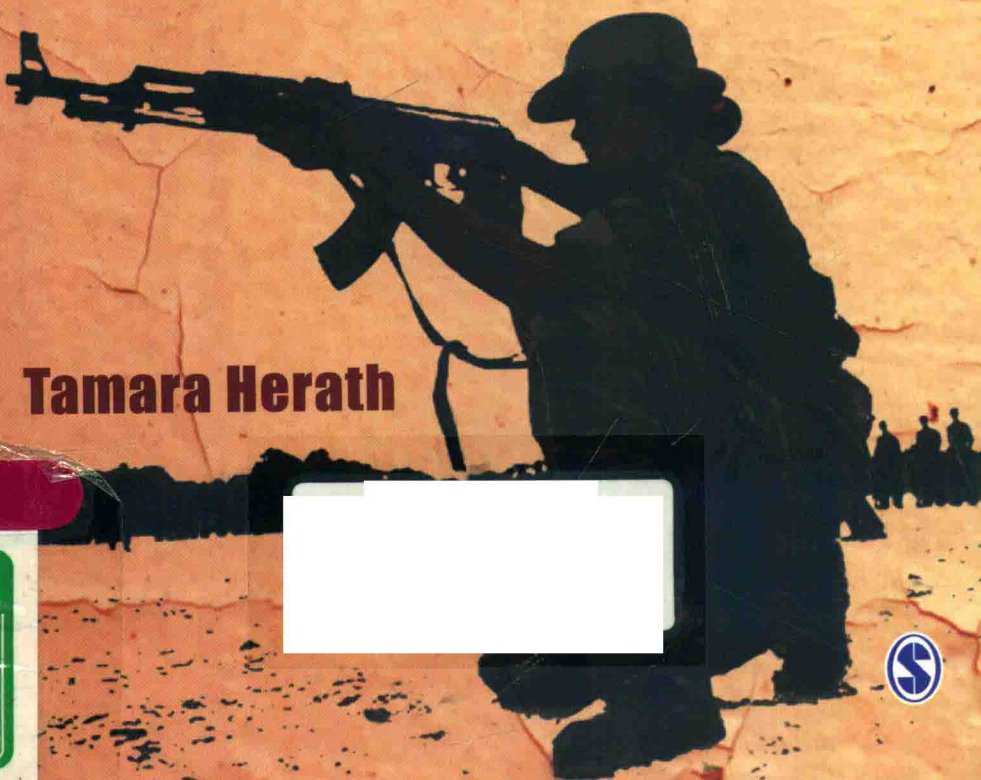
WOMEN IN TERRORISM

Case of the LTTE



Tamara Herath

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This book is dedicated to the brave, sensitive and caring women who chose to take some control of their space, their environment and of their lives.

Thank you for choosing a SAGE product! If you have any comment, observation or feedback, I would like to personally hear from you. Please write to me at contactceo@sagepub.in

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This book is also available as an e-book.

Notes on the Language Conventions

Note on Citations

I have used the commonly accepted English language spellings for Tamil words, such as, *Thambi* (younger brother) or the name, Prabhakaran, for ease of accessibility.

Note on Transliteration

The usage of Tamil words in the text are based on phonetics as reflected in the writings of Tamil-speaking authors.

Note on Research Informants

Most participants were monolingual (speaking only in Tamil), while a few were bilingual (speaking both Tamil and English).

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Finally, I wish to acknowledge the death of CH, a civic woman participant, whose untimely death is a tragic loss. I also wish to acknowledge that since the Final war some or most of the women combatants who took part in this research may not be alive today, but our differing ethnic identities were not held as barriers by them or by the civic women participants, raising hopes for a better future.

Contents

1 Entering a Tiger's Lair

Between the spring of 2002 and autumn of 2003, I visited the Jaffna peninsula in northern Sri Lanka with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of how three decades of ethno-nationalist war in Sri Lanka has contributed to a major social change for Tamil women in Jaffna. An important component of this change has been the recruitment of women to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil *Eelam* (LTTE), recognised globally as a terrorist group. My aim was to explore the role of combatant women from a gender perspective in order to identify how gender is constructed for women within the revolutionary movement, and the impact that this construction has on civic society.

The fundamental reasoning for conducting a research of this nature is to give a voice to the Other that has been overlooked by masculine-orientated data gathering. The feminist argument is that research conducted under the auspices of feminist research does not merely reflect and validate whatever the interviewees choose to say about their experiences, but also supplies 'a feminist critique and challenge to the way in which women's experience is constructed under (hetero) patriarchy' (Ang-Lygate 1996; Bola 1996; Russell 1996 and Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1996).

