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The Ideal of Liberation: Women in Sri Lanka's Civil War

By Akeela Makshood

In the 1990s, videos emerged from the war-torn Northern peninsula of Sri Lanka of young, female LTTE¹ cadres graduating from basic military training. Donning tiger-striped attire, groups of young girls and women were garlanded for their accomplishments by a woman standing out in stark contrast to the Tamil² fighters. Known endearingly as “Aunty” amongst the Tigers, Adele Ann Wilby came to be known internationally as the “White Tiger.” Here she was, the Australian-born former nurse, in the epicenter of an island’s civil war, garlanding female volunteers during a ceremony where they received their cyanide capsules. Adele herself wore a capsule hanging around her neck and spoke proudly of the young girls:

“They are very good fighters, they fought the Sri Lankan Army and did very well. They are fully-trained – they had to learn all that the men had to... We are talking through the political dimensions of the women; we are talking about enlightened feminism. Tamil society is particularly oppressive for women. Their roles are strictly separated from the men, and the evil of arranged marriages and dowries still exists.”

The reporter then turned his attention to a young platoon commander named Jaya. When she was asked what her plans were since the ceasefire had allowed peace to prevail tentatively, Jaya responded, “It is not up to me to decide what is best. It’s up

¹ LTTE stands for Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The fighters referred to themselves as the “Viduthalai Pulikal” or “Liberation Tigers” of Tamil *Eelam*, a word that is synonymous to the word “Sri Lanka” in Tamil. The LTTE was a militant separatist organization that fought the Sri Lankan army during the Sri Lankan Civil War to establish a Tamil *Eelam*.

² Tamils are a minority ethnic group in Sri Lanka, which consists of a majority Buddhist Sinhalese population. Tamils, either Hindu or Christian, are the largest minority group in Sri Lanka followed by Sri Lankan Moors, Burghers, and others.

to the party to decide.” When questioned about her personal goals, she responded, “I am devoting myself to the movement, I will serve in whatever way is decided.” One would have expected a response similar to that of Adele’s enlightened feminism, but Jaya digressed. Proud as a motherly figure would be, Adele smiled and said, “These girls are great – write a nice piece about them.”³

It is difficult to pinpoint whether Adele’s comments reflected the sentiments of Tamil women in the North or if Jaya’s did, but one theme is common in their rhetoric. The theme is that of liberation. One cannot simply give liberation a blanket definition as it holds different meanings to different people, but one may question what it truly means to different people. Tamil women in Sri Lanka did not all hold the same opinions in regard to liberation. There were differences of opinion within the female factions as apparent in the journalist’s interaction with Adele and Jaya. Some women were vocal about the role of women in the movement, whereas others pledged allegiance to another greater purpose – serving the nation. On the flip side, Tamil women spoke in vehement opposition of women’s involvement in the movement. Feminist discourses within the country began to critique the ways in which the LTTE used women. Other Tamil women fought back against the LTTE with words and poetry – not necessarily using feminist rhetoric.

Building on the theme of liberation, two major concepts pertaining to these Tamil women emerge – women’s liberation and national liberation, or feminism and nationalism. Using the LTTE and Tamil women as a microcosm to analyze the

³ Skelton, R. 1990. “*Guerilla in Our Midst.*” Sunday Herald, June 10.

concepts of women's liberation and national liberation begs the reader to ask a few important questions. This thesis will seek to answer the following questions: What did liberation mean for the different Tamil women from the North? Did the LTTE "liberate" female combatants who joined the movement? Was there a tension between embracing women's liberation and embracing national liberation amongst these Tamil women? If so, why did two liberational concepts conflict with each other? How did these women seek to reconcile this tension?

Scholarly works that have explored Tamil women's involvement in the LTTE and the LTTE's recruitment of them, often fall into two major schools of thought. The first group regards the LTTE's use of women as a means of liberation for Tamil women during the war, and afterwards. These scholars rely on the discourses of women in war and point to women's involvement in militant struggles in places such as Vietnam, as analogous to the Tamil woman's struggle in the LTTE. A parallel is drawn between these women as they are seen as being thrust into the public sphere of work and fight alongside their male counterparts. In addition to drawing on literature that highlights the altered (positive) experiences of women after being involved in militant movements, some scholars who subscribe to this school of thought consider the LTTE itself as an instrument of women's liberation. These scholars consider the LTTE to be an organization that opened up avenues for women who were previously stuck in a traditional society. Scholars such as Tamara Herath, who studied the case of the LTTE in particular, lean towards the discourse that claims the LTTE liberated the women in its ranks from traditional expectations

of women in society.⁴ Miranda Alison reinforces this discourse in emphasizing that female combatants in the LTTE were not victims as they are stereotyped to be, but rather, active combatants who made conscious decisions to pursue a homeland. This pursuit was their liberation.⁵ Norwegian scholar, Peter Schalk, subscribes to this school of thought as well and even deems Adele Balasingham's writings works of a "martial feminism," connecting "the demands for civil rights for women with a demand for the liberation of the homeland."⁶

Conversely, the alternate scholarly opinions do not regard the LTTE as a tool for women's liberation. These scholars, some of them feminists, consider women's involvement as counterproductive to the advancement of Tamil women. Not only do their findings suggest that Tamil women did not liberate themselves via their involvement in the struggle, they also suggest that their involvement was a mere instrument for the LTTE's leadership that continued to preserve tradition. In essence, women's involvement in the LTTE proved to be harmful to the advancement of Tamil women's liberation. Some of these arguments focus on feminism as an inherently non-violent movement, and participation in a militant organization such as the LTTE to be an implicit approval of male chauvinism. Radhika Coomaraswamy argues this point in *Women in Post-Independence Sri Lanka*.

⁴ Herath, Tamara. 2012. *Women in Terrorism: Case of the LTTE*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications.

⁵ Alison, Miranda. 2009. *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict*. London: Routledge.

⁶ Peter Schalk, "Women Fighters of the Liberation Tigers in Tamil Eelam: The Martial Feminism of Atel Palacinkam," South Asia Research 14 (1994).

