

**A “STATE OF EMERGENCE”:
THE NEGOTIATION OF TAMIL WOMEN’S
IDENTITIES UNDER CONDITIONS OF WAR IN SRI
LANKA**

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Introduction

“**H**er forehead shall be adorned not with/*kumkumam* (but) with red blood./On her neck will lay no *tali* (but) a/cyanide flask!”¹

This is an excerpt from a poem written by a woman in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a militant group that fought for a separate Tamil nation-state during the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009). *Kumkumam*—a powder—and a *tali*—a pendant—both symbolize marriage. This poem raises several questions about how the LTTE portrayed women. On the one hand, it depicts a jarring and radical departure from traditional gender norms, because the woman in the poem has pledged her life to the LTTE cause rather than to marriage. On the other hand, the woman is still figuratively “married”—not to a husband but to the LTTE. Is her participation in the LTTE truly a departure from “traditional” gender roles that the poet might have intended to imply? In any case, her identity is communicated through what she wears on her body. With her membership in the LTTE, her body, like the bodies of other Sri Lankan Tamil women, has “become the symbolic site of communal, caste, and class enmity”—enmity that characterized the civil war period as a whole.²

The Sri Lankan Civil War, while involving conflicts between many ethnic, religious, and political groups, was primarily a conflict between the Sri Lankan government, which promoted a Sinhalese nationalist vision of a single state of Sri Lanka, and the LTTE, which promoted Tamil nationalism and fought for a separate Tamil nation-state, or “Tamil Eelam.” While the immediate catalyst for the war was a riot in Colombo in 1983, its underlying causes emerged under British colonial rule (1815-1948) and became more apparent after Sri Lankan independence. During the colonial period, many Tamils had opportunities for economic gain, and the notion that Tamils were unfairly privileged consequently emerged in the Sinhalese community.³ Thus, Sri Lanka’s postcolonial government codified Sinhalese dominance, failing to

¹ Neloufer de Mel, *Women and the Nation’s Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2002): 206-207.

² De Mel, *Women and the Nation’s Narrative*, 17.

³ Sumit Ganguly, “Ending the Sri Lankan Civil War,” *Daedalus* 147, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 79; S.J. Tambiah, “The Colombo Riots of 1983,” in *The Sri Lanka Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. John Clifford Holt (Duke University Press, 2011), 647; Ganguly, “Ending,” 79.

legislate protections for the Tamil minority and at times marginalizing Tamils through laws such as the Sinhala Only Act of 1956.⁴ In 1977, when the United National Party replaced the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, shifting the economy away from state welfare and toward a liberal capitalist model, Tamils became scapegoats for the resulting economic difficulties of Sinhalese entrepreneurs.⁵ It was in this context that the civil war broke out. At several points during the war the Indian government intervened, once in an attempt to disarm rebel groups, but it ultimately withdrew.⁶ Many international actors classified the LTTE as a terrorist organization, allowing the Sinhalese government to label its violence as anti-terrorist.⁷ Ultimately, the government took aggressive military action that defeated the LTTE and ended the war on May 18, 2009.⁸

Since my research focuses on the LTTE, it is important to note that the LTTE's structure and ideology changed over time. In the 1980s, the LTTE was rooted in "popular militancy," fueled by young people who "voluntarily left their homes to join militant groups who were considered at that time marginal, risky, and foolish."⁹ At this point, the LTTE was one of "five groups that dominated the militant scene": the TELO, LTTE, PLOTE, EPRLF, and EROS.¹⁰ My paper focuses more on the LTTE in the 1990s, when it was the dominant group and became a "militarized quasistate structure" that primarily relied on forced conscription.¹¹

During the civil war, an entire generation grew up under a condition of violence. Inspired by the work of Lee Ann Fuji on the Rwandan genocide, this project examines violence as a destabilizing and productive force, rather than only as the result of pre-existing social structures and conflicts. Notably, Fuji's study has a different aim than the one I pursue here; put frankly, she seeks to understand why people kill each other—why neighbors turn on neighbors, and how violence operates at the micro-level to enable such an outcome. Still, she also highlights the importance of considering violence as social and not only political, an approach that I also seek to take.¹² Yet in this project, I consider violence as more of a background condition that sets the terms of the relationship between individuals and ethnic groups. To be clear, I do not mean to overlook the important differences between the systemic violence enacted by the

⁴ Ganguly, "Ending," 79.

⁵ Tambiah, "The Colombo Riots," 647.

⁶ Ganguly, "Ending," 82; Sree Padma, "Neither Sinhala nor Tamil--On Being a South Asian in Sri Lanka," in *The Sri Lanka Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. John Clifford Holt (Duke University Press, 2011), 680.

⁷ Ganguly, "Ending," 83.

⁸ "Timeline: Sri Lanka's 25-year civil war," Reuters, accessed October 5, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-srilanka-war-timeline-sb/timeline-sri-lankas-25-year-civil-war-idUSTRE54F16620090518>.

⁹ Sharika Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011): 187, 197.

¹⁰ Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House*, 185.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹² Lee Ann Fuji, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Cornell University Press, 2009): 19.

Sinhalese state and the militant response of the LTTE; rather, for the purposes of this study, I see the social and political violence of the war as a whole as context for the formation of Tamil ethnic identity. As Neloufer de Mel argues, “States of emergency are also ‘always a state of emergence.’ That is when a re-visioning of society and its economies takes place, changing the direction in which the nation journeys.”¹³ The view that the Sri Lankan Civil War created a “state of emergence” forms the foundation of my central research question: How did the destabilizing condition of war and violence facilitate the renegotiation of Tamil ethnic and gender identities by the LTTE and those it sought to recruit?

