THE ORDERS WERE TO RAPE YOU

TIGRESSES IN THE TAMIL EELAM STRUGGLE

THE TRAITOR WHO IS THE WRITER

This is an essay about writing and trauma.

This is an essay about violence: of men, of armies, of women, of relationships, of gossip and memory, of having to remember and having to testify.

This essay is an exercise in intimacy. It questions why women on the margins have to trade in trauma for a chance to be heard.

This essay is an exercise in trust. I seldom discuss my writing—writing as life, as living, as central to my existence and my identity—with any of the men in my life. It is enough that I give them my love, the pleasure of my body, the power to reject me from one night to the next. I discuss my writing with those who know me only as a writer: my agent, my editors, and most of all, my readers. That is why I bring this essay

to you: to show you where some of my writing comes from.

This essay is the story of how I grew up vicariously involved in the armed struggle for Tamil self-determination. This essay is the testimony of what I learned as I listened to other women share their stories of trauma.

This is an essay about three women: a Tamil Tigress, a Tamil Tiger's wife, and me.

MY STORY

When did my identification with Tamil nationalism begin?

Perhaps it began when I was a newborn baby, barely a few weeks old, and my father was asked to resign from his job as a Tamil teacher at a school in Choolaimedu, Chennai. He remembers the day vividly: 31 October 1984, the day India's prime minister, Indira Gandhi, was assassinated by her bodyguards. Why was his resignation demanded? My father taught Tamil at the Lalchand Milapchand Dadha Senior Secondary School, a private school run by a Hindi-speaking Jain management. He had

crossed the point of no return by politicising his teenage students and taking them along to protest demonstrations. I heard this story many times in my childhood, and remain convinced that when people are punished for their beliefs, it only ends up reinforcing them.

My father was no anomaly. He merely reflected the prevailing mood in Tamil Nadu, our home state in southern India. The civil war in Sri Lanka was underway. A year earlier, in 1983, the deadly Black July pogrom had seen Tamil people in Colombo attacked, murdered and publicly lynched by Sinhalese mobs. The systematic targeting and scapegoating of the Tamil-speaking minority was a standard feature of post-independent Sri Lanka. The Sinhala Buddhist majoritarian state virtually reduced the Tamils to second-class citizens, passing the Official Languages Act in 1956 which removed Tamil as an official language of the state, and reinforced a Sinhala-only policy which meant that Tamils could not access government jobs, or even intercede with the state in their own mother-tongue. This was followed, in 1972, by

a disastrous policy of standardisation, which prevented Tamil students from accessing education and employment on a par with their Sinhalese peers. The 1981 burning of the Jaffna Public Library, which housed centuries-old rare Tamil manuscripts and histories, was seen as a direct attempt to erase their history. Clampdowns on the Tamil press were common. Against this backdrop of rising ethnic tensions, with the state pursuing an explicitly Sinhala Buddhist agenda, the Tamil Tigers (officially, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE)—one of many militant groups on the island—killed thirteen soldiers of the Sri Lanka Army in an ambush in Jaffna on 23 July 1983. This was in retaliation to the abduction and rape of Tamil schoolgirls by state forces. While the standard, established practice was to send the bodies of slain soldiers to their hometowns, the Sri Lanka Army Commander Tissa Weeratunga and the Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayewardene decided to bury them with full military honours. Their mangled bodies were brought to the Kanatte cemetery in Borella, in the heart of Colombo,

and kept for public display. A delay meant that thousands of Sinhalese had already gathered at the cemetery before the bodies arrived. That crowd morphed into a mob, and armed with electoral rolls to identify Tamil homes, these state-supported rioters ended up killing over 3,000 Tamils, and left about 150,000 homeless overnight.

This caused an unforeseen influx of Tamil refugees into Tamil Nadu. Being neighbours with a shared language and history, and having once stood up to majoritarianism in our own country, we welcomed them with open arms. Tamil people took to the streets to protest, to call upon their own government to step in. From one day to the next, the war on the island began to enter our homes.

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Perhaps it was the inevitable trajectory for someone who was an Indian Tamil.

In our one-bedroom home on CNK Road in the gritty Chepauk–Triplicane area, the war meant long conversations and a never-

ending stream of visitors. It meant that my mother, a mathematics professor, took up the cases of refugee students and appealed to the colleges she knew in Chennai, pleading for them to be admitted. It meant that my father, an unemployed Tamil scholar, volunteered his proofreading skills to the many printing presses that were being set up by Tamil militant groups to produce their pamphlets, posters, campaign material. It meant that when someone came to our home, Amma would put water to boil on the stove to make sugary tea and Appa would run downstairs to fetch vadai from the Nair mess at the corner of the street.

This everyday engagement mirrored the wider mood. India set up (open) secret military camps all over the country to provide arms training to the Tamil guerrilla groups, ostensibly to protect the Tamils, but primarily to ensure its own supremacy as a regional player. As the civil war in Sri Lanka escalated, India also intervened in an official capacity. Its diplomatic efforts resulted in the Indo–Sri Lanka Peace Accord of 1987, which promised a devolution

of power, a conditional merger of the Tamil-speaking Northern and Eastern provinces (the Tamil homeland of Eelam), and the recognition of Tamil as an official language. The accord also promised the disarmament of Tamil militant groups and an end to the civil war, with the stipulated the deployment of an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) for this purpose.

The force's arrival was greeted with jubilation by the Tamil people in Eelam, but their initial optimism soon gave way to horror. At the time of their initial deployment in mid-1987, the IPKF numbered 8000 troops. Barely a year later, Indian troops in the North East numbered 80,000. Even as their presence grew exponentially, IPKF appeared to be working towards another mandate altogether—to end Tamil nationalism on the island and secure India's strategic geopolitical objectives. Seeing the Tamil Tigers as a direct challenge to its imperialist ambitions in the region, India was no longer playing peacemaker. Far from being a military presence meant to protect the people, the IPKF soon became a de-facto occupying

army, seizing control of the city of Jaffna, storming its principal hospital, killing civilians, raping women and perpetuating massacres. This was the irony of the Indian approach, first they armed and trained LTTE (and other Tamil militant) cadre in camps throughout India, and then sent their own army (in the form of the IPKF) to hunt down the same people they had trained. Eelam Tamils started calling it the Indian People-Killing Force. In August 1989, in retaliation to a Tamil guerrilla attack that killed six Indian soldiers on foot patrol, they ravaged the small coastal town of Valvettithurai, gunning down and murdering more than a hundred civilians, killing babies and burning homes. In the aftermath of such an atrocity, the Tigers announced a temporary ceasefire with the Sri Lankan military forces, and joined calls for the IPKF to leave.

As Tamils in India, we were furious and betrayed by how the Indian intervention had turned out. Our anger turned inwards; it brought us to the brutal realisation that the Tamils were not only fighting the Sinhala

state, but another enemy in disguise: India. Disillusionment with our own country made us realise that the Tamil people of Eelam could not rely on external powers to secure their liberation. We believed only the Tigers were capable of a successful struggle for self-determination.

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Perhaps it begins with the fact that my sister and I were girls in a country where girls were not wanted, not welcome.

Today, we watch the largest armies in the world half-heartedly give women a toe-hold in their ranks. So it was a surprise to many that women formed a third of the fighting force of the Tigers. It was often remarked, in jest, that the biggest recruiter of women for the Tigers was the Indian Peace Keeping Forces, a rapist army whose reign of terror drove women to take up arms.

Growing up, my friends and I looked up to the female Tamil Tigers with admiration, and in their courage and militancy we found the conviction to be strong ourselves. It was a

borrowed courage that is difficult to explain. We lived in a Tamil society where girls were expected to conform to the four quintessential feminine qualities of *accham, madam, naanam, payirppu* (fear, ignorance, modesty, shrinking delicacy): we had curfews from four in the afternoon and a chaperone wherever we went; no boyfriends, no girlfriends, no short skirts, no jeans. My parents added other layers of oppressive regimenting: no television, no playing loud games outside, no visits to the cinema, no glossy weekly magazines. Across the Palk Strait, the meagre twenty miles of ocean which separated the states of Tamil Nadu and Tamil Eelam, young girls like me were carrying AK47s and killing the enemy, and here I was, cowering under the bed in fear of my father waiting with a belt in his hand because a boy in my class had dared to phone me at home. It became easier to forget our own restrictions if we could identify with these warriors who appeared to us like living legends, so real and near, yet somehow distant and mythical. It became easier to bear our situation when armed with the knowledge that in a place not far away,

Tamil girls just shot the fuck out of anyone who snatched their rights. It was thrilling to lust after the smoking-hot Che Guevara with his beret and his stubble; equally thrilling to lust after these incredibly brave women.