She even goes as far as to critique female LTTE cadres as “perpetrators of violence” and contributors to the “militarization of society.” Other historians, whilst not necessarily taking a feminist approach to this discourse, still lean towards it. These scholars include Wang Peng, with his study on women in the LTTE,⁷ Qadri Ismail, with his study on gender and national agency in the LTTE,⁸ as well as Nira Wickramasinghe.⁹

My findings in this thesis fall under neither of the two schools of thought discussed above. I do not adhere to a strict interpretation wherein the LTTE is deemed a liberating champion of Tamil women or an oppressor of Tamil women. The answer to this question is that the LTTE did both and neither – the LTTE opened up avenues for Tamil women and also repressed them in other ways. I argue that both schools of thought that rely on the liberator versus oppressor discourse are inherently flawed because they view the LTTE as a unified entity. As apparent by the conversation between Adele and Jaya in the beginning, the voices within the LTTE were not coherent. If different viewpoints about liberation existed amongst the women, historians cannot measure the extent to which these women were “liberated.” The more important question to consider is not whether the LTTE liberated or oppressed its women, but what liberation meant to so many different Tamil women – nationalism or feminism?

⁷ Peng, Wang. 2011. “Women in the LTTE: Birds of Freedom or Cogs in the Wheel?” Canadian Center of Science and Education 4 (1). <http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/jpl/article/view/9595/6888>.

⁸ Ismail, Qadri. 1986. “Boys Will Be Boys’: Gender and National Agency in Frantz Fanon and LTTE.” Economic and Political Weekly 27 (31/32): 1677–79. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4398721>.

⁹ Nira, Wickramasinghe. 2006. *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.

My approach to this question would consist of a study of the rhetoric that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam put forth themselves after 1983 – the ways in which they recruited women and spoke of women on public platforms, their discourse on women’s rights in general – starkly contrasted with the implementation of their support for women, or lack thereof. In order to do so, I will bring in the voices of female fighters involved in factions of the LTTE and examine their experiences as women in the organization. My sources allow me to come to a general conclusion as to how these Tigresses viewed the concept of liberation. Within this section, my analysis will focus mainly on Adele Balasingham’s rhetoric. The second group that I will study is the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna). I will mostly explore the works of one human rights activist and teacher from this organization – Rajani Thiranagama - who paid specific interest and attention to the cause of Tamil women in her country. And finally, I will look into young, female, Tamil poets – specifically S. Sivaramani – who wrote about the war.

The Outbreak of Civil War

The call for the establishment of a Tamil homeland echoed louder amongst the Tamils than any other call. This had not always been the case, though. Tamils had been inhabiting the island with the Sinhalese for thousands of years. Tales of victory and defeat about warring Tamil and Sinhalese kingdoms have been proudly chronicled in literature. These hostilities, although partially buried during colonial,

particularly British colonial rule in the early 1800s, were beginning to be dug up as the island attained independence in 1948.¹⁰

The Hindu and Christian Tamil minority started to face forms of disenfranchisement and discrimination during the decolonization process. The first to be targeted by the Buddhist Sinhalese majority were the Tamils of Indian origin, who were denied citizenship after independence and sent to India in mass deportations.¹¹ The Sinhalese majority capitalized on the newfound freedom and ethno-religious nationalistic fervor of its people and emerged as the ruling class, overtaking the Tamil minority parties in government. Sinhalese political parties began to place emphasis on the use of “Sinhala only” in their campaigns. The ruling government allowed the passage of the “Sinhala only” Language Act in 1956, bolstering the growing tensions and fears amongst the Tamil population.¹²

Anti-Tamil riots spread as Tamils resisted with civil disobedience and rioting in the 50s and 60s. Tensions continued to grow in the 70s as Tamil students faced discrimination in their entry into university. Anti-Tamil riots, atrocities against Tamils, and military occupation of Tamil lands rose as did a rising Tamil opposition

¹⁰ Unknown. 1946. “*New Constitution Hit by Indians in Ceylon.*” *The New York Times*, May 19. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/107710997?accountid=14166>.

¹¹ Trumbulls, Robert. 1949. “*Indians in Ceylon Get Status Choice.*” *The New York Times*, September 30. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/105850563?accountid=14166>.

¹² Odchimar, Marilyn. “*Tamil grievances have roots in language law.*” *The Globe and Mail (Canada)*, August 14, 1986.

in the form of separatist organizations such as TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front) and the LTTE among many others.¹³

Prior to the breakout of the war in 1983, Tamils embraced different oppositional movements, from the non-violent “Gandhiyam” civil disobedience protesters staging Satyagraha¹⁴ protests to Tamil nationalist parties working within the Sri Lankan parliament.¹⁵ The utter brutality and escalation of the war eventually gave way to militant, separatist organizations like EPRLF and LTTE to appear more competent against the Sinhalese. Soon, the LTTE defeated rival separatist groups in the north and rose as the pinnacle of the Tamil separatist struggle that was gaining an increasing amount of momentum.¹⁶ The Sri Lankan government paid specific attention to fighting and eradicating the LTTE, the strongest of its separatist enemies.

Women and the Movement

The LTTE leadership did not rely solely on working towards uniting the people under an exclusively nationalistic banner. Its charismatic leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, propagated the goals of the LTTE as one that encompassed the grievances of all Tamils. The grievances of the Tamil people were to be addressed

¹³ Ponnambalam, Satchi. 1983. *Sri Lanka: The National Question and the Tamil Liberation Struggle*. Zed Books Ltd. 119 – 122.

¹⁴ Peaceful protests popularized by Mahatma Gandhi.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gordon, Weiss. 2012. *The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka and the Last Days of the Tamil Tigers*. New York: Bellevue Literary Press. 45.

and fixed with the establishment of a Tamil homeland. Amongst the many causes the LTTE claimed to fight for including the destruction of the caste system, LTTE leaders were keen to include the fight for women's rights – namely against the traditional system of dowry and arranged marriage as highlighted by Adele Balasingham.¹⁷ During its earlier years, the LTTE had not involved Tamil women in the struggle, and yet the organization was beginning to incorporate women's liberation rhetoric to cater to the Tamil female audience as well as the international community that was increasingly focusing on hot-button human (and women's) rights issues.¹⁸ Tamil women were previously removed from the fight that was supposedly being fought for all Tamils, in the mid-70s and early 80s until they were finally being recruited to further the LTTE's cause in the early 80s.

