

The symbolic survival of the “living dead”: Narrating the LTTE female fighter in post-war Sri Lankan women’s writing

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jcl**Birte Heidemann**

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Abstract

This article examines the lingering presence of the female militant figure in post-war Sri Lankan women’s writing in English. Through a careful demarcation of the formal–aesthetic limits of engaging with the country’s competing ethno-nationalisms, the article seeks to uncover the gendered hierarchies of Sri Lanka’s civil war in two literary works: Niromi de Soyza’s autobiography *Tamil Tigress* (2011) and Nayomi Munaweera’s debut novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2012). The reading draws attention to the writers’ attempt to “historise” the LTTE female fighter and/or suicide bomber within Sri Lanka’s complex colonial past and its implications for the recent history of conflict. The individual motives of the female fighters to join the LTTE, the article contends, remain ideologically susceptible to, if not interpellated by, the gendered hierarchies both within the military movement and Tamil society at large. A literary portrait of such entangled hierarchies in post-war Sri Lankan texts, the article reveals, helps expose the hegemonic (male) discourses of Sri Lankan nationalism that tend to undermine the war experiences of women.

Keywords

Sri Lanka, gender, war, female militant, LTTE, Niromi de Soyza, Nayomi Munaweera, Achille Mbembe

Introduction

In his justly famous essay “Necropolitics”, Achille Mbembe argues that “[t]o live under late modern occupation is to experience a permanent condition of ‘being in pain’” (2003:

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39). The island of Sri Lanka, particularly the Tamil-populated north, serves as a painful reminder of how a complex legacy of colonization has forged a counter-narrative of competing ethno-nationalisms in a postcolonial context. Beginning with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505, Sri Lanka is touted to have had “the longest period of western colonial exposure” (Phadnis and Ganguly, 2001: 88) by way of three different empires — the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British — which (re)shaped the island into a multi-ethnic society par excellence, consisting of Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, and Christians by the time the British left in 1948. While there can be no doubt that the claims and counter-claims over territory remain colonially engineered, it is “the clashing postcolonial nationalisms” (Parasram, 2012: 915) from *within* that led to the further disintegration of Sri Lanka’s multi-ethnic fabric in the decades following independence. The Sinhala Only Act of 1956, which made Sinhala the only official language, is a glaring testimony to the politicization of Buddhism in post-independence Sri Lanka. By bringing “to reality longer standing Tamil fears of linguistic marginalization within the new nation-state” (Parasram, 2012: 906), the Act tampered with the racial and ethnic tensions that had intensified since the end of colonial rule. This came despite the fact that Tamil would be recognized as a national language alongside Sinhala in 1978, with the Act becoming a proxy narrative for “granting a timeless continuum to Sinhalese presence and ownership of the land” (Salgado, 2007: 3). Framed around questions of ownership, origin, and belonging, the language policies of the 1950s thus fostered a sense of self-hood that resonated with the religious dimension of Sinhalese nationalism wherein the ancient Pali chronicle Mahavamsa served as a proof of Sri Lanka’s Buddhist origins. In a quest for historical legitimacy, the politicization of Buddhism, as Sankaran Krishna puts it, “pushes to the margins the Tamils and other ethnic and religious communities who have no comparable mythic charter of their presence” (2002: 37).¹ Yet, it was not until the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom initiated mostly by Sinhalese mobs — commonly referred to as Black July — that the ethnic *diversity* of the island took a decisive, if not a *divisive*, blow. Violence broke out the night following an ambush by the insurgents of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Jaffna, in which 13 Sinhalese soldiers were killed. At the end of the week-long riots, which spread from the capital of Colombo across the island, 3000 people were dead and up to 200,000 homeless. For the government, however, the alleged atrocities against Tamil civilians were nothing less than “a defensive response to the threat of Tamil militants and [...] a just punishment” (Wickramasinghe, 2014: 300). Fittingly, in an attempt to assess the political weight of Black July, Valli Kanapathipillai compares the violence committed to “waves, created by throwing a stone in the river” that have “repercussions which far exceed the moment of [their] occurrence” (qtd. in Wickramasinghe, 2014: 300). And indeed, the anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983 triggered a three-decade long civil war between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan military, which resulted in the deaths of more than 100,000 people by the time it came to an end in 2009. The fighting took place largely in and around Jaffna peninsula, causing “large-scale displacement within the country and well beyond its borders, where a significant Tamil diaspora has emerged” (Hyndman and De Alwis, 2003: 215). In turn, the north, cut off from the rest of the island for decades, has been turned into “a postcolonial island” (Parasram, 2012: 922) in itself, one that could be imagined through “classical images of island topography — isolation, insulation, smallness” (Fletcher, 2011: 12).

