

TALKING ABOUT THE BODY IN RUMOURS OF DEATH*

Mala de Alwis & Pradeep Jeganathan

Social analysis, and politics, we want to suggest, are intimately linked. We can not speak or write of a particular place and time, without being enmeshed in a politics of power. Sri Lankan anthropologists have long realized this: the best of them, to paraphrase Jonathan Spencer, write from within (Spencer 1990). Novices though we are, we too write from within. We speak about contemporary Sri Lanka, where torture and violent killings have become part of the 'every day'. The rise of violent anti-regime movements on the one hand, and the intensification of state repression on the other hand, has dulled the shock stories of death, torture and repression might have invoked at a different time. Stories about violent death are common in contemporary Sri Lanka, among men and women of different class and ethnic groups.

We present here, notes from a state of terror; Colombo, in the latter half of 1989. We speak of the stories the terrorized tell from within, and yet also against terror that surrounds them. Even as the terrorized speak about terror, however, they reproduce and foreground oppressive socio-cultural structures; in the case at hand, an oppressive construction of gender is central. Our material here is from Sinhala and English speaking residents of Colombo, both women and men, of the intermediate and capitalist classes; industrialists, professionals, middle level government employees, teachers, and intellectuals. They were both volunteered to and prompted by us during the summer and early fall of 1989, when we were living in Colombo. It was a difficult time for all of us, a time of uncertainty and doubt, as we flitted between the chaotic and the ordered, despair and hope, expecting to find the next day, week or month that life as we knew it would be no more.

Michael Taussig in *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man* puts it far more eloquently, and insightfully than we can:

All societies live by fictions taken as real. What distinguishes cultures of terror is that the epistemological, ontological, and otherwise philosophical problems of representation—reality and illusion, certainty and doubt—becomes infinitely more than a 'merely' philosophical problem of epistemology, hermeneutics, and deconstruction. It becomes a high powered medium of domination... thrust into consciousness as the space of death (1987:121).

We will let these insights guide us through the 'spaces of death' in the state of terror in contemporary Colombo. The stories people told each other and us about the violent death

of others, we suggest, was a desperate response to the chaos of terror; they were last ditch attempts to speak against an unspoken knowledge of confusion and helplessness. They were attempts to fix the shifting fictions of reality, to speak of knowing and through knowing to assert authoritative control.

Stories about the violent death of others are about empirical knowledge and authenticity. Always framed by an authoritative account that produces the credibility of the story, they continue about details of what happened and why, when and where. Centrally, such stories are about the body: the corpse. Intersecting as it does with modern forensic practices, autopsies, postmortems and dissections, the 'reading' of the corpse can be the final arbiter in an effort to stabilize the space of death (cf. Foucault 1973).

These detailed rumours of death, are also meshed together with Explanations, with a capital E, of the violent death. Such explanations produce 'moments' of insight into the larger socio-cultural structure that constitute and is constituted by them. These explanations have at their core basic views about the nature of society and its inhabitants held by those very inhabitants.

In the summer of 1989, faced with around 35 violent deaths a day, upper-middle class groups in Colombo, told stories about the deaths of only the prominent and well known; the vast majority of those who died - unemployed youths from rural and semi-urban areas, the children of the lower segments of the intermediate classes, and middle and poor peasants - entered their consciousness only as statistics. Visual familiarity pushed television personalities into the group of the prominent and well known. In this short essay, we will attempt to examine popular constructions of two such deaths: the killing of (1) Premakirithi de Alwis on June 31st 1989 and of (2) Sagarika Gomes on 15th August 1989, in the suburbs of Colombo.

Let us be clear, at the outset, that this investigation is not an attempt to excavate and privilege a 'True', 'Really Real' version of 'what happened and why.'¹ Instead of taking such a positivistic position, we find it more insightful, in the face of the multiplicity of available socio-cultural constructions of the 'event', to take a different stance: we suggest that these multiple narratives are best understood as interpretative accounts that are, in turn, locatable in a larger socio-cultural structure. In this particular instance, we find that the 'gendered body' of the 'victim' is the central signifier that structures these multiple interpretative accounts.

Note also that our concern with these 'rumours of death' is not reducible to the specificity of the two cases under study. Rather, this essay is also an attempt, as part of a large feminist project, to refine our own understanding of the interlocking theoretical categories of 'sexuality' and 'the body' that could be used to examine and critique the construction of gender in human society.

In our presentation of these 'interpretative accounts' we introduce a typology that is suggested by the structure of the accounts themselves: 1) A background description that presents 'well known' information about the person killed. 2) 'Reasons' for the killing and 3) Specific details that surround the 'event' of death itself. Within this typology, we also make two other analytic divisions: First, between dominant and minor accounts; second, between immediate and later accounts of the 'event'. We begin with a few social facts. Both de Alwis and Gomes were minor TV personalities with de Alwis being the better known of the two. Gomes' career, as a singer, however, extended beyond television. A tabulation of informant accounts is presented below.

