

NATIONALISM IN SRI LANKAN POETRY ON WAR – THE COMBATANTS

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During the past three decades an armed conflict has been going on in the northern area of Sri Lanka. The protracted violence has affected all aspects of Sri Lankan life, including education, health, cost of living, and cultural output. Not surprisingly, the influence of war can also be perceived in literature, which often portrays the thought processes and experiences of individuals within society. Over the past few years, there has been an increasing output of artistic production in all three languages concerned with the topic of war. Even though not to the same extent as films, dramas, novels and short stories, the genre of poetry too reflects a consciousness of these issues. Poets in all three languages have written on the war and its impact by depicting various themes such as the lives of soldiers and their family members, the sufferings of war victims and refugees, and the destructive and violent consequences of conflict.

The tradition of literature on war is certainly not a twentieth-century phenomenon. Ancient works on war exist in both Western and Eastern literature. As Alan Borg says, ancient war memorials—which include narrative descriptions of its campaigns—“...commemorate war itself, and specifically victory, rather than recording the loss and suffering of individuals” (x). Similar to such ancient war poetry the modern poetry too focuses on nationalistic issues, even while it is concerned with portraying the negative aspects of war.

Nationalism is the strongest factor in the political spectrum, much more so than religion, class or any aspect (Kellas 1). Aijaz Ahmed, in his much acclaimed work *In Theory* has said that nationalism is a difficult issue to settle because it is “...no unitary thing, and so many different kinds of ideologies and political practices...” are involved (7). This diversity is manifested clearly in the examples of Sri Lankan poetry on war that I cite in this article.

Nationalistic patriotism can most strongly be seen in the writings of combatant poets, both Sinhala and Tamil.¹ Various issues connected to nationalism are projected in the poetry, including the concept of traditional homelands, incorporation of myth, racial violence, patriotic fervour, the appropriation of religion into nationalism and the role of the state regarding the war. The soldier poet Pelpita J. Ratnayake's poem 'Soldier son to the mother'² is a striking example (1985).

Turning blood into milk with a mother's love
Feeding me your portion while you went hungry
Mother, caring for my well being day and night
Received your letter sent to the battle field

'No apparent sign of fear' says your letter
Doubts of me, hurt me
Why be afraid, if the blood is red
Those who fear ghosts do not build houses in cemeteries

When gem-like sons went to battle in the past
Mothers wept for the love of their children
That is an insult, a stain on our Sinhaleanness
Gods will worship your name tomorrow

That even little children ask for spears
Hearing this gives infinite pleasure
Even if the blue grass turns red in the battlefield
No matter what, we will beat our foes

Little more to go, we have come far now
Weapons will not be put down though our shoulders ache
A soldier dies, Mother, only once
The 'enemy' dies a hundred deaths

'Why was I born a woman
If not I could now be in battle'
Receiving such letters from all four sides
Seeing these letters, tears of joy filled my eyes

If given cough syrup to the 'tiger' illness
The 'patient' will cut the Doctor's hands
To kill my enemies in this lifetime
If I could have another two hands ...not enough!

Mother, I am your son
You have not taught us to be afraid
To offer my life in the name of this land
That in itself is enough to attain Nirvana.

Identification with the great heroes of Sinhalese history can be seen in patriotic claims that soldiers will not give up this war until they win it. Ratnayake states that “Even if the blue grass turns red in the battleground / No matter what, we will beat our foes”. His words echo the idealistic chivalric notions of dying for one's own country prevalent in earlier war narratives, thus emphasizing his wish to sacrifice his blood for his nation. This is further reinforced by the numerous references to the duty of a son and soldier – as witnessed by the last stanza. A similar poem to this is 'Dearest Mother' by Palitha Hegoda (1999), another soldier poet.