It is here, in the insular north, that Mbembe's notion of necropolitics finds a pronounced expression wherein the civilian population is "subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (2003: 40; emphasis in original). Arguably, in an attempt to overcome such a "form of death-in-life" (Mbembe, 2003: 21), Tamil minorities had little choice but to either "live" or cohabit with the Sri Lankan military, flee the region, if not the country, or join the Tigers — quite often by force — in their fight for a Tamil nation-state in the north and east. Taken together, Sri Lanka's colonial legacy, the clashing nationalist aspirations of both Sinhalese and Tamils, and the state's military interventions have not only partitioned the island along the lines of ethno-political alliances but also contributed to what Anne McClintock calls "the gendering of the national imaginary" (1993: 61) within the Tamil communities.

In an attempt to explore the gendered hierarchies of Sri Lanka's civil war, this article turns to the female militant as the figure of the "living dead", and more importantly, her lingering presence in post-war Sri Lankan women's writing. By "lingering presence", I refer to the political void created by means of either demonizing or denouncing the figure of the Tamil female militant in the discourses on Sri Lanka's civil war, which found a renewed expression in her "symbolic survival" (De Mel, 2004: 90) as a necropolitical yet proto-nationalist agent in post-war literary works. Following Neloufer de Mel's remark that "[t]here is little room [...] outside the creative medium to write and speak about her" (2004: 87), the article moves beyond the populist perception of the woman combatant and/or suicide bomber as being "a ruthless killing machine" (2004: 87), one that "denies, or at least seriously undermines, her historicity and socio-political role in the liberation struggle she dies for" (2004: 79). Instead, by focusing on both a real-life account and a work of fiction, my reading seeks to uncover the aesthetic and generic limits of (re)politicizing the LTTE female combatant in two literary works: Niromi de Soya's *Tamil Tigress: My Story as a Child Soldier in Sri Lanka's Bloody Civil War* (2011), an autobiographical account of one of the first female fighters who joined the LTTE at the age of 17, and Nayomi Munaweera's debut novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2012), a tale of two women — one Sinhalese, one Tamil — whose lives take tragic turns with the onset of war. Moving through her Tamil protagonist Saraswathi across the war-torn north, Munaweera's narrative explores the causes and conditions of becoming a suicide bomber and, in the process, demystifies the dominant (male) discourse that tends "to exoticize or sensationalize women who kill" (Jayasuriya, 2013: 238). From a generic point of view, however, I classify post-war Sri Lankan women's writing as *relived* (De Soya's autobiography) and *reimagined* (Munaweera's novel) modes of representation, both of which bear radical potential "to historicise the LTTE woman combatant within a socio-political continuum" (De Mel 2004: 86) while accounting for more inclusive notions of subjectivity, empathy, and autonomy. Within this, the lingering presence of the militant figure not only re(-)presents itself as a post-war narrative response to its non-recognition as an active agent, but in doing so, it challenges the dominant discourses on Tamil womanhood during the war in which the "aggressive women soldiers and suicide bombers in the LTTE" are typically set off against the "pitiful, poverty-stricken, dependent war victims in refugee camps" (Schrijvers, 1999: 307). Here, the seemingly paradoxical notion of the "living dead" helps articulate the ambivalent position occupied by the Tamil female militant who, at

once victim and perpetrator, hovers on the periphery of two patriarchal systems: the LTTE and the Sri Lankan state. As my reading suggests, it is the highly gendered motives and motivations to become a member, if not a martyr, of a militant movement that expose the masked hegemonies of nationalist discourses in Sri Lanka wherein the end of ethnic violence is often conflated with the end of gendered violence.

Gendered militancy and post-war literature

As Cynthia Enloe writes in her Foreword to Laura Sjoberg and Sandra Via's collection *Gender, War, and Militarism*, "gender, of course, is not always on everyone's mind. Nor is it something a lot of people want to consider" (2010: xi). This, as Sjoberg and Via point out in their Introduction to the book, is largely due to "the fact that genders are variable, discursive, and socially constructed" (2010: 4). Yet, the very constructedness of the category, they insist, "does not make them [...] any less real" (2010: 4), particularly — I would add — in times of war where traditional gender roles tend to shift and become less rigidly defined as "strong", "active", and "progressive" (male) versus "weak", "passive", and "conservative" (female). Although, in postcolonial Sri Lanka, "one's ethnic background has become a primary means of identification" (Schrijvers, 1999: 312), a number of feminist scholars working on, or from within, the context of war have emphasized the need to take gender analysis as seriously as ethnicity in order to fully comprehend, if not counter, the inherently masculine discourse(s) of nation building.² In a literary context, De Mel³ observes that "a feminist representation of the women combatant/suicide bomber would [...] make visible her agentic and resourceful moments [...] to understand the terms on which she negotiates with patriarchy; [and] to see her actions as strategies of coping and (symbolic) survival" (2004: 90). Here, if the notion of symbolic survival is representative of the very act of writing itself, then my own reading of the Tamil female militant's symbolic *survival in death* as her "lingering" presence in post-war Sri Lankan literature helps recover her submerged narrative voice from a doubly marginalized subject position of being in a permanent state of pain — not only within the traditional Tamil society, but also in the ranks of the LTTE. As Kim Jordan and Myriam Denov observe, such "experiences of female soldiers" often generate "a disruption in conventional gender constructions [...] as long as their exclusion does not disrupt the masculine image of warfare" (2007: 57–58). While I do not wish to suggest a synergy between national crisis and women's liberation, my reading of two female militant figures reveals that gender hierarchies may indeed be *disrupted*, if not necessarily dissolved, in the context of war — something that, as Jennifer Hyndman and Malathi de Alwis note, is "rarely mentioned" (2003: 212) in post-conflict discourses on Sri Lanka. Instead, much of feminist scholarship has been preoccupied with how women's war experiences tend to be dismissed, if not entirely denied, by the patriarchal leadership of either states or militant movements (or both) once war is over. For instance, in *Women in Terrorism: Case of the LTTE* (2012), Tamara Herath remains doubtful whether the Tamil women she interviewed for her study — all associated with the LTTE in one way or another — would be able to maintain some sort of equal status and/or opportunities in the post-war era, though it is equally questionable whether female fighters were able to undermine "the androcentric nature of the organisation" (2012: 133) in the first place. In other