I spent most of my childhood and early teenage years waiting for the liberation they were bringing to their land, and by extension, to Tamil girls like me. I wasn't the only impressionable person either. Parents were naming their daughters after the fighters (Malathi—the first female martyr of the Tigers, who died in battle fighting the IPKF in 1987, only twenty years old; Vanathi—a poet-fighter who died in the First Battle of Elephant Pass in 1991). It was acknowledged, even among the Tigers, that women were better in armed struggle because they were sharp-shooters. 'Their concentration is unwavering, they only go for the bulls-eye,' Vaiko, a senior Tamil politician who had visited the Tigers, said on a stage in Chennai.

To me, their prowess undid the humiliating years when my parents were constantly asked by total strangers, 'Two girls? Both of them!

Why don't you try for a boy? Never too late, you know!

Girls were fucking better with guns.

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Perhaps such defiant solidarity for a nationalist self-determination struggle begins with bans; with the knowledge that moral support and revolutionary sentiment could no longer be flashed around, but had to be driven underground.

On 21 May 1991, a Tamil woman suicide bomber assassinated Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in Sriperumbudur, sixty kilometres from Chennai. India banned the Tigers overnight and launched a witch-hunt against those who sympathised with the cause of Tamil self-determination. The sensational trial sentenced twenty-six people to death, later reduced to seven after much outrage and legal wrangling. Tamil public sentiment has thus far ensured that this death penalty has not been carried out. But the ban on the Tigers had wide-ranging consequences: it was no longer possible

for them to publicly enlist support in Tamil Nadu. Much of their fundraising and campaign efforts had to relocate to countries—among them the UK, Germany, France, Norway, Canada—where they had the support of a small but highly educated and well-connected refugee population.

The second ban—more powerful, potent and crippling—came in the aftermath of 9/11, when George W. Bush used the language of terror to go after Al Qaeda. At this point, the Tigers were on a peaceful trajectory: having consolidated their territory, they had announced a unilateral ceasefire in 2001. The next year, following peace talks brokered by Norway, the Tigers and the government of Sri Lanka signed an agreement for a permanent ceasefire to end two decades of conflict. When the permanent ceasefire happened, we collectively huddled around the family desktop computer, desperate to know what this meant for the Tamil people. My father made pakoras and payasam to celebrate the moment. There would be no more bad news from the island, we thought.

In 2003, the Tigers' proposal of an Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) was rejected by the Sri Lankan side, who saw it as separate statehood in all but name. The following year, the Sri Lankan president Chandrika Kumaratunga staged a coup of sorts, dissolving parliament and declaring a state of emergency. The war was restarted by the Sri Lankan state, this time not as an effort to protect their sovereignty, but dressed up as a 'war on terror'. This terminology lost the Tigers some of their essential supply lines—not only of arms and weapons and funds, but also of solidarity. The Tigers' struggle for self-determination, the drive for national liberation that formed the core of their politics, the women who led from the front lines, would all be forgotten in this newly vitiated atmosphere. No longer was Sri Lanka dealing with civil war, insurgency, separatism or secessionist guerrillas; in the new lexicon of the neoliberal world-order, they were fighting against terrorists. A liberation struggle was now a security problem. Any interference was seen as aiding the so-called terrorists: this allowed

the state's human rights abuses to continue unchecked. At the same time, literally every imperialist power—America, Russia, China, Britain, Israel, to name only a few—was recruited to the fight against the Tigers. In this battle of Us versus Them, we all walked (or cheered those walking) blindfolded towards certain defeat.

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Perhaps my sympathies were cemented when my mathematician mother, who belonged to the rare breed of shudra (lower-caste) women in science, was accused of attempting to destabilise India (and her place of work, IIT Madras) by plotting with the Tigers and the Pakistani intelligence services agency. Subramanian Swamy, a rabble-rousing Tamil Brahmin politician and routine Tiger-baiter, wanted her arrested under the National Security Act. My mother cannot point out Jaffna on a map, her knowledge of the Tamil struggle is sketchy, but she was singled out because she was a non-Brahmin Tamil. I was still in the last years of school when this happened, and I realised that

it did not matter what you were doing—you could be working on the zero divisor conjecture and super-Boolean algebra, but one day, your identity would be sufficient to put you back in your place. That my mother was a Tamil woman scientist, outspoken against Brahmin elitism in educational institutions, was enough for Swamy to paint her as a Tiger collaborator and to demand her incarceration under a draconian anti-terrorism act.

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Perhaps there is nothing more to it than what is readily apparent: my politics influenced what I did with my life (write, edit, translate), and what I did with my life reinforced my politics.

My parents were a crazy match for their time: nomadic tribe, Tamil scholar, migrant, first-generation learner, sceptical rightwinger (father) and shudra, mathematician, research-addicted woman in a family of ten children (mother). Theirs was an inter-caste *arranged* marriage. You morons will get on well together, their mutual friends had joked. Theirs was the

kind of match that did not have the traditional support systems of family or caste, and they thrived solely on the connections they worked hard to foster: with colleagues, Tamil nationalists, Periyarist rationalists, other inter-caste couples, outliers. First, I grew up knowing that we did not belong with the others who had castes, then not knowing where we belonged at all. Soon enough, I learned that caste itself had to be obliterated from existence.

Because of my mother's sustained struggle against caste supremacy and exclusion in her workplace, a struggle that would continue over the three decades she spent there, I gravitated towards anti-caste politics. My first book, published in 2003, was a translation into English of the selected essays of the radical Tamil Dalit politician Thol. Thirumavalavan. I would spend a year and a half on the project, compiling information and photographs, supplementing the work with elaborate footnotes. I was eighteen then. Eighteen years later, I now feel his words, ideas and emotions in my own work; they have become the map with which I

navigate this world, whether I'm thinking about the anti-caste struggle or Tamil nationalism or the primacy of looking at everything through language. Next, I translated the Tamil Eelam poets Kasi Ananthan, Cheran Rudhramoorthy and V.I.S. Jayapalan. Then, from November 2007 (when S.P. Tamilselvan, the leader of the Tiger's Peace Secretariat, was assassinated by a cluster bombing) until the brutal, genocidal showdown in May 2009, I filed news reports and translated on-the-ground reports into English from mp3 voice files for Tamilnet.com, a website that was then seen as the most authentic source of information on Tamil Eelam.

A blog I wrote condemning Tamilselvan's murder caught the eye of the editor, Jeyachandran Kopinath, who then approached me to volunteer my time to expand their coverage of Tamil issues. By day, I was a PhD student doing my mandatory coursework on linguistics at the College of Engineering, Guindy, Anna University. In the evenings, I was online, pulling up maps and agonising over the territory we were ceding every day to the Sri Lanka Army's

renewed aggressions along the forward defence lines. We knew that we were losing.

Writing, reporting, translating: I knew this was not enough. We had to take to the streets. My friends and I tried to unite all the student movements in our state under a common platform, Stop the Slaughter of Tamils. We demonstrated and marched against the war, adding our voices to the rallying cry in Tamil Nadu, but all was to no avail. My state was swept by a string of very public self-immolations: young men and women burning themselves, appealing to India to intervene and stop the war. In 2009, the first man to set himself ablaze was Muthukumar, who left a six-page handwritten suicide note. Along with a set of demands to the Indian state, he directed young Tamil people to take up this fight. On 30 January, the night following his immolation, I stayed up translating that suicide note, sent it to Tamilnet.com to be posted, and then raced to university. In the autorickshaw, I said hello to a woman in the rearview mirror as I took my seat, only to realise that she was me. That was what the struggle

was doing to me: it was leaving me untethered and alienated from myself.

