOLT). Despite caution from her male peers that "the movement that [one] see[s] from the outside isn't the same on the inside" (de Soyza, 2011, p. 70), Niromi did not refrain. With incessant curfews and emergencies being imposed in Jaffna and the Sri Lankan government's launching of "Operation Liberation" in 1987 to demolish the Tamil insurgencies and secessionist demands, Niromi, as a young Tamil Tigress, left her home to participate actively in the war. However, the experiences that Niromi and her friend Ajanthi garnered as young militants of the LTTE turned out to be contrary to their exuberant expectations. Niromi's craving for militancy was to counter helplessness and precarity as a girl in the patriarchal Tamil culture. However, the magnanimity of the LTTE, with its messages of social reformation, which earlier had enthralled Niromi, evaded her as she encountered its deeply embedded gender hierarchies. Niromi found that the promises of gender equality were egregiously violated in the LTTE, and the young female recruits like Niromi and Ajanthi were being devalued. Their commitments were measured in comparison to those of the male cadres. Niromi gradually realized that her long-held belief that militancy would be reinvigorating and rewarding in her otherwise vulnerable life was a myth. As an insider of the LTTE, Niromi discovered that the intricate operationalizing of the militant organization was as stringent as the rest of Tamil society and came to learn the "fundamentally gendered masculine" (Elshtain, 1995) discourse of war and patriotism.

Niromi's and Ajanthi's experiences in the LTTE were exhaustive and harrowing. They were compelled to tirelessly authenticate their dedication to the Tamil Tigers. The young

female militants were considered subordinate and had to follow the orders of their male chiefs unconditionally. Much like the conservative codes of society outside, Niromi and Ajanthi found that questioning was condemned as a mark of disobedience. They, along with other female militants, had to wait endlessly and abidingly to hear the commands. They were never made a part of the decision-making processes within the organization and, whenever needed, had to serve their male counterparts unflinchingly. Feminist analysis has often conceived of the armed woman as a “troubling figure” (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2000, p. 9)—as the mode of this representation has indispensably been circumscribed by the tropes of hegemonic manhood. Within the LTTE, Niromi found that the patriarchal systematicity had been analogous to the familial and cultural patterns she had tried to escape. The female militants did not achieve an autonomous “new space” in the nationalist struggles but remained as “pawns and victims in the discourse of nationalist patriarchy” (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2000, p. 9). While Tamil female militants had a few “agentive moments” (Manchanda, 2005, p. 4741) different from the society in which they lived by transcending traditional codes of womanhood and marriage, such moments were temporary and primarily determined by male authorities. In this framework, the Sri Lankan LTTE women are subjected to “ambivalent empowerment,” a term used by Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake to explain their circumstances, which stand somewhere between and beyond conceptions of victimization and autonomy. As Rajasingham-Senanayake argues,

While they may have broken out of the confines of their allotted domesticity and taken on new roles as fighters, it is indeed arguable that they are captive both to the patriarchal nationalist project of the LTTE leader Prabhakaran and the history and experience of oppression by the Sri Lankan military. (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2004, 113)

Niromi provides a succinct description of the deleterious conditions in which they had to survive on meagre stale food, aimlessly keep on running from one place to another, and unknowingly wait for orders from the male seniors. Romantically termed as “Birds of Freedom,” Niromi and other female combatants were relegated to a vulnerable predicament, disempowered and battered. The apathetic treatment of young female combatants was tormenting and contradicted the LTTE’s revolutionary rhetoric of egalitarianism. Aside from that, the LTTE’s ideological governance prohibited women from exercising their right to choose. The teenage female combatants were kept under strict supervision and were forbidden to respond to or meet their family members even in dire circumstances. Niromi learns to realize that, although women like her have become imperative to the organization, their participation frequently has nothing to do with their autonomy. As depicted in the narrative, opportunities for women within the LTTE are largely limited, and there appears to be no opportunity for revolutionary praxis and ideology for women within the organizational hierarchy of the LTTE (Parashar, 2009, pp. 241-242). On several occasions, the female combatants were also humiliated and disparaged. Niromi recalls how, for a small act of defiance, she was taunted by a male militant: “You might be trained fighters, but a man is a man, and a woman should know her place” (de Soya, 2011, p. 148). Even on the war front, the male cadres felt it was hard to accept females as equals. The Tamil women joining the LTTE thus witnessed a transformation of their positionality, but only from the confines of home and social conservatism to be converted to a public self driven by masculinist militarism (de Mel, 2001, p. 11).