The northern Tamils, consisting mostly of a majority of Hindus as well as Christians, could not picture women entering the front lines of the battle. Although Hindu mythology often depicted goddesses as powerful figures and warriors such as Kali and Durga, who were also mother-figures, Tamil women had never before engaged in military training and fighting. The Tamil woman was more closely associated with the motherly characteristics of Hindu goddesses than the

¹⁷ Adele, Balasingham. 1983. *Women and Revolution: The Role of Women in Tamil Eelam National Liberation Struggle.* Political Committee Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

¹⁸ "World Conferences on Women." n.d. UN Women. <http://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/intergovernmental-support/world-conferences-on-women>.

characteristics of a warrior.¹⁹ The traditional, ideal Tamil woman was coy, soft-spoken, and homebound.

This does not go to say that such was the reality of Tamil women, as well as Sinhalese and other Sri Lankan women. The United Nation's country profile for women in Sri Lanka described the status of Sri Lankan women as "somewhat paradoxical." Before and during the war, Sri Lanka stood out in stark contrast to its neighboring developing nations in matters such as rate of female expectation of life at birth and literacy rates that "approximate those of the developed countries." The 1997 Report stated that, "Sri Lankan females enjoy a status equal to that of their male counterparts in various spheres of life."²⁰

However, it went on to posit that, "in most respects, their status is similar to that of women in other Asian countries: one of general subordination in a male-dominated society."²¹ This general subordination was prevalent across different ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. Tamil women were not the only women experiencing this paradoxical status of women; so did Sinhalese, Muslim, and other women throughout the country. Although Sri Lanka surpassed many other developing nations in its country profile of women, this general subjugation of women was deeply embedded in both traditional Tamil and Sinhalese societies with the use

¹⁹ Alison, Miranda. 2009. *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict*. London: Routledge. 126.

²⁰ "Women in Sri Lanka: A Country Profile." 1997. 13. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. 3.

²¹ Ibid.

traditional Kandyan Laws governing aspects of Sinhalese society as well as Thesavalamai Laws governing aspects of northern Tamil society. Similarly, the Muslims of Sri Lanka implemented elements of Sharia Law as customary laws. These customary laws defined matters uniquely to the ethnic/religious groups that informally and traditionally governed by them. Many of these matters, such as inheritance laws, marriage, dowry, and property rights directly and indirectly affected Sri Lankan women. In the case of the Tamils, matters pertaining to marriage and dowry were two big issues the LTTE sought to reform for women. The prevalence of the still-alive Thesavalamai - meaning, “thesam” and “valamai” or “land” and “traditional law” - continued to reinforce gender roles in Tamil communities.²² Hence, when the conflict began to take its course and a demand for more Tamil participation began to grow, separatist groups started to put aside the traditional expectations of women and pursue female fighters instead.

Other Tamil separatist groups – like PLOTE (People’s Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam) and EPRLF (Eelam People’s Revolutionary Liberation Front) that were the first to recruit girls – had begun to utilize women as a major key to broadening the struggle.²³ Female units were given military training and sent to training camps in India to return to the North and serve the cause. The use of female combatants was not a new concept to the world since many groups in the decolonized world used women as fighters in national liberation struggles, like in

²² “Sri Lankan Tamil Refugee Women in India.” 1997. *Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees* 16 (2): 3–4.

²³ Alison, Miranda. 2009. *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict*. London: Routledge.

Vietnam. These Tamil separatist groups were recognizing the need to include women and were embarking on a similar path. The LTTE, on the other hand, had initially consisted of male-only units. Women fighting alongside men were seen as potentially corrupting the intentions of the men fighting. For this reason, pre-marital relationships and marriage had been banned within the organization until Prabhakaran himself wed his wife, Mathivathani Erambu, in 1984.

It was not until late 1983, during the beginning stages of the war, that the LTTE had decided to broaden its organization. By 1985, the LTTE had successfully created a women-only military unit called the “Vithuthalai Pulikal Munani” or Women’s Front of the Liberation Tigers.²⁴ The first group of women to be trained in combat, however, came about in 1985 when they were sent for training in India. In 1987, Prabhakaran had set up training camps for women-only in the Northern province of Jaffna, and by 1989, the women had their own leadership structure in the women-only camps.²⁵ Although the number of women recruited to the LTTE during these years remains a military secret, the numbers grew significantly after 1990.

Women joined for several reasons. In up to 14 interviews of Tamil Tigresses that scholar Miranda Alison conducted, she pinpointed five motivational factors that stood out: “nationalist sentiment,” “suffering and oppression,” “educational disruptions and restrictions,” “sexual violence against women,” and “women’s

²⁴ Alison, Miranda. 2003. *Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.* Taylor & Francis Ltd, Civil Wars, 6 (4): 39.

²⁵ Ibid.

emancipation.²⁶ Miranda did not mention forced recruitment but it remains a likely possibility. The motivational factor that stands out the most, however, is that of nationalist sentiment. Miranda Alison, as well as other historians such as Sumantra Bose, emphasized this factor as the most important.²⁷ It is noteworthy that the number of women who testified for nationalist sentiment exceeded the number that did for women's liberation.²⁸ This shows that these women prioritized national liberation above women's liberation. It makes one question whose sentiments Adele was echoing about enlightened feminism in the introductory anecdote.

Women in the LTTE

Adele Ann Balasingham was probably the most known LTTE tigress, internationally. Adele was not Tamil or even a native of Sri Lanka, and for this reason, she garnered lots of international attention as to why an Australian native was so passionately fighting for the establishment of a Tamil homeland. She was born and bred in a small town in Victoria, Australia. She had a normal childhood with not much of a political upbringing apart from the influences of her father, who was a strong advocate for the rights of working people with his Labor Party politics.²⁹ In her book, "The Will to Freedom," she recalled how empathy for those who were suffering was a quality instilled in her by her parents. It was this empathy

²⁶ Alison, Miranda. 2003. "Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam." Taylor & Francis Ltd, *Civil Wars*, 6 (4): 37-54.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Adele, Balasingham. 2001. *The Will to Freedom: An Inside View of Tamil Resistance*. Fairmax Publishing Ltd. 26.