Mahinda Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka's president at that time, was determined to wipe out the Tigers, and Tamils, in general, were easy targets. He had carefully chosen his moment for the final assault. In the early months of 2009, caught in the fever of parliamentary elections, the genocide in Sri Lanka became less important to most Indian politicians than negotiating seat-sharing agreements. As Indians went to vote in May, the elections provided a perfect smokescreen for the Sri Lankan state to complete its mission. As Indian Tamils, we were enraged. We could see that our country was also engaged in this proxy war: supplying ammunition, intelligence, the latest military gadgets and technical know-how. Most of all, India was shielding the Rajapaksas with its silence and complicity. Tamils in the northeast of Sri Lanka were carpet-bombed and cluster-bombed. They were asked to go into no-fire zones and, once herded there, were killed by the thousands. By the summer of 2009, when Rajapaksa gleefully announced the end of

the civil war, more than 40,000 Tamils had been (officially) killed. More than 100,000 remain unaccounted for.

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Perhaps there is no need to preface with 'perhaps' any of my reasons for being sympathetic to the Tamil struggle. This was the first time we (as Tamils) had witnessed killing on such a scale. In 2009, I wrote a book of poetry called *Ms Militancy*. The titular poem recast the story of the Tamil epic heroine Kannagi as a bomber, outraged over injustice, blowing her city to smithereens. Another poem, 'The Noble Eightfold Path', chronicled how Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism ended up in Tamil genocide. The transgressive heartbeats of these poems were feminism, caste annihilation, Tamil liberation. In Sri Lanka, the horrors continued. The surviving Tamils and Tigers both—it was difficult to tell them apart—were sent to rehabilitation camps where the worst abuses continued to be perpetrated. Women and men were subject to torture and rape, and the Sri Lanka Army could visit this intimate violence without any fear of revenge or

retribution. Political dissidents, including those who surrendered in some kind of spotlight, were being killed or disappeared without a trace.

Visiting Sri Lanka to see the camps first-hand was out of the question. In the days before the end of the war, the Sri Lanka Army had raided the premises of a left-wing Sinhala journal-website based in Colombo, and threatened its editor Krishan Rajapaksa (no relative of the President) for having published a translation of one of my English op-eds that had originally appeared in *Outlook*, demanding to know if he had any links to me. I was acutely aware that I was a marked person to the Sri Lankan state, and I didn't want to endanger my life or those of others I knew by visiting the island.

Years afterwards, these men and women would begin smuggling themselves out of Sri Lanka, taking perilous boat trips, flying to any country they could, with the embattled hope that somehow, in a foreign land, they could manage to speak and be heard.

That is where I found the stories that form this essay.

THE STORY OF GATHERING THE STORIES

In 2010, less than a year after the war had ended, news reports appeared in the Tamil media of the untold horrors of rape and violence in the Manik Farm camps. This military-run internment camp, situated thirty kilometres outside the former Tiger stronghold of Vavuniya, in the Northern Province, housed 225,000 internally displaced Tamil refugees. Conditions were so bad in these camps that 1,400 Tamils were dying there every week. Set up immediately after the end of the war in 2009, this camp would only be shut down in late 2012. In these interim years I had finished my PhD, bid farewell to a full-time teaching job, and given up on academia. I had married, unmarried. In October 2012, I had handed in the final draft of my first novel to my agent. It had taken me seven years to write. Finishing it left me with a vast emptiness. I was restless, eager to be telling some other story, and I knew that it was going to be about Eelam Tamil women in the aftermath of war. The self-realisation that I was a painfully slow writer who wrestled for years with one subject made

me abandon the idea of a book. I decided I would shoot a documentary film.

I wanted to document the lives of the women who had survived these camps, and I sought the help of everyone I knew: Tamil journalists in India and the diaspora, Tamil refugee aid organisations abroad, refugees who were sharing their stories on social media, priests and doctors who were helping victims cope, Indian Tamil politicians who were supportive of the Tamil struggle. The help of Jeyachandran, my mentor-editor at Tamilnet.com, proved invaluable: he had reporters on the ground in Sri Lanka, and he passed on to me the details of women who had escaped these camps and were willing to talk about their experiences. Those with families in Europe could put themselves on a flight to claim asylum in the first world, but for the majority who came from poor, working-class backgrounds, the first step towards finding a way off the island was to get to Malaysia or Indonesia. Given that getting a visa to visit Europe as a single Indian woman was an insurmountable difficulty in itself, I

chose to follow the refugee women who were in Southeast Asia, in countries that still used a visa-on-arrival scheme for Indians.

Initially, the decision to make a documentary seemed crazy. It was a new medium for me, and was expensive, laborious and intensive. As a journalist, I had recorded video interviews merely as a means to an end: getting people to remember the horror of the Kilvenmani massacre where forty-four Dalits were burned to death for going on strike for higher wages in 1968; asking the Dalit people of Dharmapuri what they had witnessed when dominant-caste Hindu Vanniyar mobs burnt their homes in retaliation against an inter-caste love marriage in 2012.

Making a documentary was not the same, and I spent months learning, experimenting with the grammar of this new medium. I wanted my subjects to have autonomy, I wanted them to speak for themselves. I did not want their words coming out filtered through a writer's pen.

Advance money from my first novel and crowd-funding from Tamil friends enabled me to hire equipment and pay a cinematographer for her services. Uma Kumarapuram, one of the few female Indian cinematographers, turned out not only to be brilliant at her work, but also became a sister-like figure to me. It was a time when budget airlines were springing up across the region, and we were lucky to ride the wave. In the summer of 2013, we spent a hectic three months in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Although I eventually got all the footage I wanted, the film was never made, for many of the million reasons why films never get made. But five years later, a dear friend of mine, the feminist scholar Dr Nimmi Gowrinathan, asked me if I at least had the raw material so it could be included in a memorial archive that she was curating. Living between countries, I couldn't locate the original hard-disk, but eventually I found access to an online drive where we had uploaded the audio files.

Going through these files, I decided to write this essay.

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The stories that I have picked out to share here show two different faces of women in war. The first is the story of a woman married to a male Tamil Tiger, as narrated by her. The second, unbroken transcript, containing only the answers to my questions, forms the testimony of a female Tamil Tiger, filmed with the purpose of being used in an international war-crimes tribunal, should the occasion arise.

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Typing out their words from the mp3 files, I escape the moving image altogether. I work with chunks of conversation. Their voices are not grounded: they appear in snatches; any narrative cohesion has to be imposed from above. By not experiencing their physical presence on a screen, by replacing the raw emotion of the women's first-language speech with a second-language rendition here, a distance is created between the subject-matter and the storyteller, a distance in space and time and language that allows for reflection.

Having worked all my life with words, this transition from raw documentary footage into an essay feels natural to me. There are decisions that were important during the filming that do not weigh so heavily when rendered in print. I remember the ethical tensions inherent in my position as a young woman trying to make two other young women tell their story before a camera. Their identity had to remain a secret—that was the first constraint. But close-up face-frames, the default choice for celebrity activists, angry farmers, disenchanted workers, wouldn't fit. Faces are the opposite of anonymity. Faces lend themselves to surveillance. Identifiable features would allow the Army to trace these women, putting their families back home at considerable risk.

In the same breath, I wanted to show the militant's wife and I wanted to hide her. I do not believe in blurring or disembodiment: they feel like acts of violence. Searching for places to hide her, I looked no further than domesticity. There are no parallels to its anonymising ability. To remain engaged in housework is a stand-in for

erasure. We placed her in a kitchen, cleaning. We placed her in the living room, folding clothes. We placed her in the bedroom, changing sheets. We placed her in the little garden, her nervous hands kept occupied with pruning. This woman, doing housework, is Wife. As I made these directorial choices, I'm convinced that I was channelling my own experiences of being trapped in an abusive domestic situation, where individuality disappears. Meanwhile, my cinematographer arranged every frame in the most aesthetic, artistic manner possible. Sunlight, a splash of colour, windows, curtains, a splash of colour, clotheslines. It is the only element within our control, the only space where we can reaffirm beauty and humanity. Working with the awareness that anything said on screen would reflect horror, we made the backdrops peaceful, humdrum.

S never joined the Tigers. Her husband was a guerrilla; she fell in love, married him. The price she had to pay for her choice of spouse was the torture she was made to face in the camps. She

is initially reluctant to share her story, for fear of being identified and incriminated. 'Justice' is a word women like her have learned to disbelieve; 'retribution' is another. Telling her that her story is important, insisting that it would make people enraged, could halt what is happening on her island, are promises she has heard too often. At this moment, other people are not her concern: she is not obliged to share anything. Her past, her trauma is her own.

