

# Selvi: Loss, Dissent, and Hope

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What can I write about a PEN awardee, a prisoner of conscience, a feminist, human rights activist, co-actor, and friend among friends, who disappeared from our lives without a word, without a good bye?

Jaffna in the '80s was bleak, portending a bleaker future to come. There were many we lost in the '80s to the violence, but many more to come. When we lost Rajani [Thiranagama], we did not know we would lose Kugamoorthy, we did not know Sivaramani would go, and then Manoharan, and so many others, and then news of Selvi. We did hope for a long time she would return. International pressure was brought to bear upon the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leadership. Clint Eastwood sent a missive to the LTTE station in Paris. She did not return. As Yvette says in *Mother Courage*, "They do not return, the young men, who went to war." My recollections here are a return to that moment of war and dissent. Then I know we have not lost her – this smiling and steadfast woman, Selvi, whom I briefly knew as a fellow traveller and whose brief history blazes a trail for many others following her in the political turbulence of our times.

## My Recollections

Selvi walks in with a sprig of flowers in my play *Aduppadi Aratti* (An Old Wife's Tale) staged in April 1989 at the Kailasapathy Auditorium. She was the symbol of hope in the play, playing the part of a young woman who asks questions, a critical consciousness embodied by youth, womanhood, and a fighter's spirit. This is a lasting image for me, not only because she acted in the play, but because that image symbolised what Selvi meant to me, for long, even in her loss; candour, honesty, wistfulness, youth, laughter, and hope.

I first saw Selvi at the inauguration of the University Teachers for Human Rights, Jaffna (UTHR-J) in late 1988, maybe September. At the close of the launching ceremony, a petite woman walked up to Rajani, held her hand and spoke to her; her smiling face belying the seriousness of purpose in the few words she uttered. I asked Rajani who she was, and Rajani told me. Later in 1989, when I cast women for my six-women play *Aduppadi Arattai*, Selvi was one of the first actors of my choice. Her look of hope and wistfulness was very much what I wanted in the play. But it was not just her character. Selvi was all that and more. She was also dedicated to theatre, not just studying drama and theatre at the University, but putting into practice what she learnt as an academic discipline.

The play was bold, in my view as that of others, and I knew I had to have a cast that was unafraid and deeply committed. With Rajani's assistance, I handpicked a select cast of women; Vasantha Sritharan, Avvai Vickneswaran, Rajani, Lalitha Brodie, Selvi, and I; women who would withstand pressure and have a sense of commitment to society. Sivaramani was a right and left hand assistant. My premonitions proved right. Before and after the staging of the play, *Aduppadi Arattai* was mired in controversy. The play spoke of sexual violence, in the public sphere, by the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) and the Sri Lanka Army, and within society and sexual relations in the intimate space of the home. The play spoke of this in direct address, in very overt terms, avoiding the gaze of male discursivity; it was women gazing back at society, boldly. It looked upon the particular valorisation of the armed

struggle as a male dominant norm – sometimes touched upon, slightly, implicitly, and at other times openly and in a sustained manner. The Jaffna Women's Study Circle got cold feet and withdrew their sponsorship of the programme and I was without a sponsor; the newly formed UTHR (J) stepped forward.

Selvi stood by me amid the controversy that the play created before and after its staging, about the way rape and marital sexual violence was treated in the play. Selvi was adventurous and bold. She identified with the multiplicities of the meanings in the play, even when women's groups did not want to talk about sexual violence in the way it had to be spoken about; directly, without bowing down to dominant social norms, like loss of virginity, without being shackled by heterosexual norms of conjugal integrity, and with a sensitivity toward cherishing the subjectivity of the woman or the 'victim'. Selvi stood by all this, even if it meant challenging the authority of other women and other feminists. She was clear headed. She gave herself to it as a dedication. In a letter to Prof. V. Arasu of Madras University in April 1989, she wrote: "We are proposing to perform a play on violence against women on April 29<sup>th</sup>. This is an experimental initiative. Will there be opposition to it from state forces and suppression—it is hard to tell. We are trying. I will write about it, if our venture is successful."

