

A STATE OF TERROR: LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF RAPE AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN SRI LANKAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

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My husband drinks very heavily and beats me up at least two or three times a week. Sometimes he says he will kill me. After he beats me, he forces me to do it. I have no choice. Anyway, why should I complain, when our motherland (mavrata) is being raped by the enemy.

Drawing together themes of domestic and national suffering, violence and rape, this extract from an interview with a woman from the Colombo slums reveals a deep sense of personal hopelessness and insignificance. Although she recognises parallels between her situation and the fate of the nation, she regards her own tragic story as unimportant by comparison. Working in a Slum Women's Development project for three years I became aware, not merely of the extreme degrees of violence that these women were exposed to but the self-denial of the suffering they endured.

Subject to frequent mental and physical abuse from employers, husbands, lovers and even from sons, the women seem to have cultivated a common sense of powerlessness and resignation. Through lives of suffering and sacrifice, their protests are muted by the knowledge that their 'motherland' is being violated by the enemy, the soldier and the separatist. The rape they experience is being sanctioned as an instrument of control in both the bedroom and the battlefield.

The daily realities of rape and violence are not, however, exclusive to the lives of Sri Lanka's slum women. Their experiences are echoed through the words of women whose oral narratives traverse both class and racial boundaries. The inability to articulate 'rape' as a personal experience seems to operate through society. Expression of 'rape' as a personalized subject in Sri Lankan society is often taboo. Only when utilized as a metaphor signifying the 'rape of the motherland', does sexual violence seem to acquire a voice.

The crisis of nationhood in Sri Lanka assigns women a dual fate. The very process that appropriates and valorizes women as popular symbols effectively establishes them as targets for attack. Synonymous with imagery of the 'motherland', female chastity represents the purity of the nation. Presenting a powerful mobilizing statement of national strength and unity, the female figure also becomes the object of assault from the forces of opposing nationalist perspectives. 'Rape' is the weapon of defilement in dismantling notions of

national purity and women become victims in the struggle of asserting identities.

Recognition of the phenomenon of rape, operating and being condoned, in both the domestic and military arena, necessitates an exploration of the co-relation between these spheres of violence within a context of nationalist expression. Focusing on an analysis of several literary texts I will attempt to examine the ways in which sexual violence in the home and its use as a weapon of war is represented in literature. These texts, written in English, reflect the predominant attitudes of the minority social group, often posited as 'liberal', 'enlightened' and who possess the political power to initiate change at structural and policy levels. I will examine the ways in which the writers I have selected, reflect the characteristics of self-censorship exhibited in oral narratives and position themselves in relation to the issue of sexual aggression, contesting or reinforcing the dominant ideologies.

Many dominant discourses are entrenched in patriarchal structures that reinforce male dominance and received notions of femininity. Portrayed through the stereotypical images of passivity and subservience, women can become the compliant and uncomplaining focus of male sexual aggression. Before analysing Carl Muller's *The Jam Fruit Tree* as a representative case, it must be recognised that the rape scene as a sensationalist device has figured prominently in popular culture in Sri Lanka. Commenting on the Sinhala cinema, Laleen Jayamanne discusses the 'formula film' in which certain scenes (one of which is the rape scene) recur with absolute predictability. Serving as allegories of class and power, the rape scene also relies on binary opposition of the macho male against the victimised woman.

This polarity operates forcefully in the gender relations between two key characters depicted in Carl Muller's *The Jam Fruit Tree* and its sequel *Yakada Yaka*, where domestic rape plays a central role. Characterizing the social fabric of the Sri Lankan Burgher community in the immediate pre-and post war era, the sensationalist rendering of male and female sexuality has resonances of the passages from Henry Miller that Kate Millet deconstructs in *Sexual Politics*.² The portrayal of Sonnaboy's wife Beryl's adulterous affair reinscribes chauvinist gender stereotypes unveiling the ways in which sexual aggression is represented. On his discovery of the

affair, Sonnaboy took savage satisfaction in assailing Beryl with his penis. He used it as a weapon on her constantly taking, constantly impregnating her.³

The narrative strategies employed in rendering this episode expose the 'satisfaction' that the protagonist derives in his maltreatment of his wife. The positioning of 'constantly taking her, constantly impregnating her' with terms like 'savage satisfaction' unveils the tacit endorsement of this method of redress. Violence as a means of controlling 'recalcitrant' women is the ideology that Muller seems to rely on.