I am torn as I try to make her speak. Why should one woman ask another to remember, recollect and narrate the very things she barely wants to forget? Those around her intercede, appeal on my behalf. She listens to a man who goes by the name of Master, a suffix of respect for male commanders who used to train new cadres in the Tigers, and who appears to command immense goodwill among the small Tamil-speaking refugee/ asylum-seeker community here in Cisarua, Indonesia. Uma and I assure her that we will not show her face, and that we will work towards protecting her identity. Eventually, she agrees to speak.

I am a writer making a documentary, feeling my way through an uncharted terrain. My intention was to make a documentary about women who were victims of sexual violence during the war. Here, far away from all our homes, I realise that these circles of exploitation never end. These women's vulnerability—as women, as poor, as people without papers, as strangers in a new land—makes them easy prey to sexual harassment, rumours, ostracisation.

Women survivors of violence and abuse are often told to take it one day at a time. It is a regular prescription. But this one day, this everyday, becomes impossible under the weight of social judgment.

The people who promised to help S with her eventual asylum process in Europe disappeared from her life overnight. 'They told me they could not bear my expenses any more,' she said. 'They asked me to borrow money from home and buy my own safety. No one picked up our calls, no one made any arrangements, no one bothered about what happened to us.' Because she is a

woman who has suffered sexual violence, she is seen as someone with compromised morals (being with more than one man is a judgment that condemns a woman to shame in the Tamil moral universe) and any man lending her a helping hand is construed as receiving sexual favours. Such gossip destroyed S.

Raped women who are not broken down by the experience are seen as continuing to exercise their sexual autonomy: they are condemned by a spectre of fear that they will wreck families.

Women raped as a weapon of war are potent tools for political mobilisation and grandstanding oratory, but in everyday life, they are viewed with derision, suspicion, shame.

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In the midst of making arrangements to film in Cisarua, S goes out of reach for a couple of days. I assume that she doesn't want to talk to me and has switched off her phone to avoid me.

When I ask her in person about her silence, she retorts: 'You have never been on a boat, have you?'

I shake my head.

'How would you know, then? We are taken on Wednesdays and Saturdays. We are thoroughly checked. They go through all our stuff. Everything. That's why we do not have phones—they're taken away from us—so that we do not call anyone, so that our locations are not traced, so that they do not get into any trouble. They are taking a risk for us—and they do not want us to put them at risk either.'

I am thrown into disbelief. I had read her as a victim, as someone who suffered, but underlying all her desperation was a courage that cannot be contained in the words I know.

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In the course of making this documentary, I realise how hard I have to work within myself to avoid collapsing into a weeping heap. Some days, I smoke two twenty-packs of cigarettes, and drink shots of double espresso every chance I get. The 24-hour kopi tiam near our place doesn't help. In just a few days, the baristas know me on a first-name basis, and three of them have asked

for my phone number. The pointless flirting provides distraction, holds down the waves of revulsion and physical terror that I experience when rape is being discussed.

Why was I this chain-smoking, bitter-coffee guzzler as I worked on this story of rapes by the Sri Lanka Army? Why did I so desperately crave to come across as a tough bitch? Was this exterior necessary to facilitate others to place their confidence in me? Or was it a facade, so others might think I knew what I was doing? Tigers were teetotallers who most likely viewed cigarettes as a suspect activity, so was my behaviour, marking myself as outside the domain of the good-Tamil-girl grid, an effort to masquerade as an outsider? Tamil enough to be in their midst and win their trust; modern enough to ward off probing questions about my personal life, about the enormous stigma of my divorced-woman status? Was I constructing this persona for my own benefit—so that I would not break under the trauma, so that when I looked in the mirror I would see a woman who had stopped caring? Was I tailoring myself to look the part? Was this what they call imposter syndrome?

As I was working on this story, a journalist with close ties to the Tamil Tigers called me up to ask if I had links to any white documentary filmmakers. A senior Tigress, very influential in the political department, was dying of cancer. He felt that her thoughts and experiences should be recorded on tape, made into a film and shared with the world. Why white? I asked him with trepidation. He replied, 'So that it appears like a balanced account.' That is what whiteness means. An automatic stamp of neutrality, balance, sound political judgment. The whiteness of the artist enriches the subject.

I do not have that with all my brown skin.

I do not have even the semblance of neutrality here, in starting this project as someone with deep sympathies for the Tamil struggle for self-determination, with a childhood history of adulation and fangirling over Tigresses that could border on the problematic.

I do not aspire to this whiteness that I cannot attain anyway. I only aspire for my right to tell a story on my own terms, and on the terms of the women whose stories I am telling.

~

S's lack of interest, almost aversion to talking about the war, underlined the magnitude of what she must have endured. She did not choose or anticipate such tragedy. By contrast, the female fighters I met, whether in Tamil Nadu, Malaysia, Indonesia, Norway, or in their own homelands, were constantly in combat mode. When S opened up, it appeared like an act of charity, as if she had taken pity on me. She was not doing this for herself, she was doing it for me. In the course of afternoon, I realised how easily power had switched: I was no longer the writer-filmmaker helping her, she was the woman helping me.

Does telling a story change a storyteller? Does making others tell their own story demand a different game with a different set of rules?

THE STORY OF THE MILITANT'S WIFE IN HER OWN WORDS

Akka, they said that if I spoke about this to anybody they would kidnap my child. Murder the baby. That's why I never spoke about this to anyone.

I attempted suicide. It was my mother who took me to the hospital. I was very serious.

I was under the impression that I would die. I am alive because of my child.

My mother is old. She does not have anyone. I do not want people to say she has a daughter who does not take care of her. I must one day live without fear. I thought about all of this. I wanted to take care of my child and I must be able to look after my mother.

I tell you this, placing my faith in you. When we came here, we stayed with a family, and even there, I had to face sexual torture. They locked us up. They locked up all my things. Even when my child was ill, they would not take her to the hospital.

I have left everything to God. I came here to flee the difficulties. But here again I had to face

the same. It was Master who brought me out of these problems. I should worship him. I suffered there. I suffered here.

We were staying in someone's house. There were two of us, battleworn. In every house, there are chores to do. I cannot help as much as the other person because I have a small child. If someone becomes cross with me because of that, because I cannot do as much work, what can I do?

I have lived through so much humiliation and torture.

If it was anyone else in my place—anyone at all—I am sure, promise, they would not have stayed alive for so long. They would have committed suicide, they would have died long ago. When I came here, the torture continued. Behind where I stayed, there was a waterfall. I wanted to drop my child and jump myself so that all of this would come to an end. Eventually I had to call Master and tell him what was going on. It was he who came and saved me.

Let those who slander, slander. Let those who praise, praise.

This child is the reason I put up with so much torture, so much sorrow, so much difficulty. That is why I refuse to talk about my story to many people. Tomorrow, I do not want this child to carry the shame.

In the end it was Master and N who helped me, who got me a separate house to live in, who cared for me. But do you know what followed? They called my family back home in Eelam and told them that I had eloped with N. That boy is like my brother. It is horrible to hear the things they say. He is doing the most he can—will God tolerate all this slander against him? I sometimes want to stop praying to God because he does not seem to know the difference between good people and bad people.

My parents advised me against marrying that man. It's because I married this child's father that I'm undergoing all this humiliation today. That was how I sinned against my parents. I made them shed all these tears and today I'm being punished for my own sin, I'm shedding all these tears. They were against this marriage. But I married this militant and I'm bearing all

the consequences of that decision. I had no connection to the liberation movement. But because of his connection I became a victim. If I had been a part of the liberation struggle and I was bearing the same consequences—that is an entirely different story.

I do not know anything about the movement.

Today, when someone comes to help me—they are already creating gossip about me—how is it possible that they expect me to survive without any help from anyone?

When I call my mother, I tell her that I'm happy. I tell her I'm at peace. That is true. When I was there, the CID would call me any time of the day. I would lock up the house and remain indoors. I'd escape unseen through the back door. My mother is still being harassed by the CID, asked about my whereabouts. When she is suffering that kind of torture, why would I tell her about my troubles?

For a woman living by herself, life is hell. It is easier if she is single. But if she is married, if she has lost her husband, or he has abandoned her, or if she is divorced, or anything of that

sort—you cannot speak of what we go through.

