
FEMINISM, WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND *CAT'S EYE*

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It may be a little late in the day to respond to a newspaper writing that appeared some two months ago. I speak of the *Cat's Eye* column in *The Island* of the 12th of December, 2001, which has been reprinted in the December issue of *Pravada*. But given that the Peace Talks between the government and the LTTE hold our concerted attention these days and that makes it all the more important to develop a gender based approach to the issues of democracy, devolution of power and the idea of Peace itself, I feel it is important to give voice to my thoughts on the issue of feminist activism, democracy, the Peace Talks and *Cat's Eye*.

One line caught my eye: "the north remains a male bastion." Let me begin from the beginning. The write up was about the elections, the UNP's Women's Manifesto, the PA's indifference to women's issues and the election of women representatives to the parliament. I had read the UNP's Women's Manifesto earlier in the newspapers and had also watched the UNP launch the Manifesto on television. As much as I was happy with the whole effort that the UNP was making toward women and women's affairs, I was curiously disturbed by thoughts that did not quite gel or crystallize into theoretical constructs until I saw the *Cat's Eye* piece. The slight stirrings within, a few amorphous quantum strikes, took better shape.

My entry point was of course the North. The "Northern Province has remained a male bastion," says *Cat's Eye*. "What is the Northern Province?" I began to wonder. "Oh come on forget it. This is a newspaper column and surely you don't expect it to be theoretically nuanced," I thought to myself. My initial response was to read on and pass it up, as I did with the UNP Manifesto, welcoming and dismissing it in the same breath as a kind of women's developmental policy. But again: *Cat's Eye* is of a different order though. It is deeply committed to gender not in the middle-class reformist fashion of the UNP Manifesto but by way of exploring issues of gendered ideologies and politics. And I could not dismiss it as easily or erase it from my immediate consciousness.

What does the north mean to us, me today? As a Tamil woman, feminist, I will ask all of those who call themselves feminists to ponder what the north means to feminist politics. To many in Sri Lanka, the north represents a no-no place; the edge of civilization, war, struggling masses of people, uncleared areas, displaced in Vavuniya, in Puttalam, Anuradhapura, the LTTE, the EPDP, the pass system. It is a place that has not seen the light of day. Of course, *Cat's Eye* has not mentioned any of these things. But that is my worry. *Cat's Eye* in its liberal agenda of "human equality" has quite forgotten to see that the north is a metonymy of what is at

the centre of this country's pressing issues today—the ethnic conflict—and that an answer to the ethnic conflict is crucial to an understanding of women's issues as well.

In the south, the ethnic conflict has been reduced to ideas revolving around war by a large number of people, NGOs and others. In my work through NIPU (National Integration Programme Unit) in the past year or so, I have found that the larger masses of southern Sinhala people rarely display a desire to go beyond considerations of the ravages of war, the insecurities it has created, the personal loss resulting from it. Many of the groups I have had dialogue with in the past have shown little inclination to resolving the ethnic conflict politically. "Stop the War" seems to have been the slogan so far. Why, how and to what end has little occupied the activist mind. About a year ago, in an article of mine on *Saroja*—the film—which appeared in the *Sunday Observer*, I noted that activism should go beyond mere sloganizing; demonstrating at Lipton's Circus; and beyond petitions against war. The concerted effort toward lasting peace carried out by women's groups, activists and theorists should engage in far-reaching issues of democracy for women in conflict-ridden areas.

The north remains a Male Bastion says *Cat's Eye*. What is male here? I do not know too much about how *Cat's Eye* understands the "male." But I see the gendering of the north in slightly different terms and that has to do with militarism: The north is beset with many genders, I am certain. But if we are to reduce them to just two as we do in other places, I see the north as being gendered into the armed and the non-armed. In the north, there is a war going on. It is also crucially underlined by the protracted ethnic conflict. The conflict has been taken over by those who are armed: the Sri Lankan military, the LTTE, the EPDP and other militant and militarist groups. I will look upon that as the maleness of the militarist option. The female gender here would be that of the non-armed, people who have been defined negatively, the marginal, the powerless: those who have to run around for "passes" in Vanni; for the green or the red card in the uncleared areas. I am of course by no means suggesting that all unarmed women and men are of the same gender. What I do suggest is that this particular opposition, armed and unarmed, may be effectively used to deconstruct liberal feminist assumptions, which set up an unproblematic binary opposition between men and women, lumping all women together. The feminist question should intervene in the political debate surrounding the nation; women's activism has to grapple with the question of militarism and the untold suffering it is causing women in the north. The flippancy lacing the remark "male bastion" is a highly reductive reading of the north. Even a superficial reading of the column will bring up questions about what lies behind the

masculine political projections of the north. Women. And where are they? We whisper then the names of Rajani Thiranagama, Selvi, Sivaramani, Sarojini Yogeshwaran, Mallika Rasaratnam. We also gape in fascinated horror at the spectacle of suicide bombers: Dhanu, Yasodara and so many others. What has happened to Jeya by the way? Nobody seems to remember her even, a mere 11 years after her much talked about appearance on TV during the Premadasa-LTTE talks. This is important, particularly since the *Cat's Eye* column keeps the question of woman and democracy apart; the UNP Manifesto in general keeps women of the north and democracy apart.

