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Reflections of Conflict and Militarism in Art and Culture



Law & Society Trust

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Editor's Note

The LST Review, in this edition explores 'art and the artist' as agents of social change. Artists may not conventionally be classified as 'activist' or 'civil society' or be seen among 'movements of resistance and change'; but contemporary discussions on the subject indicate that art and the artist are often under-estimated in their potential to influence and effect change. The particular focus of this edition is to understand reflections of militarism and conflict in expressions of culture and art. Artists who inhabit contexts of conflict, and spaces that are subject to militarism, have in the recent past been increasingly recognised for the diversity of their contribution and ability to influence how we 'see' and 'understand' these contexts and spaces from 'within'.

The edition features two contributions; an article by Priyantha Udagedara on the art work of Chandragupta Thenuwera, and a report commissioned by the Law & Society Trust and written by Sumathy Sivamohan on the subject of 'militarisation and cultural expressions'. Since the early 1990s Thenuwera's art has been 'response' to a country gripped by conflict. It captures the changing political landscape – the exploitation of political power and the overt militarization of the everyday life. Introducing art forms such as 'barrelism', Thenuwera's art is provocative. It is an agency that reflects upon core issues of humanism, society and human rights. In the post-conflict years, his art reflects upon the politics of the regime that claimed 'war victory' and its socio-economic priorities, such as city beatification and development, that ignore the more pressing needs of post-conflict rehabilitation. These expressions and reflections of art, their integral importance to a society distorted by militarism and 'self-serving' governance, places the artist at the centre of social activism that attempts to address the issues of a conflict impacted society.

In her article, Sivamohan explores cultural responses to the militancy and militarism which defined and characterized the making of the 'Tamil nation' and 'Tamil nationalism'. She identifies the written word and notably poetry as a popular means by which those within the nationalistic space, responded to issues of gender, identity, land, among others things, and expressed their dissent. Interestingly she notes the merging of 'popular cultural expression' and 'art' where expressive sentiment and literature of this space is concerned. Sivamohan's article offers the reader deep insight into the cultural and social context of the Tamil nation, the manner in which it challenged and re-constructed Tamil identity, notably that of women, and its societal structures. Hence, the art or cultural expression of this time has the potential for many things, including the capacity to inform a process of de-militarisation, or the re-defining of the socio-cultural fabric of the post-war context.

Many 'artists' are located in contexts of conflict, and offer through a diversity of art form, expressions of conflict and militarism that is at times difficult to capture in other forms of discourse that falls outside the classification of 'art'. These reflections capture the deeper essence of the discussion. Hence, reflections of societal issues in the arts, including those of human rights and governance that LST is committed to, is integral to a social activism that sees the subject of conflict and human rights violation as the core of its concern.

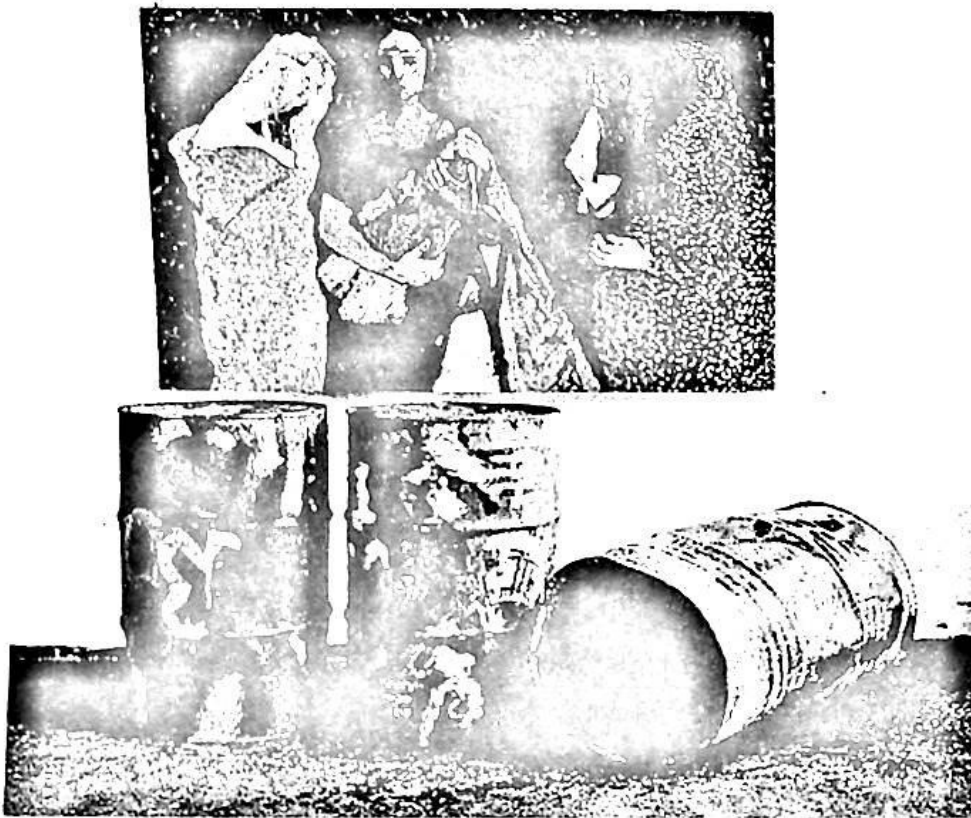
Rasika Mendis

Editor



Barrelism to Electric Chair: Reflection of Militarism in Chandraguptha Thenuwara's Art Practice

Dr Priyantha Udagedara *



Chandraguptha Thenuwara, "*Women in Barrelistic Area*", Acrylic on Wood and Three Painted Barrels, 1998.

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Introduction

In the introduction of the exhibition catalogue *After Shock - Conflict, Violence and Resolution in Contemporary Art*, Yasmin Canvin states that 'in the 21st century socially or politically driven conflict and violence has become an omnipresent backdrop to our life'. This is maybe why the majority of contemporary artists are constantly exploring and questioning conflict in diverse ways, raising their individual voice against the moments of violence. As Canvin elaborates, *Instead through the video, photography and reworked images, these artists articulate the voice of the individual, producing a poignant, personal response to the conflict and violence they have either directly or indirectly experienced* (Canvin, 2007, p.7). As such contemporary artwork itself is presented as a cultural and political critique. What Canvin discussed has been well evident within the work of contemporary Sri Lankan artist's. Since 1990, the three-decade-long war (1980-2009) has produced artistic responses against militarism from numerous Colombo-based artists. This short discussion attempts to explore the work of Sri Lankan artist and activist, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, whose art practice often consists of socially and politically integrated subject matter, and a critique of militarism and exploitation of political power.

Thenuwara's paintings, illustrations, drawings and installations are widely considered as visual media that interweave living truths encompassing militarisation, political conflict, disasters, social and economic concerns. As an activist and an artist, Thenuwara's personal integration with these issues is significant and his work becomes a product of dark life experiences, memories and social criticisms. His work is multi-disciplinary in that it symbolises his own experiences while reflecting manipulations of violence.

The nature of reflection

In Thenuwara's paintings the spectator can see symbols of conflict, violence and imageries of a war-torn society. His 1997 exhibition entitled "*Barrelism and Other Works*" consisted of painted barrels and weeping Madonnas. This exhibition reflects the reality in the city between 1990 and the new millennium, when painted camouflage barrels and walls became popular images in the Sri Lankan cityscape. Barrier gates, road blocks, walls of the military establishments, as well as bus stops, were painted using camouflage colour patterns. This militarisation of society is symbolised and questioned in Thenuwara's paintings. As Thenuwara states, *Barrels have occupied the space around us, that no-one can deny. An artist especially can't afford to ignore this truth, and this situation inspired me to draw "barrelscapes" instead of landscapes* (Thenuwara in discussion with Medis, 1999, n.p).

During the war large extents of land in Sri Lanka, were either demarcated as high security zones, or became battlegrounds. In the cities of Jaffna and Colombo for instance, barrier gates were built using barrels. It was not only high security areas that were divided up in this way, but villages and natural human habitats were also separated with barbed wire, their borders marked with buried land mines. Thenuwara's work, during the last two decades, addressed and captured this dark and fearful aspect of society resulting from war. Dark green, black and yellowish patterned landscape, barrels and disabled soldiers, or a

weeping woman and barbed wires, thorns and gestures of camouflage or motifs of human scraps, in his artistic installations, remind us of the dynamics of a war-torn society.

Since Barrelism in 1997, antagonism against militarism has constantly appeared in Thenuwara's exhibitions, presenting social and political criticism of Sri Lanka, even during a time when freedom of speech and activism against ongoing government policies was overtly restrained. Since his series on Barrelism he continued to question the socio-political situation in exhibitions, *Wall of Death*, *Neo-Barrelism*, *Dhammapada*, *Post-Barrelism*, *Black paintings*, *Vigil*, *the Monument*, *Beautification*, *Monotony* and, most recently in 2015, *Electric Chair*. These exhibitions courageously and publicly presented his response to the war in Sri Lanka, creating a new platform for critical discussion about his work. The artist was able to respond fearlessly to the despotic events taking place during the war and specifically against the political regime during the last stages of the war.

