

# REFLECTIONS ON WOMEN AND CULTURE: THE SRI LANKAN TAMIL COMMUNITY IN TORONTO, CANADA

Amali Philips

A perusal of writings by young Sri Lankan Tamil women in Toronto, as well as anecdotal information and reported cases reveal the dilemmas of Toronto Tamil women in coping with the conflicts between the value system they experience in Canada and that of their natal society. While immigrants of colour, regardless of gender, face the challenges of cultural adjustment and adaptation, integration and survival in a complex urban environment, the women among them face problems that are specific to their roles and experiences as women in both the private and the public spheres. The problems faced by immigrant women are not entirely triggered by their immigrant situation, but are equally attributable to their subordinate status in their native cultures.

One might expect to find more similarities than differences between the Toronto experiences of South Asian women in general and of the Sri Lankan Tamil women in particular. At the same time, the experiences of women within the same culture could significantly vary depending on the circumstances of individual women. As has been pointed out by others, many of the Sri Lankan Tamils, particularly women, who came to Canada after 1985 are disadvantaged by the lack of English language training, lower educational qualifications and lack of social skills that would facilitate their integration in Canadian society. The experiences of these women are very different from those of other Sri Lankan and South Asian women who are not so disadvantaged. In this brief article, I reflect on the role of cultural values in shaping the experiences of the Toronto Tamil women in the areas of marriage, family relations, gender-role socialization, gender-division of labour, cross-sex interactions, and domestic conflicts.

## Culture Deconstructed

Culture in the anthropological sense is a 'way of life' based on the acquired values, beliefs, rules and standards, that are used to 'interpret experience and generate behaviour.' This definition by James Spradley (2003) is one of the better definitions of culture that are available to us. Culture provides the framework for action and interaction in natal as well as diasporic contexts and has value and relevance as an adaptive strategy in any given environment. However, within anthropology, the concept of culture has generated a great deal of controversy and discussion with respect to its definitions and meanings, to the point that some of us are dismissive of culture's potential to reflect the shared experiences and interests of all individuals and groups within a single culture. Thus, we might even speak of Tamil 'women' and 'men,' the youth and the elderly as having different subcultures.

Although we should acknowledge the diversity of values and beliefs within a single culture, or promote the view of culture as neither fixed nor unchanging, in the popular view 'culture' is taken to be homogeneous and immutable in time and space. This conservatism appears to be stronger among communities in immigrant or diasporic situations than in their natal contexts. The 'freezing' of culture provides a sense of security, preserves cultural roots and satisfies nostalgia for the home country. Such needs are common among recent immigrants of older age groups, who are slow to adapt to a foreign culture, than among their children who may have been born or raised in their formative years in a western culture. Undoubtedly, there is a generational difference in perspectives and values between for instance, Canadian-Tamil parents and their children, a difference that expresses itself through increasing tensions, miscommunication or lack of communication between Tamil youth and their parents.

Canadian-Tamil parents often blame these tensions on the Canadian cultural influence, viewing Canadian culture and all western cultures as sexually permissive and anomic (without norms), and use this as an argument against the 'cultural' integration of Tamils in Canadian society. Such perspectives are both misguided and erroneous and betray a kind of 'ethnocentrism'—the idea that one's own cultural values are superior to those of others. The main cultural concerns among many Tamil parents living in Canada are regarding cross-sex mixing, controlling the marriage of children, maintaining domestic and gender hierarchies, and parental disciplining of children. These areas are considered to be fundamental to Tamil cultural traditions, and the attempts to preserve them invariably involve the control of women as wives, daughters and sisters.

In most Asian cultures, there is nothing more immutable than the assignment of a superior role to men and a subordinate role to women. What anthropologists call 'androcentrism,' or male-centred perspectives, underlie household and conjugal hierarchies, unequal gender division of labour, the sexual control of women, and double standards for women and men in their permitted gender behaviour. Gender is a cultural construction, and the positions and experiences of women within a culture cannot be considered apart from the cultural meanings assigned to women as a gender. Culture shapes community notions about women's roles and functions, their innate nature and proper behaviour in both restrictive and prescriptive ways. As anthropologists would argue, 'gender inequities come already embedded in culture.'

