

RETHINKING RESILIENCE: EXPLORING DECOLONIAL POSSIBILITIES OF REPRESENTING NARRATIVES OF CONFLICT AFFECTED WOMEN IN THE NORTH AND EAST OF SRI LANKA

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Abstract: This paper reflects on the interventions presented in my master's thesis from 2020 which analyses representations of conflict affected women in the North and East of Sri Lanka in post conflict discourse through postcolonial and decolonial feminist lenses. A central source in the analysis is a documentary I produced in 2019 titled *Women's Plight: Dreams of a Better Life* which presents five women's narratives of their lives during and post- conflict. This work was produced as a submission to the 'Tamils of Lanka: A Timeless Heritage' exhibition which took place in 2019, marking 10 years to the end of the conflict and the atrocities committed by the state at Mullivaikal. The documentary aligned with the exhibition's central theme of recognising the resilience of the community in the homeland and diaspora through the violence, marginalisation and its resulting impacts. I worked within a team of volunteers, who were part of the Tamil Information Centre in London, to organise the exhibition. The thesis unpacks the reductive ways conflict affected women are represented in the discourse and draws from Sangam literature and historical narratives of gendered spirituality and resistance to trace alternative epistemologies that could be applied to represent these women and their perspectives in more expansive ways. The paper includes reflections from engagement and presentation of these interventions in both academic and non-academic contexts.

Key words: Tamil, resistance, gendered narratives, decolonial, postcolonial, feminist, representation, Sri Lanka, gendered spirituality, Sangam literature, diaspora

Introduction

I open with a vignette also found at the beginning of my master's thesis that introduces the central themes of intervention in this work, around women's agency and representation in the Tamil context in Sri Lanka.

One afternoon during a stay in my mother's childhood home in Jaffna, Northern Sri Lanka, I overheard a conversation between my

aunt and her friend who were avidly discussing the latest village gossip on the veranda. They had heard of a recently married couple experiencing problems as the husband was beating the wife. I found myself getting worked up when my aunt said that she should bear with it and stay in the marriage. I recognise this reaction as stemming from seeing the situation from a liberal lens that as a victim of domestic violence the woman leaving the marriage would allow her to access her agency and liberate herself. But what my aunt said next complicated this gut reaction. She said if she stays with him, she's hit only by him and if she leaves, she'll be hit by the whole community, alluding to the community's stigma around divorce. I saw this as complicating her circumstance in recognising that she also has agency if she chooses to stay in the marriage. (Vigneswara Kumar, 2020 p 6)

Including this piece from my personal diary, during my couple months stay in Sri Lanka working on a documentary project, acknowledges the conclusions we draw on women's agency on a day-to-day basis based on our own assumptions and stereotypes. This paper is a self-reflexive analysis unpacking how these hegemonic representations of conflict *affected* women are constructed within human rights and development discourse, and, how these constructions show up in my own work, a documentary I produced in 2019 titled *Women's Plight: Dreams of a Better Life* which presents five women's narratives of their lives during and post- conflict. In acknowledging the potential harm and injustice connected to the connotations of these representations, I explore alternative ways of interpreting and representing these women's narratives. I consider the trajectories of representations of women in Sangam literature and historical narratives around gendered spirituality and resistance to commence plotting coordinates of Tamil women's subjectivities in more expansive ways.

Feminist analysis of representations of conflict *affected* women in the North and East of Sri Lanka has presented challenges to the perception of women solely as victims by locating their agency and conceptualising resistance (See Nesiah, 2012; Satkunathan, 2012; de Mel, 2002; Balasingam, 2003, Malathy and d'Souza, 2012; Gowrinathan, 2017; De Alwis, 2012). They consider women's roles at the forefront of resistance movements during the conflict and in the post conflict environment, including as female combatants and through the Mothers of the disappeared campaigns¹. I expand on this work to critically analyse the frames of reference that are used by state and international liberal institutions to interpret these women's narratives and resistance in ways that support their own broader political agendas. I pay attention to how these institutions are implicated within the 'liberal peace' agenda. This agenda is a framework applied to the post-Cold war policies and practices of post conflict intervention that centres economic interdependence, democracy, and rule of law as the sustainable foundations of peace (Sabaratnam 2011; Nadarajah 2010). I draw from postcolonial critiques of this agenda, and the role of neoliberal governance in reinforcing its prominence, that highlight the ways it