This book is therefore about combatant women in the LTTE, an armed resistance group led by Vellupillai Prabhakaran that has been active in Sri Lanka since the early 1970s pursuing the goal of an independent Tamil state named *Tamil Eelam*.[1] During the height of its success, the LTTE controlled large parts of the North, including the central Northern Province known as Vanni, as well as parts of the Eastern Province (although during the period I was in Jaffna, the Sri Lankan government had taken control of all other areas, including the Jaffna peninsula in the Northern Province and the land along Mannar in the North West).

This book addresses the currently limited understanding that exists in relation to the combatant women of the LTTE by forcing the question: how is gender constructed within the revolutionary movement of the LTTE? My findings illustrate that female gender identity is negotiated in complex ways and is transformed as a consequence of women becoming fighters. They become socially constructed images of Armed Virgins (viewed by some as androgynous), female warriors of injustice who protect Tamil nationals. Civic women have also adapted to changing socio-political conditions, although they have retained some aspects of their traditional gender identity. There is evidence that combatant women and civic women both become part of the (re)construction of 'new' women (*Puthumai Pen*), with a new gender identity. This new identity may not conform to Western feminist notions of emancipation, but within the Jaffna Tamil context it represents a profound change.

In addition, two of my findings have more general applications. First, the empirical evidence gathered during this research reveals a previously unrecognised link between those who are internally displaced to the LTTE-controlled area of Vanni, and voluntary enlistment. Due to inaccessibility, or difficulties in gaining entry to both LTTE-controlled areas and to combatant women, this link has previously been overlooked, and the focus has been on forced recruitment. However, this is a key point in understanding the combatant women, as the sense of security that is offered in Vanni (even when living under a tree, exposed to the elements) is preferable to living within the comforts of a home but in a state of continuous fear. The finding that displacement is an important factor in the recruitment of armed combatants may be relevant in other cases elsewhere. My second finding expands the debate on suicide bombings by focusing on combatant women's involvement in the act. Through the empirical research, I have concluded that combatant women view suicide bombing as a selfless act of giving; a view that directly connects suicide bombing to Durkheim's concept of 'obligatory altruistic suicide'. My research findings show that there was a clear gender dimension to the combatant women's involvement. Although at first suicide bombing appears to contradict the traditionally socio-culturally constructed female role of the carer and unselfish giver, in the combatant women's

discourse this act symbolizes an extension of a nurturing and giving role. Consequently, the combatant women view it as a willing gift to the Tamil nation—rather than a sacrifice—in order to progress the cause of Tamil *Eelam*.

This book contributes to discussions on the feminist methodology of representing the Other through multiple identities (Sinhalese, Tamil and British) which at once link and separate the researcher and the participants. Issues around multiple identity form recurring themes both in and away from the field, and these identities had to be continually negotiated. These negotiations formed the base of a reflexivity that linked me to the combatant women through our shared identity (Sri Lankan) and yet separated us through the differences of ethnicity (Sinhalese/Tamil and British identities) and language.

Though the conflict ended in May 2009, the safety of all 15 participants still remains paramount to this research, which is based on the narrative life-histories of a group of both combatant and civic women, covering a wide age range and diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The research sample was confined to a small number in order to delve deeper into the life-histories of the seven combatant women, one ex-combatant woman and seven civic women. I was also aware that becoming involved with me might have a detrimental effect upon the participants, as the LTTE could have viewed them as collaborators, and the state-run security forces might have seen them as holding sensitive information that could be of use to them. Therefore, with a view to differentiate the groups of women without compromising their identity, the interview participants have been given anonymity, with alternative names for the combatant women and alphabetic characters for the civic women.

Whilst acknowledging the above, it must also be recognised that researching sensitive topics is fraught with many difficulties.[2] For the purpose of this book, the definition of 'sensitive' is derived from a personal perspective based on the *potential* that the research has for creating a physically dangerous situation both for the individual participants and/or to myself.[3] It must also be recognised that sensitivity does not necessarily change with political or social changes, as physical dangers may continue to exist long after the conflict has ended.