To investigate this question, I use Lee Ann Fuji’s framework of a “script” for ethnicity, which is part of her claim that periods of violence are periods in which new expressions of identity emerge. Fuji argues that in the Rwandan genocide, ethnicity was state-sponsored and that people performed it according to a script: “As a script, state-sponsored ethnicity was not some ‘thing’ inscribed in people’s cultural DNA or collective histories; it was a set of constructions that were intended for performance but remained open to interpretation.”¹⁴ According to Fuji, these scripts meant to “conjure a new reality and social order out of existing and familiar elements.”¹⁵ The poem discussed above exemplifies this phenomenon—it takes the familiar markers of marriage for women and reframes them to “conjure” a new vision of the Tamil militant woman. Thus, I extend Fuji’s conceptualization of scripts for the performance of ethnicity to also include scripts for the performance of gender and gendered ethnicity. Rogers Brubaker’s conceptualization of “minority nationalism” also applies to the LTTE in some ways. He argues that “‘national minority’...designates a political stance, not an ethno demographic fact,” thereby further highlighting how ethnic identities are constructed through nationalisms rather than existing intrinsically.¹⁶ As shown below, in addition to demonstrating minority nationalism, the LTTE script tells Sri Lankan Tamils how to perform their ethnicity in response to the “nationalizing nationalism” of Sri Lanka and the “homeland nationalism” of Tamils in India; these are two other types of nationalism that Brubaker identifies.¹⁷

I argue that just as the destabilizing nature of the crisis period lent itself to new iterations of Tamil ethnic identity, so too did it create space for the renegotiation of Tamil womanhood.

First, I use newspapers and a book produced by leaders and supporters of the LTTE to argue that the organization created a script for how Tamils should perform their ethnic and gender identity. This script positioned Tamil women as emblematic of the Tamil nation, both by positioning them as victims who need protection and by

¹³ de Mel, *Women and the Nation’s Narrative*, 17.

¹⁴ Fuji, *Killing Neighbors*, 121.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (OUP, 1996): 5.

¹⁷ Ibid.

arguing that their liberation through militant nationalism represents the liberation of Tamils as a whole. Second, I examine the testimonies of Tamil women themselves to argue that the LTTE was both an agent and a product of the condition of violence during this period, thereby facilitating both agency for and oppression of women. Tamil women therefore sought agency by at times following scripts for the performance of their identities and at times deviating from those scripts. Due to the range of sources that I was able to access, I ultimately focus more on how women negotiate the LTTE script from within rather than outside it, and recognize the room for further investigation of the latter question. While I am attentive to longer histories of pre-war Tamil ethnic and gender identity, I demonstrate that to understand the LTTE's script for the performance of gendered ethnicity, it is also important to consider the more immediate context of violence as a cause of the renegotiation of Tamil women's identities.

Oppression and Liberation: The LTTE's Script for the Gendered Performance of Tamil Ethnicity

Amidst violence that sometimes victimized women and at other times gave them the agency to break from assigned gender roles, the LTTE created a script for the gendered performance of Tamil ethnicity that made women symbols of the national struggle: their victimization symbolized Tamil oppression, and their rebellion symbolized Tamil liberation. Thus, the LTTE script asked Tamils to perform their ethnicity in ways that aligned with these dual conceptualizations of women, which were at times aligned with and in tension with each other.

First, Tamil women were often perceived as the core of Tamil tradition and identity; therefore, their oppression in times of war became, according to this ideology, emblematic of the broader oppression of Tamils. Therefore, when the LTTE script told Sri Lankan Tamils perform their ethnic identities by supporting its efforts to defend Tamils the Sinhalese threat, this mission included protecting Tamil women from Sinhalese violence. The LTTE appealed to Tamils abroad as well as those in Sri Lanka. Sharika Thiranagama argues that since Tamil diasporic communities faced marginalization both in Sri Lanka and in the Western countries to which they migrated, there was a perception that the LTTE was “guard[ing] Tamil life against ‘Sinhalese genocide’ and ‘Western culture’ simultaneously.”¹⁸ By reflecting that sentiment, the LTTE documents I examine below demonstrate how transnational ethnic identities are formed through common experiences of oppression and the subsequent development of nationalism, which aligns with this paper's contention that violence against Tamils in the Sri Lankan civil war transformed Tamil ethnic identities.

For example, the *Tamil Guardian*, a newspaper for the Tamil diaspora that is produced in the UK, reveals the broad contours of the LTTE script regarding Tamil

¹⁸ Sharika Thiranagama, “Making Tigers from Tamils: Long-Distance Nationalism and Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto,” *American Anthropologist* 116, no. 2 (2014): 272.

oppression and the performance of Tamil identity through support for national liberation. First, a key argument of these articles is that Tamil people are victims of ethnic cleansing and genocide and that a militant response is therefore necessary. For example, one 1998 article in the *Tamil Guardian* characterizes one of Sri Lankan president Chandrika Kumaratunga's policies as a "slave writ for the Tamils," and argues that the "chauvinistic Sinhala leadership" is operating with "institutionalized racism."¹⁹ A political cartoon in the *Tamil Guardian* (fig. 1) portrays Kumaratunga as Hitler, wearing his distinctive mustache while doing a Nazi salute.²⁰



Fig. 1. Political cartoon published in the London-based newspaper the *Tamil Guardian*, a publication for the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. Portrays Chandrika Kumaratunga as Hitler. "Follow the Leader," *Tamil Guardian*, July 25, 2001, 7.

