

WOMEN IN THE LTTE: LIBERATION OR SUBJUGATION ?

Mangalika De Silva

In this paper, I have briefly attempted to critique gender from the point of view of women in the LTTE. As access to information on this subject is limited, I have relied heavily on two resource materials. 'The Broken Palmyra' provides a 'disturbing account' of the liberation struggle through the eyes of four academics. The other, 'Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers', is a propaganda piece written by Adele Anne, the Australian-born wife of Anton Balasingham who is the chief spokesperson of the LTTE. Adele, the self-proclaimed messiah of Tamil women has gained dubious prominence and has assumed a role questionable in many respects. Whatever the pros and cons of that position may be, moderate sections of the Tamil community are alarmed and appalled by the violent and aggressive militancy that Adele has articulated for Tamil women and on behalf of Tamil women, all in the name of liberation. Hence violence and repression have become means to achieve the ultimate end. Women, in her theoretical formulation become cannon fodder to be used as the leadership (whose interests she safeguards and promotes) demands. Premonitions and admonitions abound in her text, a warning to those rational forces who dare to defy or sidetrack that the totalitarian regime which she so vociferously and assiduously espouses is not to be challenged, questioned or exposed. In her book, what comes out sharply is a voice of a propagandist who hypocritically advances the cause of the movement's despicable power struggle rather than a catalyst committed to the goals of women's liberation. Rajini Thiranagama, an extraordinary Tamil woman who stood up to the Sinhala state and the repression of the LTTE became a victim at the hands of those who could not tolerate reason and moderation within the movement whose leader is a committed fascist.

Passive resistance is a method of securing rights by not obeying unjust laws. It is a refusal to do a thing that is repugnant to the conscience. It is contrary to our humanity if we obey laws repugnant to our conscience. Such teaching means slavery. But we have so forgotten ourselves and become so compliant that we do not mind any degrading law. We are sunk so low that we fancy that it is our duty and our religion to do what the law lays down. If woman/man will only realize that it is inhuman to obey laws that are unjust, no woman's/man's tyranny will enslave her/him.

(Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj*)

Tamil women guerrillas articulated a tremendous determination to fight the Sri Lankan army who they firmly feel have no place in their homeland. This is an unshakable belief and one that will sustain their struggle for however long it may take to liberate their homeland. It is the strength of this conviction that allows these young women to fight and rejoice in the success of their

military operations; it is the conviction that sustains them emotionally when their colleagues die in battle; it is the conviction that prepares them to make supreme sacrifices.

(Adele in *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers*)

One of the fundamental contradictions that arises from the above quote, undoubtedly a revolutionary statement, is that armed struggle is essentialized and particularized as the sole means by which liberation could be achieved through the creation of a new "nation". My objective in this paper is limited in scope in that I want to put forward few strands of thought on Adele's assumption, a particularly volatile issue in the post colonial South Asian societies, by problematizing the contradictions that emerge primarily in her text as well as other propaganda material put out by the LTTE.

To rationalize the claim that by relying on revolutionary struggle (violent/militaristic) women would achieve national liberation is to negate and therefore undermine the importance and inherent potential in non-violent forms of agitation. Perhaps a pertinent question to pose here is whether violent, armed struggle is a pre-condition for bringing about progressive revolutionary changes to the lives of women ! The basic ideological thrust of her argument creates confusions in terms of the form of struggle women ought to wage for the realization of their many aspirations.

In her "foreword", she debunks the utter bankruptcy of parliamentary politics and ridicules the necessity of passive resistance, since "non-violent campaigns did not radically change the cultural images of women".¹ While armed struggle is perceived as progressive, nationalist, modernist and reformist - "women in combat belong to a totally new world, a world outside a normal woman's life"² - other forms of mass struggle are considered reactionary and retrogressive. It is assumed that after liberation a radical reordering of society would result in an end to national repression, gender oppression and "women's emancipation".

However such thinking seems naive and myopic when one looks at the reality enveloping Tamil women's lives. If one is to accept Adele's initial contention several issues need to be raised. One is forced to examine how far Tamil militant women have succeeded in changing the dominant patriarchal ideologies that prevail both within and outside the organization, that perpetuate and reinforce oppression of women. How for instance, those who engaged in national liberation struggles, in other countries were perceived by society after the liberation ? How much of political power and autonomy they enjoyed after the revolution/liberation ? And lastly, what have been the experiences of women in nationalist armed struggles in other countries ?

