

electoral process, the party system and legislative politics. A still larger issue is involved in this decaying trajectory of modern Sri Lankan politics; the submergence of democratic political culture by authoritarian practices and values. The sudden spread of political sorcery obviously indicates the degree to which authoritarianism of all forms—state, counter-state and so on—has debilitated secularist foundations of political conduct.

While the context of authoritarianism helps us to locate the decay of democratic political culture, it does and should not exonerate the politicians who wilfully resort to obscurantist practices for political mobilization. Understandably, anti-UNP mass mobilization is an immediate item in the Opposition's agenda. Yet, because of its collective inability to present a principled and sustained critique of the Premadasa regime and to develop a clear and programmatic alternative, the entire energy of the opposition is

wasted on denouncing the regime and its individuals on the basis of personalized animosity. Even the attempt to impeach Premadasa and thereby oust him from office, despite much talk of democracy, smacked of individualized hatred towards a man whose counter-image was projected to be the supreme epitome of evil.

Sorcery in a ritualistic sense is always directed at individuals and it is no accident that it is being deployed by politicians either for self-protection or for the destruction of the adversarial individual. This constitutes a symptom of excessive personalization of politics that has occurred in Sri Lanka during the past few years. What is fundamentally wrong about such personalist reductionism in politics is that it leaves counter-democratic structures and processes unidentified and uncritiqued.

Jayadeva Uyangoda

## BOYS WILL BE BOYS:

### GENDER AND NATIONAL AGENCY IN FANON AND THE LTTE<sup>1</sup>

Qadri Ismail

If...[women are critical of patriarchal practices and attitudes] a gendered tension will develop within the national community. This could produce a radically new definition of 'the nation.'

Cynthia Enloe

In the beginning they were called 'the boys.' Mostly by upper class and upper caste Tamils, in all parts of north eastern Sri Lanka. Our boys, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam; our children, our protectors. An affectionate, but paternalistic term; an uncannily accurate one. From the beginning, the Tigers were male in constitution and gendered in ideology. In time they came to symbolize Tamil resistance, these boys coolly brandishing their AK-47's. And they came to dominate the resistance, too, having greater popular support and superior organization, but crucially by murdering many of their opponents.

A full length study of the rise of the LTTE, and its brand of 'fundamentalist' Tamil nationalism, has yet to be written; such a work would need to compare it to similar nationalisms currently rampant in post-colonial South Asia; it would also have to be situated within the logic of transnational capitalism, of uneven development or, to use Gayatri Spivak's more apt phrase, uneven decolonization. This paper, however, has a limited objective: in it, a relationship is posited between gender, (revolutionary/militaristic) violence and nationalism in the LTTE by way

of a reading of Frantz Fanon. Why Fanon? Because to this day a better understanding of third world nationalism, of its necessity and its dangers, does not exist; not in the work, in other respects important, of the more classically Marxist Amilcar Cabral and Che Guevara, and certainly not in texts like Benedict Anderson's currently cool *Imagined Communities* which discuss third world nationalisms without once mentioning colonialism (Or the work of Fanon).<sup>2</sup> To say this is not to dismiss Fanon as a mere nationalist, or to deny the enabling aspects of his work: he was a deeply committed internationalist, a Martinican fighting in Algeria; he warned of the pitfalls of excessive nationalism; and he was a (dissident) Marxist, aware among other things of how metropolitan capital could destroy nationalist/socialist experiments in the periphery. Nevertheless, he speaks most effectively, most eloquently, when articulating the case for (anti-colonial) nationalism. Therefore, while it is not my intention to erase or even downplay important differences between his account of national liberation and the LTTE's representation of the Tamil struggle, a strong basis exists for comparing the two — in their narratives of nationalism: both hold that the nationalist project can only be fulfilled through (revolutionary) violence; and both forge a nationalist subject/agent that is singularly male. Consequently, the possibilities for women, for feminist projects within a nationalism



thus constructed are tiny. Which is why a gendered critique of Fanon is imperative today; he cannot be 'excused,' only understood in the context of his patriarchal times, because his work is very much a live influence — not just in the peaceful groves of (post-colonial Western) academe, but also in some killing fields of the third world. And not in the sense that his texts provide some straightforward blueprint for revolt, but because they influence and illuminate the ideologies behind the revolts.