Let us look at that remark differently. The remark may not be flippant; it may be deeply ironic and anxious. Anxious about what is going on in the north; anxious about the rampant militarization of the zone. But this anxiety does not quite transpire in the column's euphoric praise of the UNP's Women's Manifesto. It has not looked at the women's question through the lens of nation, the Tamil nation, the Muslim peoples, the Sri Lankan nation and women. Can the manifesto on women operate in isolation of the manifesto on the ethnic conflict? And here we find the UNP deeply wanting, the peace talks notwithstanding. And here I wish to draw attention to what Sumanasiri Liyanage has been consistently pointing out in his articles. A political solution cannot be confused with the transitional arrangements that the UNP has promised to bring about. A political solution has to be more comprehensive, far reaching and ideologically acceptable. It has to tackle questions of nationality as well as that of democracy; of economic development as well as that of decentralization.

Let me explain. Women are suffering all over, because of the economic downslide, the daily violence of their lives, inside and outside the home, the violence in the public sphere. Whether the economy will uplift itself in the years to come is a question. But what about political solutions to the problems? And here lies the rub. This is where I would like to take *Cat's Eye* to task the most. *Cat's Eye* heaps accolades on the incoming UNP government's Manifesto for its position on women. So far so good. But we must remember that the UNP is talking about nation, national boundaries and the agency of women within that paradigm. We must hold the two, the Women's Manifesto and the programme for devolution together to arrive at a complex understanding of what may await us as women. Once we probe the particular structural arrangement that the UNP is willing to consider then the picture is more disturbing. Let us look more carefully at what the UNP promises for the nation as a structure. A few days before the elections, I heard the current Prime Minister utter the ignoble words—"unitary state"—meaning that any solution to the current ethnic conflict will be implemented within the unitary structure. Now, if that was only a report or a telecaster reinterpreting the Prime Minister's

words I would have thought that the reporter was confusing "united" with "unitary." But this was from the Prime Minister's mouth itself. I also remember how the UNP was unhappy with the deletion of the word "unitary" at the height of the talks around the draft constitution presented to the Parliament in mid-2000. What the UNP brings to the table of political negotiation vis-à-vis the ethnic conflict does not spell out the specifics for any constitutional change. Of course, constitutional change must occur: I don't think the UNP has any illusions about it. But publicly the UNP is silent or at best vague on the issue.

Let me then get to the issue of the woman. What has this to do with the woman question? This is where I will ask fellow women activists to begin to approach the woman question via the "north" and conversely to approach the northern question from the "woman's" perspective. Once we have this intersection of different and sometimes competing trajectories as the guiding tool and basis of analysis, *Cat's Eye* can then begin to look at not only the UNP's "Women's Manifesto," but the politics of woman itself in different ways. If we approach the question of woman from the state of unitariness, which seems to be taken for granted by the scheme of things promoted by the UNP, we will then need to figure out how the famous or infamous Dingiri Menike is going to go to town or to Tokyo within the unitary political structure. This is the million dollar question facing us feminist activists today. Even if one can overlook the ridiculous condescension embedded in the overtures made to Dingiri Menike by the Prime Minister in his election campaign speeches, can one turn a blind eye to the centralized control deeply etched in that remark? Please look at the solutions formulated for the problems faced by Dingiri Menike in tandem with the solution to the question of the nation. A federal system or any system with greater devolution may not bring in economic upliftment to any woman here. But the debate on the unitary structure should involve women's activism and challenges, and what it means to democracy—women's democracy.

Let me get back to the UNP's "Women's Manifesto" and more importantly *Cat's Eye*. As a Tamil woman, for whom the north or the northern province means much more than the synecdoche (the part for the whole) implied above, I will say that *Cat's Eye* must rethink its women's policy and its ideological stances. If we are going to, even for a moment, bracket out the ethnic conflict from the woman question we are going to erase the agency of the "northern" woman. What *Cat's Eye* does then is join the band wagon of the male establishment all over. More overarchingly and sweepingly, one may be erasing the agency of the marginalized as well. And then we may be left with either the fiction of the feminist agency of the suicide bomber or that of Dingiri Menike boarding a plane to Tokyo. ■

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