The Subaltern Speaks Nonetheless; Tamil Women during Sri Lanka's Civil War

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Introduction

> *"If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow."* - Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1988

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes in her essay *'Can the Subaltern Speak?'* (1988) about the inability of historically oppressed individuals to rise above the oppressor's hegemony and the tendency to define the subject as solely belonging to the more powerful. The term 'subaltern' itself was first coined by Antonio Gramsci as a codeword for any and all oppressed individuals (Oxford Dictionary). Spivak employs the term by assessing it in relation to the incontestable Western "desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject" (Spivak, 1988, p. 24).

Today, there is no clear path for those whose voices have been either rejected or entirely dismantled. Spivak finds this obstruction nearly universal, standing before the oppressed; yet if the Subaltern is to ever speak, one must begin to retrace the history that the 'object' (in this case, the woman) has been denied throughout history.

Brief History of Sri Lanka's Civil War

In 1983, the twenty-six-years long conflict between the Sinhalese-dominated government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) militant organisation marked a dark period of Sri Lankan history. The UN believed both parties committed several war crimes, particularly towards the final stage of the brutal conflict, with an estimation of 40,000 civilians killed only in the final months of the civil war (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Sri Lanka, however, has continuously refused to take any accountability for the atrocities occurring during these two decades.

As a multicultural and multiethnic country, the different communities and groups populating Sri Lanka, experienced the war in varying ways, including but not restricted to, forced displacement, imprisonment, unwilling recruitment to take part in armed conflict, all whilst the underlying Tamil genocide was undergoing.

The effects and aftermath of the war are still apparent, both politically and economically. A primary example of this is the economic crisis Sri Lanka faced in 2019, which was the most financially detrimental calamity the country had experienced since gaining independence in 1948. The process of recovering from this is still ongoing today, which clearly highlights the struggle for political and economical stability that keeps haunting the island even decades after the end of the war. Ethnic

turmoils and friction have equally continued to affect and further complicated the prospect of a peaceful and safe home for all Sri Lankans. A home where different ethnicities, religions, social classes can co-exist amicably and respectfully.

In order to achieve such a prospect, however, there are many unresolved matters that date back to both the period before and during the Civil War. It is by dissecting the past of a country, that a brighter and better future can be established. The subaltern (as defined by Spivak) and its history is especially difficult to trace back, and precisely for this reason, it is even more necessary in order for justice and peace to be reinstated.

Gender as a System of Power

Gender disparity undoubtedly aggravates states of conflict, leading to enhanced forms of violence during wartime. It is imperative to understand and scrutinise the intricacies formed by gender identities, structures, and roles, and how they are further magnified during periods of armed conflict and war.

Gender as a system of power has the ability to influence people's behaviour on an everyday basis and during times of social and political unrest, these power systems severely impact women, girls, and gender minorities. So, in order to structure conflict analysis and peacebuilding in a fashion that considers and prioritises all people, it is crucial to apply gender-sensitive conflict analysis methods as a standard practice in policy making.

The Subaltern Speaks Nonetheless

Tamil women during the Sri Lankan civil war comprised one of the most severely affected identities, as well as one of the most resilient and courageous ones. Their voices, however, have remained at the outskirts of post-war process and restoration. Employing the theory of the subaltern Spivak writes about, it can be argued that a major fraction of Sri Lankan history remains to this day widely untouched and "deeply in shadow" (Amnesty International, 2002).

One of the many ways in which Tamil women, as well as other gender minorities, were directly impacted was through acts of sexual violence; a consequence of war that is common amidst many past and ongoing conflicts around the world. In 2001, according to a report by Amnesty International (2002), Sri Lanka observed an increase in rape allegations perpetrated by police, army, and navy personnel. It is important to appraise the ease at which those in power specifically abuse their position during periods of diminished order and heightened instability such as wartime, an important factor that should be taken into account during post-conflict peacebuilding.

Tamil women, together with women of other ethnic groups, were caught in the midst of the violence as mere politicised bodies. Due to the highly sensitive nature of the issue, it continues to have a very low coverage in terms of recorded data. However, scholars affirm that Tamil individuals who were either directly or indirectly involved with LTTE comprised the most vulnerable group, with an estimate of 53% of the Tamil population who have experienced sexual violence during the war period (Traunmüller et al., 2019). These transgressions, especially when inflicted on women, were considered much more as a statement or a politically charged offense; a mere military tactic rather than a direct violation of human rights.

Female Voices for Female Issues

In the project 'Sri Lankan Women's Agenda on Peace, Security and Development', it is argued that not only post-conflict policy making should be gender sensitive in its analysis, but the very structure of post crisis responses and the scarcity of female representation should be revisited and remodelled.

"Marginal attention is paid to issues of women affected by the armed conflict and women are underrepresented in national development planning".

This, however, does not derive from a lack of women's influence in decision-making, but rather from a continued deprivation of liberty and an uncontested silencing of female voices both during and after war. One of the many ways in which governments and institutions continuously fail marginalised groups and minorities is by not allowing their idiosyncratic issues to be voiced directly. It is rather easy to neglect certain subjects if they are not thoroughly understood by those in positions of power, and in the same fashion, it is difficult to recognise and comprehend such issues if those who face them first-hand are not able to participate in the discourse.

In order for reintegration and reconstruction processes to be fair and inclusive, there is an urgent need to provide and create a space for women who have been affected by war. The Women's Manifesto of 2010 is, for example, a current recommendation in place campaigning for this objective. The manifesto recognises the existing representation of women in "the state bureaucracies, in diplomacy, the private sector, medical, legal and teaching professions, the arts, and in many other areas", whilst still denouncing the harsh conditions and treatments they face when participating in decision making and electoral systems.