Fanon's most mature and powerful arguments for (anti-colonial) nationalism are made, of course, in *The Wretched of the Earth*. What he says of those who fought colonialism is true of post-colonial nationalists, too. As Fanon petitions, the victims of 'national oppression' suffer physically, materially and psychologically. Denied "bread and the land," as well as their humanity, nationalists revolt in order to reclaim and proclaim it, as well as to regain control over their lives and livelihood. But "bread and the land," meaning that the nationalist project is at the same time concerned with the (colonized) people's control over their material resources, is of secondary importance to Fanon; for whom nationalism is primarily about the colonized native's imperative to assert a national identity when faced with the epistemic violence wreaked by colonialism which, among other things, denies the colonized such an identity. But.

But the identity being asserted, or more exactly the colonized subject/agent Fanon constructs, is gendered: both in his earlier work, 'The Algerian Family,' where the nationalist subject is shown to emerge only when the native son (boy!) rebels successfully against his father;<sup>3</sup> and in *Wretched*, where it is even clearer that national agency is an exclusively male prerogative:

...every time Western values are mentioned they produce in the native a sort of stiffening or muscular lock-jaw...[I]t so happens that when the native hears a speech about Western culture he pulls out a knife — or at least he makes sure it is within reach.<sup>4</sup>

The native here is male, and the native with agency is violent. Arguing that since colonialism establishes itself by force, it can only be defeated by the same means, Fanon doesn't allow for any other form of resistance, or another way of asserting a national identity. (The unavoidable necessity for force isn't a self-evident thesis; 'Gandhian resistance,' let us not forget, was an instance of *successful* 'non-violent' decolonization.) This is apparent throughout the chapter, 'Concerning Violence,' where the national subject/agent is constructed:

The look that the native turns on the settlers' town... expresses his dreams of possession — all manner of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep in the settler's bed, with his wife if possible. (WE:30)

The immobility to which the native is condemned can only be called into question if the native decides to put an end to the history of colonization...and to bring into existence the history of the nation — the history of decolonization...This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and of aggression (WE:40).

At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect (WE:74).

These passages are so obviously gendered they require almost no comment; replace he with she, his with her, in the above sentences and they sound ridiculous; they cannot be. I will fuck you, they say; a promise unlikely to come from the colonized woman to the colonizer (or his wife).

Thus, for Fanon, decolonization is quite literally "the replacing of a certain 'species' of men by another 'species' of men." (WE:27). Woman is denied voice throughout this narrative. Even the psychiatric cases Fanon talks about in *Wretched*, as Robin Morgan has noted, are predominantly male.<sup>5</sup> Of the fourteen he discusses, only three are women (one of whom is French). The two native women that Fanon examines have mental disorders caused by menstruation and childbirth —

not colonialism, the producer of the disorders in native men. Indeed, reading *The Wretched of the Earth*, it is difficult not to get the impression that colonialism made victims of men only.

When the native hears a speech about Western culture he pulls out a knife. In that single sentence, where he asserts — as he does throughout 'Concerning Violence' — that the (gendered) nationalist project can only realize itself violently, Fanon links nationalism, patriarchy and (revolutionary) violence. Cut now to an anecdote about LTTE supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran, told by a dissident Tiger who sensed, as early as 1983, a militaristic streak developing in the group. One way to begin attempting a change, she thought, was by getting Prabhakaran, who loved his macho image, to pose for a photograph reading a book, any book. She pleaded with the man for six months. Finally, he relented. When the photographer arrived, one of Prabhakaran's hands did hold a book. The other clutched a kalashnikov.<sup>6</sup> The point here is not that violence is mascu-

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line and the arts or culture, feminine; but that Prabakaran associated words (to him the opposite of deeds) with weakness:

My natural inclination makes me lay less emphasis on words. In serious politics, it won't do to concentrate on talking; you must grow through action and then talk... Words must be matched and indeed preceded by content.<sup>7</sup>

Action, here, equals violence; books, words, theory (lacking content!) are of little importance to the Tamil nationalist rebel, who can only become himself with gun.