words, given that gender equality does not equate with war victory, women's attempts to attain national agency appear to have been "short-lived" (Handrahan, 2004: 436) during and after the war. Rather, there is a marked tendency in militant movements such as Sri Lanka's LTTE merely to relegate women to the symbolic realm of nationhood as the "bearers of the nation" (McClintock, 1993: 62). Sure enough, when it comes to the moral reasoning (or ruse) of revolutionary movements that "suggests an acceptance of women 'as equals'" (Jordan and Denov, 2007: 57), there are significant differences between rhetoric and reality: "nowhere has a national or socialist revolution brought a full feminist revolution in its train", McClintock laments, and "nowhere has feminism in its own right been allowed to be more than the maidservant to nationalism" (1993: 78).

The current wave of Sri Lankan women's writing in English responds to such ideological impasses of gender, nationalism, and militancy "with a confidence that the earlier generation [of writers] could not command" (Wijesinha, 2004: 307). The very immediacy of the event allows them to recast the country's ethno-political divisions from a unique vantage point; either by setting the story in the past or by casting a retrospective gaze over the post-conflict period by means of recollecting childhood and family memories. Surely, writing about the war and its immediate aftermath from the safe distance of the diaspora risks the dangers of farsightedness of political history, owing largely to the rigid censorship regime imposed by (former) President Rajapakse. And yet, during the onset of war in the early 1980s, as large parts of the population were forced to leave their homeland, Sri Lankan literature in English became defined by "two distinct, asymmetrical" (Salgado, 2007: 4) canons of "resident" and "diasporic" writers. The latter — Michael Ondaatje and Romesh Gunsekera being the most prominent among them — have been accused of portraying Sri Lanka as "hybrid", "exotic", and even "Orientalist", mostly for their earlier work, by local critics and commentators (see Jayasuriya and Halpé, 2012; Ponzanesi, 2014; Ranasinha, 2013). In the post-war political climate, however, a number of scholars have argued that "a writer's location should not preclude that writer from imaginatively engaging with what happens in Sri Lanka" (Jayasuriya and Halpé, 2012: 19). This is indeed the case with "the burgeoning of Sri Lankan writing" in the aftermath of war, which significantly "lessened 'the burden of representation' on diasporic writers" (Ranasinha, 2013: 36) like De Soya and Munaweera, who left the country both for personal and political reasons during different stages of the conflict.⁴ This, as Ruvani Ranasinha asserts, is largely to do with these writers' willingness "to engage with politics and explore Sri Lanka's past in order to understand, rather than simply rehearse its conflicted present", something that has "been particularly warmly received by English-speaking readerships in Sri Lanka" (2013: 36) and beyond. Given the country's colonial history and the monolingual education policies in the post-independence period, it is important to note that only a fraction of Sri Lanka's population is fluent in English. Instead, it remains a minority language almost exclusively spoken by the country's westernized elite. Having said that, it is precisely the "very vexed position" (Jayasuriya and Halpé, 2012: 17) of English in Sri Lanka that has the potential to break "linguistic neutral ground" (2012: 18) for the literature produced after the end of war. Indeed, notwithstanding its contaminated colonial legacy, it is tempting enough to consider English for the reconciliatory role it may play in a post-war literary context. For instance, far from "neutral" in a political sense, the current wave of

women writers — both resident and diasporic — does not shy away from dealing with issues as pressing and precarious as the gendered violence of war. By staging women as central characters of their plots, these writers explore how the discriminatory policies of the state have transformed into full-blown warfare along and across the lines of gender, ethnicity, class, and caste.⁵ Considering the global context of production and reception, Sri Lankan women's writing in recent years makes literature a necessary intervention in a stifled political climate which, as De Mel notes, "normalises certain forms of violence and pathologises others" (2004: 76). In what follows, my reading of the two texts — *Tamil Tigress* and *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* — engages with how such pathologies of "being in pain" are projected through the figure of the female militant, in an attempt to delineate the literary-aesthetic parameters of post-war Sri Lankan literature as well as its productive engagement with forms of female agency across the generic divide.