Niromi’s disgust with war intensifies when she, like many other enthusiastic LTTE combatants, could unravel the duplicities of the charismatic leader Prabhakaran. The glorious patriotism that Niromi believed in faded, and she finds herself amid starving soldiers, piteously waiting for their turn and hateful of the dictatorial leadership. She refuses to recognize the LTTE women as only “cogs in the wheel,” a term used by Radhika Coomaraswamy, who

argues that the LTTE women “are not initiators of ideas. They are only implementers of policy made by someone else and they are the consumers, not the producers of the grand political project” (Coomaraswamy 1997, p. 9). Though the principles of celibacy and seclusion were endorsed as fundamental to the LTTE, Niromi found that they were also conveniently violated by the male comrades at their will. In the narrative, she shares that while Prabhakaran boasted about sacrifice and selflessness, he quite hypocritically indulged in romantic affairs while living a married life. She also felt appalled at the surreptitiousness of Prabhakaran’s dialogues on the Tamil cause, as he became more paranoid with power and demanded a gory exhibition of violence. Prabhakaran was autocratic in his handling of the organization. For any slight suspicion of disobedience or for developing any personal inclination, a cadre would be punished cold-bloodedly. As time passed and the LTTE started confronting the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF), young combatants like Niromi became more dispirited and disheartened. While the peace talks were in place, and IPKF were endeavouring to pacify the situation, Prabhakaran kept the lower cadres in LTTE entirely in the dark and carried on with his flagrant egotistical war tactics. As time passed, Niromi realized that the LTTE had lost its prime mission of fighting for the rights of self-determination for the Tamils and had developed a fierce love for violence and belligerence. The dream of a bright future for the Tamil community eroded to give way to fanaticism, masculine prowess, and unrelenting violence. Niromi also gains a deeper realization of the destructiveness of war and violence, of the lives that had been devastated and the families that had been forever displaced from Sri Lanka. Disillusioned and beleaguered, Niromi finally resigns from the LTTE and returns home—a step symbolic of her statement against the excesses of violence and the need for peace. Her disillusioned experiences of militarism symbolize the past that is essential to conceptualize the mechanism of “becoming” or “being” (Olick & Robbins, 1998) someone—a “Tamil,” for instance, a name that carries potent connotations for individuals and communities before and after the civil war. I conclude the section by arguing that the distinctiveness of militarized masculinities in regards to physical fortitude, exhibition of violence, utilisation weapons, “suppression of emotions” (Goldstein, 2001, p. 268), and the execution of a confrontational and prevalently “misogynist masculinity” (Theidon, 2009, p. 4) carries the potential to restrict the recognition of feminist consciousness in militarized settings.

Disclosure: Call for Peace

Niromi de Soyza’s *Tamil Tigress* incisively documents the painstaking details of the Sri Lankan civil war. It provides a glimpse of the LTTE’s workings and how militancy has determined Tamil women’s social and existential trajectories in different dimensions. Here, Niromi integrates her subjective experiences with the collective gendered recollections of female Civil War militants, empowering her to speak for disregarded individuals. Her memories transcend the boundaries and become collective narratives, making the reader cognizant that “stories breathe their own breaths; they are organic and dynamic. They are as primal to us as the organs in our body, and they evolve as we do” (Chawla, 2019, p. 19). Her memoir assumes significance not only for its commentary on the Tamil women’s dreams of liberation through unfamiliar roles in militancy but, more crucially, for its enunciation of the need for a discourse of freedom and collective empowerment vis-à-vis peace. Understanding memory in the post-war framework of Sri Lanka has emerged as a flourishing field of study that concentrates on a militarized past, and Niromi’s memoir parallels Radhika Natarajan’s (2016) observations regarding the institutional and cultural considerations of integrating the individual with the political, communal, and historical within multiple discrete compositions (Perera, 2010; Kandasamy, 2019, p. 2662). Niromi’s ultimate realization confirms a need to envisage humanitarian drives, as the violence she experiences can never facilitate a perpetual solution to ideological conflicts. Recapitulating the magnitude of human losses that the war

