

CONCLUSION

The poetry by Tamil women in Sri Lanka has borne witness to the violence and brutality of the war. Wartime is marked in this poetry as experienced by women, in its varied nuances, in an attempt to bring out the gendered nature of living through war. The Sri Lankan war in the period 1981-2009 is framed by the rise and fall of militant Tamil nationalism which came into prominence as a response to the atrocities committed by the Sri Lankan State. The poetry of women is attentive to this framing and engages with the discourses on the position women in the Tamil nation while forwarding a political critique from the realm of the aesthetic. Yet this critique is not homogenous in nature; instead it is conveyed in different registers and in different forms. While questioning as well as diversifying experiential categories, the poetry disrupts most prominently the notion of a singular voice as well as a singular representation of the ‘Tamil woman’. Written in different accents, carrying traces of their location within the island and the time they were writing in and of, the poetry of Tamil women constitute a rich and diversely gendered witnessing of a historical period.

The thesis has tried to bring out the differences within the articulations of women about various experiences of the Sri Lankan war highlighting the specific spacio-temporal contingencies that have produced these conceptual critiques. As analysed in the first chapter, the poetry produced in the early stage of the rise of militant Tamil nationalism, as seen in the anthology ‘*Sollatha Seithigal*’, is influenced by the opportunities presented by the political climate of the time. It is a reflection of the possibilities which were offered in the nascent period of Tamil nationalism: a time marked with hope and optimism over the possibilities that they thought a separate Tamil homeland might offer. This space that opened up was being used to articulate a stringent critique of the pervasiveness of gender violence. Misogyny in Tamil culture and society could be criticized and the concept of liberation forwarded in the poetry was vehemently against the existing restrictions placed on women by the Tamil society. In comparison, the articulation of liberation in the poetry of women combatants reflected a curious

juxtaposition of anxiety as well as pride. While there was an emphasis on the liberation of Tamil nation, their articulation of the reasons for joining the movement were overwhelmingly articulated on the basis of the gendered violence they had faced or witnessed. The Muslim women, writing in the 1990s, wrote of a notion of liberation from the discourses formed from misogynistic interpretation of the scriptures which were used to fetter and enslave women. This poetry is framed by the period of reformation of Islam in Sri Lanka and the introduction of new restrictions on women's movement and dressing. Similarly the experiences of displacement during war are differently accentuated in different concepts of leaving and return. For e.g. the experiences of leaving in order to join the political movements were differently marked from the experiences of forceful exile. Yet almost all the poetry analyzed in the chapter on exits and returns emphasize the gendered nature of the struggles involved in leaving as well as returning in wartime. Women's poems largely exhibit a lack of nostalgia and instead stress the complications involved in return. By displaying a measured mistrust in their reception of sons who return back from various circumstances, the poetry also complicates the notion of home and homeland.

Poetry also bears witness to the forced erasure of certain lives lived in dissent. In the poetry included in the chapter on witnessing death, there is a stringent criticism of the politics of memorialization followed by the LTTE for the purpose of a creation of a united Tamil nation. The fetish for purity is seen in the construct of the martyr for the nation as an ideal type to be emulated and venerated. Simultaneously, any difference in opinion or criticism to the LTTE's politics was silenced through the branding of the dissenting individuals as traitors. Poetry included in the thesis forms a counter-narrative to these erasures by memorializing figures that were termed as traitors by both the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE. Poetry of remembrance is also a medium used to express those aspects of war which were censored in daily speech. The addressing of those dead within the genre of poetry delineates a concept of justice which starts from a responsibility towards those who have passed away. The repeated invocation and addressing of those who have passed away can also be seen as a work of melancholia as opposed to only an act of recollection. Different conceptualizations of the woman writer

are also presented within poetry. For e.g. in the first chapter, we have seen the poet Sivaramani presenting a view of the woman-poet as somebody who is not born as a poet, but someone who becomes a poet from her experiences of gender violence. In the second chapter, the combatant poet Captain Vanathi has written about a transference of the process of writing, which places women's poetry as a series of links where what is unwritten by a combatant woman is then later written by another. This analogy is influenced by the concept of martyrdom forwarded by LTTE where death of a combatant is one link in a chain of brave deaths, inspiring the next, towards attaining the Tamil nation.