that was one of the reasons why she pursued nursing as a profession and became certified as a nurse at the age of twenty one. Bored of her surroundings, Adele decided to leave Australia for England, where she met Anton Balasingham while being enrolled in South Bank University, studying social science. Their marriage was one not of only love, but a marriage of ideologies since they had been involved in activism as students. Adele recalled how politically conscious their friends in London had been when the violence in Sri Lanka was escalating in the 70s.³⁰ Their social circles included passionate, young college students each representing different national struggles. Adeles wrote that the,

“Eritreans came with the history of their struggle; the East Timorese representatives narrated the genocidal regime; the African National Congress was twenty years away from victory and their representatives gave a talk on the struggle against apartheid; the Chilean underground representatives visited us and talked on the struggle against the military dictatorship of Pinochet, and so on.”³¹

The couple’s passion for the Tamil struggle was also extended to the other post-colonial national struggles that their colleagues shared with them. As the violence increasingly escalated back home, Anton Balasingham was approached by representatives of the LTTE to write for them.³² Soon, both Adele and Anton had

³⁰ Adele, Balasingham. 2001. *The Will to Freedom: An Inside View of Tamil Resistance*. Fairmax Publishing Ltd. 34.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

become more involved in the LTTE as a result, although they did not cut ties with Tamils who subscribed to other Tamil nationalist organizations. The couple soon moved to India working with the LTTE and eventually made it to Jaffna, the hub of the LTTE at the peak of the conflict. Anton Balasingham went on to become the LTTE's Chief Political Strategist and Adele Balasingham, a woman, joined the top ranks of an organization that had previously not included any women at all.

By 1983, there had been only four other official LTTE publications; all affirming the organization's goals and ideology. Its fifth ever publication released by the Political Committee of the LTTE was on women.³³ The mere fact that it was one of the LTTE's only publications at the time is indicative of the importance that the leaders had begun to place on women's involvement in their organization. Titled "Women and Revolution: The Role of Women in Tamil Eelam National Liberation Struggle," this 30 page pamphlet was penned by Adele Balasingham, published in Tamil and in English, for both Tamil women and international audiences. She had taken the role of leading the LTTE's first ever all-female fighters unit. With its intended audience being Tamil women in Tamil Eelam, the pamphlet put forth a three-fold objective. Adele wrote that the objectives were:

"Firstly, to inform the women in Tamil Eelam that their participation in the national liberation struggle is crucial for the victory of the nation. Secondly, that national freedom and women's participation in the struggle are crucial

³³ Adele, Balasingham. 1983. *Women and Revolution: The Role of Women in Tamil Eelam National Liberation Struggle.* Political Committee Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

to their own social emancipation. Since the freedom struggle in Tamil Eelam is progressive and revolutionary in character, their participation will provide a springboard from which women can organize, identify and articulate their grievances and fight against the modes of oppression and exploitation perpetrated on them. Thirdly, to generate in women in Tamil Eelam a feeling of solidarity with other oppressed people in struggle, a solidarity with women in struggle.”³⁴

Adele drew on the revolutionary struggles and women’s involvement in places like Cuba, Palestine, Eritrea, Nicaragua, South Africa, Namibia, Ireland and many more.³⁵ She cited prominent revolutionaries like Castro and Lenin on the grave importance of women’s involvement in the movement for it to flourish. The first half of this pamphlet focused on highlighting the women from different movements before setting the stage to bring attention to Tamil women. Adele highlighted sensitive issues and fears of Tamil women concerning their risk of being raped during the conflict. Not only were these fears of sexual violence put forth as motivating factors for women’s participation, but Adele went beyond the LTTE’s promise to protect their women. She depicted Tamil women as “victims of dual oppression,” wherein they were oppressed by “Sinhala national chauvinism” and were also “victims of social oppression emanating from cultural images of women, cultural norms and

³⁴ Adele, Balasingham. 1983. *Women and Revolution: The Role of Women in Tamil Eelam National Liberation Struggle.* Political Committee Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. 6.

³⁵ Adele, Balasingham. 1983. *Women and Revolution: The Role of Women in Tamil Eelam National Liberation Struggle.* Political Committee Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. 7 – 21.

practices.”³⁶ The exploitation of Tamil women as a “cheap labor force” in the workplace and domestic sphere was critiqued as well.³⁷ Finally, she deemed dowry “a practice that degrades women” as she called for the eradication of the unjust system.³⁸ Many of these issues were hot-button topics concerning human rights – and specifically women’s rights – in the international community and amidst international organizations starting in the mid-70s.³⁹ Adele addressed these factors as oppressive structures placed against Tamil women in their society and called for women to pick up arms and engage in the movement, as “the stage is set for women to fight.”⁴⁰

The LTTE had completely changed the way in which it perceived women’s participation in the movement in the early 1980s. The need for the participation of women for a successful movement to persist had been recognized by organizations like EPRLF, PLOTE, and EROS before the LTTE had considered allowing women to join. Female cadres recalled eagerly waiting for the LTTE to recruit women and some even recalled urging local LTTE leaders to speak to the higher-ups on their behalf.⁴¹ By late 1983 the LTTE had decided that it was time to not only allow eager

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ “*The Nairobi World Conference. Women of Europe Supplement No. 24, April 1986. X/154/86/EN.*” (1986): Archive of European Integration, EBSCOhost (accessed May 3, 2017).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ De Soyza, Niromi. 2012. *Tamil Tigress: My Story as a Child Soldier in Sri Lanka’s Bloody Civil War.* Pune, India: Mehta Publishing House.

young women to join their ranks, but it was also time to actively begin the process of recruiting women. The movement that had previously focused on eradicating caste discrimination, promoting education rights, and the demands of men to create a Tamil homeland had now placed the spotlight on the other half of the Tamil population.

By recruiting women into its ranks, the LTTE was not only speaking to Tamil women, but also to the world. The decade of 1975 to 1985 was internationally recognized as the UN Decade for Women.⁴² The LTTE was following a greater stage being set in the international system regarding women's rights. It was incorporating feminist rhetoric into a nationalist movement. She advocated for women to join the national liberation movement, and through it, find women's liberation. Adele – a white, Australian woman – speaking on behalf of Tamil women and fighting for their rights in a third-world civil war was reflective of the bigger changes occurring in the international arena towards the betterment of women's rights. Hence, the LTTE made a practical and political move of recruiting Tamil women during this time period. The first all-female LTTE units emerged. They consisted of young women, poor women, and also passionate, educated, middle-class women.