Mallika Sivakadachcham draws parallels from the experiences of national liberation movements waged in Asia, Africa and Latin America.³ She argues that male hegemony, steeped in essentially patriarchal nationalist movements continues to prevail even after the liberation. This is of course true of the LTTE who from the beginning were male in constitution and gendered in ideology. They were the symbols of Tamil resistance and they eventually came to dominate the resistance, having popular support and organization. Initially they were referred to as "podiyankal" meaning boys⁴ When the women's wing was established by the archetypal guerrilla guru, Prabhakaran, the generic term was invariably used to address them. This further stresses the claim that the "fundamentalist" brand of Tamil nationalism is constructed and articulated as a male-dominated project. Consequently, the possibilities for women, for feminist projects within a nationalism thus constructed are almost little. The national agency is an exclusively male prerogative. The masculinization of women through male identity is to deny them their identity as women. This in itself is significant and symbolic. What one finds is a dominant male psychology that nourishes and influences a narrow patriarchal ideology behind the revolt. One classic example, to prove the point I made, is the title of Adele's narrative "The Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers". Women are mere adjuncts and are being / have been used as human tools. A senior LTTE woman cadre Arathy, admitting that outside the military sphere women are not equal to men, summed up her priorities "first Eelam and then women's liberation"⁵

Arathy's perception of the national struggle indicates that women have still not grasped the fundamentals of their concrete conditions. The lack of a vision amongst the women's section in the LTTE to forge ahead with clarity, given the level of their political consciousness, is because of their failure to take into consideration the objective reality of their society. As Thiranagama petitions,⁶ it would have been impossible for women to assert themselves, carving out spaces to positively address issues specific and common to them within a repressive military structure. Their expression would have been stifled/curtailed. They would have been co-opted and/or silenced as the fate that befell on the Jaffna Mother's Front amply demonstrated. It is an indisputable fact that LTTE stands today indicted for its ruthless crushing of opposition/ dissent. In such circumstances, dreams of equality and liberty can be mere illusions. Thiranagama notes in "No more tears sister" - *Broken Palmyra* :

Because our society is hierarchically organized and steeped in the ideology of male dominance the women's position is shaped in every aspect.....by a girdle of patriarchy. If in such a society like this, the dominant ideology under which the struggle is organized is itself an even more narrow, revivalistic and romantic one, well sprinkled with images of male heroes and male valour and if nationalism is a type of aggressive patriotism then a concept of women's liberation would be working against the inner core of such a struggle.⁶

Though one could consider Adele's narrative on propaganda as a radical point of departure to the previously existing literature (which hardly even pays lip service to the women's question), to bring women to the focus and appraise generously their contribution made to the struggle, their real/genuine participation in the actual political struggle is yet to be positively analyzed and recognized.

It can be surmised that women's increasing infiltration to the organization (to the military unit) was not purely due to the "revolutionary spirit" women displayed. Or that they were a class who outwitted men in all fields of activity, but political decision making. As an overwhelming number of male cadres were killed in the battle, this anomaly created a situation where recruitment of women became a necessity. To save the situation women were allowed into the LTTE ranks. In other words, until the loss of enough male cadres made it absolutely necessary to use women, they were not mobilized. Hence, the conceptualization of their role as marginal and peripheral to the cause. Qadri Ismail quotes Franz Fanon who visualized a similar role for female cadres in resistance movement.