A few weeks later when I joined Jaffna University as a Temporary Lecturer she was one of the familiar faces in this unfamiliar place. Though the times were dark, there seemed to be an opening. There were discussions, formal and informal, on the political and cultural landscape. In the Arts Faculty, Sivaramani and Selvi were my friends, as students. On the staff, Vasantha, R. Rajmohan, and a few others banded together. I remember Arunthathi the painter at Rajani's house, painting scenes of life in the war time. Selvi and Sivaramani were a pair, they appeared to me like twins. They were together and apart. They were different personalities, Sivaramani earnest, taking delight in the company of others, with Selvi, creating the stage for laughter, cracking jokes, not at the expense of others, but at society, situations one might find oneself in. Jaffna University was often an unfamiliar place. I did not wear the saree to work even though there was intense pressure on me to do so from all quarters. In the ensuing conversations I heard that Selvi refused to wear the saree during the ragging period, the code of dress stipulated for first year students. On the day the rag period was over and ragging was lifted, Selvi came to campus, flaunting her saree. She would not bow down to any authority uncritically. When I heard the story, I knew we were kindred souls, though

separated by our positions in the University, me a teacher and she a student.

In May 1991, Yarl Aranga Kaloori (College of Drama, Jaffna) in collaboration with the LTTE's cultural unit, staged a play directed by a well-known dramatist in Jaffna at that time, called *Uyirtha Manithar Koothu Nadagam* (roughly translated as: The Koothu Play of the Resurrected), at Chundikuli Girls' College. The nucleus of the play is that the LTTE, even in the midst of defeat, will rise from its ashes like the phoenix. Selvi and Thillai – who was later arrested and disappeared by the LTTE around the same time – were in the audience and according to a viewer who was there at that time, both of them loudly criticised the play. It is also to be noted that Selvi then mentioned a play that she was taking part in at the University. Rajan Hoole in *Palmyrah Fallen* writing about this particular happening, says that Selvi's friends feared for her life after her outraged critique at the ideological thrust of the play. On the day after she was abducted by the LTTE, the play she was acting in, *The Accused*, an adaptation of a Palestinian play, went on the boards at Jaffna University without her. Selvi's part was played by Suresh Canagarajah, the Director, script in hand. This is the recollection of another participant in the play. These were dark times.

Selvi's role in Poorani in the days following the war needs to be mentioned. Poorani was set up in 1988 as a place of shelter for women who had felt the worst abuses of war and social norms. These abuses were economic, social, and/or physical. Pat Ready was one of the key initiators of this move and she lived in Poorani. Rajani, Sitralekha Maunaguru, and Sumangala Kailasapathy were involved in it. The IPKF camp round the corner would visit the home now and then, both in curiosity and in an attempt to find out what this home meant; is it a nefarious place, a place of danger, a hideout for the LTTE. A couple of times, Rajani went to the Commander and told them off, about their unnecessary visits. In the days of the IPKF, Rajani and I took turns to stay in Poorani to support the women there who were alone and in some ways set apart from society, and therefore vulnerable to the prying eyes of those carrying guns. During that time, I befriended Pat, Regi David, and Viji Murughai. Jeyanthi Thalayasingham joined the home later. Selvi, Vasuki Rajasingam, Sivaramani, and others were a part of the committed band of actors when most of us left the North at the onset of the LTTE's take over. At a recent event commemorating Rajani and Selvi, organised by Uma Shanika and Vigy Nalliah from Europe, Vasuki, Jeyanthi, and Viji Murugaiah spoke of Selvi and her days at Poorani. In the days of intense bombing, Selvi, as recalled by Vasuki