Thenuwara's exhibitions are mostly installations, where the centre piece is a sculptural installation. When the centrepiece is installed in the middle of the gallery, the other exhibiting objects and the paintings are placed surrounding the main object. For instance, in the exhibition *Wall of Death* a wall made with painted wooden bricks symbolised the thousands of men and women killed in the conflict. This centrepiece of the exhibition is surrounded by other painted and sculptured exhibits which equally connect with each other, representing the horror of the war. This structure appeared in most of his exhibitions apart from the 2013 exhibition entitled *Beautification*. The main story of the exhibition is depicted in the centrepiece which receives the spectator's direct attention; it consists of a strong message that reflects on the on-going socio-political situation in Sri Lanka.

Thenuwara's work is about negative occurrences and memories of conflict, but at the same instance, it is also an innovative approach to depicting pathetic life experiences through art. These exhibitions bring to focus the significance of an artwork and its capacity to relieve a series of necessary questions and sufferings in a politically and ethically isolated society. The art practice of Thenuwara is fluid, changeable, taking into account the shifting forms of narrative, and adopting the art forms that would allow multiple stories and perspectives to find the expression that is needed to create social awareness. They oblige us to rethink humanity and the conflicts within and around day-to-day life and its representation. According to his understanding, art, in the widest understanding of the term, not only reflects the contention between different aesthetic segments of lines, forms and colour; it questions society and its memories but also embodies them, making them visible in the artefacts produced. This was well evident in Thenuwara's 2013 exhibition entitled '*Beautification*'.

Post-conflict militarism – “Beautification”

Once the war was ended the government machinery was quick to start development projects in central Colombo, as well as in the conflict zones, with the promises of creating the “wonder of Asia” in Sri Lanka. These efforts have been criticised for over-powering the more important objectives of post-war reconstruction and healing among the victims of war.

They are viewed by some as, politically biased, opportunistic, power-centric political propaganda. Instead of answering real problems of conflict, the rebuilding and beautification of urban areas received priority. The exhibition '*Beautification*' addresses this situation and questions this politically motivated propaganda. The government's beautification project, featured, cement blocks in the pavements and public areas of urban landscape. Questioning this, Thenuwara recreated the same atmosphere at the Lionel Wendt Art gallery by layering similar kinds of cement blocks as a part of the exhibition. But on a close inspection spectators can witness cement blocks, carefully crafted and specially made by the artist. What spectators see are fading and almost buried dark memories of violence, such as scraps of human skeletons, barbed wires and camouflages. What these skilfully carved images mention to their spectators is, how evanescent is the violation of human history, with no realisation of justice, because of these new layers.



Chandraguptha Thenuwara, "*Beautification*" Details of Installation View (2013), Cement.

In addition to these layers of cement bricks, the spectator sees another few sculptural objects juxtaposed on the gallery floor, a reminder of post-war judicial instability and the disappearance of law and order on the island. Juxtaposed sculptural objects include a head, a hand holding a sword and a broken scale which refers to a destroyed statue of the god "Justitia" (Lady of Justices). These sculptures are directly influenced by contemporary incidents such as the failure of independence in the judicial system in the country during the Rajapaksha rule, and may symbolically suggest that victims will never acquire the justice that they should receive.



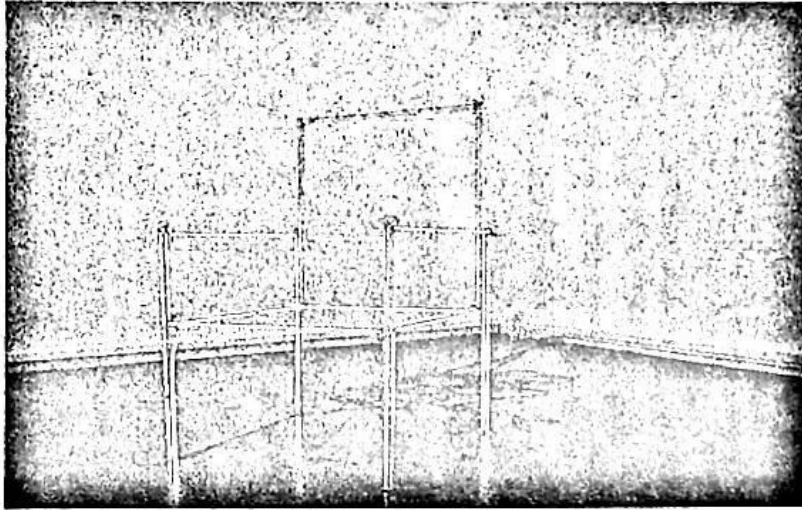
Chandraguptha Thenuwara, "*Barbed Wires*" Details (2014), Ink on Paper.

Conclusion – an ongoing quest of reflection through art

It has been 20 years since the exhibition *Barrelism*, and the war in Sri Lanka was over in 2009. As such, one can fairly ask the question 'why does Thenuwara still paint soldiers and images which reflect the political conflict'? His recent exhibitions reflect through visual motifs a 'questioning' of the prevailing and on-going political system in Sri Lanka. For instance, his recent drawing series of barbed wires and thorns symbolically represents conflict and socio-political mess in post-war Sri Lanka. They are carefully drawn and structured to create complex inter-connected visual clutter on the canvas or paper. In these drawings there is no beginning or end. They are a reminder of the era in which Sri Lanka is trapped, an era of cultural, political and economic disruption. For instance, the triptych drawing he created as part of his residence in Scotland in 2014 symbolises the island's religious disharmony at the time, which is linked with religious extremism. The centre panel is drawn with barbed wires and thorns and the right panel is reminder of traditional floral drawings in religious/nationalist establishments. The left panel is drawn with a terrain of miniature human figures lying on the ground. The barbed wires, floral design and the gestural human figures symbolise many different notions, but could be seen as a possible reflection of contemporary religious extremism in Sri Lanka. If the spectator were to read this triptych from left to right, he or she would see how Thenuwara thoughtfully transforms the traditional eye-catching floral designs into something political and critical, which are barbed wires and thorns, and the third panel symbolises disaster, crimes and violence or death.

In his exhibition "Electric Chair and Other Works", Thenuwera captures the attempts by the Rajapakse regime to remain in power following the "war victory" for which it claimed sole ownership. Election propaganda consisted largely of rhetoric associated with 'Buddhist nationalism and patriotism'. His attempts to appeal to the rural masses with iniquitous messages; that 'America and the western strongholds were attempting to take him to the electric chair, in a larger conspiracy that includes allegations of war crimes'. Turning this counterfeit story into a mockery in the 2015 exhibition entitled *Electric Chair and other*

works, Thenuwara presents an oversize chair made by 'LED bulbs'. Beside this chair there is a 'Jayakontha', a replica of the object that Rajapaksha always holds in his hand during his public appearances and political meetings. Thenuwara brings these unusual objects in to the gallery space and creates his own interpretation of them, to reject the nature of propaganda used by the regime.



Chandraguptha Thenuwara, "*Electric Chair*" Details (2015), Mixed Media.

The war has ended, but it has ended leaving endless questions which must be answered in future. Arguably, the real problem of the war, which is the ethnic conflict still remains unaddressed as are the consequences of war; the war crimes are a case in point. Allegations of politically driven disappearances remain unanswered, and unimaginable politically influenced corruption, as well as over-use of political power is evident, in the aftermath of war.

Chandraguptha Thenuwara, as an artist and civil rights activist, is not yet ready to simply turn down his humanistic, artistic mission in view that fear and conflict is still a feature of post-war Sri Lanka. Thenuwara will continue his humanitarian mission through his art practice, questioning the on-going socio-political system in Sri Lanka, in working towards a more democratic and fair society Sri Lanka.

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Man Waves: Militarisation, Cultural Subjectivity and Subjecthood

Sivamohan Sumathy*

People say the seventh wave
Has the pronom of the masculine,
Bearing on the crest of the frothing water
The name of the conqueror.

Today, they are all man waves¹

This paper dwells on the way culture and cultural expressions have been militarized over a long period of time. The point of departure for the report is the ethnic conflict and the ways in which it informed Tamil speaking societies from the inside. The report here focuses mainly on the formation of the Tamil nation and Tamil nationalism and how a certain militancy leading to extreme militarism in the form of the militant group, LTTE, characterized its formation. Cultural expressions, poetry, fiction, drama and film, are ways in which people, at times, the militants themselves responded to and inhabited militancy.

It has a tri partite structure. The paper traces the close links between the nation, nationalism, militancy and militarism as it has shaped the ethnic conflict for the Tamil subject within the contestations that had taken place with the Sri Lankan state. The literature of this period is extensive, and has been both serious as well as popular. In fact, where expressive instances are concerned, mainly, the distinction between 'art' and popular culture breaks down. Secondly, over time, dissent, resistance to the narrowness of the militant-militarist discourse of the nation and particularly the militarism of the LTTE too built up, marking a buffer zone of the literary and cultural core of the nation. Women's popular expressions have had a markedly chequered career within the literariness of the ethnic conflict and this aspect will be commented upon quite extensively. The language, expression of Muslims is dealt with here, only scantily and only through certain well established references. Muslim responses to the conflict have been quite fraught and understated, bewildered and anguished. A few works, popular and serious will be remarked

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¹ Jafir, M. I. En. *Athikaalai Neela Irul*. Coimbatore, South India: Vidiyal Pathipaham. p. 25.

upon as supplementary material. The report does not look at caste or regional aspects; nor does it work with Malaiyaha literature in any great detail.