More than half of the Sri Lankan population is female (51.62% in 2024) (World Bank, 2024), and to this day, women and children continue to be the demographic most affected during all temporal phases of armed conflict. Parliament, governing institutions, and policy makers must implement more inclusive procedures and establish a space where women affected by war are free to share

experiences, find comfort, access financial, psychological, medical support, as well as a space that will bring them closer to becoming integral contributors in post-conflict policy making and development efforts.

The Tamil women, like many other marginalised groups who have been disproportionately affected by war and conflict, continue to persevere even through the most arduous of times. All across the country, during the darkest period of Sri Lankan history, women coalesced to advocate for peace and justice in their homeland.

The primary catalyst for these movements was motherhood; a notion that is highly venerated in Sri Lanka, and one that shed light to the deeply intertwined nature between the personal and political aspects of war and the position gender occupies within political turmoil.

In fact, it could be argued that in order for the Subaltern to speak loudly and clearly, one must shed light not only on their tragedies, but also their victories. Whilst the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam was the leading militant group during the Civil War, many other movements arose throughout the years of conflict. Those that engaged in armed violence, however, included fewer women, especially in high rank positions. Nonetheless, Tamil women actively participated in their liberation through various, and predominantly peaceful, tactics and organisations.

Motherhood: A Bridge between the Personal and the Political

The Jaffna Mothers' Front (also known as Northern Mothers' Front) was one of the earliest female-led movements in Sri Lanka. It was established in 1984, in retaliation with the mass transportation of over 800 Tamil youths to the southern part of the country by governmental forces. An estimated 5,000 women, mostly mothers, peacefully marched to the Tamil Government Agency successfully demanding the release of their children.

Then followed the Southern Mother's Front in 1990, formally established in Matara, equally demanding justice and answers to the countless disappearances of their family members.The Front, at its peak, amounted to 25,000 women and different branches in ten other districts. The vast majority of the members were women from lower classes, with little to no prior experience in public political domains, but all equipped with undying determination and perseverance in their fight for justice. The first convention held by the Front was in 1991, where their clear demands included: "the release of information of the whereabouts of the disappeared; the appointment of an independent commission of inquiry; the payment of compensation and the issuance of death certificates and priority treatment in allocation of state jobs and housing" (Ilankai Tamil Sangam).

According to Sri Lankan anthropologist, Malathi de Alwis, this was “the single largest women’s protest movement of its time and arguably one of the most effective in the history of modern Sri Lanka” (Ilankai Tamil Sangam, 1996-2026).

In 1991, the Front was co-led by Manorani Saravanamuttu, the mother of the journalist and human rights activist Richard de Zoysa who was abducted and murdered by a death squad affiliated with the government on February 18th, 1990. Saravanamuttu decided to leave the Front later on as it became increasingly more and more politicised. She was a family physician and was married to a Sinhalese, Lucien de Zoysa. When her only son Richard was 11 years old, the couple divorced and Manorani raised him as a single mother. Chandri Peiris (2021), a family friend of Manorani, wrote in his article for the Daily Mirror of the bravery, selflessness, and strength Manorani had always practiced, even before joining the Front.

> “Soon after the race riots in 1983, Manorani (along with Richard) helped a great many Sri Lankan Tamils to find refuge in countries all over the world. Nobody knew about this. But all of us who used to hang around their house kept seeing unfamiliar people come over to stay a few days and then leave.” (Peris, 2021)

Her story remains of great importance today, though a story that is often forgotten and under-reported. In one of her speeches for the Southern Mother’s Front, Manorani proudly stated:

> “Our aim is peaceful, our methods are peaceful. We don’t seek revenge. We stand for hope, not for despair. The ‘Mothers’ Front’ should grow into a watchdog for the people of Sri Lanka, so that no party in power can ever again perpetrate such violations of human rights in our land.” (Dokumentation Analyse Information)

Hers was a voice so powerfully loud yet so hidden and disregarded by default. Saravanamuttu, like many other Tamil women, was very well aware of the dangers of speaking out for what they believed in and for those they loved. But Manorani Saravanamuttu spoke nonetheless.

In May 1991, she received a death threatening letter which urged her to mourn her son quietly, “Only silence will protect you” (Dokumentation Analyse Information, Sri Lanka). Still, Saravanamuttu did not remain silent. For a childless mother, she thought, there is nothing else to lose, no one else to put in danger by speaking up except for her own life, a sacrifice she was willing to take. Even in the depths of tragedy, suffering, and grief, mothers all across the island found the courage to fight and to at least demand answers and justice, if their sons’ lives were no longer retrievable. The Mother’s Front in the Northern, Eastern, and Southern parts of Sri Lanka all contributed to major political

developments of the country in the 1980s and 1990s, both against the unlawful disappearance of Tamil boys and men in the North and East, and against the JVP insurgence in the South. Motherhood, an everpresent symbol of Sri Lankan national strength, became an even more influential form of resistance and protest against violence and injustice.

Although Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) writes of the Subaltern's inability to speak, she equally affirms that "the question 'Who should speak?' is less crucial than 'Who will listen?'"

Tamil women in Sri Lanka never really did stop testifying their experience and struggles, and expressing their hopes and dreams for a peaceful and safe future in their homeland.

Even when it seems as if there is no one listening, in order to be heard, one must persevere against the deafening apathy of those in power, and keep on vocalising the urgency for justice even during the darkest of times.

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