Prabakaran once told *Newsweek* that he watched and was inspired by Clint Eastwood movies. There, too, only males have agency; there, justice equals a life for a life; nothing changes at the end of the films, no social transformation is effected. In the course of *The Hindu* interview, Prabakaran spoke of revenge, of his desire to counter-attack the Sinhalese: "If such innocent [Tamil] lives could be destroyed [by the Sinhalese in state-sponsored 'riots'], why could we not strike back?" The strike-back, the counter-attack, the fight; only thus can the native, armed now not with knife but automatic rifle, cleanse himself and be free. It is in a sense crass to compare Frantz Fanon and Velupillai Prabakaran; one was a committed humanist, the other at best a committed fascist. But what they have in common is striking (which makes Fanon a very problematic figure in these post-colonial times): for both, the native with agency is male and violent. If the flaw is tragic in the case of Fanon, then it almost becomes farce with Prabakaran, who made every significant LTTE decision:

I was brought up in an environment of strict discipline from childhood. I was not permitted to mingle freely with outsiders. I used to feel shy of girls. Great store was laid by personal rectitude and discipline. My father set an example through his own personal conduct. He would not even chew betel leaves. I modelled my conduct on his.

Prabakaran's father didn't chew even betel leaves, so neither would the LTTE, who were also prohibited by the leader from smoking and drinking. Prabakaran felt shy with women; so the boys were banned from having girlfriends. (Until, that is, he himself 'fell in love,' married and fathered children.) And for all one hears of her, Prabakaran may never have had a mother. Only the father, the male, is allowed voice in this narrative. In fact, LTTE propaganda hardly pays even lip service to the women's question.

Despite all this, as he lost many (male) cadre in the course of battles, Prabakaran allowed women into LTTE ranks. Rajani Thiranagama had this to say about the 'Birds of Freedom,' as they were called:

One cannot but be inspired when one sees the women of the LTTE, two by two, in the night, with their AK's slung over their shoulder, patrolling the entrances to Jaffna... One could see the nationalist fervor and the romantic vision of women in arms defending the nation. This becomes a great draw for other women... Our social set up, its restrictions on creative expressions for women and the evils of the dowry system are some of the social factors that led to their initial recruitment. Moreover, the political climate created by the struggle in the past decade, and the increasing loss of men to state terrorism and the world at large as refugees and emigrants, are some of the contributing factors necessitating women's recruitment.<sup>8</sup>

The women may have been romanticized in propaganda, but their military duties were limited to keeping guard; Prabakaran continued to entrust the 'responsible' jobs, the serious business of fighting, to the boys. (In so doing, of course, the LTTE wasn't inventing gender discrimination, but reproducing prevailing patriarchal social structures in Tamil society.)

In the middle of 1991, a BBC television crew was granted rare access to LTTE training camps for men and women. Speaking on behalf of the Tamil women cadre was Adele Balasingham (the Australian-born wife of chief Tiger spokesperson, Anton Balasingham). She claimed that the LTTE didn't treat women cadre any different from the men: "women are involved in all aspects of the movement. In the military section, they participate in all military operations, side by side with male cadres." In the program itself, both men and women were shown taking notes as Anton Balasingham lectured new recruits on the history of the Tamil struggle; however, it was a much smaller, exclusively male group, who got the military lesson (on planning an ambush). A mock attack against a Sri Lankan/Sinhala army post was also staged by the LTTE for the cameras; those shown fighting — need I say it — were men alone. Later in the program, the crew visited a Tiger jungle hideout: the men there were busy dodging enemy (helicopter) fire, preparing an ambush, going on patrol; only towards the end of this sequence did some women cadre appear — carrying sacks of provisions over their shoulders.

Thus women are admitted only as adjuncts to the actual fighters, men, in this narrative. Fanon, too, envisaged a similar role for female cadre in resistance movements:

Until 1955, the combat [in Algeria] was waged exclusively by the men. The revolutionary characteristics of this combat, the necessity for absolute secrecy, obliged the militant to keep his woman in absolute secrecy... The decision to involve women as active elements of the Algerian Revolution was not reached lightly... But involving, the women was not solely a response to the



desire to mobilize the entire nation. The women's entry into the war had to be harmonized with respect for the revolutionary nature of the war. In other words, the women had to show as much spirit of sacrifice as the men. (DC:49).