I do not know if you will get angry at me, but I have to say this: this Tamil society is useless. Why do they not work towards the betterment of their own condition? Instead they are putting all their time and effort into slander. Instead, they dial long-distance to Sri Lanka to tell this story. All of this because I do not have a husband.

THE STORY OF THE FEMALE TIGER IN HER OWN WORDS

This is my name.

This was my name in the movement.

I was born in _____, Jaffna.

I came to Malaysia in November 2012.

I joined the rebels in December 1999.

I joined them because of what happened to my family. I was not old enough to fight when I joined them. They waited until I was eighteen. No, that's not the right way to put it—I was asked to wait until I was eighteen. Child soldiers were a big issue at that time.

Here, I live with the constant fear of being taken back and tortured. Here we have no

recognition as Tamils. I need to save my sisters and my mother from the trouble. My brother died when he was thirteen. That's my younger brother. I have an elder brother who died too.

The Tigers took care of my basic needs. They let me study. They trained me when I turned eighteen to be a combatant. There were no violations.

I surrendered in April 2009. I surrendered along with other people who surrendered. I told the army that I was in Vanni on work.

I was asked to go to the _____ camp in Vavuniya. We were in a girls-only camp. The rapes started before the war even formally ended. The first rape happened on 5 May 2009. That was two weeks before the final days of the war.

The rapists. Everyone from a top army official to the low-level soldiers wanted a piece of my flesh.

I was released in _____

The camp is where it all begins.

No, the rapes do not wait. It does not begin after the war. There is no patience. My people were braving bombs, and here I was being raped.

I did not go into rehabilitation. Rehab was risky—it meant telling them everything I knew. I was working for the intelligence—it would have meant selling out the movement en masse. I pretended to be a civilian. Even if the pretence came with the pain of being raped. Once I claimed I was a civilian, there was no going back. Rehabilitation meant going into their custody. I thought being a civilian would give me freedom.

Yes, I was conscious when I was raped. At least the first time I was.

The first time there were four men. Later on, the numbers would increase. In the worst episode, seven men were involved.

No, I cannot tell you how often it happened. I was released from the camp with the warning: 'You must come whenever we call you.'

No, the rapes happened while I was at the camp too. I did not keep count of the number of times this happened. But let me tell you this: the days on which I was raped exceeded the days on which I was not.

How did that work? I was meant to go when

they called me. Why not? They had it all figured out, they knew I had lied. 'You could only have been a fighter—no one else was in the Vanni. If you want to avoid going to the rehabilitation for fighters you must come when we call you.'

So you think I should have gone to rehab? No. Many who went never came back alive.

You want to know why I wanted to stay alive so badly? Say it, say it. I've heard worse. No, I attempted suicide, I could not take it any more. But they took me to the hospital, pumped my stomach and saved me. That moment I decided that I would expose all these men.

Why these rapes? I asked them too, just as you ask me now. They wanted the wombs of our women to bear their children. That's what they said during the rapes.

Yes. The men who ruined me, the men who ruined so many, many women—yes, I can identify each of them.

I did everything I could have done in the circumstances in which this was all going on. I threatened to complain. 'I shall tell your superiors.' And the men said, 'These are their

orders. The orders were to rape you.'

This is what happened last time. I would say: 'I do not want to leave the camp with you. My body cannot take it. I cannot bear it any more.' What did they say? 'I am not like him, I am a good man.' That is what they all said, all the time.

The heat in the camp, under those tents, it was something. There was no water in the camps. The thirst killed us. We would have drunk even poison. They would give us cool drinks. I never knew that the first time—that it was drugged, it was laced with alcohol. Only when we returned to our senses, we knew what had transpired. It was easy, clear-cut—seeing the state we were in.

Because of what happened with me, my family is ill-treated.

There were seven of us in the camp, it happened to all of us.

There is a constant fear in my heart that this will happen again.

It is a shame. Women keep it hidden. It is a society where your story cannot cross your doorstep. Even if we say that the army called

us for questioning, the people would say, 'If the army calls you, would they let you be? Would it just be questions? They would have tested and tasted every part of you.'

The immediate implication was that we had slept with the army. This happened with thousands of women.

When I ran away my family began to suffer. My little brother was taken for interrogation. Where did your sister hide her weapons? To my family, the bomb is not the weapon. Nor the beating. It is my youngest sister, fourteen years old. The fear that she will have to face the same fate as me when she grows up.

Who do I see in front of my eyes?

Not my mother. Not my father. Not my family. I see the army. The soldiers. Even in my sleep. Even now I live in fear.

Why do I stay alive?

To get justice. To expose the army and the EPDP [Eelam People's Democratic Party] dogs.

Why me? Because I am a Tamil woman. But also because I was a fighter. And my family background didn't help either—my elder

brother was a martyr. And in the last days of the war, a younger brother too. They saw the rapes as revenge for my brothers who were martyred as Tigers.

~

On camera, the Tigress spoke like someone who had long awaited her turn.

When she spoke of wanting to stay alive to get justice and to expose the army, she really meant it. A new life held meaning only because it would allow her, someday, in some form, to strengthen the dreams she held in her life on the island. The lengths to which she was willing to go in this regard were admirable, but sometimes they left me terrified.

I met the Tigress in Kuala Lumpur, in the offices of an NGO which was assisting with her medical needs and arranging for counselling to help her cope. She had been staying in the home of the woman who ran the NGO, but both of them were frayed, tired of the effort this cohabitation required. Hardly a day after my arrival, I was tasked with finding her a safe place

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to stay. This was my first time in Malaysia, and I was myself relying on friends. While the war was on, Tigresses were objects of worship. After the war, they were unwelcome in other people's homes. I decided that I would stay in a cheap suburb outside the city, and until we found a safe Tamil home for her, she could sleep in my hotel room. Suddenly, she went from being the subject of a documentary I was making to someone who shared my room.

A journalist friend whom I knew through Facebook put me in touch with Ray, a Tamil speaker who made arrangements for me to stay in Puchong Jaya, a working class area beyond the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. It was obvious from the stylised number emblazoned on his right arm that Ray had once been part of a gang. In Malaysia, rife with Chinese triads and their rival groups, gang membership was highest among Malaysian Indians, a result of their exploitation on plantation estates, their history of secret union organising and neglect by a religious state. The Tigress—no stranger to inequality and violence—was quick to read the

situation too, and to see how she could work it for her own ends.

After our first meeting with Ray, the Tigress told me she wanted to see him again. I did not think it was a good idea; after all, his role in our story was finished. Now that we were safe in our Chinese-run hotel through his connections, I had no reason to reach out to him. What I didn't admit to her was my own reading of Ray: stylish, flashy, flamboyant, he was bristling with uber masculinity and quick to speak in the trademark double entendre that Tamil men employ when they are courting, and I did not want to get entangled.

I saw Ray exclusively through the lens of a tense sexual chemistry, but she had thought of other uses for him. To this end, she told me that she had worked out an elaborate plan. She would meet him. She would get him talking. She would achieve intimacy with him. She would recruit young Tamils from Malaysia, and he, as a former gangster, would help her find ways to get weapons. She would make the Tamils undergo arms training in the forests. Then, they would

all leave for the homeland (Eelam) and fight for their liberation. She was absolutely serious as she outlined her plans, and I was totally petrified. None of this was practical, or even in the realm of something that could be realised. But the way she spoke about it made clear that she was not joking. Everything that had unfolded in her life after the war appeared to have no effect on how she felt about the armed struggle. It seemed to me that she saw the present events in her life (being stateless in Malaysia, the impending asylum process in Europe, starting a new life in a safe country) only as temporary measures. I did not want to contemplate whether she was merely unwavering in her pursuit of her people's liberation, or if this adventurism was her way of compensating for having left her homeland.