The poetry while reconceptualizing ideas like martyrdom, liberation, movement and identity, also critiques the representation of women within the discourses of nationalism and coins new metaphors of femininity that express their experiences within war. In the second chapter we have seen how the 'raped woman' as a category of representation has been rethought. Poetry has formulated a concept of a collectivity formed around women who are raped as well as women who could be raped. By not isolating the violence of the raped woman and her bruised body, the poetry stresses the ubiquity of violence on women, even within family, and forms a bond of empathy with the raped women of war. Poetry has also taken idealized roles of women in nationalism like the mother and used this figure to articulate critiques of nationalism. Poetry has also been used to mark new experiences that war has exposed women to. In the poetry of combatant women, there is an attempt to chronicle the arduous work they are involved in and the ambiguous nature of agency they feel while operating weaponry or fighting in the battlefield. Similarly in the poetry written by the women in Diaspora, there is a registering of both the possibilities as well as difficulties involved in making home in new contexts. Movement to a new place has allowed a critical questioning of received notions of the Tamil identity and a space for denunciation of the various regulations placed over women's sexuality. Women writers have also critiqued the appropriation of female figures from Tamil myths like Kannaki and Ahalya to perpetuate the regulation of women's sexuality for nationalistic ends. They have also highlighted certain otherwise obscured acts of certain mythical figures, like Kunti's lament over her inability to mourn over her son Karna in

Mahabharata, in order to convey the experience of forced disappearances and murders which cannot be acknowledged otherwise during wartime. The poetry also invites the reader to engage deeply with the diverse nature of experiences that war has made women witness to. Yet it also constantly hints at the limits of this understanding while also conveying to the reader the difficulties in such a conveying of injuries.

The thesis has tried to be attentive to the formal innovations that are seen in the poetry of women. Through ingenious ways, forms of poetry like lament, lyric and the epistolary poem have been recast to convey at the same time both the personal turmoil and the inner thoughts of the speaker in the poem while also forcing the reader to acknowledge the violence of war in the public sphere within which the poet is situated. Yet the thesis is severely limited by my lack of knowledge of the various nuances of the metrical elements of Tamil poetry. Though the study is largely thematic, a simultaneous engagement with the aesthetic value of poetry would have enriched this study further. The reliance on translators for an understanding of the material also meant that I had to overlook some important literature in Tamil language which would have aided the study further. For example, the *Pengal Santhippu* meetings of Tamil women in diaspora have led to literary publications which have not been included in the study. Also a much more nuanced reading of the gendered nature of the Sri Lankan war could have been done if the poetry written by men were also examined.

After the end of the war in the year 2009, the dynamics of the processes of memorialization within Sri Lanka underwent a drastic change. The Sri Lankan state destroyed the cemeteries of the LTTE martyrs and undertook a rampant destruction of all the remnants of the Tamil nationalist struggle. The landscape of the war destroyed regions in the North was then inundated with the flags and war memorials of the Sri Lankan state. May 19, 2009 is celebrated by the Sri Lankan army as the Remembrance Day of the capitulation of LTTE which was later changed into the War Heroes Day in 2017. The same day is remembered as a day of mourning by the Sri Lankan Tamils, but severe restrictions are placed on their rituals and ways of remembrance. The thesis though stops at the year 2009, a comprehensive understanding of the war can only be

possible when we consider the aftermath of the war. The study can be extended to look at how Tamil poetry has marked these restrictions on memory after the war.

Within the period of the study, 1981-2009, there are two important strands of poetry which needs to be included in furthering this research. The first strand of poetry omitted from the study is the poetry of the Malaiyaha Tamils or the Upcountry Tamils. A rich oeuvre of poetry exists which mark the loss of citizenship of the Malaiyaha Tamils and their particular struggles as descendants of plantation workers who were brought from South India by the British. Their poetry is enriched by the influence of forms like ballads that were used in the oral poetry of their ancestors. The second strand of poetry that is not included in this thesis is the poetry written in the aftermath of the tsunami in 2004. The destruction of the landscape and the unexpected loss of loved ones as the natural disaster struck have also been represented in the Tamil poetry. The work started in this thesis will be complete only when both these strands of poetry are read and analyzed.

Lastly and importantly, there has to be an analysis of the politics of the widespread readership and publication of Tamil poetry from Sri Lanka within India. This then brings us to the question of writing being shaped by the demands of publication in a country that has a complicated and hegemonic relationship with Sri Lanka. There are dangers of appropriation of the voice of the Sri Lankan Tamils by subsuming it as a branch of Tamil literature mainly influenced by Tamil Nadu. There are also possibilities of collaboration and solidarity that disturbs the logic of nation-state. Tamil writers from Tamil Nadu, like Kutti Revathy, Malathi Maithri and Sugirtharani have written about the Sri Lankan war. It will be interesting also to understand the dynamics of solidarity through the medium of poetry.