Niromi de Soyza's *Tamil Tigress*

The first half of De Soyza's autobiography documents her coming of age in the northern city of Jaffna, and the growing violence against Tamils in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In De Soyza's words, an "eerie silence prevailed over" (2011: 155)⁶ her hometown as thousands of people fled the country following the anti-Tamil pogrom of Black July — an event that marks the beginning of the permanent condition of "being in pain" for the Tamil population in the north. Indeed, in the aftermath of the 1983 atrocities, Jaffna "no longer had the ordinary hustle and bustle of a normal town" but had been transformed into a place of necropolitical proportions, where the "streets were now inhabited by anxious citizens, frightened refugees, arrogant military and furtive militants" (31). By the end of 1983, as De Soyza recounts, the city "had experienced a change of personality" (31), one that bears an uncanny resemblance to Frantz Fanon's reading of Algiers under colonial occupation as "a place of ill fame, [...] a crouching village, a town on its knees" (Fanon qtd. in Mbembe, 2003: 27). Regardless of its desolated state, or precisely for that reason, Sri Lanka's "insular capital" (38) became a fertile ground to a host of militant Tamil organizations, drawing support from mainly young men who refused to surrender to the Sinhalese military. As the latter's aerial bombings began to destroy the Tamil neighbourhoods in the early 1980s, De Soyza — a teenager by now — became fixated with the idea of joining the Tigers and playing her part in defending her community: "We were so in awe of the Tigers we managed to justify everything they did" (51). Although De Soyza's blind admiration for the LTTE comes as a surprising political shift, her loyalties for the Tamil community as a whole remain constant throughout her adolescence, beginning with her association with the Tigers' student wing SOLT (Students Organisation of Liberation Tigers) at Jaffna University. Despite her sheltered middle-class upbringing, in the weeks and months following Black July, De Soyza comes to the realization that "Tamils collectively were being targeted as the enemy — whether they were separatist or nationalist, militant or politician, young or old, man or woman" (43). Much like Sinhalese nationalism, wherein ethnic identity became the most precarious link to nation building, being Tamil was reason enough to be tortured, maimed, or murdered. Inversely, it is the same ethnic denominator that was motivation enough for De Soyza to dedicate her life to the Tamil "cause", no matter her own privileged family background.

When De Soyza and her best friend Ajanti join the ranks of the LTTE, however, they are confronted with a different kind of marginalization, as women were not allowed to fight on the frontlines: “even if I had the courage”, De Soyza muses, “it wouldn’t be so easy for me to support the freedom struggle because I was not a man” (35). Gender hierarchies in a militant movement, she comes to realize, were not much different from those in the traditional Tamil society, which worshipped “goddess Kali [as] the most valiant god of them all and yet women were expected to remain docile” (36). Apropos of such symbolic (mis)empowerment, “once a female Tiger in full combat gear” (62) made it onto the cover page of the official LTTE magazine *Kalathil* in 1987, De Soyza and Ajanti are eventually enlisted as combatants. But far from suggesting “a categorical shift in the construction of ‘woman’ from ‘brave mother’ to that of ‘woman warrior’” (Schrijvers, 1999: 318), they are frowned upon by fellow male comrades who wondered whether these girls, with their western-style short haircuts and visibly privileged habitus, would actually be able to fight and sustain the life of a guerrilla. In fact, “[t]he combatants that joined in the mid-1980s”, Tamara Herath asserts, “had to continuously prove themselves in order to claim their place beside male fighters as competent combatants” (2012: 171). “Those who joined later, around 1990”, Herath goes on to contend, “did not feel that they had to work to gain respect from the male combatants [...] because their roles had already been defined within this gendered space” (2012: 171). Hence, rather than developing a distinctly female perspective within such gendered space, the women merely *imitated* their male comrades through demeanour and dress code. While such male mimicry clearly “challenges the social conventions of the symbolically bejewelled and sari-clad women as the ideal of normative femininity in Tamil society” (Herath, 2012: 186), it does not necessarily translate into gender equality in the movement. On the contrary, “wearing combat fatigues or male shirts and trousers, and carrying a gun” (2012: 186) gestures towards a bodypolitik that privileges “the achievement of a separate state of Tamil Eelam above the promotion of emancipation of women” (2012: 133).

