

## **Love Marriage: Women in Sri Lankan Civil War**

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The tiny, tear-drop shaped island of Sri Lanka has been the home of the majority Sinhalese and the minority ethnic Tamils for centuries. This co-existence was not always peaceful and Sri Lanka became the site of one of the bloodiest civil wars in South Asia in the 20th century which lasted for nearly three decades. The contemporary events of the Sinhala Tamil conflict that began in the early 1980s and formally ended in 2009 have been chronicled in the literature of the island for literature is very frequently used as a means of chronicling ancient and contemporary events as it lends itself as a fluid historical and literary interface.

This article aims to examine one Sri Lankan civil war that transformed the feminine agency within that context of violence and how the survivors chose to bear witness to it. For this purpose, I have taken up *Love Marriage* (2008) [LM], a novel written by V.V. Ganeshanathan. She was born in a Sri Lankan Tamil family in the United States (Ganeshanathan, *Biography*). She belongs to the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora and her family had left Sri Lanka and settled abroad because of the disturbances back home. Her debut novel, *Love Marriage* published in April 2008 had appeared on the long list for the Orange Prize.

The novel is narrated by the daughter of the family and focuses on how the women experienced war, love and exile through the three decades of the Sri Lankan civil war. There is a compelling need for these stories to be told in order to understand how the violence possibly brought about a permanent change in their traditional gender roles and the how the conflict foray into public arenas and roles they were previously barred from.

Through the novel, the author discusses the profile of the LTTE female cadres, direct and indirect combatants, and what motivated those women and girls to take up arms against the government and die a violent death as suicide bombers. The novel portrays how the non-combatants or the propagandist, who did not participate in the war aided the movement in their role as propagandists and while others bore witness and chose to tell their story so that the world could learn about their pain and suffering. The women caught in the civil war in Sri Lanka have been deeply affected and their lives have been transformed in multiple ways. Thus there is an urgent need to produce reliable knowledge expressing

their experiences. The narrator journalist acts as a feminist researcher or advocate who is extremely vigilant and seeks the untold and unheard stories. The listeners of these stories help the women to bear witness to the trauma, they work like therapists and in the process help them reclaim their feminine agency since the most private experiences of the women need to be viewed within the larger socio-political patterns.

The Sri Lankan government's attitude towards the Tamil minority is cited as the primary reason for the rise of the LTTE. The LTTE emerged with a thousand heads, like the mythical Hydra and became one of the deadliest terrorist organisations with its own army, navy, and air force wings that aimed at nothing less than a separate Tamil Eelam at whatsoever possible cost. They had an executive committee, an administrative unit, naval and air units, a propaganda section and a suicide unit making them one of the most structured terrorist organisations in history (South Asia Terrorism Portal, *Liberation Tigers*). The female LTTE soldiers could be categorized as combatants and non-combatants. While the combatants who become suicide bombers were engaged in a more direct front of conflict, the non-combatants who became propagandists aided the movement in various other roles highlighting the way men and women participated in the propaganda machinery of the LTTE and how the movement helped in transforming the lives of women.

Velupillai Prabhakaran, the founder of LTTE, claimed that only women with a revolutionary consciousness could become a revolutionary force and "Only such a revolutionary force can destroy the shackles of oppression" (qtd. in Allison 45). He acknowledged the importance of the women within the organization and considered the development and rise of the women's military wing as one of the greatest accomplishments of the LTTE (de Mel, *Women and the National* 208). But this idea of an empowered female terrorist is countered by Malathi de Alwis who questions the nature of such empowerment of women during times of crisis, since it was unclear whether the female combatants were liberated or subjugated, or agents of change or victims themselves ("Changing Role" 682; Abeysekera 89-90).

The women who had joined the LTTE movement were empowered in a certain way because they were encouraged to fight along with the men in emancipating Eelam. In reality, the LTTE encouraged women's active participation because it needed fresh cadres for its ranks and thus, they supported the empowerment of women, but within the bounds of patriarchy. There were two types of female

participants in the LTTE movement, the active combatants and the non-combatants who, nevertheless, undertook challenging missions. Female cadres like Janani, in *Love Marriage*, who felt active service in the LTTE had the option of helping the movement in their capacity as non-combatants. Traditional gender roles were reversed with the participation of women in the civil war as combatants, and it "created a perception of equality that empowered women to believe in themselves" (Herath 172). The movement helped in changing the contours of the lives of women in Sri Lankan society.