What left me bewildered was the contrast between her ambitions and her reality. Days before I was to arrive in Kuala Lumpur, the journalist friend who had put me in touch with the Tamil Tigress called me to ask if I could take her to a doctor in the city to obtain an official report corroborating her claims. He believed

that such a medical report would bolster her case for asylum in Europe. Online friends from the Tamil newspaper scene in Malaysia stepped in, and on their recommendation, I took her to a private hospital. The doctor running it was a Tamil gynaecologist and very sympathetic to my requests. Several generations ago his family had come over from Jaffna in the Tamil-speaking north of Sri Lanka, and he saw this act of providing her with a medical report as the smallest thing he could do. In person, I revealed to him the more pressing and urgent reason for a medical examination. The Tamil Tigress had been intermittently unwell and wanted to rule out having 'caught AIDS'. She was afraid that in an Islamic country like Malaysia, a positive screening might cause deportation. She said that she would rather die than face a situation of being back in the hands of the Sri Lanka Army. I asked the doctor to ensure her anonymity. Days later, he sent me a medical report by email, and in the body of the email, I learned that she had tested negative for HIV. I hugged the Tigress with the good news, and forwarded the report

to a doctor who had requested it, but never looked at it myself. Who am I to know what she endured? Knowing first-hand about the violence that was inflicted on her, what sort of voyeurism would it be to look through her report?

~

Her testimony takes me back to my own experience of rape.

There is something I know about medical evidence—not in the journalist-activist sort of way, but in the shameful, beaten-up wife sort of way. Two days after my marriage, as a result of sex whose spite I did not anticipate, I had to be hospitalised for heavy bleeding that couldn't be stemmed. The doctors who examined me, both women, had a good laugh. Were you a virgin? No. More laughter. That shut me up for the many months that followed—knowing that a mocking laughter would be the reception to rape within a marriage.

I was given a patient card by Father Muller Medical College Hospital, Mangalore, containing my name and the date of admission

(4 September 2011) in a laminated card holder. I kept this card with me through the four months of marriage, and I kept it in my purse when I came back to my parents' home. It was a keepsafe and a talisman: a proof for those who would demand proof of mistreatment; a testament to myself of my ability to overcome adversity.

~

A corpse in a wake is looked upon with more respect, the Tamil Tigress told me over coffee. A corpse is superior, to them, to a raped woman like me. That was the cost of war, that women were paying.

When I first heard that from the militant's mouth, I wished that I was not making this documentary. I wanted my teenage memories of Tigresses to live on: untouched by the external world, where they were valorous and magnificent, went around on speedboats, or did their target practice, or crawled on their stomachs with guns on their backs. To watch them live at other people's mercy, to know that they were being condemned by the same people

whose lives they had sought to defend and protect, was shocking.

~

It is six years since I first met these women. Both of them have now moved to advanced capitalist countries, and I have learnt from reliable sources that they have managed to get their papers. Strangely, I too have lived for the last four years in a first world country, and feel uncomfortable about not being on home ground, where my work can have more meaning.

Meeting a female Tiger in the flesh broke my own naïve carnivalisation of war. When I encountered these women personally, the image I had constructed of female militancy shattered. Nothing had prepared me to brace for the reality that these powerful women would be so vulnerable.

I have learnt a lot else in these intervening years.

From the work of my friend Nimmi Gowrinathan, I know how rehabilitation programmes targeting women militants end

up domesticating them, teaching them to make cakes and rear chickens and do embroidery—tasks for which these women have no patience or interest, skills which do not contribute to any empowerment whatsoever. I learn how female militants in Sri Lanka remain under heavy surveillance, given mobile phones by the army so that all their movements are tracked. From the work of other academics and journalists, I know of the debt traps into which Tamil women fall, and the systematic land-grabs carried out by the army. I read up on how Tamil women have become easy tools for factory labour and the cannibalistic micro-credit enterprise. From friends who are working in Tamil areas I hear how rapes by the occupying Sri Lanka Army have become a routine feature of life in one of the most heavily militarised zones in the world.

Most of all, I learn that the genocide of a people does not end with their physical extermination: it continues when they are not allowed to remember who they were and what they fought for. Today, the people of Tamil Eelam are denied the right to commemorate

and remember their martyrs: their brothers and sisters, their lovers and comrades, their heroes. As the fierce Tamil Tigresses of the last three decades become the nameless-faceless-helpless asylum seekers of today, what is lost is not only their struggle for a separate homeland. What is lost—behind news reports, medical documents, academic papers—is the dynamic, explosive manner in which they defined a cultural moment in Tamil history. We are a people with a written literary tradition that commenced over two thousand years ago.

Looking back, never have Tamil women burned so bright, never have they dazzled so much, as when they were Tigresses.

This essay is the smallest attempt to reclaim that memory of a revolution: individual and collective. To document what we feel in this fragmentary, feminine, feminist manner is also to say that we still believe in the lifeblood of our shared dream: a Tamil homeland. *Puligalin thaagam, tamil eela thaayagam.*

THE POETRY OF FEMALE FIGHTERS

In 2013, on a chilly fall weekend in London, I wandered into an Oxfam second-hand bookshop in Walthamstow along with a man I was beginning to know, beginning to fall in love with. In the poetry section's top right corner, I pulled out a copy of *Lovers and Comrades*. I showed it to him (lover, comrade) and we exchanged a knowing smile. What's that about? he asked. I read aloud the subtitle: *Women's Resistance Poetry from Central America*. That looks interesting, he said. It was published by The Women's Press. On its front page was the simple inscription, *to my lover and comrade, June '97*. The book, edited by Amanda Hopkinson, had itself been published in 1989.

Tamil women started joining the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in droves—so whenever

we heard stories of atrocities against women, we also heard, very often in the same breath, that women were fighting back, donning combat gear and taking up AK-47s. Those were the decisive years when a lot of Tamil people in India, realizing there was no way out, decided to rally behind the Tigers, and identify with the armed Tamil liberation struggle.

That book I was holding in Walthamstow suddenly seemed similarly explosive with history, with an armed struggle from elsewhere, with its own women guerrilla poets. I vividly remember these strands of thought, just as I remember a deep sadness and estrangement that I could not articulate. How could I tell him, lover-comrade, what it meant to grow up in the shadow of a second-hand war? How could I tell him of the girl-love I felt towards the very dashing, very handsome Tiger combatants, men and women alike? How to articulate this lifeblood, this thirst, this memory? He was, he is, white, European, Francophone: worlds, worlds, worlds away. It was, it is, a void between us. I remember thinking, as I took his hand in mine

and we stepped into the street, *maybe poetry*—poetry, someday. That way, we wouldn't be seen as warring, as bloody, as strife-torn, but as people who loved, people who were romantic, people who only dreamed of a better future.

I was not a stranger to that longing, holding that book, promising myself I would put together something similar with the poetry of women fighting with the Tamil Tigers, in the hope of being better understood. That was what I had been doing in so much of my writing: taking things that rattled me (the Kilvenmani massacre), shook or shocked me (domestic violence), made a fighter out of me (Tamil Tigers, Liberation Panthers) and smuggling them into English, and into art. As if that would validate my existence, my struggles, and those things that gave meaning and purpose to my life.

That is perhaps where the idea for this essay started: in unwritten words, in the unbridgeable distance between two lovers.

To put this together for the Female Fighter Series

in *Guernica*, I sent out a call for submissions seeking poetry from female guerrillas, resistance fighters, and militants. The poems that we sought did not belong to the "poetry of witness," which Carolyn Forche, in the anthology *Against Forgetting*, labeled a literary art where "the poem's witness is not recounting, is not mimetic narrative, is not political confessionalism," or simply an act of memory. We sought poems that went beyond the testimonial in their blatant embrace of polemic. Responses to the call exposed the rich tradition of poetry by female fighters: submissions and proposals about Mariana Yonusg Blanco, who participated in the Nicaraguan liberation movement in the 1970s; Criselda Lobo (aka Sandra Ramirez), ex-guerrilla poet, now Congresswoman for the FARC; Commandante Yesenia, active in the ELN (National LIberation Army) in Colombia; Zimbabwe's Freedom Tichaona Nyamubaya, who fought in the Mozambique liberation struggle; song-poems by women who fought in the Red Guard in the Finnish civil war; anonymous Maoist poets in India; Lorena Barros

and Aida F Santos from the Philippines; and the poetry of Anna Swir (aka Anna Swirszczynska), a resistance fighter in the Warsaw Uprising; among many, many others.

In the end, we decided to feature five female fighter poets from three countries: Captain Vaanathi, Captain Kasturi, and Adhilatchumi from the Tamil Tigers; Lil Milagro Ramirez from El Salvador, who was a founding member of one of the first guerrilla organizations that would eventually become the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front; and Nibha Shah, who was an active fighter in the Nepali Maoist ranks.