Although, in time, De Soyza’s male comrades treat her with more respect, she grows increasingly ill-at-ease with the irrationality of violence from within the movement:

I was beginning to question the ethics under which our commanders and we were operating. [...] From top to bottom in our organisation, everyone did whatever they pleased so long as they could justify it as being for the good of the organisation. (280)

After the killings of her closest friends in the cadre — particularly her childhood friend and confidante Ajanthi — De Soyza begins to question the political path chosen by the movement: “All I wanted was to achieve Tamil Eelam, where we could be free. But it seemed to me that I had gone about it the wrong way. I had chosen violence to combat violence” (280). This realization is not only indicative of her ideological disenchantment with the futility of *all* violence — of both the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE — but also of her inner struggle following the killings of her fellow comrades: “Now, without them, and physically weak, I was at last seeing things for what they were” (289). True to its generic character, De Soyza’s autobiographical account is characterized by a certain *affective* quest for self-actualization and self-acceptance from start to finish. Yet, her recollections of the years before and shortly after joining the movement revolve around

the *collective* pain of Sri Lankan Tamils that she struggles to personify, while simultaneously justifying her unwavering commitment to fighting for the Tamil cause. In line with De Mel's observation that "conviction and humanity come into *conflict* at heightened moments of crisis" (2004: 82), it is only towards the end of the narrative that De Soyza's ethical quest for separating the self from the collective enables her to forge a confessional narrative of "combatant's fatigue, moments of hesitancy, anxiety and questioning" (De Mel, 2004: 81). Such autobiographical moment, in turn, represents a "counterpoint" (2004: 81) to a political discourse that effectively silences the agential capacities of female militants.

Despite her loyalty to the LTTE's nationalist cause, De Soyza comes to the stark realization that the women's cadre was reduced to both a conditioned and a conditional position — "a temporary place" (Handrahan, 2004: 438) — in the movement, which the leadership could pass on to someone else on a whim. Years later, from her Australian exile, she recounts her disillusionment with a patriarchal leadership that barely acknowledged female militants' contributions to the nationalist struggle, let alone the Tamil women outside the movement. For De Soyza, becoming one of the first female combatants of the LTTE was as much about fighting for a Tamil nation-state as it was about fighting for equal status of Tamil women. Although both these objectives remained unfulfilled, she does not hold the female fighters responsible for the movement's shortcomings:

We had begun social change [...], hoping to elevate the status of women in the conservative Tamil society and empower them. Little had I realised then that following the lead of a totalitarian male and volunteering to become suicide bombers was not women's liberation. (300)

Yet, it is not De Soyza's determination to join a male-dominated militant movement alone but it is her decision to *leave* the LTTE which gestures towards the agential capacities of female combatants. Although De Soyza's departure from the movement came at the expense of her exile from the island — first to a boarding school in India, and then to Australia where she sought political asylum — she remained unconditionally loyal to her female comrades even after leaving the movement, particularly the Black Tiger suicide squad members whom she considered to be "brave and heroic" (300). Here, if De Soyza's exile from an unrealized national realm could be read as her "symbolic survival", it is this very act of survival that enables her autobiographical moment to *enliven* the buried subjectivities of other Tamil women — the "living dead" par excellence — either within or outside of the LTTE. Admittedly, being one of the first female soldiers to join the LTTE and the first female author of an autobiography on the war, it is only befitting that her moment of departure from the Tigers holds as much symbolic significance as her arrival. By removing her rifle from the shoulder and her cyanide capsule from the neck, De Soyza divests herself, quite literally, of a protective shield behind which she had been hiding for too long: "This was the sign that I had broken all my ties with the Tigers. I felt naked and vulnerable" (292). If the casting off of (male) combat gear is mere testimony to De Soyza's own symbolic survival, then it is precisely the moment of vulnerability that serves as an affective reminder of the agential capacities of female militants — not as passive recipients of a patriarchal system, but as active agents of their own choosing.

Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*

Like De Soyza, Munaweera's Tamil protagonist Saraswathi is a teenager at the time of joining the LTTE. However, the young women's life trajectories, including their motivations to become a member of the movement, are quite different from one another. While it is debatable whether "a notion of authenticity [is] available only in autobiography", De Mel is right to remark that "[l]iterary portrayals of militants and combatants have the license to vary significantly from the official propaganda about them" (2004: 80). Munaweera's novel, for its part, explores "the combatant's inner self" in a way that can only be "portrayed in fictionalised treatments of their stories" (2004: 80), as it sketches an intimate portrait of how Saraswathi is brought into the fold of the movement's most exclusive cadre, the Black Tiger suicide squad. Yet, instead of subscribing to the same sensationalist rhetoric that reduces the female suicide bomber into a "*cause celebre* in the world of revolutionary warfare" (Herath, 2012: 154), Munaweera puts emphasis on how her protagonist is motivated by the most private of intentions — to avenge the falling apart of her home, her family and, ultimately, that of her body.