Genre wise, the report focuses largely on the literary, the written word, given its long history where the conflict is concerned; and its prolific nature. Films and drama have a brief presence, but only as supplementary material. Overall, I draw upon my own seminal work on militarization developed in the monograph, *Militants, Militarism, and the Crisis of (Tamil) nationalism*². The works of Sitralega Maunaguru, M. A. Nuhman, Nirmala Rajasingam inform a lot of the thinking in this work. The input of Mathini Wickneswaran who directed me to certain recent and invaluable publications, such as the Gnanam monograph on War Literature, the poetry of Sadagopan and other literary works has helped me no end in putting together this paper.

Background

The ethnic conflict has a long history and some understanding of its complex structures as they impact on the evolution of the subjectivity of Tamil is important here. What is the formation of the Tamil nation in postcolonial imagination and what are the representations of women with it? Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism makes an early entry in the political formation of Ceylon/Lanka, Eelam in Tamil, most prominently from the 20's onwards. Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism makes an early entry in the political formation of Ceylon/Lanka, Eelam in Tamil, most prominently from the '20s onwards. The Tamil identity is seen as one shaped by primarily the language they speak (and this excludes Tamil speaking Muslims) and they tenaciously cling to it. Language is such an important aspect of their politics, underpinning the ideologies of the different social groups in their own class mobility. Language has figured as a prominent rallying point in the emergence of a Tamil consciousness. It has been the basis of much of how they struggled as a community. Thus, when in 1944 the State Council brought in a resolution to make the transformation from English to Sinhala as the official language, Tamil was also adopted as a second official language.

But many years after independence in 1948, neither of these languages had actually achieved the status of a working official language; in response, the 'Sinhala Only' bill was passed in 1956, to give a political boost to an emerging, primarily Sinhala petit-bourgeoisie and to please extreme nationalists. The left parties vociferously condemned the Act. With this move, the time for mass action for middle-class Tamils had arrived. Back in 1948, on gaining independence, a large number of plantation Tamil labor (brought over by the British as indentured workers) was disenfranchised and rendered stateless, which deeply scarred the sense of elation at gaining independence for many. State sponsored colonization of predominantly Tamil and Muslim areas led and aided, among other things, increasing militancy among Tamils. 1958 saw the first violent disturbance and riot against Tamils, and after the Sinhala youth-led lower middle class and peasant insurrection in 1971, and

² *Militants, Militarism and the crisis of (Tamil) nationalism*. Monograph. Marga, 2003,

the anti-Tamil riots in '77 following the general elections, the country progressively moved toward a pervasive violence, in which all the different ethnic communities became prime targets.

With independence in 1948 and with the Sinhala Only Act passed in '56, followed by Satyagrahas and anti-Tamil riots in '58, the Federal party, a break away party from the conservative Tamil Congress, becomes a dominant force in the nascent ethnic/national consciousness of the general mass of Sri Lankan Tamil people. The Federal Party (FP) demanded a federal state for Tamil dominated areas, particularly the north and East. While it claimed to speak for the Tamil speaking people as a whole, its regional and ethnic base was largely in the non-Muslim semi-agricultural (small holdings) professional classes of the north. With time the FP developed a base in the east as well but had little to do with the working class plantation sector and/or business communities of the hill country Tamils 'of recent Indian origin.' The Federal Party's demands were driven by parity of status for Tamils through language. Over time this consciousness fueled by language-based quotas in admission to the universities and the shrinking of accessibility to the civil service evolved into a territorial consciousness. The radical shift from language to land signals the political emergence and mobilization of a larger cross section of the Tamil communities. This gives nationalism a social base broader than that of the professional classes of Jaffna, the dominant urban and semi-urban capital of the north. The impetus for this movement comes from within the more militant wings of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and their alliances with radical youth groups working outside of the TULF. What begins as the youth movements' departure from the moderate TULF, spreads over into Jaffna University in one direction and into less privileged sections of the Tamil youth in another inter-related direction.

Initially, Tamil militancy was dominated by five different groups who, despite their different political programs, some more liberal and open than others, and some more Marxist than others, converged on the one objective of their struggle: 'Tamil Eelam,' a separate state. Yet, despite their stated intentions, their struggle remained largely divorced from any active dynamic participation by the people, although the degree to which people participated varied from group to group. The most dominant Tamil militant organization which actually controls parts of the north and east today is the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). With time they came to rely purely on military prowess and a culture of fear among the people. Internecine warfare successfully eliminated active opposition to the LTTE. Open hostilities existed between Tamils and Muslims in the east while in the north seventy five thousand Muslims were asked to leave within a mere two hours and move south beyond the contested borders.

The Tamil national struggle has also resulted in a mass exodus of Tamils to other countries. The Indian factor is another aspect that has to be explained. In normal day-to-day parlance, the south Indian state, Tamil Nadu, formed the "rear base" for the militant struggle. The militants used South India as a resource base for their military operations. To compound this factor, thousands of refugees flowed into Tamil Nadu following army violence in 1987 and 1990. In 1987 the Indo-Lanka Accord was signed but brought little relief to the acute problems of the strife. Tamil was accorded official status instead of its

earlier national language status. Provincial Councils were established. But none of these measures lasted long and when the Indian government sent its troops-The Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to keep peace in the North and East, it triggered a fresh spate of violence.

Militant Tamil nationalism in its turn is partly the catalyst for the eruption of extreme nationalist violence in the south among the Sinhala youth in 1989 under the leadership of the "People's Liberation Front," in Sinhala "Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna" (JVP) which had a "national-socialist" anti-state agenda. The JVP's actions were aimed not only at the state apparatus but also at individuals and organizations committed to unity among the different ethnic groups. Suppressed hideously by the state (equaling in ferocity if not in duration anti-Tamil measures like the Prevention of Terrorism Act, paramilitary operations against civilians leading to disappearances and rape), its overtly violent actions are dormant today; but its Sinhala-Buddhist tendencies have not completely disappeared, though it has over the years evolved into a parliamentary mainstream party, with an avowed inclusive agenda. Muslim nationalism is another force that has contributed to shaping the "nation's" destiny. Muslim nationalism has its emergences and social bases not only in the traditional Colombo-based merchant-professional classes, but also in the intellectual and political leadership of the land-based cultivating classes in the east and in regions outside the urban centers.

The LTTE and its resistant and dominance were vanquished in the last phases of the war from 2007 – 2009. Both sides engaged in pitched battle indulged in egregious violations of human and other rights. In May 2009, the state won the battle decisively, but amidst growing criticism of extra judicial killings of surrendees, blatant bombing of civilian areas, rape and massacres of civilians etc. With the defeat of the LTTE, roughly 300, 000 persons, were interned in camps set up for refugees, virtual prisoners and were resettled by the state in the northern and eastern areas. Yet, resettlement continues to be a thorn in the flank of the state's policy and administration. The northern areas remained and continue to remain, under military occupation. Militant Tamil nationalism remains quite vibrant discursively, though its operational energy is dormant. Muslim Tamil relations in the north and east remain fraught, though open hostilities have abated considerably.

The nation and its martialities

The national liberation struggle (of the Tamil people today) was and is a destabilizer of hierarchical structures of class, caste, and gender. In some ways gender has been the most dynamically active of these three social forces. Despite the fact that militancy was heavily informed by the middle class thinking of the emancipation of a bourgeois nation and of national social mobility, backed by the class of capital, a high caste intelligentsia, and a socially mobile expatriate community, despite all this, the mobilization of people at different levels led to the exploration of hierarchies including that of gender. The phase of "armed militancy" despite its initiating dichotomous male/female metaphors did create an exploration of the gendered roles prescribed within the community. In the first flush of revolt, nationalism creates a space for a militant women's consciousness to emerge. This I

place in a binaristic opposition to the *militarism* of the mid- '80s onwards when the LTTE with its centralized militarist strategy comes to be in dominance. A militant feminine subjectivity too finds a nascent expression in these explorations.

All in all, from the 70s onwards well into the years of the new millennium, cultural expressions take on a militant aspect, and is characterized by the sentiment of resistance. Cheran dubs this period of literary output resistance literature. Much of nationalist resistance literature emphasize the repression of Tamil dissent by the state of Sri Lanka and adopts the metaphor of the woman exploited and repressed, the mother, who has to be protected by the militant son.

The woman as land, and land as nation are recurrent motifs in the deployment of nationalist expressions taking many different forms. In expressive nationalist discourse, poetry takes on a powerful form of resistance and resistant nationalism says Cheran.³ Although Cheran looks upon this in an ambivalently sympathetic sense, I adopt a more estranged position on this. In my view poetry becomes adept to express resistance when the cultural milieu of nationalism employs, through an image-centered medium, a de-subjectivized and yet emotive discourse of the struggle. One of the foremost poets of the resistant nationalist era V. I. S. Jeyapalan writes in the poem that I have translated as "Rising from the Ashes of the Dead"⁴:

Mother of mine,
my dear city, Yalpaanam,
the vultures circle over
your body, laid out like a
deadened corpse.
The spine of the vine
of alien root sprouting
from your body,
could it be stronger than the
umbilical cord that for thousands of years
spread across and over,
birthed me, and reaching out,

³ R. Cheran, "Cultural Politics of Tamil Nationalism," *South Asia Bulletin*, Vol XII. 1. (1992), pp. 42-56. see pp. 50-55 for the point I am making here.

⁴ V. I. S. Jeyapalan. 'Uyirtheluhira Kavithai', *V. I. S. Jeyapalan Kavithaihal*. Chennai: Sneha. 2002. pp. 65-67. Translated by Sumathy.

touched
the edge of the
vast end of the world?