Another article in the *Tamil Guardian*, titled "Why Tamils Say Genocide," argues that violence against Tamils in Sri Lanka meets the UN criteria for genocide, as well as scholars' definitions of physical and cultural genocide.²¹ Thus, characterizing this conflict as nothing less than a genocide of the Tamils is central to the newspaper's ideological argument. From the premise that Tamils are facing genocide, the newspaper then argues against the government's classification of the LTTE as "terrorist" and instead portrays it as righteously defending the victimized community. One article makes this argument as follows:

If the Western framework is to be taken at face value, all non-state political violence is, by definition, illegal and therefore terrorism. All states battling armed opposition groups are, by the same logic, fighting terrorism. But this simplistic categorisation has deemed that there is no such thing as a freedom movement. History and

¹⁹ "Prevarication, not Peace," *Tamil Guardian*, August 15, 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/19981203034622/http://www.tamilguardian.com/edit/index.html>.

²⁰ "Follow the Leader," *Tamil Guardian*, July 25, 2001, 7.

²¹ "Why Tamils Say Genocide," *Tamil Guardian*, October 18, 2006, <https://web.archive.org/web/2006111115922/http://www.tamilguardian.com/article.asp?articleid=911>.

contemporary politics prove that many states unleash violence that is - by virtue of its effect - terrorism against their citizens as well as their neighbours.²²

According to the *Tamil Guardian*, the LTTE militants are freedom fighters, not terrorists. Challenging the term “terrorist” and describing the brutal violence against Tamils as “genocide” is part of the narrative of oppression that is central to the LTTE script for Tamil identity. Moreover, the Tamil militant identity is crafted in response to the oppressive violence of the Sinhalese state, demonstrating how violence was a productive force for the emergence of new identities.

Moreover, the newspaper articles claim that to perform their ethnicity, diasporic Tamils must support the fight for their collective liberation by supporting the LTTE. For example, one article titled “Being ‘religious’ has become merely a social pastime” argues that Tamil Hindus who “detach themselves” from the conflict in Sri Lanka because of its violence are contradicting their religious texts, which support “the use of violence to defend justice and truth,” concluding with the claim that Tamils’ duty is “to our suffering fellow Tamils first and foremost.”²³ The author of this article links Tamil marginalization in the West and Sri Lanka by arguing that religion—which she views as a core component of a shared Tamil culture—is both a means through which to empower generations of Tamils growing up in the West and a source of moral justification for support of Tamils in Sri Lanka. As Sharika Thiranagama argues, diaspora Tamils who follow the LTTE script equate the LTTE with “Tamilness,” both in Sri Lanka and abroad.²⁴ She also argues that “the LTTE...represented itself clearly as the supreme upholder...of the Tamil family, the Tamil nation, and Tamil culture more generally.”²⁵ Thus, the Tamil diaspora demonstrated the minority nationalism that the LTTE promoted because its perception of itself as a minority was rooted in its experience of marginalization both in Sri Lanka and abroad.²⁶

As shown above, the LTTE script asked Tamils to perform their identity by supporting LTTE violence. It framed this support as necessary defensive action through which to protect the core of Tamil identity in the face of oppression by the Sinhalese. This script mapped its narratives of oppression and liberation onto gender.

²² “Binary Logic: Terrorism defies definition because states practice it,” *Tamil Guardian*, November 28, 2001,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20030218123752/http://www.tamilguardian.com/tg137/editorial.htm#Terrorism%20defies>.

²³ “Being ‘religious’ has become merely a social pastime,” *Tamil Guardian*, April 4, 2001,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20010409040123/http://www.tamilguardian.com/culture.htm#The%20Arangetram>.

²⁴ Thiranagama, “Making Tigers from Tamils,” 265.

²⁵ Thiranagama, *In My Mother’s House*, 217.

²⁶ Thiranagama, “Making Tigers from Tamils,” 269.

Sharika Thiranagama discusses how Tamil Canadians have faced discrimination; for example, there is a stereotype that Tamil youth participate in gangs. With respect to those who did join gangs, her study reveals Tamil parents’ concern about the generational trauma that their children are inheriting; some “wondered uneasily” about the “parallels” between youth participation in the gangs and “the violence in Sri Lanka from which they had so recently fled.”

As de Mel argues, nationalist gender ideologies in Sri Lanka were such that “the male [is] the author and subject of the nation, while the female stands for the nation itself, in need of male protection, the reproducer and nurturer of future generations and transmitter of cultural values.”²⁷

These newspapers show that the condition of violence in which societal norms were destabilized lent itself to the solidification of Tamil ethnic and national identity around the goal of defending Tamils—particularly Tamil women—against the Sinhalese threat. For example, another article asks its readers: “Did any pray for the people back home?...Did any pray for the orphans and the families that have lost their breadwinners? Did any pray for the young girls who have been raped?”²⁸ Here, girls who face sexual violence become a symbol of the suffering Tamils in Sri Lanka that Tamils outside of the country ought to protect. Another article reported on the murder of a fifteen-year-old Tamil Canadian girl named Sharmini, arguing that “In a community that has lost many of its young stars to (often senseless) violence, the death of Sharmini should not be another unresolved tragedy.”²⁹ Notably, this article links violence against a girl in Canada to the violence against children that families in the diaspora often experienced in Sri Lanka. Thus, the LTTE script for its diaspora supporters drew upon their experiences under the condition of violence from which they fled, revealing how the war created a “state of emergence” for new performances of ethnic and gender identities.