Set in a village at the northern shore, the opening chapter to Saraswathi's story paints a deceptively peaceful picture of how "the lagoon reflects the sunlight like the shards of a thousand broken mirrors" (Munaweera, 2012: 123).⁷ True to its "broken" symbolism, a closer look at the seemingly serene imagery echoes the "eerie silence" to which De Soyza refers when describing war-torn Jaffna. With the progression of the narrative, it becomes increasingly clear that the shoreline has become a deserted, almost deadly, place, one that is littered with bodies — both dead and alive — of the "living dead". In a striking passage that describes how the village children have grown accustomed to the idea of playing war, the narrator muses:

In the sand lie many things left by the dead: shreds of uniform, ripped flak jackets, hard round helmets like buried skulls. Sometimes the children scrape their toes on sharp fragments of bone. [...] Small soldiers fighting small rebels. They lift sticks to their shoulders, make loud machine gun ratttttttttt sounds before dropping and rolling away [...] They are only acting what they have seen. (137–8)

The northern beaches, as it were, have been gradually transformed into a necropolitical habitat of the "living dead". For the soldiers stationed in the north, Saraswathi believes, the entire Tamil population is under general suspicion: "They think any of us, man, woman, child may be bomb strapped" (136). Such suspicion, however, is not entirely unwarranted, as the LTTE is rather successful in recruiting those who have already been used to *playing* war, including Saraswathi's two older brothers. Given the family's association with the LTTE, her third brother was last seen by a neighbour before "soldiers came for him" in a white van that was "swerving to a stop in a cloud of red dust" (126). With the male siblings either recruited or disappeared, it does not take long for the LTTE to come for the only two children left, Saraswathi and her younger sister Luxshmi. While their parents seem reluctant to let go of their daughters, the unwanted visits of young female Tigers become more frequent in time and persuasive in tone: "[...] Women are good for so much more than getting married and having babies. Our Leader teaches that women are as brave as men. [...] What bigger aspiration could you have than for her to fight for her people?" (142).

Saraswathi's story soon reaches its tragic climax when a group of Sinhalese soldiers break into the family home: "They break into me. Break me. Break into me. Break me. [...] Until this body is no longer mine. Until I am only a limp, bleeding, broken toy. Tiger Bitch!" (145). The rape denotes a watershed moment in Saraswathi's life, one that triggers her slow and silent transformation into the realm of the "living dead", for being raped, she believes, "means to be broken. It means forever" (146). Such permanent state of "being broken" gradually invades her familial space, as her mother — contrary to her initial concerns — mounts pressure on Saraswathi to leave home and join the Tigers to ward off the fear of family shame. Although Saraswathi begs her mother to let her stay, she soon realizes that she has no choice but to give in to the "limited options for a sexually violated young woman in a highly patriarchal society where women's sexuality is linked to the moral virtue of the nation state" (Herath, 2012: 155). Notwithstanding her mental and physical militarization at the training camp, Saraswathi is unable to shake off the memory of her rape, which haunts her repeatedly in her sleep. Despite, or perhaps precisely because of, "harbour[ing] deep-rooted feelings of impurity from a violated body" (Herath, 2012: 155), Saraswathi becomes fascinated with the idea of martyrdom the moment she discovers the portrait gallery of those who sacrificed their lives for the cause: "They are pure, with their oneness of purpose, whereas I am corrupt and insincere in the love I profess for [the Leader]" (180). Thus, it is hardly surprising that she is "ecstatic" when she receives the news that Prabhakaran has selected her as one of his Black Tigers: "He wants me! He has chosen me!" (186). From that point onwards, Saraswathi grows determined and doubt-free about her assigned task: to kill a Tamil politician-turned-traitor at a rally in central Colombo. However, given the trauma of being gang-raped, it remains questionable whether Saraswathi's determination to sacrifice her life is inspired by political motives alone or is rather a response to the "previous violence [...] against her own body" (Jayasuriya, 2013: 235) by Sinhalese soldiers. Conversely, the very corporeality of such "war of body on body" (Mbembe, 2003: 37) may be read as a ritual of coming clean, one that would make it impossible to determine who is the victim and who the perpetrator: "I smile at the thought of our bodies, mine and the traitor's mingled on the ground, in pieces, indistinguishable" (186).

In Munaweera's novel, the notion of the female body as weapon is central to the depiction of Saraswathi's suicide mission. With a suicide belt hidden behind a fake pregnant belly, her body "is transformed into a 'woman-arsenal'" (Decker, 1990: 192) that pushes "the essentialist views of women's socio-biological roles as nurturers" (Herath, 2012: 147) to the extremes. Instead, in an ironic twist of nationalist ideologies, the act of suicide bombing "contains a powerful paradox in the self-annihilation that is simultaneously regarded as life-giving to a community" (De Mel, 2004: 77) in which "the culture of sacrifice" is "deeply embedded" (Herath, 2012: 147). By "gifting their life" (Herath, 2012: 144) to the nationalist cause, the female suicide bombers appear to act within traditional Tamil gender roles which, in turn, are both used and abused by the LTTE's patriarchal leadership. Accordingly, in contrast to the male mimicry by the women's cadre De Soyza belonged to, Saraswathi performs what Jeffrey Louis Decker calls "maternal mimicry" (1990: 187). Here, the re-appropriation of the traditional Tamil dress of the sari — particularly one draped around a growing belly — transforms into "a 'technique of camouflage' for guerrilla warfare" (Decker, 1990: 193). By extension, given her

