

*Neloufer de Mel*

# ***MILITARIZING Sri Lanka***

Popular Culture, Memory and Narrative in the Armed Conflict



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Narrative in the Armed Conflict*

NELOUFER DE MEL



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne

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'Things start to become militarized when their legitimacy depends on their associations with military goals. When something becomes militarized, it appears to rise in value. Militarization is seductive.

But it is really a process of loss.'

Cynthia Enloe, *The Curious Feminist*, p. 145



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# 1

## Constituting Martial Virtue: The Processes of Militarization in Sri Lanka

Discussing Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, a play that contains a forceful depiction of the martial ideal, Jonathan Dollimore makes the point that Coriolanus' virtue in being a brave and successful warrior is valued only as long as it accommodates itself to the goals of the Roman state. Then the hero's good reputation and superiority are seen to stem from his innate, natural virtue. When Coriolanus works against the state, however, 'there emerges a contradiction which reveals both reputation and state to be prior to and in some state constitutive of *virtus*' (Dollimore 1989: 218). In other words, Coriolanus' martial virtue is not an inherent category that he naturally possesses, but one brought into being and constituted by processes that define the socio-political order. It is significant that it is at times of crisis for the state—when Coriolanus attempts to mount a Volscian army against Rome—that his identity as valorous warrior falls apart, that his family intervenes to protect his virtue/good reputation by pleading with him not to fight against Rome, and that the possibility of peace between the two enemy states, brokered by Coriolanus himself, emerges.

In the context of war, what constitutes the process that enables martial virtue, and why is it that it is in moments of crisis that we can best understand its constitutive elements and what shapes alternatives to its vision? This book, written against the background of the Sri Lankan armed conflict fought between the state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

(LTTE) over a separate state of Tamil Eelam<sup>1</sup> focuses on a central aspect of this process: that of militarization. Cynthia Enloe (2000: 3) defines militarization as a step-by-step process by which a person or a thing gradually becomes controlled by the military or comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas. At its most overt, a militarized society is one in which the military has taken ascendancy over civilian institutions, and is predominantly and visibly relied upon to police and regulate civilian movement, solve political problems, and defend or expand boundaries in the name of national security. Commensurate with such a reliance on the military is a decline of democratic institutions and the freedoms and rights of citizens on the one hand, and ascendancy of violence as a part of routine social relations on the other (Chenoy 2002: 4, 32). It is through militarization that the ideology of militarism, which mediates aggressive, hyper-masculinist, militant solutions to conflict, and justifies violence and terror, is ushered into our institutions and ways of thought. Militarization, thus, occupies a structural position in societies at war because it becomes the organizational means through which the ideology of militarism as a principle of coherence is constructed. But the process itself begins before war, for it works to lay the groundwork that justifies and legitimizes war, and lasts long after the last guns have fallen silent on the battlefield because as an ideology, militarism has seeped into our institutions and ways of thought. It inhabits ordinary, daily routines in a manner that naturalizes and masks our own embeddedness within it, which is also why it is so hard to uproot (Enloe 2000: 3). It is, therefore, as Anuradha Chenoy (1998: 101) notes, 'a larger phenomenon than war', and while Chenoy insists on a distinction between militarization as material process and militarism as ideology, she acknowledges that they are mutually supportive and often used interchangeably—a practice she herself follows (Chenoy 2002: 4–5).

*Militarizing Sri Lanka* is about the work of militarism and militarization in relation to the Sri Lankan armed conflict, and in the main covers a period spanning the late 1980s to 2005. There have been many studies on the Sri Lankan war. These have encompassed histories and facets of Sinhala–Tamil ethnic enmity (Abeysekera and Gunasinghe 1987; de Silva 1986), constitutional arrangements and devolution of power in relation to the ethnic question (Marasinghe 2004), aspects of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim nationalisms that underwrite the conflict (Cheran 2001; de Mel 2001b; Jeganathan and Ismail 1995; Manikkalingam 1995; Nesiah 2001; Roberts 1997, 1998; Sivamohan 2001), characteristics of military and political leadership (Narayan



Swamy 1994, 2003; Weerakoon 2004), the war economy (Kelegama 2003; Rajasingham-Senanayake 2003a & b; Sarvananthan 2002), military security (Senaratne 2003), arms proliferation (Muggah 2003), and anthropologies of the ethnic violence (Daniel 1996; Roberts 1996b; Spencer 1990a & b; Tambiah 1992, 1996; Winslow and Woost 2004). Although not exhaustive, this list alone constitutes an impressive corpus of scholarship on the war and its context, aside from the visual art, fiction, drama, poetry and Sinhala language cinema that have figuratively represented their impact.

While the ethnographic, feminist and figurative work on the armed conflict have paid heed to militarization and militarism because of their cognizance of the work of ideology and culture, this book seeks to contribute to this scholarship by offering a full-length study of the pivotal role and processuality of militarization in the conflict, its structures and widespread presence in institutional apparatuses that shape factors both on and off the battlefield. There are many reasons as to why a study of militarization is timely and crucial for Sri Lanka. It encompasses a multidimensional process in which gender, race, nation, ethnicity and capital intersect to form a mutually supportive grid (Chenoy 2002: 3) that needs to be understood if we are to lay bare its structures and work towards a post-militarized future. It has a significant impact on the national economy and its average growth rates, and soaring defence budgets that are amongst its indicators are invariably buttressed at the expense of public health care, education and welfare services. At the same time it gives rise to hidden economies that impact on people in the war zone(s) and rural communities. It lowers the threshold of violence, including domestic and gender-based violence. Its presence is, therefore, felt in society at large—which it transforms in significant ways—not just in high security or military zones. And while there can be many approaches to the study of militarization, including analysis of military structures, arms procurement, defence spending and military strategies, this book takes a cultural studies approach to focus in particular on its relationship to popular culture, the labours of memory, biopower<sup>2</sup> and feminist movements.

Its interest, therefore, is in how militarization works through the popular media, advertising, theatre, film, literature and memorialization to represent war and martial virtue as valour, heroism and masculine pride, and categorize their opposites as cowardice, treason and feminization in the context of war; and how it does not limit martial virtue to combatants, but encourages it in the populace as a whole. Militarization is then seen as a set