Yet simultaneously, the LTTE leadership and women within the organization also characterized women as embodying Tamil liberation. This seeming paradox or contradiction between narratives of oppression and liberation both contribute to a common phenomenon—that of women representing the nation. de Mel cites Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan’s concept of “sufficient modernity” to describe this contradiction: “in recognition of the needs of national development, human rights and civil liberties, women are no longer denied a role in ‘the time-space of the modern,’ but while promoting the modernity of its women, the LTTE nevertheless engaged in ‘female containment’ characterized by the promotion of ‘discipline and chastity.’”³⁰ This containment is evident in how the script promotes women’s complete obedience to the cause, which curtails their freedom of expression. de Mel notes that this restriction of agency is characteristic of militancy overall because the “reality of [the militant’s] driving impulses lies in complete obedience to the will of the militant leadership on whose behalf s/he struggles.”³¹ This narrative of Tamil women’s

²⁷ de Mel, *Women and the Nation’s Narrative*, 3.

²⁸ “Can we not at least spare a prayer for our people?” *Tamil Guardian*, August 15, 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/19981205172153/http://www.tamilguardian.com/article/index.html#a5>.

²⁹ “Standing United,” *Tamil Guardian*, November 6, 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19991112130226/http://www.tamilguardian.com/editorial.htm#Traditional>

³⁰ de Mel, *Women and the Nation’s Narrative*, 7, 218-219.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 204-205.

liberation through their obedience to the cause parallels the narrative discussed above about the Tamil nation as a whole—that Tamils are being victimized at the hands of the Sinhalese and must stay true to their Tamil identity by supporting the LTTE. Thus, in the LTTE script, the performance of ethnicity and gender are intertwined.

Adele Ann Balasingham, who was a leader of the LTTE women’s wing, wrote the book *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers* to highlight the stories of the LTTE women she worked with. This book exemplifies the script that women LTTE fighters were made to follow. The script glorifies women who will forego traditional gender roles to sacrifice for the cause, and positions the LTTE as an agent of women’s liberation and the liberation of Tamils, as a whole. First, it pairs the oppression of Tamils with the oppression of women and then positions the LTTE as a way to escape both. Balasingham writes:

For decades Tamil women have been exposed to violence, torture, murder and rape by Sinhala settlers and their military protectors. Thousands and thousands of women have had their family life totally destroyed by premature widowhood, by sons and daughters and extended family members shot dead in front of their eyes...With such a horrendous history of genocidal destruction forming part of their consciousness Tamil women cannot be anything other than fiercely patriotic.³²

Thus, Balasingham identifies the Sinhala people and state as the oppressors of Tamil women, drawing a parallel between the oppression of Tamils as a whole and the oppression of women in particular. She references the discourse of genocide that formed a key component of the LTTE script, as discussed above. Moreover, she lays out a script for how Tamil women must perform their ethnic identities in response to marginalization: they must emerge from their trauma with a fierce Tamil patriotism.

Notably, Balasingham also writes that “the Tamil society is a deeply entrenched patriarchal society.”³³ Her purpose in doing so is to position the LTTE, as opposed to other Tamil political organizations, as the liberating force for the Tamil people. She argues that “the militant patriotism of Tamil women finally blossomed” only when they were able to join the LTTE and free themselves from “the forms of social constraint which had obstructed their deeper participation earlier,” which, her book suggests, included “parliamentary politics and non-violent struggle” as well as “conservative images of women.”³⁴ In contrast, she argues that the male LTTE leadership is always supportive of women. For example, in her discussion of how Prabhakaran responded to LTTE women’s demands for a “separate women’s military structure,” she says that these women had “grown in self-confidence” and Prabhakaran “appreciated their aspirations and unhesitantly gave his support to the women

³² Adele Ann Balasingham, *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers*, (Jaffna: Thasan Printers, 1993), in “Military Training of Women Cadres in the East.”

³³ Balasingham, *Women Fighters*, in “Introduction.”

³⁴ Balasingham, *Women Fighters*, in “Women Join the Armed Struggle.”

fighters.”³⁵ She later writes that “For [Prabhakaran] the independence of women is crucial to their liberation and the assertion of courage and self-confidence is a prerequisite to the realization of such independence.”³⁶ The discussion of women as needing support from the male leadership to reach their full, self-confident potential reflects the paternalistic notion of the male protector and author of the nation that de Mel discusses. This suggests that the LTTE script might not actually ask its women militants to depart from their “traditional” gender roles as much as it claims to.

Moreover, the notion that the LTTE is liberating Tamil women from both its Sinhala and Tamil oppressors enables Balasingham to justify their forced recruitment. She writes:

Constant exposure to oppression has had a profound effect on the life and thinking of young Tamil women...With the large scale induction of women into the LTTE the female cadres have overcome inestimable difficulties and challenges in the process of their metamorphosis from patriotic village girls into revolutionary guerrilla fighters.³⁷

When read in the context of the forced conscription of women into the LTTE, this script for Tamil women suggests that any resistance to joining the organization stems from their internalized oppression, the result of decades of oppression from which the LTTE will liberate them.