¹ Campaigns in the North and East predominantly led by mothers and other family members of disappeared persons

reinforces Eurocentrism, political exclusions and problematise its reductive gender approach (Sabaratnam, 2013; Hudson, 2016; Vimalarajah and Nadarajah 2011; Nadarajah and Rampton 2015). Applying discourse analysis, I explore how power operates to exclude and/or manipulate the perspectives of conflict *affected* women and I seek to reclaim what has been obscured (Daniel, 1996).

I apply the works of postcolonial feminists who assert the ways colonised and racialised women's representations have been constrained and erased in colonial and liberal discourse (see Spivak, 1988; Mani, 1987; Chatterjee, 2012). I utilise these works to consider how these women's subjectivity is constrained in the discourse and is sculpted by those that speak on their behalf. I also heed Tuhiwai-Smith's critique of the postcolonial, that the 'post' in postcolonial alludes to the idea that colonialism has ended and heed her call to decolonise to enable those of us from colonised communities to orientate theory and research to our concerns and activism (2012 pp 23,39). I utilise a qualitative, transnational feminist approach to acknowledge the historical, geographical and political locations within which I position my work and ensure a self-reflexivity around knowledge production and processes (Nagar and Swarr, 2010).

As a Tamil woman located and writing from the diaspora in the UK this project is a seeking out of liberatory ways of representing the narratives and perspectives of conflict *affected* Tamil women in the homeland. Thus, this project is the exploration of the subjectivities of Tamil women within the selected discourse, however, implicated within this is the search for my own subjectivity. This paper applies standpoint theory to reflect on the role of marginal academics writing their communities into the discourse and the need for self-reflexivity around the consequences of these interventions (Abu Lughod, 2008; Collins, 1986). I consider how in this seeking out of alternative representations for our communities we can be implicated within the trappings of problematic saviour narratives and other broader liberal political agendas that ultimately disempower the very people we are attempting to uplift (Khan, 2018).

I centre analysis of the Sri Lankan government appointed Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) 2011 report and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) report from 2015, both of which outline the events and impacts of the final stages of the conflict. I also consider representations in the International Crisis Group's (ICG) 2017 report *Sri Lanka's Conflict-Affected Women: Dealing with the Legacy of War*, which portrays women's impacts and experiences of conflict and post conflict in the North and East. Alongside these reports I analyse narratives from a documentary titled "Dreams of a Better Life" I produced in 2019 as part of my work on behalf of the Centre of Community Development, a humanitarian organisation which is part of the Tamil Information Centre run by members of the Tamil diaspora in London (Vigneswara

Kumar, 2019). This work formed part of the content exhibited at the 'Tamils of Lanka: A Timeless Heritage' exhibition which took place on the weekend of May 18-19th in 2019 in London. The exhibition collated the history, cultural traditions and political trajectories of Tamils on the island of Sri Lanka, and documented the atrocities committed and struggles faced during the conflict and post-conflict periods. The theme centred around the resilience of communities that have survived through conflict, as well as facing ongoing structural violence (Seoighe 2022).

(Con)figuring the victim

Victim narratives feature heavily in government and human rights discourse which provides commentary on the events and impacts of the conflict in Sri Lanka. To unpack these narratives, I apply the work of postcolonial feminist scholar Mani (1987) and anthropologist Lughod (2002) to conceptualise the way narratives of women are and have been mobilised to legitimise liberal and colonial interventions. These are justified in the name of "saving" these women from men in their communities that are depicted as violent and barbaric. Analysing the rhetoric in the Learning Lessons and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) and Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reports, I draw attention to the legacy of the colonial reform agenda in contemporary liberal discourse. I argue that these representations trap women within reductive victim narratives from which there is no possibility for them to speak (Spivak 1988).