Drops of rain collect and become a great ocean
Drops of sand collect and turn into a land
In every child born to this earth
Every drop of milk turns into Duty

From the day I came to lead this life
I spend my time mother, with a weapon in hand
Turning Duty and Respect into songs of war
I will become a courageous son, with the taste of your milk

Leaving fun-loving friends and family
Coming to the hot-air of Batticoloa
Leaving the wife, I expect a future
Day and night, I bathe in sweat

From the days fed me by your blood turned into milk
You put stories of courage into my heart
Those valuable gems of country, race and peace
To protect these I go—my life is secondary

With huge explosions the shells go up
Young lives are killed like trees felled down
As if the Japanese had come again
Planes fly in the sky frequently

How many sins in one of your milk drops
Is there a way to repay that debt?
Knowing, not knowing the purity
Will you be my mother in the next life?

The poet considers it the “Duty” of “Every child born to this earth” to fight this war. His chivalric notions are further reinforced by words such as “duty”, “respect”, “courageous”. The inevitability of a sense of ‘duty’ building up in a child is shown through parallel images: “Drops of rain collect and become a great ocean / Drops of sand collect and turn into a land”.

The soldier poets illustrate the way that the concept of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism serves as propaganda for justifying the continuation of war. Pelpita J. Ratnayake’s words that “To offer my life in the name of this land / That in itself is enough to attain Nirvana” shows the ironic manipulation of religion in legitimizing the war. The participation in the war, which entails murder among other destructive acts, is given maximum value by declaring it as a prerequisite for the attainment of Nirvana, which is a state of mind attained through great acts of purity. Palitha Hegoda’s ‘Dearest Mother’ addresses many ideas closely connected to Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. He says “Those valuable gems of country, race and peace / To protect these I go – my life is secondary.” The “gems” refer to a Sinhalese concept according to which it is the duty of each individual to protect ‘country, race, and religion’.³ The word “gems” also raises connotations of Buddhism by its similarity to the ‘Triple Gem’—the *Buddha Dhamma Sangha*. The poet thinks of his country, his religion and his race as being

synonymous with each other, leaving no room for consideration of other ethnic groups.

These arguments show that the soldier poets consider it their moral obligation to fight in the war, which they perceive as a noble and just cause. In most of the poems by the soldiers it is evident that they align themselves with Dutugemunu in their thinking, since both the soldiers and the culture hero are seen to be fighting the same enemy and also share the identical goal of uniting the country. The mother–son dialogues are an allusion to the historical mother–son relationship between Dutugemunu and his mother, Queen Viharamahadevi, who assisted and encouraged her son to wage war on King Elara.

Pelpita J. Ratnayake’s poem written in 1985 does not show any difference in attitude from the poem by Palitha Hegoda written in 1999. These same ideologies appear in the other poems written by soldiers. A reason for this apparently static state of attitude may be the fact that, unlike in British war poetry, one cannot trace a personal progression in the poet’s attitudes to war since none of the soldier poets have published works for even one whole year continuously. At the most, these poets have written only for 5 or 6 months to the newspapers, after which there is no mention of them. It is also possible that only soldiers who are new to the battlefield produce this type of martial verse. Another reason is probably the psychological need for the sustenance of fighting morale. As the war seems to have no end in sight and the soldiers endure much mental trauma, these soldier poets may be attempting to motivate themselves and their fellow comrades by reinforcing beliefs in the validity of war through their poetry.

A nationalistic attitude is not limited only to the Sinhalese combatant poets. The LTTE fighter, Captain Vanathi, mirrors the militant stand of the Sinhalese soldier poets in her poem ‘She, the Woman of Tamililam’ (De Mel, “Agent or Victim?” 201-202).

Her forehead shall be adorned not with
kunkumam (but)with red blood.
All that is seen in her eyes is not the sweetness
of youth(but) firm declarations of those
who have fallen down.

On her neck will lay no *tali*, (but) a
Cyanide flask!
Her legs are going and searching,
not for searching a relationship with relatives
(but) looking towards the liberation of
the soil of Tamililam.