Finally, Balasingham’s script for Tamil women tells them to perform their ethnic and gender identities by sacrificing their lives to the cause. This supports Thiranagama’s argument that “the LTTE highlighted its rigid control of the sexuality of its women cadres, representing them as ‘virgin warriors’”³⁸ and that the LTTE was “valorizing women only on the basis of their LTTE membership and their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the nation.”³⁹ Balasingham praises women who sacrificed aspects of women’s daily lives to fight for the cause, such as “woman cadres [who] struggled in the darkness to carry out such routine practices as hair brushing and plaiting.”⁴⁰ She also glorifies women who willingly sacrificed their lives, such as one militant who died firing at the Sri Lankan army to slow their advance.⁴¹ While Balasingham claims that these women have broken free of conservative notions of “selfless, sacrificing mothers and wives who encourage bravery and heroism in their sons and husbands,” her script for violence instead tells LTTE women to sacrifice themselves for the agenda of male leadership who claim to believe in women’s liberation.

³⁵ Ibid, in “The Formation of an Independent Structure.”

³⁶ Ibid, in “Epilogue.”

³⁷ Ibid, in “Introduction.”

³⁸ Thiranagama, *In My Mother’s House*, 216.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Balasingham, *Women Fighters*, in “The Siege of Jaffna Fort.”

⁴¹ Ibid, in “Gallantry.”

Analyzed together, the *Tamil Guardian* articles and *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers* demonstrate the dual narratives of oppression and liberation, applied to women and the nation as a whole. While the *Tamil Guardian* portrays women as victims and Balasingham portrays them as agents and beneficiaries of liberation through the LTTE, both scripts for the gendered performance of ethnicity characterize women as the site upon which the nation's identity is negotiated. Thus, Tamils as a whole and women, in particular, are told to perform their ethnicity and gender by sacrificing for the LTTE cause.

Joining the LTTE: Performing the Script Under Conditions of Violence

Just as the LTTE script perpetuated dual narratives of Tamil women's oppression and liberation, so did women who joined the LTTE experience both the loss and gain of agency by choosing to follow the LTTE's script. Through an analysis of testimonies from such women, I argue that some chose to follow the LTTE because it aligned with their experience of violence during the context of the war. They were victims of violence that the Sinhalese state enacted upon women, aligning with the LTTE's portrayal of the oppression of women as emblematic of the oppression of the nation. Through the LTTE, they were able to seek agency in the fight against the state that harmed them; this aligns in some ways with the LTTE narrative of women's liberation. Still, simultaneously, their performance of the script resulted in the loss of agency that de Mel discusses. Also, their decisions to join the LTTE did not necessarily align with the transition from traditional to modern, the "metamorphosis from patriotic village girls into revolutionary guerrilla fighters" that the LTTE script ascribes to them.⁴² Instead, their decision arose from the destabilization of gender norms under the condition of violence in which they were raised, once again demonstrating the immediate context as a productive force for the negotiation of their identities. Ultimately, their stories of renegotiating identity amid violence complicate the LTTE's portrayal of itself as a "liberator" from "tradition" in two ways: first, by demonstrating that the idea of "traditional" womanhood was in part an LTTE construction that emerged in the context of violence, and second, by revealing how the idea of "liberation" fails to acknowledge continuities between their pre-LTTE and post-LTTE realities.

The documentary *My Daughter the Terrorist* follows two young women LTTE fighters, Darshika and Puhachudar, as they discuss their lives within the LTTE and their motives for joining it. These two women were in the Black Tigers, a wing of the LTTE that conducted suicide attacks. Their testimonies exemplify how women LTTE militants sought to transcend the role that both the Sinhalese state and some nationalist narratives gave them—namely, the role of the Tamil victim upon whom Sinhalese state violence is enacted. Darshika and Puhachudar, like other women of their age who lived through the war, grew up under a condition of violence. Antonia, the mother of

⁴² Balasingham, *Women Fighters*, in "Introduction."

a woman named Darshika who joined the LTTE, said of Darshika's childhood: "We couldn't separate ourselves from the war. We lived inside it."⁴³ Darshika said that she joined the LTTE, or "the movement," because it saved her family: "When we were running through the shelling, the army attacked us but the movement fought back. After that I felt I had to save these people. I thought if I don't join the movement, our people will be forced into slavery. That's why I joined the LTTE."⁴⁴ Darshika's story exemplifies how her experience aligns with the script for Tamil ethnic identity discussed in the previous section. As demonstrated earlier, the LTTE script characterized Tamil oppression at the hands of the Sinhalese, described as ethnic cleansing and genocide, as central to Tamil ethnic identity. For Darshika, the prospect of oppression at the hands of the government—the forcing of Tamils into slavery—led Darshika to describe Tamils as "our people." The image that her story creates—that of a movement saving a family, which is the core unit of the nation that makes possible its reproduction—also aligns with the masculinization of militant nationalism and the feminization of the nation that was a central component of nationalist narratives. Thus, Darshika's experience aligns with the nationalist script expressed in documents like the *Tamil Guardian*.