~

The obliterary aspect of war—the individual being subsumed under the collective, the urgent need for anonymity (beyond self-protection, to enable the safety of one's family), the actual act of taking on a new life as an insurgent—manifests in how little biographical detail we have about the female Tiger poets. Their literary/ creative/ political outputs appear under their noms de guerre. Biographical details become sparse,

sketchy. What is verifiable, and within the remit of existing archival work, are their publications, their dates of death, and the military operation that cost them their lives.

Writing in her introduction to *Vaanathiyin Kavithaigal*, a collection of Captain Vaanathi's poems, Jeya, leading the Women's Front (Magalir Munnani) of the LTTE, remembers encountering her work on first hearing her read a poem on the young Tamil political wing leader, martyr Thileepan, who fasted unto death in 1987 at the historic Nallur Kandasamy temple. Thileepan, only 23 years old at the time of his passing, demanded India to ensure the release of Tamil political prisoners, stop the resettlement of majority Sinhalese (colonisation) in Tamil areas, disarm Sinhalese civilian militia and close Sinhalese-manned police stations in the Tamil homeland. India did not intervene at any stage to cede to his demands, revealing to Eelam Tamil people that it was indeed collaborating with the Sinhalese. His death was a moment of political churning: the older generation no longer held illusions about 'Mother' India, the

younger generation saw the necessity of the Tiger's armed struggle as an immensely peaceful protest had failed. This tragic event crystallised the militancy of young women like Vaanathi. Writing about her valour, Jeya notes that she fought in a time without bunkers, without fortifications, and died at 27 and captures how Vaanathi encapsulates the force of the poet-fighter's persona: "She stood as a woman, and fought as a Tiger."

Captain Vaanathi and Captain Kasturi were killed the same day, on the same battlefield. Their biographies each note: "Died on 11.07.1991 in the battle to capture Elephant Pass," the bloodiest confrontation the LTTE had faced to that point. The Sri Lankan military base of Elephant Pass was of strategic importance, linking the northern mainland, known as the Vanni, with the Jaffna Peninsula.

The third Tamil poet, Aadhilatchmi Sivakumar, is not only a writer, but also worked as a producer for the Voice of Tigers (Puligalin Kural), the Tigers' radio program since the early 1990s. Her poetry is rooted within the liberation

movement, fighter-adjacent, demarcating her own position as a writer even while writing of her friends on the front lines:

> Everything is now a dream
> many of my friends
> are now on the battleground.
> A few of them, in graveyards.
> Me alone, with a pen in hand, a poet.

My rationale for choosing these particular Tamil poems was not necessarily to convey the most poetic, most romantic, or the most aesthetic mode—though these qualities are found in their body of work. My own bias as an editor comes from my feminist leanings, and my search for poems that were explicitly political. As an Indian Tamil who supports the right of self-determination for the people of Tamil Eelam, I also wanted to use this project of selection to show that the struggle to construct a nation of Tamil Eelam was emancipatory and liberatory. It was invested in the necessity to safeguard the linguistic and cultural aspects of

Tamil existence, and at once forged a feminist, egalitarian, anti-imperialist way of life.

In the work of Captain Vaanathi, we see that project of national liberation linked directly to the liberation and emancipation of women, and an unabashed feminist agenda:

> We will build the tomb
> For women's exploitation
> We will dig the graves
> For society's backward ideas

In her poetry, becoming an armed combatant is not about escaping oppression, but ending it.

The articulation of militancy, as enshrined and embodied in women, presents a radical departure from convention. First, it is an intervention into the body of war poetry that traditionally exalts men and centers their experience including in the Tamil poetic tradition. Secondly, it alters our perception of the battleground—smashing the stereotype that

it is a male preserve—and it also dismantles the lazy, patriarchal belief that gallantry and valour are male, masculine traits.

~

In Tamil public meetings where support gets rallied for the Tamil Tigers, one ancient poem is endlessly referenced: Poem 278 by Kakkaipatiniyar Naccellaiyar, from the *Puranānuru*, an anthology of four hundred poems written by more than one hundred and fifty poets between the first and third centuries C.E. An English translation that I looked up online goes like this:

> The old woman had protruding veins,
> Dry, thin shoulders;
> Her waist a thorny twig.
>
> When some said,
> "Your son was afraid in battle
> And turned tail,"
>
> She said,

> "If he broke down in the throng,
> I'll slash these breasts which fed him,"
> And, angered, sword in hand,
> She picked the red field over,
> Turning over fallen bodies.
>
> Seeing the place where her slain son lay,
> Scattered in pieces
> He pleased her more
> Than on the day he was born.[1]

For poems that concern itself with war and conquest, there is an unbelievable level of self-awareness and reflection. For every instance of valorisation of martial courage and celebration of one exploit or another that occur in the *Puranānuru*, there are a sizeable number of poems that decry the plunder of other lands, the sadistic impulses of conquerors, and the immense, tragic futility of war itself. What is happening in this poem is a chronicle of the

1 Quoted in *Tamil Geographies: Cultural Constructions of Space and Place in South India*, Martha Ann Selby and Indira Viswanathan Peterson, SUNY Press 2008, p.41.

shame that a mother must feel for a son who has chickened out—she is expected to slay or slash her breasts than having him run away from the battlefield. The counterpoint to such a celebration of slaughter is the understated, heart-breaking song of the emperor Pari's daughters, who write:

> On that day, under the white light of
> that moon,
> we had our father and no enemies had
> taken the hill,
> On this day, under the white light of this
> moon, the kings,
> royal drums beating out the victory,
> have taken the hill. And we! we have
> no father.[2]

The old woman venturing into the battlefield went there as a mother. Pari's daughters wrote of the war as daughters. In

2 Poem 112, George L. Hart and Hank Heifetz, *The Puranānūru: Four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom*, Columbia University Press (1999) p.75.

the poem-songs of the *Puranānuru*, even as men play the role of the valorous and exalted warrior, women were handed out other roles: lovers and wives suffering with desire for the broad chests of their men; singers who praise invasions; anguished widows beating their breasts in pain, wailing without end; widows who give their last tearful embrace; widows who enter their dead husband's burning pyres on the battlefield because they dread the life of widowhood they would have to otherwise follow. The man remained the warrior, the valorous one—women were defined in relation to men.

In the many centuries that separate these ancient Tamil women from the ones of our times, we see that they are no longer looking for reflected glory and taking war-pride in the corpses of their men, because they have been warriors themselves.

I think about this poem often. I think about it when I eat in the homes of ex-militants, I think about it when I take a female fighter to

the doctor. We exalt militancy, but when the conflict turns genocidal and ugly, when our militants are raped as a weapon of war, we bury the truths with our silences, we look away. Even among the most political and radical elements in our society, the bodies of militants become sites of evidence, proofs of torture. Without much thought, we reduce their lives into convenient exhibits. To read, translate and share their poems is one way of allowing them to hold their own. It is a way of saying that they belong to the Tamil tradition of bardic, heroic poetry—having besieged their way into this domain both as warriors and as poets—and in doing so, they have fundamentally and radically altered the world for all of us Tamil women, just as they have also have reshaped our understanding of (ancient) poetry.

War poetry naturally fits into elegiac forms, showing a certain preoccupation and predisposition towards death, both in eulogies to fallen comrades and in the poems that foretell, celebrate, or mark the impending death of the poet. We encounter recurrent

imagery of graveyards, memorials, and burials in the poems of these combatants, as we do the striking metaphor of the sowing of seeds. This is echoed in the work of Lil Milagro Ramirez when she writes:

> The holes left by our dead
> have to be filled fighting.

It attests to the continuation and progression of struggle. This continuation is not only seen as a process intrinsic to struggle, but held out as a project even within literature and writing.

It is inevitable that female-fighter poems resonate across cultures, languages, and struggles. Nibha Shah's poem "Kaili" that personifies the lived reality and struggle of one young, impoverished orphan girl called Kaili, finds a distinct parallel with Kasturi's "Tea Baskets" that draws upon the exploitation of tea plantation workers in the south. They both offer a revolutionary solution as an answer. Kasturi poses a rhetorical question:

When will there come a day,
where, marching as fire-gods
they torch away their sufferings?

It is a question that finds an immediate counterpart in Shah's declarative:

From Kaili's womb rises the revolution,
inquilab
Inquilab jindabaad.