The 'homegrown' government investigative commission, the LLRC, was instigated in 2011 to address the actions of the state and LTTE in the final years of the conflict. This includes addressing allegations of misconduct pointed towards the state with a forward reaching intention of moving past this towards reconciliation. However, the commission was conducted under the backdrop of glaring power asymmetry and militarisation with the government dominating the mechanisms of transitional justice (Nesiah 2009). Accusations of government bias with a limited mandate called into question the ability of the commission to deliver accountability and justice (Höglund 2019; Amnesty 2011). Due to the accusation of Government bias the LLRC report provides a convenient portrayal of the Government mediated narrative of the events of the final years of the conflict and who is considered a victim.

In analysing narratives of the postcolonial state, the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist myth holds an important place in terms of acknowledgement of the Sinhala Buddhist hegemonic claims to the island and construction of the 'terrorist' other (Dharmadasa 1992; Kleinfeld 2003). This notion of the 'terrorist threat', referring to Tamil nationalists, non-Tamil critics of the state and encompassing more generally the ethnic Tamil population in the North and East, has been heavily mobilised to justify state sponsored violence (Rasaratnam, 2016; Jegatheeswaran, 2017; Ramakrishnan, 2015). The construction of the need for the state to overcome the terrorist threat is depicted as a heroic rescue mission to save innocent civilians from Tamil militant violence, justifying the offensive of the state and the overlooking of state committed atrocities (Keenan and Nesiah, 2004).

In the report there is ethnic inclusivity in terms of reference to victimhood with reference to impacts on Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil populations. The narrative of victimhood is also heavily gendered with women, children and the elderly claiming to have taken “the brunt of the conflict” (LLRC, 2011 pp181). A lack of an intersectional approach minimises the disproportionate burden of the war on Tamil women and makes invisible the victimhood of Tamil men by perpetuating binaries of women as inherently peaceful and men as violent (Sivachandran, 2013; Sarvananthan et al., 2017; Gowrinathan and Cronin-Furman, 2015; Satkunathan, 2017; Charlesworth, 2008; Myrtilinen et al., 2017; Henry, 2017). These essentialised portrayals demonstrate the state’s alignment and role in reproducing the saviour rhetoric endemic in liberal discourse, of brown women needing saving from brown men (Spivak, 1988). The approach towards illustrating victimhood can also be seen as a way to undermine the dominance of Tamil victimhood portrayed by liberal peace institutions and NGOs such as the International Crisis Group and Amnesty, which the state has claimed are funded by the diaspora based LTTE (Gunatilleke, 2013; Seoighe 2016).

The UN OHCHR report emerges out of a response to the lack of a credible national process of accountability to address mass atrocity crimes and thus, I assert, to redress the accusations and calls for accountability that surround both the state and non-state actors drawing equivalences between violences. (Vigneswara Kumar, 2020; OHCHR, 2015). This attempt to create a notion of impartiality, with addressing the atrocities from both sides, is associated with enforcers of the liberal peace agenda, such as the UN, and has been critiqued on the grounds of feeding into an idealistic portrayal of conflict resolution detached from political interests and power relations (Malito, 2017). There is a need to pay attention to the power asymmetry in play in terms of a state versus non-state actor, while the state continues to shape its own particular narrative tied to nationalist mobilisations and the non-state actor, the LTTE, having been eradicated by state forces (Vigneswara Kumar, 2020). In fact, the UN’s approach on the Sri Lankan conflict has been accused of verging on complicity. The UN gave humanitarian help with one hand but withheld concrete political action, through resistance from the security council, with the other (Lynch, 2010, Weiss, 2012).