Darshika's narrative of gender-related violence that she faced also reveals how her experience aligned with the LTTE's characterization of itself as an agent for women's liberation. She and her mother witnessed how soldiers "harassed" women and girls, and "even ten-year-old girls were scared of what the soldiers might do." They were "defenseless" against the army.⁴⁵ Darshika tells a story exemplifying this defenselessness:

Once, the army forced my mother, sister and me to sit outside in the baking sun. The commander was sitting in the shade under a big umbrella held by the soldiers. To protect us from the burning sand my mother put my sister and me on a towel. The soldiers yelled at us, grabbed the towel and put us back on the hot sand again.⁴⁶

This story demonstrates the oppression of Tamil women at the hands of the Sinhalese military, aligning with the LTTE narrative of victimization. The fact that Darshika's mother was unable to protect her and her sister also signifies how the army destabilized the family structure, positioning Darshika's story in line with narratives of the LTTE as an upholder of the Tamil family. Thus, for Darshika, LTTE membership was also an act of agency in the fight for the family and against the state, aligning with the LTTE script for Tamil women's performance of identity and presumably making it easier for Darshika to follow that script, even when it meant participating in violence that victimizes others.

⁴³ Morten Daae, *My Daughter the Terrorist* (Nordic World, 2007), 23:18.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 44:15-44:44.

⁴⁵ Daae, *My Daughter*, 24:42-24:49.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 25:20-25:43.

Finally, Darshika's loss of socioeconomic opportunity due to military violence also appears to have contributed to her decision to join the LTTE. In the documentary, she says, "By the time I was 13 years old we were permanently displaced [from Jaffna]. I had to stop studying and everything was lost."⁴⁷ Therefore, for Darshika the LTTE became an alternative to a life without permanent housing and consistent education. Notably, that loss of housing and education was a direct result of the destabilizing condition of violence in which she lived, revealing the role of immediate conditions of violence, in shaping the lives of young women such that they would join the LTTE for an alternative. Thiranagama also notes how the LTTE positioned itself as a chance for opportunity: "The LTTE with its promise of power through recruitment promised another route to achievement, given that the traditional route, education, was no longer available to the same degree."⁴⁸

As Fuji argues, "Looking at the effects of social relations does not rob actors of their agency" but rather "provide[s] the immediate context in which people act and interact for, against, and toward others."⁴⁹ Thus, the above testimony does not deny that Darshika joined the LTTE and followed its script by choice and that this was an act of agency on her part. At the same time, her motives for becoming a Black Tiger—a desire to protect Tamils as a whole, a desire to fight for women like herself and their families, and a desire to find an alternative to life after displacement—at times map onto Balasingham's script for women cadres and directly result from the conditions of violence in which she was raised. As de Mel and others also suggest, the role of the LTTE in the lives of women who joined it did not fully align with its narrative that it was an opportunity for women to break free from "traditional" gender norms. As the above evidence demonstrates, gender relations that these women experienced before their militancy were not only products of long-held norms but were also products of the more immediate destabilizing condition of violence during the war.

Meanwhile, the new Tamil womanhood that the LTTE script told women to perform bore as many resemblances to their previous experiences as it did differences. Before deciding to join the LTTE, Darshika wanted to be a nun. She says, "At one time I was always talking to God. I wanted to be pure and live a life of celibacy...After my father's death [in the war]...I wanted to fight against all this."⁵⁰ To explain why she instead joined the LTTE, Darshika asks, "If there is a God, why does He keep us in this endless misery? Even those who came to the church for protection ended up in pools of blood."⁵¹ This story again reveals how a time of violent crisis was the catalyst for her decision to follow a new script for performing her gender identity. Despite what the LTTE script might suggest, Darshika's choice was not between the LTTE and a "traditional" path of marriage and subservience to men. Rather, as her plan to

⁴⁷ Daae, *My Daughter*, 27:21-27:30.

⁴⁸ Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House*, 37.

⁴⁹ Fuji, *Webs of Violence*, 18.

⁵⁰ Daae, *My Daughter*, 5-5:22.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 19:30-19:44

become a nun indicates, she had access to another expression of womanhood that went beyond the “traditional” Tamil woman. The destabilizing condition of violence narrowed the opportunities for Darshika’s future as a woman, and only under those conditions did the LTTE emerge as a way out.

In addition to complicating the notion of “traditional” Tamil womanhood from which the LTTE claims to liberate women, Darshika and Puhachudar’s accounts also demonstrate continuities between women’s conceptualizations of their roles before joining the LTTE and after. For example, as different as they are, there are some core similarities between becoming a nun and serving the LTTE celibacy, forming communities with other women rather than within a marriage-based family unit, and complete devotion to a particular belief system and leader who promotes those beliefs. de Mel discusses how this complete commitment to the cause, which suggests a loss of agency, also parallels “traditional” visions of Tamil and Sri Lankan womanhood in general and not just for nuns: “the notion of warrior-mother [created by the LTTE] did not displace deep-seated notions of normative female identity which...continue to instruct the Sri Lankan woman on her symbolic value as the sexually chaste, enlightened, altruistic maternal being.”⁵² Thus, the stories of LTTE women fighters complicate the LTTE narrative of their singular progression from a victimized woman to a liberated one by exposing how both notions of womanhood were products of the condition of violence in which they emerged.