Until 1955, the combat (in Algeria) was waged exclusively by the men. The revolutionary characteristics of this combat, made the necessity for absolute secrecy, obliged the militant to keep his woman in absolute secrecy....The decision to involve women as active elements of the Algerian revolution was not reached lightly... But involving the women was not solely a response to the desire to mobilize the entire nation. The women's entry into the war had to be harmonized with respect for the revolutionary nature of the war. In other words, the women had to show as much spirit of sacrifice as men".⁷ Fanon's apt statement on the role of the fighting woman by virtually dismissing female cadre as the male fighters' woman-arsenal⁷ finds justification in a statement made by the LTTE leader Prabhakaran:

Today young women have taken up arms to liberate *our* land. (*my italics*) They have made supreme sacrifices to this cause to the amazement of the world. I am proud to say that the birth, growth and expansion of the women's military wing is a remarkable achievement of *our* liberation movement, an achievement which marked a historical turning point in *our* struggle⁸

The element of the movement's macho pride, an impetus for heroism, is powerfully present. Women are used as adjuncts to the actual men fighters. Prabhakaran gloats over the sacrifices made to the struggle by women cadres. He prides himself on the notion that women through sacrifice have enabled the movement to progress and advance and taste the joys of victory - note the word "achievement". Patriarchy has been vindicated at least temporarily. Its project triumphed. The leader openly articulates his views on the women's military responsibilities while carefully dodging the important question of women's liberation and thereby the element of political autonomy.

It is ironical that Prabhakaran indulges in such exhortation after women have been consistently denied agency. "Our struggle" - who "our" refers to here is not clear, decidedly the male leadership. And his use of the words "our struggle", "our liberation" at every point in the passage echo the political underpinnings of his ideology. His is an all pervading personality who wields enormous power, authority and influence. Women are honourably valorized and idealized. While this seems enlightening, it is wholly unconvincing and unpersuasive. The perennial question is "how can women hope for equality after the victory, if the struggle itself, if the agency identified, if the nationalist project is conceived, defined and if not executed in exclusively male terms? Mere reiteration about women's rights cannot achieve them. Female images are reproduced in the form of sacrificers. There is then a clear sexual division of labour. While women are busy fighting the enemy in the battle field, resisting violence and repression men are preoccupied with more ennobling tasks like administering, decision making and governing.

When one looks at the LTTE's history, such chauvinistic thinking should not shock our conscience.

The entry of women into the LTTE aroused mixed feelings of anxiety and scepticism. The older women in particular took a hardline attitude. They were virulently harsh and critical of those younger women who responded supportively. Many eyebrows were raised. Thiraganama records an older woman's articulation of patriarchal norms and attitudes; "The tigers were all right, till women joined them. They have spoilt the Movement and the boys' dedication".⁹ A barrage of invective was thus hurled at a tiny community of women who had no power at all within the movement.

A professional woman who was perhaps outraged at the bizarre turn of events, snapped arrogantly.

Those days when we asked these women why they joined the movement, they said that it was for the sake of our land. Now where is the land? Why could these women not have kept quiet? They are the ones who give all the encouragement to the men.¹⁰

The gulf between them was ever widening. The older women could never grasp the younger, more assertive, militant women's dedication and commitment to the cause. Thiraganama had this to say on the question of women's oppression. "Such hard and cruel words as well as the commonly heard insinuation that women themselves invite molestation and rape, show the trap that women have set for themselves. Wherever a woman is, not only is she oppressed and made to play a subdued and non-assertive role (being allowed to be assertive only within the ambit of male dominance), she is also destined to take up set roles - playing to perfection the emotional and sensitive roles, at once of daughter, lover, wife and mother and providing a stable base for the man and the family to stand on".¹⁰

The duality and ambiguity of the society's construction of her identity comes out sharply. She is expected to maintain,

manage and minimize her oppression, restoring simultaneously the oppressive patriarchal structures, "family" to its old form. Hers is not to revolt and rebel or engaged in unarmed resistance, not to provoke and stand out, not to "bellow like a cow" not to defy discriminatory cultural practices, not to fight against violence and repression of whatever form - the state, society and the LTTE's - but to remain meek and silent.

This is why it becomes imperative for women not to put trust too much on the gun. Taking up arms, crying nationalist slogans while preserving and protecting structures that effectively debar and peripheralise them would further jeopardize their interests.

Rajini perceptively observes that existing nationalisms including Tamil nationalism are gendered and dangerous. Before the LTTE's women's wing was formed, several other mainstream militant groups had their own women cadres. When EPRLF was crushed by the LTTE, the women cadres who had no way to escape were subjected to manifest forms of harassment. The following statement reflects the ideological basis on which women came to be perceived and treated in Tamil resistance movement: "what liberation for you all. Go and wait in the kitchen. That is the correct place for you".¹¹

Legitimizing further this claim to a male superiority, women were pushed on a negative role, that of taking a passive stand when it required sustained, consistent protest against violations.