In comparison to the LLRC report Tamil victimhood is centred in the UN report including references to both female and male victimhood, in terms of sexual violence during the conflict. This includes not just during the war but also post-conflict vulnerabilities, naming structural factors such as militarisation as creating insecurities through sexual violence and exploitation of women by the military (OHCHR, 2015 p117, p120). This alludes to the continuum of violence that women are exposed not just during the conflict but also thereafter. However, the report fails to apply an intersectional approach in terms of recognising vulnerabilities and marginalisation of not just Tamil women but also men in the post-conflict context. For example, alcoholism and drug abuse have been flagged as key concerns in the North and East and also changes to family structures due to many women working abroad and men staying at home has resulted in altered pressures (Somasundaram and Sivayokan 2013; Vigneswara Kumar, 2017). However, the lack of consideration of

vulnerabilities of men in the post war period and absence of discussion of resistance and activism of the community perpetuates the narrative of Tamil women trapped in a state of victimhood and needing saving by the West from the violence of state and localised patriarchal structures.

Here, subaltern women are constructed as the universal victim in human rights discourse, in need of saving, and their victimhood is mobilised as justification of liberal peace interventions (Kapur, 2005; Nesiah, 2012). There is a need to pay attention to how these same actors and processes of liberal peace are implicated in creating further insecurities for conflict *affected* communities through their roles in shaping the outcomes of the conflict and post-conflict landscape.

Realigning perceptions, uncovering agency

I now turn to analysis of works that aim to counter these victim narratives and centre agency and resilience of Tamil women, including the International Crisis Group report and the narratives in the documentary that I produced (Vigneswara Kumar 2019). I draw from critical commentary of the representations of agency and rhetoric of empowerment in development discourse to analyse how works that aim to 'empower and 'liberate' Global South women reproduce reductive liberal logics that perpetuate limiting notions of agency (Wilson, 2011; Cronin-Furman et al., 2017). These are in turn mobilised to exploit these women through elaborations of neoliberal models of development. Through this I consider how neoliberal development models propagate and intensify the entrenchment of liberal logics through constrained representations of conflict *affected* women in the North and East of Sri Lanka (Vigneswara Kumar 2020).

The ICG report outlines Tamil women's victimhood and the structural factors creating vulnerabilities and marginalisation in the post-conflict context but also refers to their agency in terms of the demands for justice and accountability of wartime violations (Vigneswara Kumar, 2020; ICG, 2017 ppi). The "highly patriarchal context regulated by rigid cultural and social practices" are determined as a key contributor to these women's victimhood which aligns with the phrasing of empowerment programming which considers marginalised women's agency as existing in opposition to cultural and social expectations (Cronin-Furman et al., 2017). This presents the image of culture as static and unchanging and disregards external factors, such as the state and colonialism, that have shaped localised patriarchies (Chatterjee, 2012). This argument has been used time and time again by liberal feminists and institutions in the Global North to justify interventions as part of their moral duty to improve the lives of their third world counterparts, resonating with colonial sentiment (Abu-Lughod, 2002; George, 2018).

In the report there is also reference to women's agency and in particular their 'anger' as 'threatening' in relation to hopes of peace and reconciliation efforts (Vigneswara Kumar 2020). A 2016 FOKUS report features the voices of Tamil feminist organisers and leaders on the ground who extensively critique and problematise the reconciliation processes. Sarala Emmanuel, a development practitioner from

Batticaloa in Eastern Sri Lanka, states “the term [reconciliation] seems to be telling the affected people to forgive, to reconcile, to move on. Yet where is the justice and the accountability for all that has happened in the past, to go with it?” (FOKUS, 2016). The report seems to be calling for people to reconcile and move on without any accountability and justice for past and ongoing violations and falls short in terms of the inclusion of women’s voices and the acknowledgement of grassroots activism (Satkunathan).

Women’s Plight: Dreams of a better life, which I produced, attempts to redress questions of agency and women’s perspectives and experience during and post conflict. I apply a self-reflexive lens to critically analyse this work alongside the surrounding debates around agency in the literature. The purpose of the documentary was to centre the resilience of Tamil conflict *affected* women and contribute to an exhibition that demonstrated the resilience of the community in the homeland as well as in the diaspora. I unpack some of the sentiment and wording of the documentary that frames these women’s narratives in ways that align with neoliberal agendas that ultimately disempower and exploit these women (Vigneswara Kumar 2020). For example in the documentary there is a statement of these women’s resilience allowing them to “overcome barriers and build a better future” which can be considered a colonial reworking in terms phrasing their struggles as obstacles that can be overcome through hard work and a helping hand from those in the Global North, whilst obscuring the forces of oppression and exploitation (ibid, 2020; Vigneswara Kumar 2019; Wilson, 2011).