Anxieties on the Field

Both the State armed forces and the LTTE had checkpoints at various border crossings. The Vanni district checkpoints were controlled by the LTTE, as the whole district was under the jurisdiction of the Tamil Tigers. The army had checkpoints along the roads, at jetties and at airports, sealing the northern part of the island. The checks conducted by the state armed forces varied according to the person travelling into or out of the area. At these checkpoints, women and men were subjected to rigorous body searches.

By travelling with LTTE sympathisers and LTTE combatant women, I discovered that my Sinhalese identity, combined with an inability to speak Tamil and an unwillingness to speak Sinhalese, proved to be a hindrance. It was due to this that I attempted to distance myself from my ethnic hegemonic identity in order to be part of a more neutral and accepted identity (for the Tamil nationals and the LTTE) as a British national, but this carried other dangers, and state armed forces often subjected me to a more thorough process of searching than other women. I was aware that I had presented the army with something of an enigma.[4]

I discovered conducting field research in conflict areas where my hegemonic identity made me the enemy in the eyes of one side of the ongoing conflict and a sympathiser with the other gave rise to emotional and personal safety issues. It is considerably easier to reflect on situations away from field conditions with the safety of a few-thousand miles in between. The reality is that, when situated in the field researchers realise that their extensive theoretical knowledge does not prepare them fully to deal with all eventualities that arise, and there is much they need to deal with extemporaneously on their own. This is reminiscent of Sanders' (1980) metaphor of 'rope burns'. My rope burns included the unawareness of when I was being watched, followed or simply informed upon.

I gained first-hand experience of this on the first day in the field, when I had an occasion to change accommodation. As it was getting dark, the need to find another suitable accommodation in a place where there were no hotels prompted me to overlook certain safety aspects. This was a breach of my own security process, whereby I failed to inform

anyone in Colombo that I was moving from the address given to them prior to my travel. I was in possession of a list of possible homes that were able to accommodate visitors who had been arriving in Jaffna since the ceasefire in late 2002. These visitors were mostly from the Tamil expatriate community or aid workers, with only a nominal number of Sinhalese; none had been a lone Sinhalese woman, albeit British, wandering on their own in what was essentially a troubled time. Within an hour of being at the new accommodation, I was informed that I was to receive a visit from the LTTE. During the LTTE occupation of Jaffna, householders had to report all visitors staying at their accommodation. This was not the practice during my research period, but I was aware that such practices were continuing covertly during this period of fragile ceasefire. After spending a troubled night waiting for the LTTE to arrive, I was informed that they failed to turn up due to an incident that otherwise occupied them in Jaffna town. This incident made me aware of the ever-present subtext of the unknown and the high levels of vulnerability experienced by researchers on the field.

The researcher's vulnerability in conflict zones is a key part of my own positionality in this research. Emotions that are traditionally overlooked in field research become key factors within conflict zones (Kleinman and Copp 1993: 26-48; Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000: 14 and Porter et al. 2005). Whilst there was no sense of danger present on a moment-to-moment basis, there was a continuous sense of being in a very different place, where familiarity and unfamiliarity continuously merged with uncertainty. This changing position was mostly experienced when I travelled away from the relative security of Jaffna to Kilinochchi in Vanni district, which was then held by the LTTE.

The journey often left me feeling physically exposed. This may well be due to the mode of transport: a three-wheeled scooter taxi (an everyday cost-effective way of travelling in Jaffna). The sense of over-exposure was heightened by the journey through isolated jungle areas where there were signposts warning of landmines. On one occasion I noticed a face staring from the undergrowth. As soon as I saw them with their weapons, they blended back into the shadows, making me question the reality of that vision.

Safety and escape routes, therefore, were not an option away from Jaffna and its neighbouring villages. Means of contacting the outside world were also limited, as there was no mobile phone signal and no readily accessible telecommunication service. My limited language skills and local knowledge in a place that was strewn with landmines invariably gave rise to a series of negative thoughts. These thoughts had to be compartmentalised and rationalised in order to retain my focus on the research.

Reflexivity

Researcher Identity, Positionality and Empathy

The researcher's location, positionality and identity have impacted deeply on the research conducted amongst the Tamil women of Jaffna. Throughout this chapter I have identified issues based on my dual identities—Sri Lankan and British. The intricacies of a dual identity based on Britishness placed me outside of the struggle whilst my Sinhalese identity connected me to Tamil women through my hegemonic Sri Lankan identity. This was in line with Anthias' (2002: 512) argument of 'location and positionality [being] more useful concepts for [the] investigating process'. It did concern me that being an outsider with multiple identities but without a Tamil ethnic identity might have made it harder to build trust with the LTTE, which fortunately proved not to be the case.