months-long military training, Saraswathi's appropriation of the sari becomes a mere imitation of the woman she can no longer identify with: "She is a ghost from a different time and place" (201). With the prospect of martyrdom approaching, Saraswathi appears to have established "a moment of supremacy" within her body which, as Mbembe would put it, "becomes the very uniform of the martyr" (2003: 37). Thus, it is not her dress but her bodily demeanour that reveals her "laboring under the sign of the future" (Mbembe, 2003: 37). Past and present, as it were, are being cast off the moment Saraswathi sets out to perform her "maternal mimicry": "I search for my own eyes. In them I see Hope... and that is Everything" (201).

But when a group of soldiers board the very bus Saraswathi is about to blow up, her determination begins to falter, as her mind races back and forth in time and space — to the many racist insults she had been subjected to, and to the rape which, just like the destructive force of the bomb blast, shattered her dream of becoming a school teacher in one instant. By avenging her rape in the name of national liberation, Saraswathi believes, she would no longer be stigmatized as a victim to the ethnic "other" but remembered as a national heroine by both her own family and the "national family" (McClintock, 1993: 63) of Tamil freedom fighters: "the new cadres will [...] be inspired by my fearlessness, my dedication. Amma and Appa will be proud. Luxshmi will be the sister of a martyr. I cannot give more than this" (203). Yet, in spite of giving everything, Saraswathi's martyrdom becomes mere cannon fodder to the masked hegemonies of Sri Lanka's gendered nationalisms in which "women who are victimized sexually are doubly victimized"; not only by the rapist(s) but equally "by the order to commit a suicide bombing from the male hierarchy" (Jayasuriya, 2013: 245) of their very own ethnic community. Thus, while it is tempting to read the act of suicide bombing as engendering a transformation from victimhood to agency, it is rather its "symbolic violence [...] as *statement*" (De Mel, 2004: 76) against a permanent condition of "being in pain" on the part of the female bomber that Munaweera's novel brings to the fore. Contrary to Mbembe's reading of Paul Gilroy's work on slave suicides, wherein choosing death over continued suffering may indeed "be represented as agency", the case of the LTTE female suicide bomber further complicates the notion that "death is precisely that from and over which I have power" (2003: 37). Instead, through its *fictional* intervention into a suicide bomber's interior life, the novel reveals that Munaweera's protagonist's (final) actions, notwithstanding her temporary disruption of the dominant order, remain subservient to multiple patriarchal structures at work: the conservative Tamil community she is born into, the Sri Lankan military that "breaks into her", and, ultimately, the very militant movement that promises to avenge her "unburied pain" (Mbembe, 2003: 35).

Conclusion

While the two texts under discussion forge a nuanced critique of the gendered nationalist hierarchies in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, they do so within the generic parameters set forth by their narrative form(s). For instance, Niromi de Soya's construction of the figure of the Tamil female militant stems from her own authorial self-positioning, supported by other parabiographical moments, elements, and motivations, including those of fellow female fighters like her friend Ajanthi. As such, De Soya's book closely resonates

with the emergent subgenres of “life writing” and “testimonio”, which, unlike the single subject-centred autobiography, narrate rather collective and communal histories through which the author negotiates a sense of selfhood. Since the multiple subject positions involved in collective narratives call for imaginative modes or devices of narration, such as dialogue, characterization, focalization, and flashbacks, *Tamil Tigress* “crosses boundaries between fact and fiction, memory and history, selves, and others” (Döring, 2006: 72). Thus, while mediating the collective struggle of Sri Lankan Tamils through her own “true self” (2006: 73), De Soyza’s autobiographical account mimics many formal-aesthetic devices of fiction “— sometimes drawing these distinctions, but more often blurring them” (2006: 72). The fictional form of *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, on the other hand, enables Munaweera to explore the inner struggle — one that is motivated by personal rather than political reasons — of her Tamil protagonist Saraswathi. In fact, the aesthetic imaginary of the fictional form allows her to set these affective trajectories against another protagonist, the Sinhalese Yasodhara, who is portrayed as the *doppelgänger* of her Tamil counterpart. By employing two female protagonists from across the ethnic divide, the novel succeeds in presenting a balanced perspective on Sri Lanka’s polarized political identities at different stages of the war. Although Munaweera’s Sinhalese protagonist was not central to my analysis, her story may be read as a mirror narrative to the two female combatants discussed here, as it clearly inflects the differential sameness of the two warring sides: Tamils and Sinhalese; men and women; state and insurgents; the nation and its margins.