Her gun will fire shots.
No failure will cause the enemy to fall!!
It will break the fetters of Tamililam!!
Then from our people’s lips a national anthem
will tone up!!

For her, military force as symbolized by the word “gun”, is the only means of achieving the “liberation / of the soil of Tamililam” and is, therefore, fit to be valorized. She says, “On her neck will lay no *tali*, (but) a / Cyanide flask”, which suggests the militant’s patriotism and commitment to the Tamil nationalistic cause, as she is prepared to embrace death in the form of cyanide.⁴ Similar to the Sinhalese combatants, she depicts death in battle as the ultimate heroic sacrifice. Patriotism is shown towards the LTTE cause which she claims is “looking towards the liberation of / the soil of Tamililam” here again a reference to the concept of traditional homelands. The poem emphasizes the poet’s commitment to the separatist cause as much as the soldiers are committed toward the country’s territorial integrity. In this poem, the Sinhalese people are perceived as the “enemy” in the same manner that in the soldiers’ poems the Tamil people are considered the ‘other’. She shows the Sinhalese as holding the Tamil people in bondage or custody as denoted by the word “fetters”. By pointing out the perceived bondage of the Tamil people she justifies the murder of the Sinhalese, which is emphasized by her reference to the “red blood” of the “enemy” as an adornment. For Captain Vanathi, freedom is synonymous with a separate state, symbolized by a “national anthem” and “our people”. The latter term exclusively refers to the Tamil people and not to an amalgamation of all ethnic groups.

An analysis of these poems reveals that attitudes of extreme nationalism, which strongly support definite and distinct ethnic identities inevitably imposes limitations. It results in an inability to see the other person’s viewpoint, to empathize with the suffering of the whole society and more importantly, results in the propagation of the war and violence. Extreme nationalism such as Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism insist on the existence of pure races, pure languages and corresponding religions. The result is a homogenization of people into groups that can be named ‘Sinhalese’ or ‘Tamil’, thus entailing stereotypical images of people. As such, the differences within these groups are erased. In the poetry of the combatant poets Pelpita J. Ratnayake, Palitha Hegoda and Captain Vanathi, this homogenizing trend is very clear. They assume the existence of (stereo)typical identities. They all use opposing images of the Sinhalese and Tamils, which implies that to belong to one group is to be antagonistic towards the other. As a result, they display no sympathies towards the plight of the ‘other’, but instead perceive them as an enemy to be destroyed. The glorification of war and the chivalric notions in their poems also act as morale boosters towards furthering the war. The use of religion to serve this end further legitimizes the war.

More importantly, the construction of the other community, as ‘the enemy’ is an ideological necessity. Without such a construction, waging a war against the other community would be an ethical and moral impossibility. Poets who express such nationalist attitudes reveal a one-dimensional view of either group, becoming

trapped in a patriotic discourse that precludes any solution to the ethnic conflict beyond the destruction of the other ethnic group, which is constructed as the ‘enemy’.

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Notes

1. By combatant poets I mean those who are involved in fighting in the battlefield. This includes both the Sinhalese armed forces and the Tamil LTTE guerrilla fighters.
2. The poems by the soldiers were translated from Sinhala to English by the author.
3. This poet refers to ‘peace’ instead of religion. It might be from a confusion arising through the similarity between the two words used for peace and religion. In Sinhalese, the above concept is referred to as ‘*rata, deya, samaya*’. *Samaya* means religion. ‘*Saamaya*’ is the term for peace in Sinhalese and there is only a slight difference in pronunciation between the two words.
4. At the end of their training the LTTE cadres are given a cyanide capsule (two capsules in the case of women), ostensibly to avoid capture. It signifies absolute dedication and sacrifice. An estimated one-third of the LTTE’s combat deaths between 1983-90 are supposed to be by this mode of suicide, which has been called *altruistic suicide* by Durkheim (Somasundaram 63, 205). ■

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