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS:

de Alwis (42 yrs, married)
Dominant accounts

- 1.(a) Womanizer: Married twice, continues to have extra-marital affairs
2. On state TV: Live lottery show; Sunday Breakfast show

Minor account

3. Well read, Knowledgeable

Gomes (27yrs, unmarried)
Dominant accounts

- 1.(a) Flirt; 4 boy friends; 'very friendly'
(b) 'beautiful'

2. On state TV/entertainer: featured singer on entertainment programmes on and off TV.

Minor account

3. Independent, assertive woman.

Turning to the table above, it is clear that both de Alwis, and Gomes were characterized sexually: they are said to have had multiple sexual partners. However, in the case of Gomes, we discern a difference at the outset: her sexuality is inscribed on the 'body', in a way that de Alwis' is not. Gomes is seen as a (sexually) 'beautiful girl'. Note that there are no references to de Alwis as handsome, only as well read and knowledgeable, which we suggest is a 'preferred' sexual attribute in a man. In the context of violent anti-regime movements, the links of both entertainers to state institutions were also highlighted by many informants.

Next, we turn to 'reasons', A 'rumour of death' is often constructed as a narrative. As such, causal links between sections become crucial. Tabulated below are 'reasonable explanations' for the killings:

EXPLANATIONS/REASONS:

de Alwis

Immediate/Dominant

- 1.(i) Anti-militant comments at the funeral of a victim of militant violence
- (ii) Scornful dismissal of militant 'hartal' letter

Later/Minor

- 2.(i) Revengeful husband of mistress
- (ii) Wife jealous of mistress

Gomes

Immediate/Minor

1. (i) Pro-govt-singer
- (ii) Newscaster when regular readers were under militant threats

Later/Dominant

2. (i) STF man jealous of Army boyfriend
- (ii) Army man jealous of other boyfriends
- (iii) Spurned small businessman
- (iv) Spurned hotelier appeals to the militants to dispense 'justice'
- (v) Politician boyfriend's wife commissions killing
- (vi) Militant killing as punishment for sexual liason with the President.

The immediate rumours surrounding the killings were overtly political. They stressed the 1) links that Gomes and de Alwis had to the regime/state 2) their explicit anti-militant positions, and then argued that the killings were the work of anti-regime militants. Interestingly however, later accounts mark a major shift in the case of Gomes. A set of sexual reasons for the killing become predominant. As one can see from the large number of different accounts of this nature that are available, these accounts were widespread. Note also, that many of these later accounts have a political tinge, while maintaining and underlining a sexual motive for the killing. In the case of de Alwis, on the other hand, the distinction between political and sexual accounts is sharp, with accounts stressing a sexual motive for the killing being quite rare (the account in the table comes from a single source). This is, indeed remarkable when one notes that many versions of de Alwis (extra-marital) sexual relationships were a dominant narrative in his biography.

The construction of the *specifics* of the killing(s) forms the core of a 'rumour of death'. Informants are at pains to causally link a given 'background', and 'reasons' with the reconstruction of

the events immediately prior to the killing (abduction) and the killing itself.

EVENT

de Alwis:

1. Abduction
Friendliness towards abductors; "Laughed & joked with them". Left voluntarily.

Intended to return. Wife had made coffee & was awaiting their return.

2. Killing

Shot

Gomes:

1. Abduction

Friendliness towards abductors. "Laughed & joked with them". Left voluntarily.

Recognized abductors. Tied to 'boyfriend' story.

Contradiction between statements and actions: "Don't worry I'll be back" vs. Took off jewellery; worshipped parents (suggests premonition of death).

2 Killing

Shot and stabbed

non-sexual torture

sexual violence:

- * nudity
- * rape
- * gang rape
- * rape with foreign object

Once again, but very sharply now, we see differences between the cases of de Alwis and Gomes. Two major factors emerge in the case of Gomes, which are absent from all accounts of the 'event' of de Alwis' killing, 1) A dominant version of the 'event' sees it as an outgrowth of Gomes' sexuality and 2) Both sexual and non-sexual versions are inscribed on her body; the inscription of the sexual versions being most detailed.^{2,3}

Let us now proceed with a contextualized 'reading' of these accounts. Both Gomes and de Alwis were TV personalities/public entertainers, visual and discursive commodities, available for public consumption. Therefore:

1. It would seem that informants expected, and argued that their sexual practice would be morally 'loose'. Interestingly, the intensity of this 'loose sexuality' is not different in the two cases"; it is difficult to mark a

difference between Gomes and de Alwis here.

2. Their (serious) speech acts are heard. We suggest that these speech acts contain a coded sexual kernel that maybe decoded by the patriarchal ear of informants even though it does not emerge explicitly in their accounts:

* de Alwis' TV appearances were structured so that he, 'knowledgeable and well read' man impressed, and then flirted with a coy female partner.

* Gomes' singing voice had, we suggest, erotic value, especially when rendering 'love' songs.

3. Most importantly their bodies intersect a public gaze. We suggest that this gaze is a patriarchal⁴ one that produces and assigns differential 'sexual/erotic' value to signifiers in a visual field. The operation of this gaze upon each particular agent produces what we have named, for brevity, 'the gendered body'. It is clear, here, that Gomes' body carried a much higher 'sexual' value than that of de Alwis.