Beryl later gets pregnant by her lover and tries to have a homespun abortion which makes her gravely ill. Sonnaboy's reaction to these events is not confined to the socio-historical milieu of the novel but familiar in the oral narratives:

After two weeks in hospital [she] was sent home to a murderously angry Sonnaboy who dragged her into the bedroom, threw her across the bed and raped her..... And this was the nature of their relationship for many more years.⁴

Sonnaboy comes across as a brute and his force is obviously no match for Beryl who seems resigned to her fate. From the text, it would appear that it is precisely the attitude that is expected from a woman who indulges in an adulterous affair. The writer denies Beryl a voice to articulate the physical and mental trauma that is generated by her husband's extremist behaviour. The victimisation and oppression of woman, her defence or the re-establishment of her lost dignity and integrity is irrelevant to the novel. The writer who frequently intervenes to make value-judgements is significantly silent in this instance. No attempt is made to condemn Sonnaboy's actions or explode myths of male prowess. On the contrary, concomitant with other descriptions this becomes an insignia of Sonnaboy's machismo that is valorised. In *Yakada Yaka*, the sequel to *The Jam Fruit Tree*, Muller goes on to vindicate Sonnaboy's actions of forming a homosexual liaison with an underguard in the railway suggesting that his wife's infidelity coerced him into it. While excuses are made for Sonnaboy's adulterous liaison, Beryl's transgression does not merit a comparable exoneration. The pernicious effects of using physical violence in the domestic realm are trivialised by the narrative's levity. When Beryl goes to her mother for refuge, the latter is quick to defend her son-in-law. Her reaction is 'Even if coming and borrowing money that Sonnaboy is a good man' followed by 'must light a candle, tell Saint Anthony'. Kate Millet's argument that 'emotional responses to violence against women in patriarchy is often curiously ambivalent and references to wife-beating for example produce laughter and some embarrassment' is validated by the use of such narrative strategies.⁵

Read in a context of contemporary societal violence, any claim to the radical representation of sexual relations in Muller's novels can be profoundly challenged. The violence inherent in Beryl and Sonnaboy's relationship merely serves to establish the acceptance of acts such as rape as a weapon of dominance in both the domestic and military arena. The strategic deployment of terms like 'weapon',

'assailing' enlist the metaphors of military discourse alluding to its potency both within and outside the bedroom.

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan recognises that rape serves as an allegory of 'other' political encounters. The female protagonist becomes the victim of rape as much because of her membership of her class/caste/race as because of her sexual identity; we might even say that she is less the object of sexual desire than the scapegoat in a struggle of forces.

Rape has long been tolerated as one of the spoils of war, an inevitable feature of military conflict. In separatist/nationalist struggles it has been utilised as a means of ethnic defilement and cleansing. The reticence that is evident in addressing the issue of rape is not confined to literary work produced by men. Rejecting the application of traditional euphemisms, Kamala Wijeratne is one of the few poets who overtly deploys the term rape. The poem 'For a Sinhala Soldier' makes reference to rape in a context of war.

*They say you..../Raped their women*⁶

However, the subtextual nuances in the seemingly innocent phrase 'they say' betrays the fraught nature of discussing rape. Although a space is created in which to articulate the existence of rape, its actuality remains shrouded in a veil of hearsay. The hesitant way in which Wijeratne broaches the subject is symptomatic of a disinclination amongst the Sri Lankan middle classes towards discussing sexual violence. Despite these limitations I read this poem as an enabling moment in Sri Lankan creative writing in English. For women to even speak the word 'rape' is itself a measure of liberation, a shift from serving as the object of voyeuristic discourse to the occupation of a subject-position as 'master' of the narrative.

References to rape recur more frequently in the work of Jean Arasanayagam whose writing involves, in her words, 'an exploration of women's identity in all situations generated by the social and political climate they live in'.⁷ Rape functions as a motif so that the very body of Sri Lanka seems often to be a female torso tattooed by the pen of politics and warfare' (Norman Simms 1991). While Arasanayagam is generally blatant about sexual aggression, some of her poems reflect the 'unspeakable' nature of articulating the female experience of rape. In the poem 'Ancestors' the allusion to the colonialists' rape of the land and Ceylonese women has resonances of a recurrent form of dominance. In resurrecting the historical dimension she does not absolve the colonial rulers of their violence.

To leave your name implanted
With some compliant virgin
As you caroused
Raping the land.⁸

Twin aspects of colonialism, the appropriation of natural resources and the sexual exploitation/maltreatment of women can both be regarded as forms of rape. However, Arasanayagam only utilises 'rape' in the form of a trope to denote the conquest of land. In referring to the female experience of rape, she subscribes to the dominant patterns of discourse. An euphemistic tone permeates the

words 'compliant virgin'. Furthermore, compliant as a term is problematic, for we are now aware that 'compliance' is a myth that enshrouds the insidious power relations between the colonialist man and colonised woman.