While Darshika and her friend Puhachudar joined the LTTE seeking agency to fight against their oppressors, their loyalty to the LTTE’s script of violence still reflects the “complete obedience” to leadership that de Mel characterizes as a feature of LTTE militancy, and suggests a loss of agency for these women while continuing to demonstrate how both ethnic and gender relations were defined through the process of violence. Both Darshika and Puhachudar said that if the other were a traitor to the movement, they would shoot her—and the Leader is the one who would order it.⁵³ Darshika and Puhachudar’s ideological arguments also resemble those in the newspapers discussed earlier; for example, Darshika redefines what the public might mean by “terrorist” to say, “We fight for true justice. They spread false rumors that we don’t fight for justice, that we kill civilians.”⁵⁴ On the topic of the 1996 LTTE’s bombing of the Colombo central bank, she says, “Our Leader would never choose a target like that. Our Leader would never choose anything that causes devastation to civilians.”⁵⁵ This denial of reality in favor of the script for violence promoted by the Leader reveals a loss of independence for these women, supporting the argument that LTTE leaders like Prabhakaran “contain” and “protect” the LTTE women by ensuring that they follow the plans of the male leadership.⁵⁶

⁵² de Mel, *Women and the Nation’s Narrative* (?), 215.

⁵³ Ibid, 35:41-35:57.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 51:47-52:12.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 52:25-52:31.

⁵⁶ de Mel, *Women and the Nation’s Narrative*, 222.

Avoiding Recruitment: Rejecting the LTTE Script

My eldest daughter was taken [by the LTTE] but she escaped and came back. I took off my thaali and made her wear it. I put the red pottu of a married woman on her forehead – because married women were less likely to be taken away by the LTTE. Then to make things more convincing I folded a sari and wrapped it around her stomach so that she would look pregnant.⁵⁷

This story from a Tamil mother stands in direct contrast to the poem cited in the introduction. It reaffirms the oppositional relationship between membership in the LTTE and the more “traditional” woman’s life of marriage and maternity. But rather than celebrating the replacement of the *kumkumam* with blood and the *tali* with cyanide, it represents the choice of a woman to enter into “traditional” gender norms in order to avoid that fate. This story demonstrates that both the “traditional” and the “liberated” are, to some degree, constructions of Tamil womanhood that emerged during a destabilizing period of violence. Notably, the LTTE constructed notions of “traditional” womanhood in its actions as well as in its script for Tamil civilians. Sharika Thiranagama discusses how “even as the LTTE advocated radical forms of relatedness within the movement as forms of exceptional life, it increasingly policed and regulated a version of the conservative normative Tamil family for those who were not cadres.”⁵⁸

While the testimonies of Tamil women who avoided the LTTE are in many ways the exact opposite of the testimonies of voluntary LTTE militants, both perspectives highlight how the construction of Tamil nationalism in the context of violent conflict takes place on and through women’s bodies. Both perspectives also demonstrate how the notion of “traditional” Tamil womanhood, like the LTTE’s notion of the “liberated” Tamil woman, is a product of the violent condition in which it arose. These competing ideas of the Tamil woman, and the discrepancies in the ways that different women find agency, demonstrate the fluidity of gender roles resulting from the destabilizing context of ethnic cleansing. Still, the stories of women who avoided the LTTE, in particular, highlight how Tamil women were alienated from the LTTE script when it was incompatible with their lived experiences under conditions of violence. Therefore, these women exercised agency by strategically adopting and diverging from that script.

For example, one mother said that the LTTE forcibly took her daughter away from her studies, and after her daughter escaped and resumed studying, “a bullet entered her head and she died instantly.”⁵⁹ In contrast to Darshika’s story of joining the LTTE as a response to the loss of access to education, this mother’s daughter had

⁵⁷ “We Lived Under a Mango Tree,” Interview by Radhika Hettiarachchi et. al., *HERSTORIES*, <http://theherstoryarchive.org/photo-essays-vavuniya/we-lived-under-a-mango-tree/>.

⁵⁸ Thiranagama, *In My Mother’s House*, 29.

⁵⁹ “Mullaitivu Letter 58,” letter published on *HERSTORIES*, <http://theherstoryarchive.org/photo-essays-vavuniya/we-lived-under-a-mango-tree/>.

educational opportunities and lost them at the hands of the LTTE. The story complicates the LTTE's narrative of providing opportunity for women to emerge from an existence of "housekeeping, reproduction, and slavish submission to men," as Balasingham says in her book.⁶⁰ Still, the daughter here also shares a core experience with Darshika—the condition of violence interrupted her previous plans for education, showing again how violence destabilizes gendered experience. In this case, however, the LTTE directly victimized a young woman, a far cry from "liberating" her.

Another mother told a similar story of the LTTE committing violence against women:

One night at around midnight, the LTTE surrounded my house and demanded my daughter. I begged them to leave her alone. They dragged her out. I ran after them and grabbed her arm. Then a cadre kicked me, and took my daughter away. On May 13, 2009, I heard my daughter's name on the LTTE radio broadcast of the LTTE dead. My eldest son went into the camp to identify her body and saw her laid out on the ground. I never saw my daughter. After she died, I got her O levels results and she passed her exams well.⁶¹

This story is strikingly similar to Darshika's story of being made to sit on the burning ground with her mother and sister. The key difference is that the LTTE was the agent of violence here, rather than the Sri Lankan military. Read together, these stories once again demonstrate how, regardless of their relationship to the LTTE, conditions of violence lead women's bodies to become the site upon which Tamil ethnicity or national identity is performed.