While we do note a difference of intensity from our informant accounts in the sexualization inherent in (1) and (2), we also note that this sexualization is gendered. In the dominant cultural logic operating here, Gomes is constructed as a beautiful' and 'promiscuous' woman given her status as an audio/visual commodity. There is an unstable duality inherent in the image of the 'promiscuous beauty': she is, simultaneously, alluring but dangerous and duplicitous, a source of pleasure, but also of destruction and evil. The construction of a man, like de Alwis, even though it is sexual, is not unstable in this way. Furthermore, and most importantly, we must note the difference in the constructions of the gendered body here. The central point seems to be that while both de Alwis and Gomes were seen to exist in a sexualized space, Gomes' body was central in that space, while de Alwis' was not.

Given the uncertainty surrounding the space of death in both cases, the dead body becomes a central ground where the accounts of the death can be fixed. Even though a reading of de Alwis' body was not explicated in the accounts we heard, we suggest that it nevertheless remained important negatively. That is, in the case of de Alwis, it can be suggested that the importance of the body after death, and the low sexual value placed on it 'overdetermined' de Alwis' highly sexualized biography producing remarkably few sexual motives/reasons for his death.

Gomes' body, however, emerges as the major signifier of her death. Note, that there are two 'moments' in the production of this body. First as 'beautiful', and second as a mutilated corpse. The first, described in point 3, above, takes a visual construction, from TV for example, as its input. The second 'moment' of production is described in section 2 (killing) of the tabulation of the EVENT, above. In this case a discursive construction was primary: pictures of the dead body were not available for mass consumption. However, the two 'moments' were (nearly) always juxtaposed for differential significa-

tion: a still picture, or video tape of Gomes accompanied the gruesome reporting of violence upon her body in the media, or the remark 'she was a beautiful girl' would begin or end a verbal informant account.

This juxtaposition, we suggest, is an explicit amplification of the unstable duality inherent in the construction of female sexuality we spoke of earlier. The two poles of the construction are explicated in the different images of the body that are now linked by narratives: the stories of death. These narratives expand upon the duality of the 'promiscuous beauty'/ 'evil distractor' dichotomy, 'explaining' the 'ease' with which Gomes could proceed from one pole to the other. As Gananath Obeyesekere, Laleen Jayamanne, and Mala de Alwis have noted in their own work, from diverse theoretical orientations that draw upon ethnographic examples from the Sri Lankan social field, the very construction of 'promiscuity' sanctions the mapping of violence and especially explicit sexual violence, upon the body of the woman. Our analysis of the case at hand, we suggest, is supported by, and speaks to such previous claims.

The capitalist, and intermediate classes of Colombo, we conclude, have not risen to their finest hour. Instead of joining together with the small group of courageous activists who struggle tirelessly for peace against the tide of violence, these privileged social groups seek to re-normalize the chaotic terror that surrounds them by reconstituting "high powered medium[s] of domination" which are then thrust into the "space of death".

And what about us, the anthropologists, who speak authoritatively about knowing and through knowing, assert control? The story of Sagarika's death had to be repeated, in detail, for our analysis to proceed. Thus, we too are trapped in the politics of power. Are we to wring our hands in despair? If our analysis were to be "objective" that might be our only course of action. But to write from within is not to be objective: we write to make a stand. It is not the telling of the story that matters but how it is told. We too, like all those we spoke to in Colombo, speak of terror. Yet, we have tried to read against the grain of that narrative and to speak in a different voice. And if in that voice of terror and space of death, you have also heard a cry for a just peace, then only can there be some worth to this essay.

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Notes

*. This brief essay was written during those terror-ridden days of August and September 1989. It was subsequently presented at the 20th Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison, Wisconsin in November 1991 & at the Gender Studies Workshop, University of Delhi in September 1993. We gratefully acknowledge all the comments we received from those who participated in the lively discussion that succeeded the presentations. We are especially grateful to Radhika Coomaraswamy who first suggested that we write on this topic.

1. The 'interpretative' that follow have been gleaned from, formal conversations, and newspaper reports, 'read' in and around Colombo, in the months immediately after the 'events'. They represent, we suggest, a near totality of the major, 'true' versions of the 'events' available at the time.

2. Unrepentant positivists should note that sexual violence is denied in the inquest proceedings and the Assistant Judicial Officer's report. Informants, in general, however, argued that the AJMO was quite wrong or had been bribed to hide the 'truth'.

3. Note that it is widely believed that anti-regime militants do not practise rape, or sexual torture. This binary rest, increases the importance of the nature of the violence done to the body of the victim by the killers(s) in the accounts of informants.

4. While we acknowledge that both men and women are participants in this 'gaze', we suggest that it is patriarchal because it operates within a patriarchal power structure that is hegemonic.

Mala de Alwis & Pradeep Jeganathan, University of Chicago/International Centre for Ethnic Studies