A fictional narrative like Ganeshanathan's *Love Marriage* (2008), can be seen as an interplay between fact and fiction; the collective memories of the communities are actual historical facts while the personal recollections of the characters are the fictionalized accounts of the Sri Lankan civil war presented from a Tamil perspective.

In *Love Marriage*, Kumaran and his daughter Janani were former soldiers of the LTTE who left their lives of direct combat and took up non-combatant roles of propagandists and fund-raisers for the LTTE. *Love Marriage*, blends the first person account of Yalini, a Tamil girl, with the political narrative of the civil war in Sri Lanka. Yalini became aware of how the Sri Lankan civil war had really affected her family when Kumaran and his eighteen year old daughter, Janani, came to live with them. They came to live with Yalini's family since Kumaran was suffering from terminal cancer. Kumaran had been allowed to leave the LTTE with the permission of the leadership and "...They let him go and, in doing so, made him promise not only his loyalty, but also ours. *They let him go only in body* [emphasis mine]. (LM, 35).

Yalini's cousin Janani was also a Tamil Tigress like her head mother. According to Yalini's description, Janani had "strongly muscled arms. Her bearing too, was slightly military... Janani did not follow me but rather walked alongside me... Her eyes darting around, assessing everything carefully. She was not nervous, but her eyes were watchful.... She did not look disoriented or confused" (LM, 39). Janani's face was blank and cold because she had "not yet accustomed herself to the idea of a future" (LM, 261) since there was no future in the place where she came from.

In the past, increasing discrimination and violence against the Tamils had forced people like Vani and Murali, Yalini's parents, to leave the island, while Kumaran and others stayed back and in this process changed the course of their lives and

that of their children. Kumaran and his un-named wife joined the movement to seek redress for the Tamils while his daughter Janani was "educated as a radical ... because she had grown up inside the movement" (LM 260). He had named his daughter Janani, meaning 'mother', possibly because the LTTE had reconstructed the ideal Tamil mother as the "warrior mother" and linked the issues of national liberation with women's liberation (de Alwis, "Changing Role" 682; de Mel, *Women and the Nation* 216-217).

Women like Kumaran's wife broke the "shackles of social constraints" and their militant patriotism blossomed as they joined the armed struggle (Balasingham). Alexander points out that the gendered reconstruction of womanhood helped women to transcend the social barriers and they were not confined to the house during wars but ventured into the battlefield and gained some "control or authority over some aspects of their lives in society" through militarization (1). Since women, like Janani's mother, had symbolic roles as nurturers of society, their active involvement with the LTTE signaled an ultimate moral sanction for the violence.

In describing her silent and reticent cousin Janani, Yalini said that "She was eighteen years old, but so much older. She had done all sorts of things that I did not want to ask her about; she was going to be married. She had never been to college, but she had fought in a war, probably held a gun and knew how to assemble and disassemble it" (LM 151). Female LTTE combatants like Janani broke new grounds by undertaking work that was previously done by men as they learned to use and maintain communication equipment, handle explosives, learned weapon technology, electronics and use the of heavy weaponry (Balasingham).

Janani had secured a passage to Canada for herself and her farther " ...But she claimed none of the escape for herself " (LM39-40). Suthan was a drug dealer who funded the LTTE (LM 147). Yalini realized that the violence precipitated in Sri Lanka was not a part of her Sri Lankan past, but of her present as well. Janani had faith in the LTTE and agreed to the marriage with Suthan because she believed that "They [LTTE] would not send me into something I could not do. This is something that is good-for me for him. *For them* (emphasis mine)" (LM 173). Further, she would remain closely associated with the LTTE by marrying "Suthan, and his politics" (LM 152). This marriage was an LTTE mission as well. Suthan was "someone the Tiger chose" for her and she "let them" (LM 172). Although she had left Sri Lanka and ceased to be an active combatant, her ties

with the LTTE were cemented through her marriage to Suthan. She became a part of the LTTE propaganda and funding machinery even after she ceased to be an active combatant.