In 1967, Becker wrote, 'There is no position from which sociological research can be done that is not biased in one way or another' (cited in Hammersley 2000: 61). This highly insightful view became the foundation upon which I thought through my reflexivity. At the preliminary stage of planning I was able to be clinical about how I wished to direct the whole of the research project. However, once I entered the field, relationships and friendships began to develop. Blackwood (1996) states that the word 'friend' is often used by American field researchers to describe their participants. The word 'friend' emerges as a situation-specific word that describes relationships built in the field and the comfort that such relationships offer the researchers who are away from their home

environment. Through these friendships the researchers gain a valuable understanding of the conflict they research. I found that the Gatekeeper and his wife located me as part of their family, and I was accepted as a friend. They took it upon themselves not only to act as hosts, but also as teachers of Tamil culture, and even as interpreters for the participants on some occasions.

The relationship between the Gatekeeper's family and myself as the researcher was built upon a common focus, that of the political struggle of the Tamil people, albeit with differing objectives: mine was focusing on an under-researched subject area, and theirs was finding a voice for the suffering endured. This common focus also brought forth an empathy with the participants, as they became the face of the struggle. I had heeded Kondo's (1986) separation of 'knowledge' and 'understanding', in which knowledge is obtained from a certain perspective, and understanding is based on culture, history and biography. My relationship with the Gatekeeper provided me with much-needed understanding. This type of a relationship is referred to in Kleinman and Copp (1993: 29), in which the authors claim that 'participants are the teachers and we are the students'. The understanding was obtained by my constant questions requiring explanations of situations and behaviour that left little room for ambiguity.

I was always very aware that the enhanced status of residing with the Gatekeeper, who was viewed by the LTTE with a great deal of respect, enabled me to have a level of access and trust based on the Gatekeeper's extended connections.

Blackwood (1996: 55) states, 'The ethnographic experience is more than an identification of positionality or subjectivity; we occupy multiple positions and identities that transform over time, forcing us constantly to reconstruct who we are in relation to people we study.' As noted herein, I discovered that self-reconstruction located me within the Gatekeeper's family circle as a 'trusted' person: trusted to live with the family, trusted to roam free in their home, trusted to see their interactions with other civic citizens and combatants of the LTTE. In a way, this kind of trust is historical in Sri Lanka and forms part of its customs where strangers are welcomed and treated as part of a family.[5] However, I was surprised to

discover that this custom is still practised in Jaffna, especially after many years of bitter civil war.

It is perhaps inevitable that researchers tend to locate themselves within the research based on loyalties and relationships formed in the field,[6] where researchers are often challenged to ascertain where their sympathies lie in a conflict. The explanation given by researchers generally centres on being neutral in the setting as objective observers rather than engaged participants, as the advantage of being neutral obtains in that the researcher stands outside 'local categorical distinctions and boundaries' (Lee 1995: 23; Gilmore 1991; Sluka 1990 cited in Lee 1995). That said, there are occasions when claiming neutrality becomes problematic, as the researcher's intentions are then questioned–especially in areas of high conflict where social relations have little precedence (Gilmore 1991 cited in Lee 1995). Peritore states, 'Assertion of scientific objectivity or neutrality can be perceived as being naïve or as screening a hidden agenda' (Peritore 1990: 360 cited in Lee 1995: 23). With that in mind, I would argue that complete neutrality is perhaps extremely difficult, as it is impossible to be sympathetic in equal degrees to all parties engaged in the conflict.[7]

There is an issue of empathy that a researcher needs to be aware of where there is the possibility of being drawn into a subject area. This may well be due to romanticising about or empathising with those whom the researcher is researching, which means we are unable to represent those we research without some bias. This danger of romanticism/empathy can spill over into one's own research. At times I may be guilty of representing the participants in idealistic and romantic ways, and of reclaiming a notion that suits my own social perspective, especially in representing an Other who is involved in danger and violence. Above all, challenging the gender stereotyping of a patriarchal society may cause some romantic awe of the researched where, as Salazar (1991) claims, the participants are aware of their circumstances and actively take up issues to end their oppression. This notion clearly applies to the combatant women of the LTTE.

Kleinman and Copp (1993: 39) state that, 'researchers usually argue that participants' immoral acts stem from a social or structural problem