A Glimpse into a LTTE Woman

Although Adele Balasingham was the official voice representing the LTTE women to the international community, other female combatants were also vocal

⁴² "The Nairobi World Conference. Women of Europe Supplement No. 24, April 1986. X/154/86/EN." (1986): Archive of European Integration, EBSCOhost (accessed May 3, 2017).

about their participation in the movement. These women were able to contribute their writing and poetry to the LTTE's journals, like the women's journal, *Birds of Freedom*. One such woman, Captain Vanathi of the Women's wing, penned a poem titled, "She, the Woman of Tamililam!" describing the dedication that the female fighters possessed. She wrote,

"Her forehead shall be adorned not with kunkumam⁴³ [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,⁴⁴
[but] a Cyanide flask!"

The fighter juxtaposed traditional gendered expectations of the female fighter with those of the new LTTE woman. She likened a cyanide flask to the *tali*, or holy thread tied around the neck of the bride by the groom. The female fighter was thus, no longer bound by marriage but by her dedication to the Tamil nation. The women Vanathi described were those who had abandoned social norms, namely married life, to pursue the fight for the nation above everything else. Considering the great importance of the institution of marriage in a society as traditional as Tamil society, it is insightful to see how female LTTE cadres placed a higher degree of importance upon the Tamil struggle. Vanathi's poem was a denunciation of marriage and tradition itself. She wrote about the movement with such dedication and it appears to the reader that adherence to traditional norms was a thing of the past for many of

⁴³ Vermilion applied to the forehead for religious or social markings in the Hindu tradition.

⁴⁴ An auspicious or holy thread tied around the neck of the bride by the groom.

these female cadres. Vanathi's poem and the sentiments it reflects is not the only one of its sorts. Within the Women's Wing, many female combatants wrote and published pieces about the national liberation movement and their role in it. To these women, their ideal women's liberation came from the pursuit of national liberation.

Opposition to Women in the LTTE: Conservative Tamil Society

While the LTTE focused on denouncing the old, traditional ideal set for women in Tamil society, other opposing voices amongst the Tamils began to emerge. The first, and natural byproduct of the LTTE's "liberation" of women was an outcry against the organization's radical ways from the most traditional sections of Tamil society. These critics were mostly amongst the most conservative of northern Tamil population, viewing women's involvement in the struggle as detrimental, not because of the struggle itself, but because of women's perceived roles in Tamil society and how they should not be transgressing those limits. These critic voices tended to spread by word of mouth and we are aware of them because of existing female fighter literature that highlights the opposition they faced by their own communities.⁴⁵ For instance, Tamil women had not been allowed to ride bikes or dress freely before women started joining the movement.⁴⁶ Women maintained a traditional sense of dress – donning "modest" clothing instead of the Tiger shirt and

⁴⁵ De Soyza, Niromi. 2012. *Tamil Tigress: My Story as a Child Soldier in Sri Lanka's Bloody Civil War*. Pune, India: Mehta Publishing House.

⁴⁶ Alison, Miranda. 2009. *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict*. London: Routledge. 167.

pants, and wore their hair long and often neatly braided. The female Tigers abandoned this style and cut their hair short, for practical purposes and sometimes just for the sake of wearing their hair short.⁴⁷ There was a general feeling amongst these Tamils that the gender intermixing within the ranks of the LTTE was blameworthy and shameful. Their communities had begun to view them vastly differently from what a Tamil woman ought to be, traditionally.⁴⁸ The ideal liberation to these critics was national liberation – but not a nation so “liberated” that it challenged traditional Tamil society and the role of its women.

Opposition to Women in the LTTE: UTHR(J) and Rajini Thiranagama

Conversely, critics of female fighters rose from another spectrum of Tamil society – that of Tamil intellectuals and feminists from the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) or UTHR(J). As an organization, the UTHR(J)’s mission statement was,

“To challenge the external and internal terror engulfing the Tamil community as a whole through making the perpetrators accountable, and to create space for humanising the social & political spheres relating to the life of our community.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Rajan, Hoole, Somasundaram Daya, Sritharan K.A., and Thiranagama Rajini. 1992. *The Broken Palmyrah*. Jaffna, Sri Lanka: The Sri Lanka Studies Institute. 5.8.

⁴⁹ “University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna).” n.d. <http://www.uthr.org/>.

These intellectuals took to critiquing not only the LTTE, IPKF (Indian Peace Keeping Forces) and Sri Lankan government, but also the LTTE's use of women and the traditional oppressive structures in Tamil society that often forced Tamil women to seek alternatives in order to escape them. The University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) was an organization of lecturers and intellectuals who previously taught at the University of Jaffna. It was formed in 1988 as a part of the bigger national organization called University Teachers for Human Rights in Sri Lanka.⁵⁰ While the organization functioned separately from the University of Jaffna for a while since it was founded, the situation in the LTTE-controlled North left little room for voices that critiqued their ways. Their mission statement highlights how the LTTE demolished all rival militant groups in the north, and this included the LTTE's verbal critics. The University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) had become infamous in the north for their rhetoric focused on human rights violations, so much so that the University of Jaffna had to publicly disassociate itself from its former academics and scholars in UTHR(J), presumably to maintain safety in the LTTE-controlled area.⁵¹

By the 1990s, the LTTE had been getting increasingly serious with its crackdowns on opposition. Assassinations conducted by the LTTE were not an anomaly. Even before the LTTE was founded, the organization hadn't hesitated to crush not only Sinhalese, but also Tamil opposition from within. The assassination

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ "The Resolution by the Council of the University of Jaffna, the LTTE Press Release and Our Note." n.d. <http://www.uthr.org/Reports/Report11/appendix5.htm>.

of the mayor of Jaffna in 1975, Alfred Duraippah, was one that struck fear into the hearts of many Tamil opponents.⁵² The LTTE's rise to power in the north itself was one that was borne of the destruction of other Tamil militant groups with different ideologies or methods. It follows that the LTTE had no issue with silencing the voices of civilian Tamil academics, critics, and those perceived to be "sympathizers" of the Sri Lankan government, with violence.