~

Does reading their poetry change the perception about female militants? At the outset, it challenges the predominant discourse that these women were merely brainwashed, forced into bearing weapons. These female fighters used poems as tools of political commentary, and that far from being unwilling recruits, innocent recruits, helpless recruits, they were acutely aware of macropolitics—that their armed struggle was taking place in the context of an imperialist world order, of superpowers and foreign nations meddling in their affairs, and

that there were geopolitical considerations at play. Kasturi uses the form and format of poetry to berate imperialist superpowers, writing: "Most often, your interventions / have left behind only scorched earth." Such a telescopic view is counter-balanced by an investment in the individual, and in the micropolitical, as when Nibha Shah slyly asks, "People only saw the tree fall./ Who saw the nest of the little bird fall?"

It is a shameful disservice to their liberation struggles if we reduce, restrict, and flatten their discourse to a purely local context, to a question of language and territory. The freedom they envision is not limited to a particular place, or withheld by only one enemy. Lil Milagro Ramirez writes that "Your combat name / belongs in history." To read these poets is to reclaim their rightful historical space. To read them together is to embark on a resistance project, an attempt to undo imperialism's blacklisting of all guerrilla movements under the punishing, isolating banner of terrorism. To read these poets is to also remind ourselves

that the systems within which we operate as "progressive" writers are sometimes complicit with the same capitalist and imperialist systems that have allowed such voices and struggles to be annihilated. While literature is eager to celebrate the author *as* activist, its rarefied realm is never opened up to the activist/fighter *as* author.

Immersion in the struggle, and a feeling of aloneness as a writer within it, an inside-outside existence, is exemplified throughout the work of female fighter poets. It begs one to address the question—why poetry? Without succumbing to the inevitable comparison, of the pen and the sword, or its inverse, of power flowing from the barrel of a gun—we have to allow the work of these poets to shed light on how they saw their writing in the context of their guerrilla activity.

I urge readers here to approach their work as a critique of colonialism, occupation, the imperialist world order. I would invite them to partake of what these female fighters are doing with poetry: Poetry as op-ed, poetry as resistance, poetry as a call to arms, and poetry as a call to poetry.

CAPTAIN VAANATHI

Get ready for battle

You, who have become
a refugee in your kitchen,
because of the storm of patriarchy
You, waging a silent war with fire!
Get ready, and come!

Let your self-confidence grow
and your courage too.
Do you have any freedom
to act on your thoughts
and your desires?

Family life does not exist
for the have-nots now.
This is what has continued
into the twentieth century.

Like the dreams of someone mute,
your emotions now run silent.

You sob in the kitchen
as you are being rapped.
Get ready, and come away.
Let us create a new era,
in the shadow of the guns
we now carry.

When we get national freedom
that we desire so deeply,
we will build the tomb
for women's exploitation.
We will dig the graves
for society's backward ideas.

For this revolution tomorrow,
you must come today.

Look! There, in a flood of blood,
your sister holding her gun out to you.
Take her weapon.
Walk in her footsteps.

She, the woman of Tamil Eelam

Not the red dot of the kunkumam
but blood decorates her forehead.
You do not see the sweetness
of youth in her eyes, only
the gravestones of the dead.
Her lips don't utter useless babble,
but the vows of martyrs.
On her neck, she wears not the thaali,
that marker of marriage,
but a cyanide capsule.
She embraces not men
but her weapons.
Her legs do not wander in search
of her relatives, but towards
the liberation of Tamil Eelam.
The bullets from her gun
will destroy the enemy.
It will break the shackles.
and then, our people
will sing our national anthem.

CAPTAIN KASTURI

Tea baskets

Having hung the baskets
of tea leaves over an
exploitative balance,
these tea plants
yearn for a cup of tea.

When will there come a day,
where, marching as fire-gods
they torch away their sufferings?

Superpowers

Superpowers—
in order
to surge ahead,
you torture others.
When your power will be probed,
it will be clear that developing countries
were driven to destitution by you.
For you to create a history on the moon
you strip and pillage and shame lands.

Your coming only increases
poverty and famine.

The Red Cross of your land
does not gather the wounded,
they only care for inventory.
Your country's researchers
tabulate the statistics of deaths
alongside stocks.
Those peace-loving countries
who have brokered deals with you
have entered our land

and only birthed troubles.
As your airports expand
is it not our little huts that are set on fire?

You tactfully enter peaceful countries
cut their flourishing roots
and pour water on the stalks
so they do not appear dead.
Most often, your interventions
have left behind only scorched earth.
The AIDS that you spread is not even
natural.
Even wind and rain now suspect you.

You are the international terrorists
out to claim ownership
of the artificial hurricanes
that you will create!

AATILATCHUMI

Memories spreading out in the shade

Under that tamarind tree,
that's where the grandfather
selling ice-cream used to stand.
In front, this wide playground
that's where we played
drunk on all the dust.
In the north-west of the ground
where you see Vairavar's trident
we used to remove our slippers
for safekeeping.
We would hang our school bags
on the tamarind tree.
We threw stones at the cows
coming to graze in our playground.
Silently witnessing all this,
the school-building stood inanimate
built on our village funds
a one-storey, haphazard structure.
Here is where

the Indian Army lived.
They broke the chairs
the tables, the windows
They made chappatis.
They cut down coconut trees
that encircled the school
turned them into barricades.

Everything is now a dream.
Many of my friends
are now on the battleground.
A few of them, in graveyards.
Me, pen in hand, a poet.

Wiping away tears

Amma Krishanthi![3]
When I think of what happened to you
I'm filled with dread
my belly is on fire.

State radio, state newspapers lie:
'Tamil lives are flourishing'.

In Valikaamam,

3 A report dated 3 July 1998 from Tamilnet (https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=1709) said: "Krishanthi Kumaraswamy, a student at the Chundikili Girls School was attacked by Sri Lanka Army and police personnel at a military checkpoint in Jaffna. She is said to have been gang raped by up to 11 security forces personnel, before being murdered on 7 August 1996. Concerned the girl had not returned home, her mother, brother and a neighbour went to the checkpoint. They too were arrested and 'disappeared'. Their bodies were found in shallow graves several weeks later. Krishanthi's body had been dismembered. According to human rights activists, on the orders of the Sri Lankan government, the bodies were flown to Colombo and her family was told to dispose of the bodies within two hours. It was one of the rare cases of rape that actually came to trial."

your life has been snatched away
you have been denied the right to live.

Do you remember, amma?
A while ago, the army claimed
to have rescued a teacher who accidentally
fell into a well.

It is the same army that vandalised
—Ranjani in Urumpiriya
—Raajini in Kondavil
—You in Kaiththadi.

Killed you, buried you.
You, a schoolgirl who was raped.
Having feasted on you, the beasts laughed,
you could not even shout.
You were battling death—
what did you think, amma
as your eyes fixed themselves
on the sky and grew still?

They say, off-handedly,
your death was a conspiracy

against the army. That is not true.
You know that, the world knows too.
Truth never sleeps inside a grave.

Fresh flower, you were torn to shreds.
We wipe our tears
and strengthen our resolve.
Let them realize
we are not slaves
to state terrorism.

Captain Vaanathi

Born, Patmasothi Sanmukanathapillai. She headed a Women Tiger unit of the LTTE during the Elephant Pass battle. She embraced martrydom in the course of this battle on 11 July 1991. In December (the Tamil month of Margazhi) 1991, her poems were published posthumously by the LTTE.

Captain Kasturi

She was a poet, a short-story writer, and a playwright. She headed a Supplies Unit of the LTTE during the Elephant Pass battle. She embraced heroic death on 11 July 1991. Her collected poetry was published as an anthology, *Kasturi Kavithaigal*.

Aatilatchumi

She has written short-stories, poems, and radio plays. In 1990, her collection of short-stories, *Puyalai Ethirkkum Pookkal (Flowers that Fight the Storm)* was published and was followed in 2006 by another collection *Manithargal* (People). Her

collected poems were published under the title *En Kavithaigal* in 2000. Her stories were adapted into short films. As a feminist lyricist, her songs rang out of homes in Tamil Eelam. Under the nom de guerre Kannamma, she produced and broadcast several programmes for the LTTE Radio *Puligalin Kural* since the 1990s. She was a recipient of the Tamil Eelam nation's highest literary honours in 1998. Her latest novel is *Pulligal Karaindha Pozhudhu* (*When the Points Dissolved*), published in 2018.

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