We set our imprint on the land
growing tall making our history
today;
It will erase from this earth
the footprints of those
who marched in line;
Of Senbahap Perumal, the Ferengeez
commander, the Hollanders and the white man,
.....

Cheran's "Amma, Do Not Weep"⁵ is similar.

.....
On sleepless nights
when your little boy stirs restlessly
screaming out, "Appa".
what will you say?

When you pace the night, showing him the moon
and soothing him against your breast,
do not say,
"Appa is with God."

⁵ Trans: *Lakshmi Holmström* in Kanaganayakam, Chelva (ed.) 2001. *Lute song and Lament: Tamil Writing from Sri Lanka*. Toronto: TSAR Publications. Originally from Cheran, R., A. Yesurasa, Pathmanaba Iyer and P. Nadarasan (eds.) 1985. *Maranaththul Valvoo*. Jaffna: Thamiliyal.

Tell him this sorrow continues
tell him the story of the spreading blood
tell him to wage battle
to end all terrors.

Known for its rigid control of the sexuality of its cadres, the LTTE has given a particular twist to the gendering of military discourse. The LTTE and following it the media, both Sri Lankan and the international, have repeatedly projected the spectacle of the woman as fighter and martyr. The LTTE focuses on the woman fighter as an imago-signifier, and in doing so, has kept up with a public emphasis on the control of the sexuality of its cadres, both men and women. From the time of its "official" inception in the mid-'70s it has publicly celebrated the celibacy of its cadres (men) as a virtue. Since then it has been boastful of its rigid control of the sexuality of its cadres (both men and women). The deployment of celibacy as a hegemonic signifier serves to allay the fears of a moralistic Jaffna public (the high seat of Tamil nationalism initially) and to reinscribe the aspirations of society onto what is considered its progeny and by extension, the LTTE. According to Nirmala Rajasingham (previously Nithiyanandan) a much acclaimed activist attached to the LTTE in the early '80s, the LTTE felt that its strictures on sexuality conformed with the moral sensibilities of the Jaffna public.⁶ In some respects this control endeared it to the moralistic middle classes of Jaffna in the '80s. That the organization was able to maintain this public image of celibacy, by prohibiting love relationships and marriage, testifies to the rigidity of its centralized command, and its politics of renunciation and self-control.

In order to understand the effective control of women's sexuality and their agency, we need to look at these paradigms and their operations in Tamil society. Peter Schalk sees *Katpu* (chastity), a concept of virtue, supposedly highly valued in the Tamil community, as a discourse of power for women fighters. For him, the containment of the woman fighter's sexuality allows her to take on the role of an avenging female empowered by her chastity/chaste womanhood⁷. For the archetypal signifiers of this virtue Schalk says, via Adele Balasingham, that the LTTE women go to the anti-colonial martial heroines like the Rani of Jhansi of India and Illakumi Visvanathan, the (Tamil/South Indian?) leader of the Rani of Jhansi regiment in the army of the militant Indian nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose. Both the Rani of Jhansi and Illakumi Visvanathan are signifiers of martial chastity.⁸ Following this, he chooses to draw upon a constructed and yet "authentic" mythological resonance for the equation of "katpu" with martiality. In the nationalist imagination, according to him, the women fighters are engaged in a "just" war where the

⁶ Nirmala Rajasingham, "Construction of Gender and Political Agency in Nationalism: The Experiences of Tamil women," MA Thesis, London, SOAS, 1998. 13.

⁷ Peter Schalk, 'Women Fighters of the Liberation Tigers in Tamil Ilam. The Martial Feminism of Atel Palacinkam.' South Asia Research 14 (1994), pp. 163-183.

⁸ Schalk, pp. 176-178.

sexual energies of the woman have been transferred to military power through their containment.

Following this mode, Schalk translates the practices of national liberation by Tamil women as martial feminism, particularized within the context of war, and therefore, tangential and opposed to what is commonly considered feminism, which he calls, rather arbitrarily, western feminism. In the propaganda of the LTTE, and in an overarching sense, in the discourse of the nation itself, nationalism is the only valid site of social struggle. Hegemonic militarist-nationalism upheld as authentically non-western by Schalk and by Adele Balasingham, sees nationalism as the only site of struggle through which women are able to express themselves and proposes the armed struggle of the LTTE as the liberatory movement of the Tamil people. For Schalk who uncritically supports LTTE's practices and control, the culture of sexuality exemplified in the idea of chastity and chaste womanhood, gives power and agency to women fighters from within a space opposed to western feminism. In his view, the authenticity of chaste womanhood channels sexual energy into military valor; it works against a putative western feminist conception of subject formation, which is realized through individual sexual liberation. For Schalk, and the LTTE probably, martial chastity becomes a resistant power by opposing the imperialism of western feminism and by embracing a revolutionary nationalism.

While Schalk extols the liberatory potential of the contained sexuality of women, the nation fritters away its unifying forces in its militaristic denial of the praxis of women's resistant action within the nation. This denial also excludes the possibilities of multiple sexualities as well. Since LTTE's strategies are geared toward containing heterosexual desire, segregation can be argued as favoring homosexual desire. But the multiple possibilities of women's desire created by segregation are thwarted by LTTE's celebration of sexual containment and the channeling of sexual energy toward the cause and more importantly toward the *male* leader as well. Rajasingham examines this hegemony where heterosexual desire is concerned in her description of how the nation and on a smaller scale the military units of the LTTE are constructed as a family. In this sense, the cadres of men and women are brought into a network of filial relations preserving the nation and the LTTE as a family, united in its struggle. In her reckoning, this is aimed at keeping desire at bay⁹. Desire is recouped into the strategies of a gendered discourse of nation, family, and struggle. In this respect, any fracturing of the nation displayed by women through a resistant consciousness and practice is translated as breaking faith with the chaste mother/woman construct. Against an independent alternative structure within and outside of nationalism, the rigidity of Tamil nationalism holds out martyrdom as the liberatory potential for Tamil women.

In many ways a politics of suicide was a predominant theme of Tamil nationalism of Tamil militancy, glorifying militarism over a politically negotiated reflexivity. The politics of suicide is an offshoot of the LTTE's military program, which revels in its vortex of cyanide suicides and suicide bombings. It is pervasive in all of the consciousness of Tamil nationalism. The inevitability of death becomes the resolution of the nation's dilemmas.

⁹ Rajasingham, 27.

The predominant theme of death and nihilism locked in battle with the viability of the nation is a recurring theme in women's writings. Rajasingham comments on this extensively in her understanding of suicidal martyrdom and its persuasiveness in the writings of the women fighters¹⁰. A suicide killing is sanctioned as an act of avengement for a raped woman. Here the raped woman is contrasted with the chaste woman." The LTTE here restates Tamil society's anxieties about its national purity and cohesiveness by foisting the traditional stigma of pollution on the suicide killers. Specifically focusing on the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the ex-Prime Minister of India, at an election campaign in Tamil Nadu, Sitralega Maunaguru says:

A raped woman is considered one who has lost her chastity: the "super virtue" of a Tamil woman. She is not only violated but polluted. She cannot regain her purity by any means except by negating her polluted body. ...In other words, [Dhanu] by killing Rajiv Gandhi, she not only tackles revenge against the enemy, but also performs an ancient purification ritual-the *agnipravasam* (immolation by fire).¹¹

The contained sexuality and its subsumption under land-nation is pivotal for an understanding of resistant-nationalist expression. Suicide-martyrdom has a particular kind of ring within the narrative of state repression, and violation of both land and woman. In 1997, Koneswary a young woman in the district of Amparai in the eastern province is raped and mutilated, her genitals torn apart by a grenade that had been thrust into her vagina. The incident widely reported in the Tamil press, received little mention in the Sinhala or English press. In the tabloid, *Sarinigar*, a poem appears under the nom de guerre of Kala; while many privately speculated that the writer of the poem is male, the poem assumes a feminine poetic voice.

Koneswarries¹²

Her death didn't give me pain
How can it shake me
When my feelings are numb?
Dear my Tamil women
What did you do
For the peace for this Island?
So, come on

¹⁰ Rajasingam, pp. 30-31.

¹¹ Sitralega Maunaguru, *Gendering Tamil Nationalism: The Construction of 'Woman' in Projects of Protest and Control*, pp. 162-171; 171.

¹² Kala, "Koneswari," *Sarinigar*, July 1997. Trans. M. A. Nuhman

Remove your dress
And be naked
My mother, you too

Open your *yoonis*
For those who follow the Buddha's path
And fighting for peace
Pity
Where can they release their perversity?

Heroes, come on
Full fill your perversity
My school going sister is also behind me.

Have you finished?
Don't stop there
Tomorrow's generation
May sprout out from our *yoonis*
So, smash them
Throwing grenades
Collect the pieces and bury them
To prevent sprouting our race any more

Sinhalese sisters,
Your *yoonis* are free now

(*Yooni* = female genital)

This elicited protest by feminist actors. Selvi Thiruchandran in particular wrote a vocal piece against it, protesting its exclusivist and demeaning portrayal of women. She wrote:

"The poem Kooneeswarikal deeply disgusted me. Rape is a violent act in relation to female sexuality. When it is used as a subject of poetry, we do not say that it is obligatory to express only its violence, its gender, its content, unrighteousness of the state and the agony of the women. But at least there should be a civilized quality. Even though there is no delicacy in the use of words the meaning should be descent.