My last introductory remark is about 'cultural relativism.' The notion of cultural relativism holds that all cultures are equally valuable and that customs and traditions of different cultures must

they are also privy to routine expressions of affection between parents. Tamil parents are usually reticent when it comes to expressing affection and are generally reluctant to indulge their children. These familial differences are not lost on the Tamil children growing up in Toronto; in fact, they are confused and disturbed by these differences. Tamil youth have commented on the absence of displays of emotions of love and affection on the part of parents. They remark that while their parents provide them with material goods (computers, clothes, etc.), even under great financial strain, they would seldom engage them in conversation, or offer verbal support and encouragement. Conjugal affection is also hidden and secretive, and in the open environment of Canadian society, where children and youth are constantly exposed to public displays of love and affection between couples, the Tamil children become unsure about the relationship between their parents. This is unfortunate and regrettable because most Tamil parents undergo tremendous hardships for their children, but they are hierarchically constrained from opening the home to free communication and emotional interaction between its members.

The family can also be the site of abuse and violence. Domestic violence is a concern within the Tamil community in Toronto. Violence is often fuelled by the economic and job insecurities of men, by male alcoholism, and women's resistance to their domestic work burdens and gender-based restrictions. Tamil women suffer many of the same pressures as men in Canada and are indeed worse off because of the disadvantages some of them face with poor language and communication skills. But as in other cultures, verbal and physical violence is the prerogative of men. There have been reported cases of suicides among Tamil women. Women are also known to contemplate suicide and to sacrifice even their own children to avoid the humiliation of domestic abuse. Young girls are at the mercy of their male siblings or cousins, who restrict them to prevent cross-sex interactions and preserve the 'honour' of the family. A newspaper report described the case of a young Tamil girl on whose arm a hot iron was placed by her brother and a male cousin as punishment for socializing with a boy.

Domestic violence is universal and is not peculiar to specific cultures, but in the context of an immigrant community violence against women acquires different dimensions. Wives, who are the targets of domestic violence and abuse, are usually without the traditional support of extended family members who would intervene on their behalf. There is also the absence of informal sanctions of the village or community that are brought to bear on the misbehaving husband. Domestic violence is also a well-kept secret, hidden and tolerated to protect the honour and good name of the family. Male perceptions on domestic violence are influenced by women's traditional roles. Thus, I heard an elderly gentleman say that domestic violence among the Tamils in Toronto is due to women being carried away by the values of equality and freedom and the loosening of male control over their women. However, many Sri Lankan Tamil women who are victims of violence, as well as men who perpetrate violence on their spouses, are now seeking and obtaining counselling to break out of the cycle of

domestic violence. On the other hand, social workers who undertake counselling among the Tamils have pointed out that there are instances when women are prevented by their male kin from freely communicating with the social workers.

## The Dilemmas of Tamil Youth

Within the context of diaspora and migration, the children of immigrants, more than anyone else, find themselves in the 'in-between spaces' of the host and home cultures. Many young girls experience the 'contradictions' of cultural 'hybridity,' because of opposing value systems. For instance, parents demand university degrees and high-earning jobs of their daughters but will not allow them the same freedoms granted to sons. One of my female students pointed out that keeping late hours when it is job-related and involving overtime work is permitted, but not when it involves socializing with friends. Her brothers, on the other hand, have no curfew restrictions and are free to socialize with friends. Young women begin to question the traditional restrictions when faced with new values and lifestyle changes in immigrant situations.

Overall, Tamil women in Toronto have to measure up to two contradictory sets of values in the public and private domains. Independence, assertiveness, free thinking, creativity and confidence are deemed necessary for success in education and employment. But the values, generally considered ideal for Tamil women are passivity, obedience to cultural norms, and dependence on males. A Tamil university student outlined her experience thus: "My father is very proud when I discuss controversial matters with him and encourages it, but in the presence of relatives or other community members, I am expected not to air my views, particularly if they are controversial." She attributed this to the cultural conditioning of older men to see passivity, obedience and lack of outspokenness as essential qualities for a woman. The two sets of values demand two types of personality types. Success in the public sphere demands an independent personality type, while submission to domestic hierarchies requires a dependent and passive personality. Young women who are high achievers or have independent personalities must either succumb to these gender rules or develop multiple personalities to fit the demands of family, community and the society at large.