By 1990, those who associated themselves with UTHR(J) were forced to leave Jaffna for safety. The reason for this was not only because of the LTTE's crackdown on militant groups or so-called treasonous Tamil politicians, but also its crackdown on Tamil civilians who were verbally critical of the LTTE – many of them being UTHR(J) academics. One such incident was that of the murder of Dr. Rajini Thiranagama, one of the founding members of UTHR(J). Rajini was murdered on the 21st of September, 1989, by an unknown gunman, cycling on her way back home.⁵³ Although the gunman was unknown, many sources point to it being a member of the LTTE that was angered and threatened by Rajini's writings.

Rajini Thiranagama, former Head of the Department of Anatomy at the University of Jaffna had embraced activism by joining UTHR(J).⁵⁴ Although her contributions were cut short by her premature death, lots of literature published by

⁵² James, Hawdon, Ryan John, and Lucht Marc. 2014. *The Causes and Consequences of Group Violence: From Bullies to Terrorists*. United States: Lexington Books. 95.

⁵³ Feizal, Samath. 1993. "Sri Lanka Activists Brave Death Squads in Documenting Human Rights Violations." LA Times. http://articles.latimes.com/1993-07-18/news/mn-14291_1_human-rights.

⁵⁴ Helene, Klodawsky. 2006. *No More Tears Sister: Anatomy of Hope and Betrayal*.

the UTHR(J) in conjunction with the works of Rajini still exist to this day. Rajini was most critical of human rights violations of any sort – whether they were committed by the Sri Lankan army, the LTTE, or the Indian Peace Keeping Forces that were in the north for a short while.

While many of the books, reports and statements published by UTHR(J) focused on human rights issues and atrocities against Tamil civilians, Rajini took to specifically highlighting the experiences of Tamil women, not forgetting to address the gross violations of women’s rights in the north. In the book, *The Broken Palmyrah*, written by academics from the UTHR(J) in conjunction with Rajini Thiranagama, the authors offered a historical narration of the conflict, the components of the conflict as it was happening and a section for reports on human rights violations against civilians – men, women, and children – along with their analyses.⁵⁵ In one such section, the authors highlighted the case of the rape of Tamil women by the Sri Lankan army, IPKF, as well as Tamil militants. For the time period during which they were speaking out, the authors of this book (and many other reports, briefings, and publications) were quite progressive in their approach to topics that were considered taboo in Tamil society. In that way, the UTHR(J) was an organization not only critical of those who utilized violence but also the traditional and conservative Tamil society in which they lived. For instance, in the case of rape, they wrote that the

⁵⁵ Rajan, Hoole, Somasundaram Daya, Sritharan K.A., and Thiranagama Rajini. 1992. *The Broken Palmyrah*. Jaffna, Sri Lanka: The Sri Lanka Studies Institute.

“loss of virginity in a young girl, even if against her will, meant that she could not aspire to marriage in our society and, if already married, there is a good chance that she will be abandoned. All rape victims are socially ostracised, often by the family also.”⁵⁶

They went on to posit:

“In our cultural setting, sexual violence takes on a more serious significance and has a severely psychologically traumatising effect on the victim and her close relations, including her husband. Chastity is traditionally considered one of the supreme virtues of women, to be safe guarded with the same diligence as their life.”⁵⁷

They highlighted the norms of the society in which they lived and how the concepts of virginity and chastity applied to Tamil women. In their report of the cases of rape that they had been recording, the UTHR(J) activists made sure to condemn the perpetrators of such actions and also the oppressive society in which they lived – often times ostracizing the very women who had been wronged and traumatized because of rape. They recognized the unique circumstances that Tamil women faced that were not like that of their male counterparts. Tamil women were brutalized by non-Tamil men (Sri Lankan armed forces and IPKF) but they also faced ostracism by their own Tamil men and society for being victims of rape, which was viewed as

⁵⁶ Rajan, Hoole, Somasundaram Daya, Sritharan K.A., and Thiranagama Rajini. 1992. *The Broken Palmyrah*. Jaffna, Sri Lanka: The Sri Lanka Studies Institute. 4.9.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

shameful. The Tamil woman did not only suffer at the hands of rapists, but she also suffered in silence due to the idea that speaking of rape was a shameful matter in Tamil society that would bring shame and dishonor to a family. The Tamil woman was battling oppression on two different fronts.

Rajini wrote in perhaps one of her most quoted pieces on women's issues, titled, "*No More Tears Sister: The Experiences of Women*," on reports collected about the experiences of Tamil women. In this piece, Rajini also went on to put forth her views on women joining the national liberation struggle as well as other organizations. She wrote, "Whatever the experience - positive or negative - one cannot deny that this is a sweeping phase in the life of the whole community of women" in her introduction to writing about women and arms.⁵⁸ The outbreak of the civil war coupled with the induction of women into Tamil militant movements set the stage for a drastically different Tamil society than the one most had been used to for decades. She went on to write:

"One cannot but be inspired when one sees the women of the L.T.T.E., 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 L.T.T.E.. One could see the nationalist fervour and the romantic vision of women in arms defending the nation. This becomes a great draw for other women to join the militant movements. Our social set up, its restriction on creative expressions for

⁵⁸ Rajan, Hoole, Somasundaram Daya, Sritharan K.A., and Thiranagama Rajini. 1992. *The Broken Palmyrah*. Jaffna, Sri Lanka: The Sri Lanka Studies Institute. 5:8.

women and the evils of the dowry system, are some of the social factors that led to their initial recruitment. Moreover, the political climate created by the struggle in the past decade, and the increasing loss of men to state terrorism and the world at large as refugees and emigrants, are some of the contributory factors necessitating women's recruitment. However, it would be an over-statement to say that it is the climate of "liberation", the kind of literature that is available, the knowledge of the experience of women in other struggles from far flung corners of the world, or the rebelliousness against being kept out of the centre of the struggle, that was drawing the fertile minds of young women to active participation."⁵⁹

Rajini brought up similar points to the ones that Adele brought up as the spokesperson of the women's wing and their liberation, but in contrast, Rajini disagreed with what Adele had argued. She recalled that, "women at one time were considered evil by the L.T.T.E. and they were said to make men loose (sic) their sense of purpose, on account of which men in the movements were prohibited from having relationships with women."⁶⁰ This holds true as pre-marital relationship between the genders were strictly prohibited in the movement prior to Prabhakaran's own marriage. Even after he had permitted marriages amongst cadres, they were only allowed with his approval. The LTTE adhered strongly to the

⁵⁹ Rajan, Hoole, Somasundaram Daya, Sritharan K.A., and Thiranagama Rajini. 1992. *The Broken Palmyrah*. Jaffna, Sri Lanka: The Sri Lanka Studies Institute. 5.8.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

idea that romantic relationships would skew the mindsets of the men in the movement.