This reinforces the rhetoric of neoliberal development by focussing on individual agency and reductive notions of resilience. The implications of this narrative of ‘resilient’ and ‘liberated’ women has been heavily mobilised by the state and international institutions (Wilson 2007). For example the state has opened women-run low cost eateries called “Ammachi” canteens in the North, mobilising these women as ‘liberated’ in their role as enterprising entrepreneurs (Balachander, 2020). This rhetoric has also been utilised to portray women as better borrowers and providers to hand out microfinance loans as part of an agenda that appears to resolve both issues of poverty and gender equality whilst further implicating women into global circuits of capital (Wilson 2011). In the context of Sri Lanka, there has been a prevalence of microfinance loans distributed across the North and East as a means of promoting entrepreneurship and providing ways out of poverty. With a significant proportion of women headed households there is a gendered approach to this distribution (ICG 2017). These initiatives have had dire consequences with affected women buried deeper into poverty and a significant number of associated suicides (Economist 2019). Thus, by constructing these women as, ‘enterprising’ subjects with a limitless capacity to cope, both the structural factors that result in women’s marginalisation, and the resistance movements to the violence of the ‘democratic’ neoliberal state are rendered invisible (Vigneswara, 2020).

The transformation of the ‘liberal victim’ to ‘liberal agent’ means that rather than these women being trapped in notions of universal victimhood, these women’s agency becomes evident but constrained. The rhetoric of empowerment and liberation becomes economic and political disempowerment perpetuated through

neoliberal development programming. Reflecting on my own complicity, in aligning with these political agendas through the framing of documentary, I highlight the need for those in the diaspora to carefully consider their role and responsibility whilst assembling these narratives for audiences in the Global North (Vigneswara Kumar, 2020; Kandasamy 2020; Gowrinathan 2015).

Tracing alternatives

With this acknowledgement of the limitations and implications of the framing of narratives of conflict *affected* women in human rights, reconciliation and development discourse, I explore alternative trajectories of representing Tamil women's narratives in order to find possibilities of escaping the colonial trappings perpetuated by (neo)liberal discourse (Vigneswara Kumar 2020). I draw from the interventions of historian Vijaya Ramaswamy (2007, 2013) to trace historic trajectories of South Indian women's resistance to hetero-patriarchy. I use the South Indian Tamil context because of the cultural similarity with Tamils in Sri Lanka, as a result of close cultural contacts that have been traced back to prehistoric times (Rajan and Boperarachchi, 2002). Ramaswamy utilises Sangam literature as a reference point for alternative narratives of Tamil women, associated with pre-Brahmanical traditions, indicating greater social and economic autonomy, including references to pre-marital courtship and spiritual empowerment. A key lens to this approach is recognising A.K. Ramanujan's assertion of the ways non-Western knowledge has been othered and considered as different 'logics' associated with "an earlier stage of 'cultural evolution'" by orientalist scholars (Ramanujan, 2004 pp37-40).

First, I look at the representation of women in Tamil Sangam literature. Narratives such as that of Kannagi in the popular late Sangam era epic *Silapadikaram* provide depictions of Tamil women which divert from the Brahmanical stereotyping of women as silent and self-sacrificing (Dikshitar, 1939; Ramaswamy, 2010). This tale is one I fondly remember being told and retold in Tamil classes I attended growing up. Kannagi, whose husband leaves her for another woman, on hearing her husband has been unjustly killed by the king goes to confront the king with the truth. The story portrays a woman taking fate into her own hands and confronting authority, and the story goes that during this encounter her *Karpu* blazed forth and burnt down the city of Madurai. This notion of *Karpu* has been imperfectly translated into English as 'chastity', but has also been expanded to refer to the restraining of all impulses that are considered immodest (Hart, 1976). It is associated with immense spirituality and enables Kanngi's transformation to a goddess-*Pattini Daivam* venerated across South India and Sri Lanka, following her confrontation with the King (Ramasamy 2007). I also recognise how these narratives are co-opted through patriarchal agendas to hold women to a higher moral standard endemic in nationalist discourses, visible in both the Sri lankan and Indian Tamil nationalist movements (Vigneswara Kumar, 2020; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Coomaraswamy and Perera-Rajasingham, 2009; Pandian, 1987). However, there is speculation about how these ancient tales may be matrilineal myths that were subsumed under the