brought, Niromi claims that there is an urgent need for peace-making and reconciliation processes. Niromi travels to India for studies after resigning from the LTTE and later migrates to Australia. While she recuperates from the trauma and psychological wounds caused by the war, her writing becomes a means of self-introspection and voicing her message of social redemption. It should be noted that “women are not necessarily the victims of war, but also change agents. In numerous instances, despite the adverse and brutal consequences of war, women have transitioned from victims to agents of change by reconfiguring social conventions, transforming cultural practices, and breaking gendered hierarchies” (Karmakar, 2022, p. 5). Niromi mentions that the war could neither perpetually resolve the animosity between the Tamils and the Sinhalese nor empower the Tamil women who had participated in the armed militancy. Her memoir’s criticality lies in some notable points on female identity and emancipation that reflect her arduous journey as an LTTE combatant. Niromi’s hopes and disillusionment bring to sharp focus what Radhika Coomaraswamy, the former UN Special Rapporteur on Women, stated in her study on LTTE combatants, that while “inducting women into a fighting force” can signal a possibility of empowerment, it inevitably leads to “the militarisation of civil society - a militarisation which in itself is inimical to anyone who believes in human rights” (cited in Manchanda, 2005, p. 4741). The Sri Lankan civil war spanned three decades and was halted when the Norwegian government negotiated a ceasefire in 2002. A peace process was inaugurated between the Sri Lankan government armed forces and the LTTE, followed by various policy discussions which sought to alleviate the war damage and restore stability.

One of the most decisive aspects that were taken into consideration in post-war policy deliberations was the status of women—those disparaged by violence and those who had participated in armed struggle. As a starting point for emphasizing women’s voices and representations in the peace processes, a network of “multiethnic women’s groups in Sri Lanka” (Nesiah, 2012, p. 139) was launched to figure out the personal and unspoken experiences of women who had either been disparaged by wartime crimes or had been perpetrators of crimes in the LTTE. Similarly, the Security Council passed Security Council Resolution 1325 (in 2002), attesting to the need to assess gendered violence and to work on the possibility of including women in reconstructionist measures and peace-building activities. Niromi’s memoir subtly aligns with such peace perspectives in pinpointing that a real emancipation for women lies not in exhibiting masculinist prowess or violence but in involving them as decision-makers and independent political actors at the communal and national levels. Niromi’s retelling is her way of substantiating that as refugees or combatants, “women and men experience conflict differently” (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002, p. 1) and, therefore, the women’s experiences must be probed to garner appropriate takeaways for social consolidation. There is a need to “expand the boundaries of our understanding of women and violence in times of violent conflict” (Meegaswatta, 2019, p. 30) and push women to rethink affirmation outside masculinist paradigms. So, her memoir concludes with a profound realization which stands as a disclosure for real feminist emancipation:

Little had I realised then that following the lead of a totalitarian male and volunteering to become suicide bombers was not women’s liberation. There is no doubting that these women were brave and heroic, but they served a master, never achieved equal status to or the recognition of their male counterparts. (de Soyza, 2011, p. 300)

The regeneration of Tamil women, as Niromi envisions, can only take place through the institutionalization of their rights and representations, and to accomplish such a goal, women, despite being “the most oppressed” (Loomba, 2019, p. 1), should take charge to ameliorate the injustices and inequalities heaped by war and violence.

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