Rajini also recalled the ways in which the LTTE dealt with women from the opposition in groups such as PLOTE or EPRLF that consisted of many women in their ranks as well. Once they were defeated by the LTTE, there were reports that female fighters from these groups were beaten and abused by the dominating LTTE, to the extent where an LTTE leader had allegedly exclaimed, “What, liberation for you all. Go and wait in the kitchen. That is the correct place for you” at the women of the opposition.⁶¹ She made the argument that it is no surprise that this type of rhetoric and attitude towards women would have trickled down to the lower ranks and influenced the way female cadres were treated by their male peers.

Rajini’s writings on LTTE women are very clear as to her stance on the LTTE’s use of women for their movement. She did not necessarily take a confrontational stance towards the women involved per se, as other feminists like Radhika Coomaraswamy did, but she pointed to the oppressive nature of the LTTE as an organization and also the oppressive nature of the society they lived in towards women. It is as though she viewed these women as victims stuck between an exploitative organization and an oppressive society. Rajini emphasized who and what types of women actually joined the militant movement. They were predominantly young, poor and sometimes middle class girls. This is supported by much of the research done by other scholars who studied the LTTE’s female

⁶¹ Ibid.

fighters.⁶² Ultimately, Rajini viewed the LTTE as an organization that takes advantage of the young and impressionable girls with nationalist fervor or other incentives for which they joined. According to her, the LTTE used women in the movement as a tool to reach a greater goal but paid little heed to issues truly concerning them. Rajini wrote in the report:

“In such a situation, a call to arms for women had been based on images of mythified "brave and valiant mothers" who justified such male pride and went for wars or sent their sons, lovers and husbands to the war fronts. Therefore the armed women's sections developed either in terms of "use" as in the case of the L.T.T.E. or in a mechanical fashion, as a graft of an idea borrowed from other liberation struggles as with the E.P.R.L.F. Thus the passive stand by the L.T.T.E. women can be understood, as the movement approved of them exactly as their society did.”⁶³

In essence, Rajini viewed the LTTE as no different from the society, and the way they treated Tamil women. Her remark about “brave and valiant mothers” is one that this thesis echoes. The LTTE had been reliant upon the age-old image of brave and valiant Tamil women and, as a result, capitalized on that image to gain support for its movement. In other words, the image of Tamil women in society as brave

⁶² Alison, Miranda. 2009. *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict*. London: Routledge.

⁶³ Ibid.

mothers or caregivers, was simply transferred from the family unit or their obligations to serve Tamil society, to participation in the LTTE's fight for freedom.

Another important aspect of Rajini's views on women's involvement is how she highlighted the ill-treatment of the female cadres by their own society as well. While Rajini condemned women's participation in the movement, she was still empathetic towards the women who chose to participate, often as desperate resorts to see change in an otherwise depressing atmosphere. As mentioned before, much of Tamil society viewed women's involvement as a shameful act. The failures of the LTTE were easily attributed to the small group of women who had joined and these failures were apparently all due to the women's negative influences upon the men, according to society, as Rajini did not neglect to mention. Rajini mentioned how, "one older woman said: 'The Tigers were all right till these women joined them. They have spoilt the movement and the boys' dedication.'"⁶⁴ She went on to comment on these remarks:

"Such hard and cruel words coming from women themselves, show the deep seated ramifications of women's oppression. These as well as the commonly heard insinuation that women themselves invite molestation and rape, show the trap that women have set for themselves."⁶⁵

Tamil women, alone, were at the receiving end of a much harsher criticism and backlash from both their own society and the enemy forces. The Tamil women who

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

had previously adhered strictly to conservative dress codes were now donning pants and shirts and wearing their hair short, resembling men. They were doing a man's job and abandoning their responsibilities as women according to these traditional voices. They were not being proper women by attempting to spearhead the fight for a Tamil nation, rather than leaving the important task to the men and sons of Tamil society.

Rajini highlighted these criticisms to emphasize how Tamil women were not only repressed by the national liberation movement, but also traditional society. Serving the national liberation cause was an extension of the servitude that Tamil women were always pushed towards in society. According to Rajini, servitude to the national liberation movement or compliance with traditional Tamil societal expectations were not the means towards women's liberation.

Opposition to Women in the LTTE: Young Female Poets

The LTTE dealt with opposition harshly by forcefully crushing opponents, as it did by crushing rival militant groups with different ideological stances when it rose to power. However, not all opponents took the form of an armed organization. The LTTE's vocal opponents were great in number, but rarer amongst the Tamil female demographic. Dr. Rajani Thiranagama was one of the women that met Tamil militant groups with vocal opposition and faced an imminent death. Other Tamil women in the north, whilst not as vocal as the likes of Dr. Thiranagama, were also met with unfortunate deaths, either sanctioned by the LTTE or led to commit suicide, which urges one to truly question the LTTE's so-called feminism. Two such

women were S. Sivaramani and Selvi Thiagarajah – both young poets that wrote about the horrors brought upon Tamils by the war.