This strategy is archetypal of the problematic nature of articulating rape which Jenny Sharpe declares an 'unspeakable' crime. Commenting on the reports of the rape of English women in the Indian rebellion of 1857, she notes the common narrative structure that they share, the use of such terms as 'violated', 'kept for base purposes'. According to Sharpe the reports offer a range of signification that has the same effect as the missing details. In other words they speak a discourse of rape.⁹ She states 'this plotting belongs to a discourse of rape, a specifically sexual form of violence which has as its aim an appropriation of women as 'the sex'. This appropriation takes place through the objectification of women as sexualised, eroticised and ravaged bodies.' (p.229) Furthermore Spivak argues that 'it is through the *significance* of my body and others' bodies that cultures become gendered'.¹⁰ The dichotomous function of women's bodies is demonstrated within the post-colonial Sri Lankan context. Whilst the materiality of women's bodies is of symbolic centrality to the formulation of a nationalist ideology, the process of appropriation necessitates an erosive reaction. The woman becomes divested of her body's totality and is reduced to being identified in terms of component sexual organs, as the womb and the breast, representing reproduction and nature. Perceived in these objectified terms then, women are denied the space to challenge the hegemonic forces of domination.

Nedra Vittachi's play, *Cave Walk* (1986), illustrates the fate of a woman who attempts to create such a space. The romance of a secret mixed-race relationship is undermined by societal issues of ethno-racial hegemony. Rejecting the monolithic gender role of subservience, the female protagonist questions the ethnic chauvinism that characterises the attitudes of her boyfriend and his family. Unable to accept this challenge, the boy answers with violence and 'hits his girlfriend until she becomes unconscious'.

Analogous to the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*, the romantic element obscures the predominance of violence, paradigmatic of blatant male dominance. Further, the playwright fails to subvert the parameters of what is considered 'safe' (that is marrying within the community), by advocating cross cultural relationships. The negative denouement and the eagerness with which the Girl vindicates her Boyfriend manifests an unwillingness on the part of the playwright to deal with the social status quo and challenge the overarching violence against women that is often taken for granted.

Perceived as a crime of passion, the brutal subtext uncovers the violence at every level of post-1983 Sri Lankan society which infiltrates cultural production. The subtitle of the play 'Every Man Kills', signals the close proximity of menace that has the potential to subvert any relationship-personal or political. Attributing the tension in the relationship to racial difference discloses the subliminal force of the ethno-political realities that have culminated in armed conflict and get reproduced in multifarious forms as culture. Hence even the literature which overtly eschews the fraught socio-

political exigencies are predicated upon images of violence. Women who dare to make a choice against the established social norms, (for instance), the Girl in *Cave Walk* are made to live in constant fear of violence, rape and death.

Although there are recurrent limitations surrounding the articulation of rape in the texts cited, I will conclude by examining a work in which the centrality of rape as a topic creates a myriad of possibilities for the future. Senaka Abeyratne's *Por la Libertad* is a pioneering effort that brings the issue into the public arena.

Set in an imaginary Latin American military state, the play is a thinly veiled indictment of the human rights violations that were executed by State and counter-state forces in Sri Lanka. Abeyratne's blatant use of sexuality is designed to shock the complacency of the English-educated audience into active realisation of the heinous effects of political machinations. The radical character is established in the opening scene where:

(A woman is lying on the floor, with a man on top of her..... The guard gets up and pulls up his pants.)

Pedro: You know what, Senorita? I do it to a lot of women but never do it to a poet before. You like it, Anita?.....¹¹

An instance of institutional rape, perpetrated by members of repressive state forces like the police or the army upon women not merely of the oppressed classes but anyone who is perceived as a threat is captured in the above. That the protagonist in this context is from the middle or upper class demonstrates the playwright's recognition that rape transcends class divides. The violence that accompanies the rape in the play questions the dynamics of male domination which can be harnessed for and becomes a weapon of political power. The macabre pleasure that the Guard derives from terrorising and watching his victim suffer illustrates the force of this tactic. The play provides evidence to support the argument that rape is more properly understood as the expression of 'male' violence sanctioned by various modes of social power-rather than of sexual desire *per se*. Feminist theory has identified the body as the site of power, that is, as the locus of domination through which docility is accomplished and subjectivity constituted.¹² Power has long been masculinist and a primary target of masculinist power has been the subjugation of women, most especially through the control of her body.