Thiranagama also challenges "the conventional story told of how Tamils came to identify with a collective discrimination and fear through the 1983 riots," pointing to the discrepancies between the ideologies of different Tamils depending on their particular circumstances.⁶² This again highlights the multiplicities of identities generated amidst violence and reiterates that the LTTE did not in any way represent the entirety of the Sri Lankan Tamil population in Sri Lanka or abroad, even though it claimed that following its script was an essential component of Tamil identity. Thiranagama's interviews with Tamils in both Jaffna and Colombo shows how their experiences diverged from some of the main components of the LTTE script, which included resisting state violence and defending a national homeland. How could Tamils follow this script if they experienced violence from the LTTE as well as the state, and had no clear sense of a "homeland" because they had been displaced? Thiranagama also discusses how the very idea of a single home and life was destabilized

⁶⁰ Balasingham, *Women Fighters*, in "Women Joined the Armed Struggle."

⁶¹ "I tried to protect my children but still lost them," Interview by Radhika Hettiarachchi et. al., *HERSTORIES*, 2:08-3:20. <http://theherstoryarchive.org/videos-mullaitivu/i-tried-to-protect-my-children-but-still-lost-them/>.

⁶² Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House*, 89.

during the period of violence: “The constant remaking of life--a task ceaselessly embarked upon in Sri Lanka--is as much a sign of violence as it is an act of ‘healing.’”⁶³

Amidst this violence, many Tamil families rejected the LTTE script for how Tamil ethnicity should be performed and instead performed their ethnic identities according to their own visions for Sri Lankan society. One mother said, “I have nothing against anyone, whether Sinhalese, Tamil or Muslim. I have a lot of faith in all the religions. All the gods are the same to me. I pray that my family and I can live in peace. What else would I want?”⁶⁴ Many of these feelings of solidarity with other Sri Lankan ethnic and religious groups emerged from their experience of displacement; thus, paradoxically, conditions of violence brought them together with other communities. For example, one mother said, “Earlier we had very little interaction with Sinhala people, now that has changed. We think it’s a good thing.”⁶⁵ Another said that after being displaced, she now lived with “a few Muslim and Sinhala families,” and they all “live well together.”⁶⁶ Another wished that “someday, [her] children might be able to live as equals in society.”⁶⁷ In her interviews with survivors, Thiranagama also found a belief that the “transformation of the political structures” was necessary for change in the country.⁶⁸

Therefore, these women diverged from the LTTE script because it did not align with their experiences under the condition of violence created during the civil war. This demonstrates how Tamil women exercised their own agency by strategically adopting or rejecting the script and moving beyond the narrative of women as emblematic of the nation.

Conclusion

Adopting Neloufer de Mel’s characterization of the Sri Lankan civil war as a “state of emergence,” I argued that this period of violence destabilized ethnic and gender relationships, leading the LTTE and the Tamil women it sought to recruit to renegotiate Tamil women’s identities. I applied Lee Ann Fuji’s framework of a “script” for the performance of ethnicity to LTTE’s doctrine to argue that the LTTE’s “script” for how Tamil women should perform their ethnic and gender identities reveals the conceptions of Tamil womanhood that emerged during this period. The LTTE script represents women as symbols of the nation, at times portraying them as victims and

⁶³ Thiranagama, *In My Mother’s House*, 104.

⁶⁴ “What Else Could I Want?” Interview by Radhika Hettiarachchi et. al., *HERSTORIES*, <http://theherstoryarchive.org/photo-essays-mullaitivu/what-else-could-i-want/>

⁶⁵ “There’s So Much We Want to Forget,” Interview by Radhika Hettiarachchi et. al., *HERSTORIES*, <http://theherstoryarchive.org/photo-essays-vavuniya/theres-so-much-we-want-to-forget/>

⁶⁶ “We Lived Under a Mango Tree,” Interview by Radhika Hettiarachchi et. al., *HERSTORIES*, <http://theherstoryarchive.org/photo-essays-vavuniya/we-lived-under-a-mango-tree/>.

⁶⁷ “I hope our children will live as equals,” Interview by Radhika Hettiarachchi et. al., *HERSTORIES*, <http://theherstoryarchive.org/videos-vavuniya/video-vavuniya-i-hope-our-children-will-live-as-equals/>

⁶⁸ Thiranagama, *In My Mother’s House*, 104.

at times as liberators. It told its supporters to perform their Tamil ethnicity by supporting its mission to defend the Tamil home and family, while it simultaneously told its women that it was completely breaking from oppressive Tamil tradition by fighting for the cause. It appealed to potential supporters and recruits by drawing from their experiences under the immediate condition of violence in which they lived.

For women who avoided the LTTE, and even for some who joined, their experiences before and during the war did not always fit the LTTE's narrative of a transition from "traditional" to "liberated" Tamil womanhood. Tamil women's choice to obey or reject the LTTE script for their self-representation depended in part upon whether their experiences aligned with the LTTE narrative. My analysis therefore suggests that while the ideologies of the LTTE and other Tamil groups draw from the long histories of ethnic relations in Sri Lanka, Tamil communities' relationships to the LTTE during the war were directly shaped by the renegotiation of their identities under the condition of violence that the war created.

This study leaves a number of questions to further explore. In the final section, I was only able to examine a select number of testimonies from Tamil women who rejected the LTTE script and formed their identities outside it. There is much room for a more in-depth study of how women navigated scripts for Tamil womanhood to ultimately avoid LTTE recruitment. In addition, I acknowledge the scholarship that problematizes concept of "agency" that I have used and calls into question the perspective on violence that I take in this project. In a further and more extensive study, I would seek to more fully theorize these terms and examine how the context of the Sri Lankan civil war contributes to our understanding of them.

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