patriarchal register, which has become the mainstream narrative (Kandasamy, 2011). Writer and poet Meena Kandasamy explores this in her anthology *Ms Militancy* in which she subverts the patriarchal approved narratives to reclaim the revolutionary potential of these protagonists (Biswas, 2017). In the title poem Kannagi is said to have made a bomb with her left breast and blown up the city, reclaiming the revolutionary essence of the character and subverting patriarchal limitations (Kandasamy 2011).

The realm of gendered spirituality is another location of representations of Tamil women that subvert patriarchal norms. This is grounded in the context of Hindu Brahmanical tradition which denies women the right to asceticism or monasticism; thus, women who resist this are considered 'dangerous' and 'deviant' (Ramaswamy 2007 pp9). There are notable women in history who have defied social norms such as Auvaiyar and Karur Amma, who broke the ritual taboo of worshipping the Linga (Lord Shiva) whilst menstruating and are widely respected and revered (ibid). This can be considered a reclaiming of the considerable social, economic, and spiritual autonomy Tamil women had in Sangam society (ibid pp18-19). Spirituality and resistance are also discussed in the context of narratives that portray an interchangeability between women and the mother goddess, Amman; wronged or murdered women who turn into fiery goddesses and seek justice (Ram, 2008). In a context where formal notions of justice, associated with the Western derived judicial system, are inaccessible these narratives provide alternative epistemologies of justice. This phenomenon of spirituality associated with resistance and justice has also been identified in Amman worship practices in Batticaloa. During the conflict when the community was oppressively silenced and dissent was impossible, the work of Amman "oracles" or trance mediums were seen to embody, interpret and acknowledge injury (Lawrence, 2000). Therefore, narratives of gendered spirituality offer coordinates towards alternative epistemologies of justice, resistance and empowerment of women that enable us to disrupt the reductive depictions in liberal discourse and provide potential for reclaiming of the subjectivities of Tamil women.

Returning to the documentary, I seek to apply these points of reference to offer a reinterpretation of the narratives present in the documentary (Vigneswara Kumar 2020). This includes, drawing from the narrative of Kannagi in her confrontation of the King whilst facing the suffering of the loss of her husband, to perceive the ways the women in the documentary are holding immense pain and suffering alongside strength. This diverts from the (neo)liberal interpretation of these women having 'overcome' their struggles and empowered themselves which invisibilises their ongoing struggles and structural marginalisation. In considering these expressions of strength I also take note of how these women may choose to intentionally conceal their struggles from others. I recognise this rhetoric in the concept of *maanam*, which I often encounter in conversation with family and the wider community. This can be translated to a sense of pride and/or self-respect, which induces these women to obscure their struggles stemming from the ongoing structural barriers they face for fear of shame and ostracisation. This problematises the framing of these women as 'resilient neoliberal agents' as that rhetoric overlooks the ways these women purposefully obscure their true suffering. I call for the recognition of alternative

trajectories of resistance that capture the multiple ways of expressing or obscuring struggle and discontent. Maybe then, returning to Spivak's seminal statement, the subaltern can speak and partially be heard. Or maybe she does not wish to be heard at all?