What is the meaning of the racial use of the phrases "O Tamil women" and "O, Sinhalese sisters?" ... women's sexuality has no caste, religion, class and ethnic differences. In the violence of male chauvinism these differences disappears....No women should open anything to satisfy other's perversions...Do not seek justice to Koneswari, degrading femininity to such an extent."¹³

Nuhman in his paper, *Ethnic Conflict and Literary Perception*, says that there were many favourable responses to the poem. One of the readers, Thushyanthi, he cites says this:

"After reading the poem I felt pain in my heart. Anger, frenzy and grief... and more different feelings tormented me for hours... what a poem has to do, it is fulfilled. The feminist politics of the oppressed Tamil women has emerged forcefully through the poem. I wonder about the power of the poet who could express the depth of the ethnic and gender oppression of Tamil women through a small poem."¹⁴

Responses to state violence by writers demonstrate a certain embeddedness in the overarching violences that pervade society. The woman as raped is a continued trope that is of course rooted in a certain reality of state violence and deployed to express the sentiments of a "wounded" nation. T. Mayuran's short story "The grieving nation," invokes this trope of a wounded woman who momentarily turns militant and attacks her attacker, would be rapist –soldier¹⁵. Mayuran wrote quite a number of stories in the last 10 years in newspapers and in small journals like many other writers. In 2007 one of his stories won the best short story prize awarded by the organization Thahavam for a story published in *Thinakural*. In "Kanneer Thesam" (Wounded Nation/ A nation of tears) the repeated harassment of the school girl, Malathi by sentry at a check point, brings up all the horror laden images of Krishanthi Kumarasamy, who was in fact waylaid at a sentry point, raped and killed. The story resonates in its pathos of anguish and helplessness with the experiences of a people living in a militarized occupational environment and amidst the fear it brings about for ordinary women. What is somewhat unremarkable is the fact that the helplessness of women and their families is dutifully channeled into a rhetoricity of militancy and nationalism. The story of course is interesting. It does not merely end with Malathi turning upon her violator. While she turns the gun, left on a side by the soldier himself, upon him splattering him with bullets, her entire house and family comes under a reprisal attack by the army stationed there. The media reports an incidence of a terror

¹³ *Sarinikar*, July/August 1997

¹⁴ *Sarinikar*, August 1997; M. A. Nuhman, *Ethnic Conflict And Literary Perception: Tamil Poetry In Post-Colonial Sri Lanka*. *Colombo Telegraph*. August 19, 2012.
<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/ethnic-conflict-and-literary-perception-tamil-poetry-in-post-colonial-sri-lanka>

¹⁵ Found on the internet.

attack on the military camp which had been thwarted by the army. A “female terrorist” and a “soldier” are among the casualties. People in the vicinity listen to the news the following morning and continue with their lives as before. The call to arms, or action is unstated and one might say, even unintended, but the story emphasizes the helplessness of a besieged community and by implication calls for a reaction; it is an act of mobilization of the people along the lines of nation and nationalism. The spontaneous and temporary militancy of the young school going woman, Malathi, who is compelled to carry out this act of terror, is a political statement, understated and compelling as it is, on the way women and men, and the land itself, when confronted with military repression, responds spontaneously and tragically.

A similar sentiment is expressed by A. Yesurasa who was the editor first of the little journal *Alai* (Wave) and later from the mid 80's onwards the weekly or fortnightly “*Thisai* (Direction/Path). An extract from the poem *Your Fate Too*:¹⁶

You stroll back home
from the beach
or may be from the cinema.
Suddenly a rifle cracks
boots scamper away.
You'll die dead
on the road.
In your hand
a dagger sprouts
a pistol too may blossom.
“A terrorist,”
You'll be dubbed.
No one
dare ask questions.
Silence freezes.
But
deep in the people's mind

¹⁶ In Cheran, R., A. Yesurasa, Pathmanaba Iyer and P. Nadarasan (eds.) 1985. *Maranaththul Valvoo*. Jaffna: Thamilial. Trans. M. A. Nuhman

indignation bubbles up.

Puthuvai Rathinathurai's "The boy with the gun" is an unabashed celebration of the child soldier, extolling the merits of his service to the nation, his feats at a tender age¹⁷. Rathinathurai was the uncrowned poet laureate of the LTTE apparatus from the 1990s onwards and this Marxist turned nationalist is totally unabashed, unsubtle and uncritical in any of the lines in his poem. The child, male or female, like the woman is trapped inside a body that comes to power only through a chartered sexuality, raped and turning vengeful, or by bearing arms. The grieving land is the tears and wrath of the woman violated.

But the ethnic conflict and its militant, militarist assertions has invited many dissenting voices too to the fold. Even the nationalist poets and writers, Cheran, V. I. S. Jeyapalan have penned critical views of the nation's landscape. Jeyapalan too in the vaulting nationalist poem cited above Uyirtheluthal Kavithai ("Rising from the ashes of the dead/ Resurrection) writes compulsively of the eviction:

Not our foes,
my mother, but we,
who with our own hand,
felled you down
in the front yard of the Masoodi

The mother-land nexus remains intact for Jeyapalan, but what is different here is that the mother, Jaffna is not just one of Tamils only, but of a land encompassing the Muslims as well.

Sadagopan's collection of Poetry¹⁸ blends nationalist sentiments with a consciousness of class and caste, gently breaking through the rigidity of nationalist boundaries. In respect of this, I comment on a poem of his, Villithuli Nambikkai (Tears of hope)¹⁹, about an imagined Sinhala soldier writing about being commissioned to do service in the warring north. The poem is an attempt to understand the subjectivity of a Sinhala soldier who is forced through poverty and a wish to enhance the economic status of his family to enlist in the army. Class solidarity is a sentiment that pervades this poem. Sadagopan like many of the other writers, see the Tamil nation as wounded, exploited by multiple forces and the

¹⁷ Puthuvai Rathinathurai, "Thuppakkiyodu Thirihindra Siruvane," *Eelathup Por Ilakkiya Sirapithal. Gnanam*, Nov. 2012, pp. 83-84.

¹⁸ Sadaagopan, *Mannil Tholaintha Manathu Thedi* Thesiya Kalai Illakkiyap Peravai, Colombo, 2004.

¹⁹ Sadaagopan, p.84.

military. Interestingly, there is little mention of the LTTE either as freedom fighters or as bearers of arms, military attire, in sum, militarization. This is pervasive in most expressions stressing and channeling the nationalist sentiment.

A non-nationalist response to the horrendous act of rape involving the Sri Lankan army in 1996 of Krishanthi Kumaraswamy, can be seen in Vinodhini's poem. The rape and murder of Kumarasamy's elicits a feminist consciousness that cuts across the nationalist flavour of the one on Koneswari cited above. This particular incident was widely publicized first in the Tami press and then later in mainstream media as well. A trial was held among much publicity and led to convictions. Such wide spread publicity might have helped in creating a consciousness that went beyond purely a communitarian sense of solidarity. The poem by Vinodhini is quoted in full here²⁰.

Krishanthi

As the birds sang
And the sun fell into the sea
Her death took place
In the open space of white sand
No one knew about it

When she was born a female child
She wouldn't have thought of such an end
Her mother neither

First their look pierced her like a thorn
Then their terrible hands seized her arms

No sound arose
She fell in a faint
They raped her senseless body

²⁰ Vinodhini. 2007. *Mukamuudi Seypaval*. Nagarcoil: Kalachuvadu Pathappagam. Translated by M. A. Nuhman.

It happened
At the open space of white sand
She was buried
At the edge of the salty cremation ground

When she was born
Would she have thought of such an end?

I close this section with a comment on the poem "Aanalaihal" (Man Waves), an extract of which forms the epigraph to the paper. The poem, powerful and controversial, won a prize for the best single poem at the independent literary awards of Vibhavi: centre for alternative culture in 1994. It elicited a controversial response from certain Tamil literary circles who considered the poem chauvinist. The masculine, the military and its tortured relations with mother and land as mother are best captured in this Tamil poem. I do not know how important it is to mention that it is a Tamil poem by a Muslim poet. I consider this important for in a casual conversation with the author I told him that this poem which I like for many reasons was a nationalist one. He asked me, "Is it Muslim Nationalism?" We had been discoursing on Muslim nationalism prior to that. This question confused me a little and I had to think; and compelled to respond, said "No, it is not Muslim nationalist, it is Tamil nationalist." This conversation and my own engagement with it in translation beckons me to ponder the nature of language, idiom and the encompassing embrace of nationalism, a Tamil nationalist discourse that underscores yearning, desire, expressiveness, articulation and ontological premises. I cite the poem by Jafir in full here.

Man Waves²¹

The sea heaved, rose and
Fell, frothing at the end
As far as one's eyes can see.
The waves weaving, one
On top of the other,
The forerunner still gasping for breath

²¹ Jafir, M. I. En. *Athikaalai Neela Irul*. Coimbatore, South India: Vidiyal Pathipaham. p. 25.
Translation by Sumathy.

On the shore, before the next one
Swoops down, dying on the shore.

On the empty sea, today, there are none but
The seventh wave. Today
on the empty sea, one cannot see,
anywhere, the little ones.
People say the seventh wave
Has the pronom of the masculine,
Bearing on the crest of the frothing water
The name of the conqueror.

Today, they are all man waves.