In drawing attention to the individual motivations of Tamil female militants to join and/or leave the movement, my reading has sought to expose their attempts to navigate and, ultimately, negate the permanent state of “being in pain” to which they (and their community) are confined. Although the motivations of a former “Tamil Tigress” reflecting on her role in the LTTE, and that of a Sinhalese novelist narrating the life story of a Tamil suicide bomber may be quite different, if not disputable, the two texts share a common concern for uncovering the powerful ambiguities associated with the ideas of gender, ethnicity, and nationalism. For there is neither a “single narrative of the nation” (McClintock, 1993: 67), nor “only one feminism” or “one patriarchy” (1993: 77), the result is a complex portrayal of the effects of political violence on the lives of Tamil female militants who remain both invisible and intangible in the official narratives, largely because their “bodies are literally erased by their actions” (Jayasuriya, 2013: 234). By contrast, both De Soyza’s and Munaweera’s narratives foster a literary historicist reading of the LTTE female combatant within Sri Lanka’s conflictual past as well as its colonial legacy. By portraying the female militant as a vulnerable yet politically motivated individual who simultaneously balks at *and* bolsters her commitment to the cause, the two writers challenge populist political discourses that either dismiss or demonize the female militant “much more than they do male suicide bombers” (Jayasuriya, 2013: 238). Correspondingly, the two narratives enliven the figure of the female suicide bomber as a “human being” who, in the words of Mbembe, “truly becomes a subject [...] through which [...] she is cast into the incessant movement of history” (2003: 14; emphasis in original).

Finally, in the epilogue of *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, Sinhalese protagonist Yasodhara responds to news reports that proclaim the end of Sri Lanka’s civil war. For

Yasodhara, however, the memories of the victims of violence far outweigh the relief over the newly found “peace”, as her sister Lanka was among the many casualties of Saraswathi’s suicide attack:

I dream of the eighty thousand who did not live into this moment. Those who were left behind in the lagoons and paddy fields, in the cement jail cells, in the white vans [...] those who were taken as children, those who were pierced by shrapnel, those who lost limbs to the landmines, those who lost eyes, hearts, livers, [...] those who were called to strap bombs on and detonate themselves. I dream of the one that I can give a name to: Lanka Rajasinghe. And that other, her unnamed, unloved assassin. (224)

The “contrapuntal” dimension of Yasodhara’s reflections on Sri Lanka’s recent past not only raises daunting ethical questions about victim and perpetrator, collective responsibility and individual guilt, but it calls upon re(-)membering the war’s “living dead” as complex human beings shaped by their personal grievances and political motives. Although the war may have ended in formal terms, the ghosts of the past linger on, leaving the imprints of their symbolic survival on the post-conflict present. Such “present itself”, as Mbembe reminds us, “is but a moment of vision [...] of the freedom not yet come” (2003: 39). The current wave of post-war Sri Lankan women’s writing in English serves as a periodic reminder of the frail foundations of such “freedom not yet come”. But these literary passages can only produce *tentative* visions of a peaceful future unless they are accompanied by vernacular imagination that does not solely cater for the Anglophone readership in the west.

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Notes

1. For a critical discussion of Tamil nationalism and the claim to a Tamil nation-state in the north, see A. J. Wilson’s *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism: Its Origins and Development in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (2000), Sumantra Bose’s *States, Nations, Sovereignty: Sri Lanka, India and the Tamil Eelam Movement* (1994), Amita Shastri’s “The Material Basis for Separatism: The Tamil Eelam Movement in Sri Lanka” (1990), and Kristian Stokke and Anne Kirsti Ryntheit’s “The Struggle for Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka” (2000).
2. See, for instance, Joyce P. Kaufman and Kristen P. Williams’ *Women and War: Gender Identity and Activism in Times of Conflict* (2010), Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, Dina Francesca Haynes, and Naomi Cahn’s *On the Frontlines: Gender, War, and the Post-Conflict Process* (2011), and Carol Cohn’s edited collection *Women and Wars* (2013).
3. A provisional list of De Mel’s insightful readings on the intersections of gender, nation, and militancy includes *Women & the Nation’s Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka* (2001), *Militarizing Sri Lanka: Popular Culture, Memory and Narrative in the Armed Conflict* (2007), and “Gendering the New Security Paradigm in Sri Lanka” (2009).
4. After resigning from the LTTE, De Soyza was forced into Australian exile where she has been living ever since; Munaweera spent most of her childhood in Nigeria before settling in the US.

5. In addition to Munaweera's novel, see Ameena Hussein's *The Moon in the Water* (2009), Ru Freeman's *A Disobedient Girl* (2009), and Minoli Salgado's *A Little Dust on the Eyes* (2014).
6. Subsequent references are to this (2011) edition of *Tamil Tigress* and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.
7. Subsequent references are to this (2012) edition of *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

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