S. Sivaramani was a young student at Jaffna University in the 80s, the decade during which the LTTE increasingly incorporated women into its ranks and when fighting escalated. Having been born and raised in Jaffna, she wrote passionately about the state that the war had left her land in. Her poems were vague criticisms of the conditions brought upon the Tamil people by those who insisted on fighting to the end. In one of her poems she wrote,

“Finally,
 Our last thinking human is dying, slowly.
 The door is closed to all dissent.
 You leave your children the legacy of darkness;
 The crumbs of culture
 Preserved in the traditions
 Of a six-yard cloth.”⁶⁶

This poem succinctly highlighted the repressive state in which Sivaramani and those who dissented lived. Her critique emphasized “the crumbs of culture preserved in the traditions of a six-yard cloth.” The six-yard cloth she mentioned is analogous to the traditional sarees donned by Tamil women, often considered signs of womanhood, tradition, and modesty. Sivaramani was trying to portray to the reader that the fighters had removed the space for dissent and intellectualism in nationalism and only held onto the conservative traditions of the past, that

⁶⁶ S.H., Hasbullah, and Morrison Barrie M. 2004. *Sri Lankan Society in an Era of Globalization: Struggling to Create a New Social Order*. New Delhi, India: SAGE Publications. 145.

unsurprisingly, applied to the ways women lived. The crumbs of culture remained in the clothing Tamil women donned whereas other markers of rich Tamil culture and history, such as a deep-rooted love for intellectualism, were being abandoned in the pursuit of aggression and war. As such, Sivaramani emphasized the hypocrisy of the national liberation movement, implying that it exploited Tamil women with its reinforcement of oppressive gender norms.

This poem was one of many highlighting Sivaramani's views on the war and those who represented the fight on the Tamil front. It is one of the few remaining as Sivaramani, at the age of twenty four, gathered her collection of poetry, burned them, and set her room on fire to commit suicide. Sitralega Maunaguru, a prominent Tamil activist and poet who published Sivaramani's remaining poetry, commented on her tragic death. Maunaguru pointed out how Sivaramani's death garnered little to no attention due to the nature of her death.⁶⁷ Sivaramani did not die an honorable death like the female fighters who bit into cyanide capsules or blew themselves up, and therefore, she was not worthy of adoration or memory. This is an interesting point in that it shows how Tamil women, were only praised when they died in the "honorable" way of the martyr – while still subservient to the nation. The LTTE claimed to have given Tamil women agency but it is apparent that this agency was only valid as far as it validated the LTTE's struggle itself, and did not condemn its violence or ideology. The LTTE promoted a narrow ideal of liberation for women.

⁶⁷ Wenona Mary, Giles, de Alwis Malathi, Klein Edith, and Silva Neluka. 2003. *Feminists Under Fire: Exchanges Across War Zones*. Toronto: Between the Lines. 70.

The women who believed national liberation to be the ideal liberation in the LTTE were thus held to a higher honor than the women who believed otherwise.

The case of Selvi, or Thiagarajah Selvanithy, was similar to that of Sivaramani. Selvi was also a student at the University of Jaffna. She was a poet, activist, and was openly feminist in her works for a feminist magazine in Sri Lanka. Selvi caught the attention of the LTTE due to her criticisms of the movement. She was abducted, silenced, and later executed by the LTTE for her opposition.⁶⁸ Like Sivaramani, Selvi was met with death for her feminist criticisms of the national liberation movement. The tension that existed between the two concepts of feminism and national liberation amongst Tamils is apparent in these examples.

Conclusion

Tamil women's participation in the armed conflict was a contested issue within the country. It is hard to deny that the LTTE did indeed open up avenues for its women. Tamil women enjoyed more mobility albeit within the parameters of LTTE-controlled areas during the conflict. The women changed their dress codes, picked up weapons that were reserved uniquely for men only, and fought side by side with men. Joining the struggle meant physical protection from sexual violence and aggression from the Sri Lankan armed forces or IPKF for many women. However, these changes were often either superficial and temporary in nature (increased mobility, attire during the conflict, etc.) or were mere promises made to

⁶⁸ Lucy, Popescu, and Seymour-Jones Carole. n.d. *Writers Under Siege: Voices of Freedom from Around the World*. New York: New York University Press. 141.

women with regards to eradicating the dowry system. Rather than serving to liberate Tamil women as the LTTE had promised during their recruitment, it focused on what Tamil women, instead, could do for the LTTE. The LTTE relied heavily on reinforcing the femininity of Tamil women for its own advantage. For instance, the choice to use many women in the Black Tiger suicide squad was reliant upon women's ability to use their femininity to gain access to crucial Sinhalese target areas. When Sivaramani described the "crumbs of culture preserved in a six-yard cloth," it was comparable to how the elements of Tamil culture the LTTE sought to preserve were in the sarees that women donned, to escape being obvious targets in suicide bombing missions. The "crumbs of culture" preserved were those elements that proved to be advantageous to further the cause of the LTTE.

From this, one can continue to reflect on whether or not the LTTE truly liberated women. The existing scholarship on this question is divided on this matter. This clear division and constant debate over whether or not Tamil women were liberated by the LTTE should be looked into further as there is no definitive answer, and there will be no definitive answer so long as we ask the wrong question. This thesis sought to answer not whether LTTE women were liberated or not, but what the ideal of liberation meant to these women. All Tamil women did not regard liberation in the same light and we must not homogenize their viewpoints.

As analyzed in this thesis, it is apparent that there were differences of opinion amongst women even within the LTTE. Outside of the LTTE, Tamil women took on different approaches to defining liberation as well. To Adele, women's

liberation came from national liberation. The two concepts were compatible. To soldiers like Vanathi, national liberation was at the highest point of the fight. Women's liberation was simply a byproduct of fighting for an honorable cause such as the Tamil homeland. To intellectuals like Rajini, the women in the LTTE had it all wrong – they were working for the LTTE that was contributing to the oppression of Tamil women. The LTTE itself was worthy of condemnation and women's participation in the LTTE was counterproductive to women's liberation. To others like the young poet, Sivaramani, liberating the nation was not liberation for anyone – particularly women. Preserving the status quo in the treatment of Tamil women was the last bit of Tamil culture that the LTTE held on to. The fight for national liberation was one that essentially relied on oppressing women.

The personalities discussed were all voices of women highly involved in the local debate in the 1980s and 1990s regarding women's participation in the movement. What historians of this story have neglected is the importance of highlighting the conversation itself. This story is not about whether or not LTTE women were liberated. It is about the tensions between the different ideals of liberation – women's liberation or national liberation. Some women chose one or the other, some chose neither, and some struggled to reconcile the two concepts like Adele. It is this tension that needs to be highlighted when studying a time period such as the late 20th century when people in post-colonial nations were going beyond the ideal of simply national liberation, and exploring different liberating concepts that were sometimes at odds with each other.

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