In addition to the defilement of the female body, Adam Jones comments that rape is not always 'bounded' by respect for the actual life of the victim. Even for the large majority of victims that survive the experience the fear of death is pervasive. The terror is that this other person has total control over you and can overpower you.¹³ This is clearly exhibited in the play where Anita, while trying to appear brave and resist her oppressors, prefers death to the incessant sexual torture.

As a weapon of war, rape works sometimes even better than killing does. On numerous occasions, Anita reiterates, 'why don't you just shoot me now and be done with it? While killing makes martyrs of victims, rape defiles and shatters the individual women especially

in tradition bound societies. Rape further punishes the victim by adding a social stigma. In today's context it has also become a part of the atrocities of ethnic cleansing and atavistic nationalism. The battleground then is not only a territory but the body of woman.

In nationalist struggles, women have tended to participate as the biological reproducers of ethnic communities. They are also perceived as transmitters of its culture and as signifiers of the nation by reproducing the boundaries of ethnic/national groups which are central in the ideological replication of the collectivity.¹⁴ In the event of rape, none of these functions can be fulfilled, because their progeny are considered to be corrupted with 'enemy' blood and the entire community is then tainted. In addition, as Akbar Ahmed asserts,

Notions of honour, modesty and motherhood are violated. Rape is thus deliberately employed by ethnic neighbours who are fully aware of its expression as political power and cultural assertion to humiliate the other.... Rape as a final line divides one group from the other.¹⁵

Sexual violence and subjugation, recognised as intrinsic to patriarchy, is intensified and validated in times of national crisis where ideas of feminised sacrifice and masculine valour become even more exaggerated.¹⁶ Sarah Radcliffe and Sallie Westwood's analysis of Latin American politics can be applied to the Sri Lankan context in highlighting links between violence against the people and violence against women in the domestic sphere.

Representations of rape and violence against women in Sri Lankan writing in English serves not only as an index of dominant patriarchal ideologies that seem to accept violence as a part of everyday reality but also reveals the tremendous difficulty of speaking about a subject that is culturally and socially taboo. Few writers have endeavoured to challenge the received notions of patriarchy.¹⁷ Cultural production (in the form of literature and the media) is a double-edged sword: it reflects the overarching sexism that operates in society, but becomes a conduit through which negative stereotypes are further bolstered. The synchronisation between masculinity and violence and femininity and non-violence is cultivated ideologically in the mass media. Foucault writes that power's hold on sex is maintained through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law. Discursive strategies and representational practices become institutionalised and perpetuate themselves as sexism. In this context, negative representations of rape and violence against women reinscribe the hegemonic power relations which license women to be both valorised and violated in nationalist struggles, where they are almost perpetually victims but rarely agents.

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Notes

1. This article was presented as a paper for a conference on 'Terror and its Representation' by me Kent, U.K., in April 1995. I am very grateful to Prof. Shirley Chew for her contributions.
2. Millet on Henry Miller: 'while the release of such inhibited emotion however poisonous is beyond question advantageous, the expression of such lavish contempt and disgust, as Miller has unleashed and made fashionable can come to an end in itself, eventually harmful, perhaps even malignant. To provide unlimited scope for masculine aggression, although it may finally bring the situation out into the open, will hardly solve the dilemma of our sexual politics. p.313
3. Carl Muller, *The Jam Fruit Tree* (Delhi: Penguin, 1993), p.207.
4. Ibid. p. 207-8
5. Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago 1977), p.44.
6. Kamala Wijeratne, *That One Talent*, Kandy: Malinda, 1988, "For a Sinhala Soldier", p.6.
7. Interview with JA.
8. Jean Arasanayagam, *A Colonial Inheritance and Other Poems*. (Ariya: Kandy, 1985) p.9.
9. Jenny Sharpe, *Colonial Theory and Post-Colonial Discourse*, (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994) ed', s.v. "The Unspeakable Limits of rape", p.229.
10. Spivak, Gayatri. *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. (Routledge: London, 1994)p.20.
11. Senaka Abeyratne, *Por la Libertad*, June 1990, p.3.
12. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections in Resistance* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p.x.
13. Adam Jones, "Gender and Ethnic Conflict in ex-Yugoslavia", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* Vol . 17, no,1 (January 1994): p.118.
14. Anthias, Floya and Nira Yuval-Davis. 'Women and the Nation-State'. *Nationalism*. Eds John Hutchison and Anthony D. Smith. (OUP: Oxford, 1994). p.313
15. Akbar Ahmed, "Ethnic Cleansing: a metaphor for our time?" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* Vol 18, no.1 (January 1995): p.19-20.
16. C. Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p.197.
17. The process of 'mimicking' the west is, sadly, accompanied by a sense of snobbery .