The cultural practices and underlying values that limit women's freedom are invariably focused on cross-sex interactions, dating, arranged marriages and modesty issues. In all these areas, women's sexuality becomes a subject of great concern to the family and the community. A double standard exists for daughters and sons; men's sexual infractions are viewed as being the natural unfolding of male sexual drives, with relatively little implications for family reputation or marriageability, whereas women's sexuality has to be curbed and protected within the bounds of formal marriage. Reports about pre-marital sex and cross-sex interactions involving young Tamil women would indicate that they are reacting against the rigidity of the social norms of their parents and the community.

As well, they are influenced by peer pressure to be 'cool,' which in youth parlance means fitting into what they perceive as the mainstream adolescent culture. The parents' rigidity and the children's reactions appear to be based on a thorough misreading of sexual freedom as being synonymous with sexual promiscuity.

Tamil boys seem to hold a double standard as well. They are willing conscripts to the culture of cross-gender mixing but are more selective when it comes to marriage. One young woman notes that a Tamil boy would date many women but expect his future wife not to have had a boyfriend. A woman's 'friendliness' would be interpreted as 'promiscuity.' An independent female personality is less valued as a prospective partner in marriage by young Tamil men who have grown up in Canada and like their female counterparts have been exposed to more liberal values regarding dating and marriage. Physical appearance and 'smartness' are valued for a girl, but 'independence' and 'assertiveness' are associated with promiscuity and a dominating female personality. Marriage is the number one priority for parents regardless of their daughters' ambitions for career and independence. Young women object to their parents' discouragement of higher education for the sake of marriage. With marriage comes the emphasis on motherhood and, in some instances, pressures on newly married women by their mothers-in-law to have children soon after marriage regardless of their career ambitions. Marriage and motherhood continue to be the defining criteria of Tamil womanhood in Toronto, without any consideration being given to the changing roles of women and their new circumstances.

The common South Asian view of North American culture is that it is materialistic, but there can be nothing more materialistic than arranged marriages and dowry practices that degrade and place a price tag on women. When marriage proposals are brought for a girl, prospective in-laws crassly inquire about her student loans and insist that they be paid off before the marriage in addition to the usual dowry payment. Beauty as in 'fair skin' and a slim appearance continue to be highly desirable traits in women for marriageability, although such traits are seldom required of men. A rather exacting mother-in-law-to-be wanted her future daughter-in-law, a professionally qualified young woman who had just arrived in Toronto for her arranged marriage, to go through beauty treatments before the marriage to have her 'dark' skin bleached to make it 'lighter.' Young Tamil women, like their parents, do not take marriage lightly, but their criteria for a good marriage are

different and less focused on the larger collective attributes of caste, family, ethnicity, or on individual attributes such as money, jobs, etc. Instead, they place greater emphasis on love, compatibility, and common interests. With greater opportunities for cross-sex mixing, women are becoming open to the romantic and voluntary aspects of marriage, as indeed they should. They also want the time-honoured institution of arranged marriages to be modified by allowing the prospective partners to socialize before committing to marry.

In conclusion, gender discrimination is universal and is not peculiar to Tamil or South Asian cultures. But compared to other communities in Canada, the South Asian communities are among those who more emphasize the control of women's marriage and sexuality in the name of female modesty and female reputation and as a way of preserving cultural traditions. The preservation of 'culture' thus becomes synonymous with the control of women. The emphasis on cultural preservation is legitimate but not at the expense of one half of the membership of a culture. My argument is that the use of 'culture' to justify the control of women is illiberal and indefensible under any circumstance, and in extreme instances it can also be patently illegal. Oftentimes, culture is conveniently used to prolong old hierarchies that have neither meaning nor value with changing times and in different places. Every society has its own version of sexual differences, but as Sylviane Agacinski (1998), the French philosopher and feminist, has noted, 'difference' does not necessarily imply 'hierarchy.' Sexual difference—woman and man—must be celebrated but hierarchy denied. The goal of societies must be to promote 'parity' of the sexes, which means that sexual differences are affirmed and given equal value in all areas, not only in regard to equal representation in politics but also in observing democratic values in the family.

## References

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Dr. Amali Philips teaches Anthropology at Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Canada.