The sea's loud moan
Turns into a bleat of thunder
The sound rose above that,
In a struggle again
A thousand demon waves
Flung quarry rocks against my beating heart.

The trumpet call of war
Sounded in the
Seascape of my soul,
In another place.

My feet clinging in the wet, sticky sand
Wetted by the waves rolling in,
Clutching my knees, I stared at the sea.

At the checkpoint near the Church, faces three,
Torn by cruelty,
Grabbed me by the collar of my shirt, haunted me,
Again and again, delving into my thoughts
Of reflection, anticipation.
My heart dry,
My breath hot,
My eyes may blaze with fire.
I throbbed, in the sinews of my body,
With a rage that knew no control.

I had arisen.

However, on that day,
In that land of my mother,
Where I rolled in the rising dust of the
land
I did admit to defeat
At the hands of khakhi wearing
Alien Sinhala dogs.

Dissenting Voices

[War literature], adopts the sentiments of Sangam literature [Classical Tamil literature of the 1-4th centuries of the common era]; it is a form of propaganda literature that has at its aim, victory on the battlefield. It is partisan, and looks at one self as the suffering one. It emphasizes the suffering of the people which is objectively there, but with an aim toward motivating people toward war and its triumphs. But war is like an elephant in musk. It is not heeding our call. It wreaks havoc upon all and sundry, on the people, their lives, their environment. This corpus of literature is multi tongued; it may be on one side or the other, but it is embedded in the life experience that people have of war. ...The third [form] is the literature of silence. A form of literature that exists only in the interstices, a simmering

volcano that cannot find an outlet, a sudden burst of flame, an expressive moment that finds itself flowing in the gravest danger of the times²².

The extract is from an essay by the poet and writer Karunakaran. A resident of Killinochchi, Karunakaran was in the LTTE controlled area in the last stages of the war, seemingly a willing subject of the militants. After May 2009, when the Vanni was "liberated" he came out openly in criticism of the LTTE, its ways and more keenly about Tamil nationalism. What he has penned here, particularly the third point, war literature as literature of silence, cannot but be understood autobiographically. Karunakaran raised many a pertinent question regarding the valorization of Tamil nationalist preoccupations and emphases. In commenting on the Literature of War, he emphasizes the fact that war literature is diverse and has to be seen through a lens that takes in the multiple perspectives on it and its marginalities. He identifies a triangular perspective on war as it has been expressed in literature, popular mainstream and art. One,

In war the first casualty is truth. How much does literature of the war then reflect the truth of the war? How much does it deviate from it? The Literature of War encompasses all of it.

Dissenting voices tore apart the nationalist presumptions of the Tamil leadership and the militants. Many of the writers were ex-militants or were sympathetic to the cause, and had to flee the country, to avoid arrest, the general crackdown on the youth by the Sri Lankan state and/or persecution by the LTTE. Chakravarthy's stories and poetry, Part II of the War, a critical creative work on Tamil nationalism, the short stories by Ranjakumar's "Kosalai" and "Kolaru Pathikam," "Paduvankarai" (Sunset Coast) a short story by Sakkravarthi, Kalamohan's "A Tale of Three Cities" are sensitive portrayals of the violence within. S. Ranjakumar's "Kolarau pathikam"²³ (Invocation) is tellingly and compulsively confusing in structure, unable to give coherence to the violence of internecine warfare, turning informer upon friend, the meaninglessness and namelessness of violence that attacks an unknown number of persons. "Sunset Coast" portrays the plight of two women, one pregnant, who are assailed by both camps, the army and the militants. The two women are trapped in a border area, marking by their very fertile and recalcitrant bodies, the border between state and state and state and statelessness, repression and repercussion. Chakravarthy's novel remarks upon the eviction of Muslims and questions the presumptions of the Tamil nation.

²² Karunakaran, "Perillaikyam Thamili, Ethilirunthu, Engirunthu" Eelathup Por Ilakkiya Sirapithal. *Gnanam*, Nov. 2012, pp. 149-151.

²³ Kalamogan, "A tale of three cities," Trans. S. Sumathy, in *A. Lankan Mosaic*, ed. Ashley Halpe, M. A. Nuhman and Ranjinie Obeyesekere. The Gratiaen Trust. Colombo: Three Wheeler Press. pp. 271-279; S. Ranjakumar, "Invocation," Trans. S. Pathmanathan. *A. Lankan Mosaic*, ed. Ashley Halpe, M. A. Nuhman and Ranjinie Obeyesekere. The Gratiaen Trust. Colombo: Three Wheeler Press. pp. 305-316; Sakkravarthi, "Sunset Coast," Trans. S. Sivasegaram. *A. Lankan Mosaic*, ed. Ashley Halpe, M. A. Nuhman and Ranjinie Obeyesekere. The Gratiaen Trust. Colombo: Three Wheeler Press. pp. 343-357

Yo. Karnan's collections of short stories written in the aftermath of the Vanni debacle, the last phase of the war, *Colombusin Varaipadangal* (Columbus's Maps), *Thevathaihalin Theetuthuni* (Angels and their soiled rags), *Che Guevera Iruntha veedu* (The house that Che Guevera stayed in) are remarkable encounters with the violence within, the gun that has turned upon itself. Yo. Karnan was an LTTE combat cadre in the years leading up to the ceasefire. Wounded in battle he left the movement, but also turned a vocal critic of the LTTE, and for which he suffered repeated harassment at the hands of the LTTE. Tamil Kavi was in the political wing of the LTTE and was in state detention at the end of the war. Her novel *Oolik Kaalam* (Doomsday) is an insider account of the last days of the battle and the plight of the people.²⁴ An unembellished account, its journal like narration of the last days, remarks upon the helplessness of the people and the ways in which the militarized LTTE, turned upon them. Its lucidity, simplicity and the collectivity of sentiment makes it a witness account of the war and a critique of militarization. Natchathiran Sevinhiyan, Solaikilli, M. Jabar from the north. Solaikilli, a poet from Kalmunai, has written extensively on Muslim –Tamil relations.²⁵ The extract of one of Solaikilli's poems below will demonstrate to the reader the pervasive sense of the meaningless of violence and its internatlized nature within society to the core to.

When I think of that village
The moon escapes with its life
From that village.
It stood in my piece of sky.
From its broken lip
Dripped drops of blood.
The wind,
Gasping for breath, with all the hurrying,
Near collapse,
Asked for water from me.

²⁴ Tamil Kavi, *Oolikaalam*. Chennai: Thamilini, 2013.

²⁵ See M. A. Nuhman, "Ethnic Conflict And Literary Perception: Tamil Poetry In Post-Colonial Sri Lanka," *Colombo Telegraph*. August 19, 2012 for an elaborate discussion of Muslim Tamil relations in Tamil writing. Also see, M. A. Nuhman, "Samakaala Illangai Kavithaiyil Ina Muranpaattin Thaakam" in *Gnanam*, pp. 74-89 and M. I. M. Haneefa Ismail, "Killakilangai Muslimgalin Porkaala Vaaymolip Paadalhal, *Gnanam*, pp. 416-423.

Demons devoured the babies
In that village,
The said, said, and kept on saying
As they fell upon my head.

Solaikilli²⁶. Trans. Sumathy

M. Jafir, whose poem is quoted above, bring concerns of the Muslims to the fore through a certain quizzicalness and reflection in the poem below

Just Rule= *Just* Rule²⁷

It's been some time, isn't it
Since we killed Muslims?
Aren't we going to kill them any more?

The palace walls shook
With the sound of the burst of loud raucous laughter.
The King, in a golden voice spoke:
Nosuchthingasnokilling
For now, no.

Natchathiran Sevvinthiyan's poem "Kokkatticholai 166"²⁸ is as follows:

It means nothing to me.

²⁶ Solaikkili, *Aani Veer Arunta Naan*, France, Asseay: 1991.

²⁷ En. Aathmaa. *Athikaalai Neela Irul*. Coimbatore, South India: Vidiyal Pathipaham. p. 50. Trans. Sumathy

²⁸ Natchathiran Sevvinthiyan, "Kokkatticholai 166," *Eelathup Por Ilakkiya Sirapithal. Gnanam*, Nov. 2012, p. 160. Trans. Sumathy.

Today's headline.

166+ Thamilar killed in

A gruesome massacre.

Tomorrow,

I have an examination, again.

Tonight, I will study.

Shoba Shakthi's novels, *Gorilla* and *mm*, both by Karuppu Publishers are uncompromising in their critique of Tamil nationalism, its violences and militarism. Here I give a short extract from the novel *mm* to demonstrate the nexus between caste, nationalisms, and the complexities of the existence of people living in the midst of a militarist environment.

Folks who lived around the Bauddha school, many of the youth and some of the elderly, slept in the school building at night. But today they had all gone to the Nativity Mass. This is a carefully planned premeditated act. On this particular night, old Thaveethu was alone in the school building. He cannot walk all the way to the Church. They had dragged the sick old man out of the building, tied him to a palmyrah tree and set fire to the school dousing it with kerosene oil.

Old Thaveethu was in a state of total collapse. Struck speechless, he lay drenched in a pool of sweat, his eyes glazed over with fear and panic. It was a time of spreading stories. Some true, others rumours: Tamil militants had attacked or tried to attack the Karaveddy Narada Bauddha school, Alvaai Somahe Bauddha School, Puttur Panyaseeka Bauddha school. Maybe this school too had been set on fire by some band of freedom fighters, so thought the inquiring young men. Lasser took the old man by the shoulders and shook him: 'Tell, Thaveethu Appa, who set fire to the school building? Do you know them? Did they say they were from the Tigers?'