The LTTE had created the concept of Ah-hu-maior 'empowerment' (Herath 196). The Puthumai Pen was the masculinized virgin warrior re-christened as the 'Armed Virgin'. LTTE promoted these two powerful gendered symbols—the armed virgin (armed Janani) and the warrior mother (like Kumaran's wife) to appropriate women within its cause. These 'Armed Virgins' who projected the image of sexual purity were readily accepted by the patriarchal Tamil society (Herath 170). The newly recreated combatant woman of the LTTE was presented as an alternative role model for the Tamil women and it was the greatest change from their traditionally gendered image. But in reality, the LTTE presented the old patriarchal values in a new mould so that women would join the movement as it appeared as a means of empowerment to them. The idea of equality and empowerment was used to persuade women and girls to join the movement. As Rita Manchanda says that women were pawns in such movements since their "liberation is accepted only in so far as it fits the contours of the nationalistic project" (115). This proves that the LTTE supported the cause of women's empowerment to the extent that it served to strengthen the terrorist movement, so even if Janani was the 'new woman' who took the decision to marry Suthan, the groom was chosen by the LTTE.

A close scrutiny of the novel shows that the movement had reconstructed Janani's gender identity to a certain extent and led to a limited empowerment. She was very confident about her decision to marry Suthan even though the match had not been arranged by her father according to Tamil Traditions.

Zuzana Hrdlickova says that the new women of the LTTE were self-confident, self-reliant, active in public sphere and took important decisions for themselves and their families (89). Janani was an empowered woman who chose the course of her life, both as a soldier (direct combatant) in Sri Lanka and as a propagandist (indirect combatant) in Canada. However, the nature of this empowerment was very ambivalent since she too reverted to the role of a traditional Tamil girl by settling into a state of matrimony and the LTTE reinforced its patriarchal stance by choosing a groom for her. She agreed to this marriage because she was loyal to the LTTE.

Yalini decided to write down the information she gathered from Kumaran since the act of writing was not only a therapeutic act, but it was also an act of resistance to the oppression, subjugation, repression and trauma inflicted upon the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Transforming Yalini's worldview was Kumaran's last act of propaganda. She acknowledged that she was "A noncombatant, but complicit nonetheless if ... silent" (LM 276).

A close reading of *Love Marriage* shows that Janani and Yalini are used as foils for each other. Ganeshanathan shows how Janani, who had grown up within the LTTE, conformed to Tamil traditions because they were fighting to establish a Tamil Eelam where their traditions could be preserved. On the other hand, Yalini grew up to

question those very same traditions. Yalini was an empowered women and not bound by the traditional norms of Sri Lankan culture because her parents had left their country due to the civil war and her westernized upbringing made her question the Tamil traditions. Through Yalini's questions the novelist has put under inquiry the conventional Tamil traditions and norms. In contrast to Yalini, her cousin Janani had a very difficult life in Sri Lanka. When Janani got married to Suthan she was "SMILING" (LM 273) and Yalini felt that Janani chose to marry Suthan because he was "able to dream the two of them into new selves, living in a happier Sri Lanka." (LM 276). The marriage itself was not based on their love for each other, but for their common love for Eelam. Kumaran too had married a Tigress and they too shared their love for a common cause.

With the "end of the ceremony" begins the marriage of Janani and Suthan. Her life as a combatant ends and she enters the life of a propagandist. From a soldier with a military bearing, she becomes a demure and "proper" bride. This transformation is symbolic of the transformation that she actually undergoes - from a combatant soldier to a non-combatant propagandist. As a civilian she blends among the Tamils of Canada and can carry on her work for the LTTE.

At the end of the novel Yalini is transformed as well. She consolidates her Sri Lankan Tamil identity and thereby comes to terms with her American identity as well. The identity crisis that she suffered in the beginning of the novel disappears in the end. Through her character Ganeshanathan shows that there is "no precedent" for people of her generation and that some of them would not travel down the path of their parents since they had "entered other countries in which the rules ... do not always apply" (LM 290). Yalini concludes that "The story

cannot always end in marriage. Sometimes it goes beyond that. And sometimes we live our lives alone. This might be my future, but I have learned to live with what is mine and imperfect" (LM 289). She accepts her own imperfect life gladly and hopes that "Someday, I will be able to walk into that country again, because they [her parents] walked out of it" (LM 289).

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