Rajini writes: "Women were considered evil by the LTTE and they were said to make men lose their sense of purpose".¹¹ Prabhakaran, prohibited sexual relationships within the movement (until he himself breached the law by falling in love, marrying).

Contrary to views expressed in by the author in her book it is difficult to believe that women are given equal opportunities and recognition within the movement. The contradictions that arise in this text, and in other accessible literature in the form of video films are complex and diverse.

The adulation accorded to the leader of the movement, whose photograph adorns the first page further justifies my initial claim of the nationalist agent as exclusively male. Yet the author is confident that "he - Prabhakaran - is determined that women should have equal opportunity for participation in all aspects of armed struggle".¹²

It can be argued that Prabhakaran's definition of "equal opportunity" falls short of society's (women's) expectations and aspirations. His conception of the principle has narrow limitations. If as he flaunts women had access to equal opportunities in all aspects of the armed struggle, they should not only be given equal opportunities but must be seen to be freely enjoying the fruits of their labour and participation in the armed struggle. They are however conspicuously absent in the film made by the BBC in the year 1991.

Women's wing was represented by Adele Balasingham, the wife of the chief spokesperson of the LTTE, political ideologue and party theoretician, in the film. Tamil women must be envying the many portfolios he holds !

In an article published in a Tamil newspaper *Sarinihar*, in a critique on the video, the writer questions the right of Adele Balasingham, to proclaim as a representative of the women's wing.¹³ One has scant evidence to show, the ideological differences that may exist between Adele and the Tamil women, who have experienced national subjugation over the years ! Women who fight, secure victories, die in the battle and are touted to be capable of displaying exceptional heroism and remarkable fiercelessness are seen to be carrying sacks of provisions over their shoulders, probably to war weary soldiers (men).

Men are given pride of place to demonstrate 'manly' virtues, commitment, courage, agility and the list is endless. The image created and recreated often is that of a male person fierce, loyal militaristic, patriotic, mindful of his duties, disciplined and unemotional. This is further reinforced through another sequence, where a wounded woman fighter was being attended to by a male cadre. Tamil psyche - the male pride - in Jaffna society would not tolerate scenes of men stretching their hands, out writhing in agony and bleeding profusely. It would mean humiliation and dishonour to men. None of the sequences in the film depict men screaming in pain. It seems that it is the natural order of things for women to be cared for and tended by men.

Particularly poignant is the story of Selva, who despite her loss of arms and limbs, is made to appear before the cameras "to display the same enthusiasm and determination to work for the struggle within the limits of her disability".¹⁴

How can women within the armed resistance movement, struggle and strive for women's rights and interests, when the movement horrendously lacks a clear vision of a woman-centred project towards liberation. The new cultural image, and a radically progressive political role women have assumed, a change in the power relations has not altered their subjugated existence in any drastic way. One of the major drawbacks for women is their failure to collectively articulate issues specific to women as women.

It is fairly conceivable that despite the important contribution made to the continuation of the struggle, women remain marginalized and isolated within and outside the movement. Though their experience as militants has been somewhat empowering, their militancy has not helped them in a major way to revolutionize their lives, to renounce violence as a de-stabilising force.

The film forces an impression on the viewer, that Adele is a powerful figure amongst all women who has been elevated and promoted to the LTTE political wing much to the envy of other women, who certainly deserve better than the insignificant space accorded to them. What is conveyed is the Tiger viewpoint as it ought to be. The only instance women

came into focus is at a military demonstration taking an oath of loyalty, pledging their support to the movement and to the leader - by accepting the cyanide capsule, of-course.

Thiranaagama notes how/why women "birds of freedom" as they were called, came to be increasingly drawn to the armed struggle.