The old man, rolled his eyes in panic. He had not heard of the Tiger boys in his whole life. He mumbled something. Lasser insisted. 'Are they tiger boys?' The old man opened his mouth, slightly. 'No, Vellam boys'

In the ensuing silence, the beams of the roof of the canopy at the entrance caught fire, cackled, spluttered, splintered and crumbled in a heap. Two of the youth took off in a boat in the pitch black night to Naina Thivu to convey the news to the residents of the Buddhist Vihara there. Gulping down some water, old Thaveethu continued: There were two people. I

have no idea of who one of them is. The other is Ernest Master's son, the one who is going to be a priest.' ²⁹

Women, the nation and the discontent of violence

A militant feminine subjectivity too finds a nascent expression in these explorations. Women writers too have attempted to express their aspirations and experiences in considerable numbers in poetry. At the same time, I must say that in many ways, poetry has allowed, women to forge resistance too, even if in a marginal sense. In the context of our analysis, I look at a few selected poems of this period of high militant/militarist nationalism.

From the many writings on women by women, and from the formation of women's organizations within and outside the militant movements, it can be seen that women's discourse gains currency within what R. Cheran calls "resistance culture," (resistance to the Sinhala nation). The co-optation of women, initially and predominantly middle-class women of the intelligentsia, paves way for women to articulate and grasp the concept of struggle from a position mediated by gender specifics. In Gramscian terms, I would say that the articulation of women's subjectivity is a negotiated position that falls inside and outside of the "nation." Yet women's cultural articulation, even in those instances when they teeter on the edge of the currents of the time, remain subsumed under the dominant ideology of Tamil nationalism.

Women's literature in general is subsumed under the Tamil nationalist paradigms—the conditions of war, resistance, militancy, and deprivation. On the whole women's cultural activity begins to articulate "deprivation" as the condition of the struggle: the deprivation of land leading onto the deprivation of civil liberties, deprivation of sexuality, and deprivation of life itself. At the reformist end, short stories and plays are written/produced on specifically women's concerns, such as dowry, education for women, the plight of the abused woman, widowhood etc. This illustrates the concern of the socially-minded youth and others for the deprived lot of women.

I begin with two poems by Bhanu Bharathi and Anichcha, both titled 'Lullaby' published together in the magazine *Sarinigar*. Both are about the war-torn context of the northern peninsula. These two poems definitely draw upon the oral tradition of lullabies which is importantly popularized in popular South Indian cinema. In the first, by Bhanu Bharathi, the mother gently coaxes the child to sleep although, as she says, the tranquillity and security necessary for sleep are no longer there. The poem is uninteresting if we are looking for a counter hegemonic stance. The woman's role is definitely that of deprivation without men. The second lullaby by Anichcha is a slight variation on the former in structure and content. The rhythms of the lullaby genre are broken by a more discordant structure. The child, a daughter here, is the hope of the future. I quote from a stanza of the second poem.

²⁹ Sivamohan Sumathy. From the novel *mm* by Shoba Shakthi. Translation of First two chapters of the novel *mm*. Nethra. Vol.1. 1. 2010.

Rolling in the heavy rain clouds,
you my little girl,
are a child of war time.
You have come to give me
a new lease of life.
Sleep my baby sleep.

On the whole the "lullaby" here stays within the discourse of the images of war. The use of lullaby as the poetic mode is very pertinent to the construction of a subject-position for the woman. The discursive formation revolves around that of family, community, and extended to its ultimate, the nation. But there is a reversal of the mother-son relationship. It focuses on the girl, daughter of the nation.

This containing idiom is pervasive beyond the purview of the LTTE. Even where independent women's organizations have emerged, they have been hamstrung by having to toe the L TTE line. The Mothers' Front is a case in point here. In the mid '80s it heroically battled against the government of Sri Lanka to secure the release of youth held under the PTA, but capitulated to the demands of the L TTE and fasted at its bidding to get negotiations between the LTTE, the government, and the IPKF going³⁰. Thus, women movements have a chequered trajectory within nationalism. The heroism of the Mother's Front and other women's collectivities some of which are spontaneous gatherings are commemorated by Rajani Thiranagama, in *The Broken Palmyrah*³¹.

But even as she salutes women's efforts a sense of disillusionment persists in and dominates her writings until her death in '89 at the hands of the L TTE. Her poem "Letter from Jaffna" written at the height of the LTTE-IPKF war concludes with these lines.

Fear? Now we know of Rape.
I'd like to get together with the other women.
But I know of nobody to get in touch with.
All of us are scattered.

* * *

³⁰ Sitralega Maunaguru, pp. 160-63; 167-68.

³¹ Rajan Hoole, Daya Somasundaram, Sritharan and Rajani Thiranagama, *The Broken Palmyrah: The Tamil Crisis in Sri Lanka--An Inside Account*, 2nd ed. Claremont: Sri Lankan Studies Institute, 1991, pp. 305-301.

15 years of war
And now a hopeless halt.
Our society has no will to organize.
.....

The era demises with so much loss and bitterness all round.³²

Working within a Tamil national framework, even if not a nationalist one, the poem sees a connection between the breakdown in women's networking and the breakdown of the cohesion of Tamil society. In relation to these fragments of the nation, her position can be viewed as being traumatized. Thiranagama does not see any easy solution to the problem of women, particularly that of *Katpu*, nor does she take nationalism as a valid site of struggle even as she operates from that location. I see this as the postcolonial predicament which operates within a site of competing and conflicting ideologies and social movements. This presentiment would persist in her writings until the very end.

Dissenting voices, check the overt and latent militarism that lies embedded in the cultural apparatus. I would like to discuss a poem by Anichcha which is less sanguine than the one mentioned above, called "lullabye." It is the third poem of a four-poem series called "Four Poems About Our Nation: ten years to the 21st century," centered on the woman's political role of an activist, who stands up to the brutality and impersonality of the gun.

You did not stay crippled
claiming womanhood
Did not laze away life's energy, eating, sleeping,
You clasped our hands tight
to show the way to the light.
.....

They shot you dead
threw the bones
across the way
to close it off
Took the ashes

³² Rajani Thiranagama Commemoration Volume, 2009. p.10.

Threw them against the wind
To silence it.

There's life beyond silence;
Struggle beyond the
Bounds of death.

The poem about the death of a woman activist and leader-nurturer; it speaks of resistance to the culture of violence. But it cannot name that violence. Specifics about the context of the death of the activist seem somehow unimportant although I read it as an oppositional, counter hegemonic poem. But, given the celebration of suicidal martyrdom on the one hand and an overpowering sense of disillusionment with political process/progress, even oppositional women's strategies end up in being swallowed by a celebration of death. Thus, even in this tragically hopeful poem, the poet feels compelled to celebrate death as resistance to the violence that precedes it. The resolution seeks answers beyond the pale of life, in death. Thiyagaraja Selvanithi's (known as Selvi to many) poem of 1988 reproduces this same sense of disillusionment but through a more thorough going discordance with the dominant sentiments of militarist hegemony. The dominant tone is ambivalent and traumatized about the jubilant cries of a doomed nationalism. Here I reproduce lines from the poem "In Search of Sun"³³

In Search of Sun
My soul, full of despair
yearns for life
.....
.....
primitive humans
yellow toothed, ugly mouthed t
hirsting blood, slit flesh
saliva adribble
cruel nails and horrifying eyes.
Bragging and jubilating

³³ T. Selvi, "In Search of Sun" *Options* (1994) 1. 1 ed. Neloufer de Mel, p. 10

over victories are not new
legs lost from long walks for

miles and miles
in search of a throne
days wasted waiting for full moons
only boredom lingers ...

Selvi was a political activist until her detention by L1TE in the early '90's. After distancing herself from nationalist politics in which she had been active as a member of a militant nationalist movement (PLOTE), she allied herself with factions that critiqued nationalism. Given her continued disappearance in L 1TE custody (presumed dead), her poem here sounds strangely prescient. In contrast to nationalist jubilation, the writer yearns for life, its unities, and harmonies, seeking the sun amidst the scatter of "slit flesh, saliva adribble/cruel nails and horrifying eyes."

In 1986, the J affna Women's study Circle released a slim volume of 24 poems by 10 women called, *Sollatha Sethigal* (Untold Messages) edited by Sitralega Maunaguru. Since then, women's literary activity, as a separate phenomenon, has attracted considerable notice. This volume expresses a concerted effort to express a "feminist" ideology as it stands in relation to the dominant culture. One of Sitralega Maunaguru's poems "Viduthalai Vendinum" ("Towards Liberation"), written under the pseudonym "Sangari," articulates a desire for a female existentialism, appropriating metaphors normally associated with male ideologies, such as "the space air craft Odyssey" in her poem³⁴. Her poems translate the signifiers of the nation, here national heritage, into a feminist consciousness by transcending nationalist ideologies and invoking the construct of a universal "woman." In another poem, "Avargal Parvaiyil" (In Their Eyes), she looks down at what goes on earth, in the city, village, within the nation. As she says:

I have no
face
heart
soul.
I have in their eyes,

³⁴ Sitralega, M. ed. *Sollatha Sethihal*. Women's Study Circle, 1986. p.4

two breasts long hair
slight waist
broad hips.