In other words, until the loss of enough male cadre made it absolutely necessary to use woman, she was assumed (by the male leadership, of course) to be incapable of secrecy, commitment, courage and other 'manly' virtues; and therefore wasn't mobilized. Even when she was, however, she was kept out of combat — limited in that respect to hiding weapons inside her clothes. Fanon ends his comments on the role of the fighting woman by virtually dismissing female cadre as the male fighter's "woman-arsenal." (DC:58)<sup>9</sup>

If a Frantz Fanon, or a Che Guevara, holds (or held) that women must be adjuncts to men in the struggle, why shouldn't a Velupillai Prabhakaran? So it shouldn't surprise that, when asked by Thirunagama, women in the LTTE "confessed to much confusion within the movement regarding the women's question. But they ultimately ended the argument with an expression of faith in their leader's ability to solve all problems." (328) Leading her to conclude,

If in a society like this, the dominant ideology under which the struggle is organized is itself an even more narrow, revivalistic and romantic one, well sprinkled with images of male heroes and male valor, and if nationalism is a type of aggressive patriotism, then a concept of women's liberation would be working against the inner core of such a struggle. (328)

That is to say, if women had raised women's issues with the Tamil nationalist movement, they would have met with the perennial reply: 'not now, later.' Why? Fanon himself writes, "Sometimes people wonder that the native rather than give his wife a dress, buys instead a transistor radio." (WE:64). In other words, women can wait till after the revolution, not for their rights — the man will still do the buying, will retain the agency — but (even) for the satisfaction of material needs. After all this, however, after writing woman out of his narrative, Fanon explicitly calls for woman's equality:

We must...raise the level of the national consciousness, and...de-tribalize and unite the nation. In an under-developed country every effort is made to mobilize men and women as quickly as possible; it must guard against the danger of perpetuating the feudal tradition which holds sacred the superiority of the masculine element over the feminine. Women will have exactly the same place as men, not in the clauses of the constitution but in the life of every day: in the factory, at school and in the parliament. (WE:162).

Who "we" refers to in this passage is unclear — probably, and problematically, the male leadership of the struggle;

and situating patriarchy only in feudalism, unconvincing. But at this stage in the narrative, after woman has been consistently denied agency, that exhortation, though honorable, is unpersuasive. *For the question is: how can women hope for equality after the victory if the struggle itself, if the agency identified, if the nationalist project, is conceived and defined, if not executed, in male terms?* Mere assertion about women's rights cannot achieve them. To quote Spivak from another context, we see in these lines an "anxiety to write women into the narrative of history... [But] we have to record a failure,"<sup>10</sup> since the nationalist subject/agent has already been constructed as exclusively male. A failure, one might add, peculiar to just about all nationalisms.<sup>11</sup> By which statement I do not seek to delegitimize nationalism; rather, to problematize its gendered construction. In many instances, including the Sri Lankan Tamil, actually existing nationalism is gendered and dangerous; but also, I would argue, necessary. Arguably necessary due to the actions of the Sinhala state which restricted Tamil access to state employment, land/irrigation, university admissions etc., quite apart from engineering attacks on Tamil life and property. Arguably necessary, also, because the Sinhala left often acquiesced in anti-Tamil state actions, thus discrediting leftist alternatives in Tamil eyes.<sup>12</sup> (Though *not* necessary in the virulently communal form Tamil nationalism has taken with the Tigers, who have consistently repressed, often brutally murdered, Sinhala settlers in, and Muslim 'natives' of, northeastern Sri Lanka.) Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka, then, was arguably necessary — but not in a communal form **and not as a male-dominated project.**

For these reasons, because nationalism is sometimes necessary and always gendered, Cynthia Enloe finds "living as a nationalist feminist... [to be] one of the most difficult political projects in today's world." (48) A point also made by the Women's Study Circle of Jaffna:

When we became aware of our need to struggle as women, it also became inevitable and necessary to link our struggle with the Tamil national struggle. Some of us have been actively involved in the national movement through both armed and political organizations. Our participation in the struggle opened new horizons to us. It also placed many obstacles on the path of our struggle as women.<sup>13</sup>