My insider/outsider status as a Tamil woman is something I draw attention to and return to in recognising my positioning in being able to both hear what these women are saying and understand the context, including concepts such as *maanam*, but also have an awareness of how to frame and translate the narratives using (neo)liberal logics to engage Global North audiences. I relate this in-between positioning to how Ramanujan (2004) discusses his father's ability to hold both the Western scientific logics of astronomy alongside the seemingly contradictory logics of Hindu astrology. I consider how my positioning allows me to hold both Western derived liberal logics and the non-western concepts discussed. This highlights the responsibility of the insider academic in terms of our approach to writing about our communities and making accessible our community's experiences to wider audiences. We find ourselves implicated in the modern liberal project of constructing subjectivities, the struggle within the subjectivities of individuals of which can be traced back to the founding moments in the colonial constitution of modernity and of tradition (Ram, 1998; Panikkar, 2002; Nandy, 2009). As well as this intervention being implicated in the project of constructing subjectivities, I also recognise how as a Tamil woman it is implicated in my own search subjectivity within literature.

Afterlife

When I mention the documentary to people, the next question they ask is "where can I see it?" I then proceed to explain that I never made it public and penned a thesis exploring why the final edit felt distant from the sentiment expressed on hearing their stories first-hand. Ultimately this has generated guilt connected to feelings of injustice to these women and the platforming of their stories. The analysis in this paper, enabled me to name and respond to the distance between documentary and reality and attempts to bridge the gap. Ultimately, the work comments on the ways these complex narratives and experiences get manipulated and packaged in ways that feed into broader political agendas with often disempowering consequences for these women. Rather than reaching a point of resolve and readiness to make the documentary public, I acknowledged that perhaps the work has value as a perpetually unfinished product, the process and reflections forming a stimulus for conversation.

I presented my thesis for the first time at the 'Tamil Studies Symposium' hosted at York University, Toronto in June 2022. Engaging with other scholars of Tamil Studies enabled me to recognise the value of this conversation in terms of centring reflective and critical spaces of diaspora engagement with the Tamil struggle. Following on from the momentum of these discussions I developed and ran a workshop, which included a screening of the documentary and collective reflection on the narratives. I ran this session at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London in January 2023 as

part of the public programming for the exhibition *Another World* by Tamil artist Christopher Kulendran Thomas (Thomas 2022). The workshop enabled me to generate a space of collective reflection around the role and relationship of diaspora communities with their homelands with predominantly Tamils, but also with individuals from other South Asian backgrounds. Feedback from attendees highlighted the value of the space and conversations opened up within themselves as well as collectively as a group. These workshops and presentations have enabled a processing of the conversations within and impacts of this work on my own praxis and approaches to community organising and advocacy work.

In contrast to the predominantly positive engagement with the documentary and space for conversation there was one person of my mother's generation who expressed feelings of discomfort in watching the documentary. Her response echoed my mother's reaction to watching it in terms of the difficulties of hearing these women from their homeland speaking of their struggles. This compared with the empathy that other people in the workshop had felt with the documentary but perhaps were able to distance themselves from due to gender, age (generation) and/or cultural background. This reinforced the sense of the multiple ways these women's words are being heard and interpreted. A friend commented that the conversation I generate through this work could be considered an expression of the messiness and complexity that makes up a decolonial practice. I echo this in considering that a decolonial practice is not something to be applied, transformed and done but something that is ongoing, reflective and unfinished. After all, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith asserts "the reach of imperialism into 'our heads' challenges those who belong to colonized communities to understand how this occurred, partly because we perceive a need to decolonize our minds, to recover ourselves, to claim a space in which to develop a sense of authentic humanity" (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012 pp23). And this is no straightforward task.

Conclusion

Within my thesis and the subsequent spaces of conversation and engagement with the work I have traced and analysed the narratives of conflict *affected* women in the North and East of Sri Lanka. I have been prompted to rethink resilience and what it means to represent the community, considering the legacy of colonial interventions within (neo)liberal agendas and the disempowering implications of these political agendas. In terms of the constraining and manipulation of women's voices trapped within victim agent binaries. This reflection has led to embarking on a journey of what a decolonial approach could offer in terms of expansive representations of Tamil women. Using the context of Tamil literature and notions of gendered spirituality I begin to trace alternative ways of framing and interpreting these women's voices, whilst taking heed of the implication that this work is part of increasing the legibility of my community and the responsibility of this role.

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