and Jeyanthi, was a constant support for the women who were in Poorani and an ally for Jeyanthi who fondly recalls that time, a time friendships were born amidst intense fear. Poorani was a centre of support for 22 villages. When some of the women who had to go to the South on training programmes were refused passes to leave the North, Selvi wrote them letters, asking the LTTE permission to leave on their behalf. The women fought for their passes, refusing to remove themselves from the LTTE centres that issued passes and in the end, tired out by their determination, it issued the passes for 15-odd women. When they went on their journey to the South, the young women who had fought perhaps their first recognisable battle against public authority as the Poorani Collective, sang songs of women's liberation that Vasuki and others had taught them. 'Poorani Illam' or Poorani Women's Home was a thorn on the LTTE's flank. It fought it, wanting them to pass on their funds to them, and keeping a watch on their doings. In the oppressive atmosphere of that time, where no independent home or group could function, Viji, Jeyanthi, Regi, Vasuki, and others left. Selvi too hoped to leave, but something held her back.

Our house on Navalar Road had been raided many times by armed groups, first by the Sri Lankan army, then the IPKF, and then later by LTTE cadres. It was a frightening time. When the LTTE raided our house, with only our ageing parents living there at the time, we did not quite understand what to make of it. It was an act of intimidation aimed at UTHR personnel in my view, aimed at bringing them into submission. It was also said that the LTTE was trying to find out who was passing information onto the outside world. Selvi, Manoharan (who was also arrested and disappeared by the LTTE), and others were prime targets. They belonged to or were associated with independent and alternative groups. They were seen as Rajani's associates. Selvi in particular was associated with an independent and powerful alliance. The LTTE could not brook any dissent or any alternative to their ruthless politics. Selvi was also involved in a play that raised many questions about authority, just before her abduction. The LTTE coveted control of the university space. Many in the University feared it, others welcomed it, and a few others stood up to it. Selvi was one of those few.

Selvi's poetry is an integral part of her identity. Tamil literature of that time in its ethos was nationalist. In the critical tradition that women's poetry inaugurated, particularly with the publication of *Sollatha Seythigal* (Untold Messages), edited by Sitralekha for the Women's Study Circle in 1986, we see poets like Avvai, Sivaramani, Selvi, and of course Sitralekha emerging as critical dissenting voices. I wish to single out Sivaramani

and Selvi here, whose poems are marked by a distinctive dissonant voice<sup>1</sup>. The dissonance has to do with both the political and the social order. The poem *Enakkulle* (translated as 'Within Me') speaks to that. She has a sharp critical eye that is in dissent and dissonance with the idiom of the dominant mode, and she does not balk at voicing it. The poem begins with the lines "I live in days that have no meaning" and continues:

In the lecture room,  
the lies that unfold,  
hang on the wings of the fan above,  
in their rotation.  
I look up at the ceiling, in frequent fear  
They may fall upon me.  
Power cuts are frequent,  
they too may bring some good  
The soft skin on the drums of the ear,  
they do need a rest.

These lines above remind me of the first few lines in a poem by Sivaramani, titled *Putthisalithanamaanaal Kadaisi Manithanum . . .*

Finally,  
our last thinking human is dying, slowly.  
The door is closed to all  
dissent.  
You leave your children the  
legacy of darkness.

The answers to all questions  
are already in print.  
Who has scored the highest mark?  
The nation's intelligents await  
The verdict  
In expectation,  
At the street corner,  
Junction by junction.  
Who takes the prize,  
Crowned as the victor?

Selvi's poems are remarkable for their references to nature. In recent Tamil poetry, I find nature, images of nature as metaphors of abstract notions, or as what might be seen as pathetic fallacy. Selvi's poems do carry that sense; but interestingly, in a few of the poems, I find nature as a mediating force, the poet herself embodying nature in a social landscape where it mediates her relationship with the social and political forces at hand. This is most starkly evident in the personal poem that carries this sense of nature as a social force that mediates and shapes her sense of self; as a sustaining external and internal force of revolution and liberation. This moving and intensely personal poem, *Vidaipettra Nanbanukku* that starts with a parting of her friend, and her awaiting

his return, uses it as a point of departure to pave a complicated and circuitous path toward liberation.