Such is the situation of Tamil women in Sri Lanka — oppressed not just by the Sinhala state and patriarchal Tamil society, but also by the LTTE, who have a consistent record of not tolerating any dissent (remember, they murdered Thirunagama) — that they never publicly raised questions concerning women as women. The only women's group that agitated openly in northeastern Sri Lanka during the eighties was the Mothers' Front. Drawing its inspiration from the Plaza del Mayo mothers, they peti-



tioned the Sri Lankan authorities for information about their (often "disappeared") sons. As long as they organized as mothers, as long as they demonstrated against the Sinhala state, they were allowed to protest. However, when these women showed signs of turning their group into a peace movement, as they successfully mobilized Tamil women of all classes all over northeastern Sri Lanka, they were co-opted and/or silenced by the LTTE. As Thiranagama put it, "Sadly the Jaffna Mothers' Front's inarticulate acceptance of women's sufferings at the hands of...the LTTE...leaves them in a wasteland, only to be used as a tool..." (325) By then, Tamil mothers had even been persuaded to feel proud to 'sacrifice' their children (sons, mainly) 'for the nation.' For instance, the unnamed mother of the first Tiger to kill himself in a suicide operation told the BBC: "My son's death doesn't affect me at all."

Thiranagama believed that involvement in the nationalist resistance has been somewhat empowering for Tamil women. The same argument was made by Chitra Maunaguru, that having tasted a certain degree of autonomy through their involvement over the years with the Tigers, Tamil women cannot be expected to accept patriarchal norms if and when the Tamil ethnic conflict is settled.<sup>14</sup> But this has not been the experience of women in other revolutionary situations. So I choose to end this piece with another image from the BBC program: the funeral rites of three women cadre who 'fell in action.' It was a moving moment, tragic not just because death is always sad. After the revolutionary speech-making, gun-salute and military band, the women were buried. In graves dug by the boys.

## Notes

1. My thanks to Joya Ganguly, Kumari Jayawardena, Colleen Lye, Gayatri Spivak and specially Aamir Mufti for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.
2. For an excellent critique of Anderson, see Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Zed: London, 1986) pp 19-22.
3. *A Dying Colonialism* (Grove: New York, 1965) pp 102-105.
4. *The Wretched of the Earth* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1967) p 33. Further page references have been incorporated into the text.
5. *The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism* (Norton: New York, 1989, p 161).
6. Personal communication.
7. Interview by Narasiman Ram, *The Hindu*, 5th and 6th September, 1986. The following Prabakaran quotes come from there.
8. 'No More Tears, Sister: The Experiences of Women', Thiranagama et. al., *The Broken Palmyrah: The Tamil Crisis in Sri Lanka - An Inside Account* (SLSI: Claremont, CA, 1990) p 325. Thiranagama was a unique Tamil woman - she stood up over the years, to the Sinhala state, the Indian army and the Tigers; for displaying such principled courage, and also for contributing to this book, she was killed by the Tigers in 1989.
9. It must be added here that for a Velupillai Prabakaran, Guevara, the archetypal guerilla, would be the greater guru; in fact Prabakaran often chooses to be photographed with a portrait of Che behind him. Guevara himself, in *Guerilla Warfare*, devotes all of two pages to the 'Role of the Woman': "Naturally, the combatant women are a minority.....[because they] do not possess indispensable physical characteristics...." So, Guevara would rather use them in their "habitual tasks of peacetime," at which they are so much better than men; he mentions cooking, teaching, sewing and nursing. (*Guerilla Warfare*, Monthly Review: New York, 1969 pp 86-88). Looked at from a different perspective the comments of Fanon and Guevara actually reveal the indispensability of women to the success of a resistance movement, even while they are denied agency within it. A similar situation could be assumed with respect to the LTTE, that Tamil women who didn't actually join it played a role essential to its efficacy; but the material on this subject is scant.
10. 'Reading *The Satanic Verses*,' Third Text, 11, Summer 1990, p 46.
11. Ann McClintock, for instance, calls all nationalisms gendered, 'No Longer in a Future Heaven: Women and Nationalism in South Africa.' (*Transition*, No 51, 1991, pp 104-123.) And Cynthia Enloe argues that "nationalism typically has sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope." *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1989) p 44. For a more theoretical account of the relationship between nationalism and gender, see Flora Anthias and Nira Yuval Davis, 'Introduction,' *Woman-Nation-State* (Macmillan: London, 1989).
12. For an excellent and brief account of this, see A. Sivanandan's 'Sri Lanka: Racism and the Politics of Underdevelopment,' *Race and Class*, Vol 25 # 1, Summer 1984, pp 1-38.
13. 'A letter from the Women's Study Circle of Jaffna,' *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1989 p VII.
14. Personal communication.