One cannot but be inspired when one sees the women of the LTTE, two by two, in the night with their A. K's slung over the shoulder, patrolling the entrances to Jaffna City. One cannot but admire the dedication and toughness of their training, seen in the video films put out by the LTTE. One could see the nationalist fervour and the romantic vision of women in arms defending the nation. This becomes a great draw..... our social set up, its restrictions on creative expression for women and the evils of the dowry system, are some of the social factors that led to their initial recruitment.¹⁵

While their infiltration into the LTTE military ranks has strengthened the Movement, they have yet to prove themselves as decision makers. In the whole history of the LTTE, one woman "Sundari" was given the post of assistant secretary to the political wing, who later died in battle. This has not so far been filled much to the credit of Prabhakaran. This confirms the view that women's participation has been limited to military activities, medical supplies, propaganda and student movements, all of which come directly under the powerful male subjects.

Adele writes: "Astounding also are the feats of courage by women fighters in the supplies and medics team. The medics cadres moved amidst the torrential bombing and strafing to reach the frontline battle theatre. As the fighting raged, with bullets and shells flying in every direction, the women cadres armed with their medical kits, worked with dedication, applying first aid measures to the wounded and carrying the injured, for long distances to the field clinic. Such emotionally intense and physically heavy work continued for hours on end, even days".¹⁶

Commemoration ceremonies for fallen victims, "heroes", martyred by the movement leadership are graced by Prabhakaran who sings eulogies. Photographs of women "heroines" Adele speaks of in her book, do not appear at all. Does it call for greater courage, greater sense of magnanimity on the part of men in the movement to honour women who die in battle and yet are effaced from the face of this earth unhonoured ? After every major operation tigers record victories, male cadres who fight valiantly and fiercely are promoted to higher ranks. This is evident in one of the sequences, in another film produced by the Tigers. In the aftermath of the Pooneryn attack, those who fell victims were martyred. When the photographs were flashed before the cameras, the faces were overwhelmingly those of men cadres. It was speculated that a sizeable number of women were deployed in order to carry out this biggest military operation against the army. Image after image, the video focused on parading male cadres, fawning on their captured military

equipments, - the spoils of war - patrolling the streets of Jaffna. Women have not only been denied voice but also identity.

Cynthia Enloe argues that "nationalism typically has sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope",¹⁷ and so the nationalist subject/agent has been constructed as exclusively male. It is this exclusiveness that de-centres and de-links women from the nationalist struggles while simultaneously stressing their indispensability to the success of the resistance movement. Prabhakaran often chooses to be photographed with male children around him. At a recent opening of an orphanage for children whose parents have died in the war, the smiling LTTE leader was photographed doting a male child, while little girls sat around him, looking perplexed and confused.

Whatever his vision of "women's path to liberation" is, the movement's veering towards a male constructed, nationalist project holds a bleak future not only for a feminist agenda but also towards women's liberation.

When the history of the nationalist struggle of the LTTE is recorded, whether women would be written out of the narrative of history remains an unanswered question. Or, will the contribution made by them, be buried in the sand like the image of women cadres who "fell in action" in the BBC programme are buried in graves dug by the men?

Notes

1. "Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers" by Adele Balasingham. (Publication Section LTTE 1990). Tasan Printers. (Introduction)

2. Adele B. Page 1

3. Critique of women fighters of liberation tigers, Mallika Sivakadachcham. (*Sarinihar*, Dec' 1993)

4. Personal communication

5. Changing value of education reflects predicament of youth. (*Counterpoint*, Nov; 1993. Vol 1 Issue 8)

6. "No more tears sister: The experiences of women Thiranagama et al. "The Broken Palmyra": The Tamil crisis in Sri Lanka, An inside account (SLSI: Claremont, CA, 1990) P. 327

7. "Boys will be boys: Gender and national agency in Fanon and the LTTE by Qadri Ismail. (*Pravada* July, 1992. Vo 1 No 7)

8. *ibid.*

9. Thiranagama. P. 329

10. *ibid.* P. 329

11. *ibid.* P. 327

12. Adele B. P. 7

13. *Sarinihar*. (Sep-Oct 1992)

14. *ibid.*

15. Thiranagama. P. 325

16. Adele B. P. 83

17. Qadri Ismail. (*Pravada*)

Two cheers for Democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. Two cheers are quite enough: there is no occasion to give three.

**E. M. Forster, 'What I Believe',
Two Cheers for Democracy, 1951.**