In the steadfastness of her commitment, she writes boldly, even as she lived with fortitude, caring for the people around her with a strong sense of commitment, and at the same time, making a plea for herself, her own care, herself as a part of a vaster human entity.

In our desire and effort to establish a life of worth  
for humanity  
we encounter so many impediments!  
Cruel eyes oversee our paths,  
and a bitterness bruises our hearts, in a kindling.  
The life of a cadaver, lived in a senseless forgetting  
of human feeling,  
is not the life I want,  
living in this world.

I leave to the last a poem that can only be prescient, that hints at a subjectivity, a mood, that is political beyond mere critique aimed at an external force. She speaks of her body and soul/mind, as a woman, as a poet, and as a political being caught in the shackles of bondage of a mythology of the past and the present in the poem *Ramane Ravananai* which I have translated as 'Asokavanams', the garden in which Sita was kept imprisoned during her captivity in Lanka. The poem inverts the familiar hero/villain topology; Raman, the hero of the epic *Ramayana* is the sneaky deceiver and captor. Yet, it is not a simple inversion, but a deeply felt poem in which the poet identifies her innermost feelings, subjectivity, with those of Sita, the heroine, who does not have a fairy tale ending. It is a personal and political poem that centres the woman as a "within me". A few lines from the poem:

Sneakily, hiding out at the back of the throne,  
the high seat of his rule,  
Raman made up his face,  
with the mask of Ravanan.  
I caught sight of it.  
My heart stood still for a moment,  
in shock, transfixed.

The sly hypocritical morality of Rama(n) perched on "the high seat of rule" inverts so much and much more than what meets the eye. We need to be shocked too. And in opposition stands the just claim of the woman, which finds a voice. In the milieu that I survived at Jaffna University in that brief 10 months or so in 1989, during which time there were a number of deaths of students, once in a shootout by the IPKF during a demonstration, and of course Rajani's death, it was the company of Sivaramani, Vasantha, Rajmohan, A. J. Canagaratna, and Selvi that kept me going. Sivaramani

writes of this ethos in her poem about drinking tea in the canteen on campus, "Place: Jaffna University Canteen/Time: 4. 30 pm". It describes a scene of love, joy, sadness, and fear set within the familiar scene of drinking tea. The following lines (in translation) bring to mind the times when I hung out with them.

In these scar filled days,  
unspecial,  
we do try,  
to make time for moments of happiness.  
In a silence, without words for our thoughts  
a friend taps out a beat,  
his fingers moving,  
in the rhythm of a song, forgotten.  
The flies feast on tea-spills on the table,  
And then are trapped in the grooves on the table's  
top.  
She my friend, laughs to herself, her shoulders  
turning red.  
Who cracked the joke? I don't know.

I like to think that I was there among them at the canteen, the scene is familiar. Is it Selvi who cracks the joke? I don't know. While in captivity in the LTTE's detention cell, Selvi sends a missive through another inmate, to her friends. In that letter she writes "I have hope that one day I will be with you all, I will be with Ashok, Vasuki, (and others)." At this moment, I recall the forever young woman, Selvi in *Aduppadi Arattai*, bearing the bouquet of flowers as she enters the stage. She has the last words in the play too.

We have told our story,  
It is your responsibility now!

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*This is adapted from the paper "Reflections on Selvi" delivered at the Rajani Thiraganama Memorial Lecture, held on October 2, 2021.*

**Image:** <https://twitter.com/t30m2status/1013097223251357696>

## Notes

1 All translations of Selvi's poems are based on the source poems in Tamil published in *Selvi Sivaramani Kavithaigal, Thamarai Chelvi Pathipakam* (1996). All translations of Sivaramani's poems are based on the source poems in Tamil published in *Sivaramani Kavithaigal* (1993), edited by Sitraleka Maunaguru, Batticaloa: Women's Study Circle.