Cooking,
spreading beds,
bearing children
are my tasks

They'll talk
of chastity,
its power
to make rain
thrash down,
on command,
and of Kannaki,
endlessly,
and while they
talk so
they'll keep on gazing
at my body.
This is habitual
from shopman
to husband³⁵.

Sangari's poem here cuts through the male dominant practices of the nation-family. This powerful poem bemoans the lack of space for a woman to function outside of the family-nation nexus, which is exhausted by the continuum from husband to shopkeeper, from

³⁵ A. Sangari *Sollatha Sethigal*, p.1.

home to the streets. There is a difficult and unnamed strival for a beyond, to talk of women's issues as women's issues.

Rajani Thiranagama's writings are even more unequivocal. That she was one of the first of the academics and feminist-civil activists to be murdered by the LTTE is noteworthy. The forthrightness with which she accosts the suicidal politics of Tamil nationalism of the different groups, challenges the core of LTTE's operational practices. The death of Rajani in '89 coincides with the take over of the north by the LTTE for seven long years, followed by the fleeing of many activists to the south and the deaths of others who stayed behind. Yet others, both activists and other inhabitants, continued to function by strategizing their lives around soaring prices controlled by the state and the LTTE, curfews, chronic shortages of staple food items, oppressive military operations by the Sri Lankan army, illegal migrations, and the LTTE's military dictates. The expulsion of Muslims in 1990 and the way their belongings and property were promptly confiscated and sold by agencies of the LTTE, reasserts the group's bid for homogeneity. In 1997, when the Sri Lankan army regained control of the northern city of Jaffna and the surrounding regions, the Tamils this time, were forcibly evacuated by the LTTE. Some of those who remained were harassed and even killed afterwards.

With this experience of war in mind I quote from Rajani's poem. Being closely associated with her writings, having co-edited this poem, along with Nirmala Rajasingham in 1987, for publication in *Outrite*, a feminist magazine in Britain, I make no claims of being non-partisan here. Written during the height of the initiating war between the IPKF called by the people 'Innocent People Killing Force,' and the LTTE during the IPKF occupation of the north and East in '89, it captures a sense of the desperation/intensity of war time conditions. It suggests a sense of the internal conflict of the construct of the 'nation' itself. The poem names the problem and the contestants directly. Here, the contest locks the people and 'Tigers' in battle. I, who know her voice well, can hear her passionate plea for reflection and her anger at the rhetorical gestures and military intimidation of the LTTE in these lines.

Our great brave defenders and freedom fighters
lure the enemy, right to our door-step,
to the inside of the hospital,
start a fight
ignite a land mine,
fire from near each and every refugee camp,
escape to safety.
And then come the shells, whizzing whizzing.
Bloody hell,

Tigers have withdrawn, while
We the sacrificial lambs
drop dead in lots³⁶.

A sense of lack of space is pervasive in counter nationalist literature. A desperate tone of frustration and loss surfaces in the poetry of the young poet Sivaramani, who writes of the slow draining of all initiative as the war progresses with great ferocity. She writes:

Finally,
Our last thinking human is dying, slowly.
The door is closed to all
dissent.
You leave your children the
legacy of darkness;
the crumbs of culture
preserved in the traditions
of a six-yard cloth³⁷

This poem of 1990, written just after the LTTE regains control of the north, and the north and east are once more convulsed in heavy military operations, captures the sense of dearth of all critical activity and initiative. In these lines she looks at the culture of nationalism, emptied of dissent and intellect and, instead, is preserved by the conservative idea of tradition. The analogy she uses is related to women-the sari (six yard cloth)-a sartorial I signifier of womanhood. Sivaramani makes these slight attempts to displace the discourse of nationalism from struggle to dissent, nation to gender, and thereby from martial feminism to a critical consciousness because that is the only terrain of oppositionality possible within the binary of western/martial feminism proposed by Peter Schalk.

Sivaramani undercuts that binary, weaving her way in and out of a woman's consciousness of nationalism that is nevertheless steeped in pessimism. Her disenchantment with the national struggle, just before her suicide in 1991, demonstrates the contradictions that the intensity of "war" brings to her humanist ideology, rendering it indeterminate and intimately dangerous.

³⁶ *Rajani Thiraganaga Commemoration Volume*, 2009. p.9.

³⁷ *Sivaramani, Sivaramani Kavithaigal*, Toronto: Vizhippu, 1994 p.58.

Militarisation takes a different form in the poetry of Anar (Ismeth Raheem) and Penniya M.I. Najeefa). Both Muslim and hailing from the east and writing in the late '90s onwards, their poetry is heavily influenced by a nuanced understanding of society and its authoritarianism. In that respect their poetry is not overtly about militarization. Their stances are subtly feminist and feminine. I present here two of their poems, both remarking on violence and how it impacts on women. Penniya's poem "Vetpaalanin Manaivi³⁸" (The Politician's Wife) is a quiet but determined response to militarization as it touches upon ordinary political life of the people.

On one of those terrible election days
I began to guard very carefully
the freedom given by the vote to me.
Having put the lock on the fragile indifferent door,
I walked down the streets full of the
the violence of these political days and its sidekicks,
ogling me.
I walk, clutching my vote tight;
As I turn the corner at the end of the street,
women, who had already cast their vote, are walking back
hurrying their pace, intent on the thought of
the midday meal.
Yet I, holding my vote in my hand,
arrive at the polling booth.
I ask for my polling chit,
take it in my hand,
shred it and
cast my vote with the
four pieces of torn paper.

³⁸ Penniya, Vetpaalanin Manaivi," *Kalaimugam* (2011): 51. Trans. Sumathy.

Proud in the fact that I have voted,
I walk back along the unprotected streets and
its untold horrors.
And open wide the closed doors of the house,
cloaked in fear,
in a feeling spirit of freedom.

Anar's poem "Melum Sila Irathak Kuripuha³⁹" (Notes written in blood – some more) is about the culture of violence signified by the shedding of blood. It is a bold and yet reflective poem.

Notes written in blood-some more
I am habituated
to the sight of blood shed
every month. Yet,
when the child comes screaming
with his finger, slashed,
I shudder in shock and suffering
like I see it for the first time,
it stirs in me a yearning, a sympathy;
a helplessness engulfs me.

The blood of a woman, her body forced open,
gone cold, leaves a trail in its wake,
repugnant like the blood of a spider, dead,
the sticky colour of the woman's gasping breath.
The blood drips from the body of the

³⁹ Anar, "Melum sila irathak kurripuhal," in Enakku Kavithai Muham. Nagarkovil, South India: Kaalachuvadu, 2007. p.22. Trans. Sumathy

murdered baby child,
silently, childlike.

Those who shed their blood
in the battle field, those
who caused blood shed, spilling
the blood of others, are being
honoured and promoted to higher orders
by their leaders.

The blood stained walls
of the torture chamber
are splattered with drops,
of the human soul's shattered fragments;
they cry out, loud, in their tortured state,
in a plea for delivery.

The stench of ferocious cruelty
The hunt's bloody scent;
Clots—the blood clots
in the streets, gone mad,
hounded by a merciless blood thirst;
It spreads through the walls,
of the tombs, drying,
follows me, to this very day,
wherever I be,
like death's trail.

The new genre of short film: Short films are a genre that has seen a proliferation in recent times by amateur film makers. The area is not only extensive, but has evinced a uniformity in subject where the ethnic conflict is concerned. The report mentions a few short films that have been seminal in creating a genre and my own work which taps into a different sentiment altogether. There is a plethora of short films that are made on a daily basis, but given the sameness of theme, of bombs, guns, and the suffering of people, I decided not to deal with them in at any length. They do not throw any additional light on the subject. The films, "Under Pressure" by K. Gnanadas (2003), "Seruppu" (Slipper) b Kowthamam Karunanithi (2003), the internationally award winning "Silent Tears" by Ilango Ram, have their theme as war and the disempowerment of ordinary persons. In this respect, my films, "Piralayam", 2005 (Upheaval) and "Oranges" (2006) and the debut feature, *Ingirunthu* (Here and Now), 2013 have a different ideological provenance, being largely critiques of violence, inter ethnic tensions and militarization of the LTTE. Yet, in all of these films, mine including, the content revolves around militarisation, occupation, tensions, war and dispossession of many different kinds. I have elsewhere commented on militarization and films in general in Sri Lanka (Surveillance and Survival).

Conclusion

The report on militarization sees the current moment as an ideological stance, an ontological position of subject formation for a collective that does experience militarization on many different political fronts that has its close connection with nationalism, experiences of internalized and external forces of violences and the state of the political state. In view of that, I close with Sivaramani's poem that remarks upon the hopelessness of life entrapped in a violence that surrounds one, and yet, gives meaning for the poetic voice. In her poetry the echoes of the gun can be heard shattering the complaisance of the unity of the nation. I quote lines from a poem here.

I do not have words
for a solution
like a leaflet in bold print

Dreams
their meaning is lost to me
who is uncertain
whether the sun will rise tomorrow
While a gun
aims at society's

umbilical cord,
the dreams
of a butterfly
resting delicately
on the tip
of a fragile flower
are merely
an occurrence.

In my attempts
to be humane
I would rather leave
the flowers
on the trees.
Now,
the beautiful night
shaped by the day
is only a dream⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Sivaramani, *Sivaramani Kavithaigal*, p.59.

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