

**Playing Resistance of War: Ethnically Oppressed Sri-Lankan Tamil Women's Voices
Protesting Gender Violence Through Theatre**

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Abstract

Plenty of Sri Lankan Tamil artists and scholars have talked about the lives and struggles of ethnically oppressed Sri Lankan Tamil people as war and lives of the people are indivisible in for the past five decades. Thus, theatre, which played a vital role in mobilizing people against ethnic oppression as well as voicing nationally and internationally, symbolizes women to tell how the people are worse subjugated by the oppressors. Hence, most of the core performers performing uplifting roles in the theatre were played by women. The objective of this study is to examine the voices of women raised for protesting gender and sexual assault of the Tamil women and others in Sri Lanka through Tamil theatre. War theatre and Propagandist theatre including street plays and “Pongu Tamizh” performances, which was considered as the theatrical uprising for the political aspirations of Tamils, are used as the primary sources whereas discussions made on the themes of these plays are considered as the secondary sources of this paper.

Key words: Sri Lankan Tamil, Tamil Theatre, Ethnic oppression, War Theatre, Women's performances.

Introduction

Oppression refers to the subjugation and marginalization of specific groups of people in terms of class, sex, ethnicity, religion, etc. It most likely befalls in every country, culture, and society, including the most developed societies. Despite a single far and wide accepted definition,

oppression is still being defined. Taylor (2016) defines oppression as a form of injustice that occurs when one social group is subordinated while another is privileged, and oppression is maintained by a variety of different mechanisms including social norms, stereotypes, institutional rules, and culture.

In the pre-colonial Sri Lanka, Tamils had been ruling themselves as native homeland in the northern and eastern parts of the island. British colonial masters united both the Tamil homeland and Sinhala homeland together for their administrative convenience in 1833 and ruled the entire island under unitary ruling. When the British rulers left the country, they gave the ruling power to the numerically majoritarian ethnic Sinhalese. The successive Sinhala dominated governments brought Sinhala Only Act in 1956, standardization in higher studies in 1971 that all together led to the massacre of World Tamil Research Conference in 1974, and several other genocidal massacres mainly in 1977 & 1983 committed by the military and police against the Tamils. DayaSomusundaram evaluates these historical oppressions,

This burst of state terror, classed by some as cultural genocide, left a grievous hurt in the collective memory of the Tamil people. During the ethnic war in the subsequent years, many community institutions like temples, churches and schools were destroyed or damaged. Whole communities and villages were displaced or forced to leave their way of life, and cultural foundations behind (2014, p.48).

Following the anti-Tamil riots in 1983, radicalized Tamil youth decided to establish a separate state for the Tamil community in Sri Lanka. Thereafter, oppressed Tamils have been fighting against the successive Sinhala dominated oppressive governments for more than three decades in both the non-violent and violent forms of struggle.

In the 1980s, during which the armed struggle of Tamils initiated, Tamil women had remained domesticated doing chore works. But when the revolutionary Tamil militant movements gained prominence in the Sri Lankan, Tamil women started providing medical assistance and prepare foods for the rebels. Gradually, they expanded their contribution in liberation struggle against the oppressive government in many fields including social and medical services, cultural performances etc. Symbolizing the women to tell how the people are worse subjugated by the

oppressors became popular in the cultural activities such as theatre and songs. Sri Lankan Tamil women have been contributing in the propagandist performances that aimed at mobilizing against the oppressive governance, to assert their ethnicity and freedom (R.Hensman, 1996).

Politics determines the theatre in various ways either with positive or negative impacts in the post-colonial era. The domination of ethnically majoritarian started even with the identification of Sri Lankan Theatre as national theatre though Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multicultural nation. Instead of calling it national theatre, it was then called 'Desheeya', by the Sinhalese, and 'Thesiya' was indicated for the Tamils; which both mean nationwide. Though Sri Lanka has a rich Theatre tradition of both Tamils and Sinhalese, theatre of the oppressed community performed by the Tamils is hugely significant in making meanings of resistance. During the JVP rebellion and counter-violence in the late 1980s, the theatre remained a 'permitted space' where political satire and criticism was still allowed (Ranjini Obeyesekere, 1999).

Theatre among the Tamils in Sri Lanka started growing with the beginning of the 'civil war' which was waged until very recent times in traditional homeland of the Tamils which is northern and eastern part of Sri Lanka. Though the war came to an end, political aspirations of Tamils remain unchanged.

Modern Sri Lankan Tamil theatre is an amalgamation of social, political and cultural activism with an oppressed consciousness. Modern Tamil theatre in Sri Lanka has been performing politically relevant to the circumstances all the way through its history for the past six decades by inherited theories and innovative practices of theatre. Modern Tamil theatre extended its wings beyond proscenium theatre stage and voyaged over all the nooks and corners in varied theatrical forms in order to engage people on societal issues in terms of ethnicity, caste, class, gender and environment from the nineteen seventies.

In Jaffna, Street Plays turn out to be the vogue to impart the people about the oppression that the Tamils face during the war period. Then the plays performed by Sithampanathan's theatre movement became very widely held. Kulanthai M. Sanmugalingam, who wrote 'Man Sumantha Meniyar', Sithampanathan and others did many Tamil original plays, apart from the translations and adaptations produced many plays, in many kinds. By having a deep look into their plays, it could be well understood that a social or political message should be conveyed

through art effectively but it should be done aesthetically instead of being a straight forward propaganda. Man SumanthaMeniyar, Maayaman, Annaiyitta Thee, Velviththee, Maathorupaakam, EnthaiyumThaayum, UyirththaManitharKooththu, Poikkal, SivappuVilakku, KalaththilKaaththanare some example for the staged plays. The role theatre played was considered socially relevant, and very soon it activated its used as a therapy in dealing with traumatized war victims. Sithamparanathan was a pioneer in this effort as he was very much successful in performing this form of plays that could be meritoriously used as a therapy to the victims of the war.

The genocidal onslaughts committed against the Tamils by the Sinhala chauvinism induced the Tamils artists to converse more of their identity and their existence among other communities. Shanmugalingam's open air theatre activities which made the people gathered at the street corners to see how the dramatists brought their lives into action became a popular medium to exchange of ideas on the issues faced by the Tamils.

Methodology

War theatre and Propagandist theatre including street plays and "PonguTamizh" performances, which are considered as the theatrical uprising for the political aspirations of Tamils, were used as the primary sources whereas discussions made on the themes of these plays were considered as the secondary sources in this paper.

As wartime theatre covers numerous performances, plays (MaathoruPaagam, Man SumanthaMeniyar 1, Man SumanthaMeniyar 2, AnnaiItta Thee, Veli Thee, EnthaiyumThaayum) written by Professor M. Shanmugalingam, who is reflected as the god father of Sri Lankan Tamil theatre, were taken as the primary sources for this study. Conversations with theatre personalities were also taken into consideration as the secondary sources of this study.

Discussion

Sithamparanathan, who had prompted to question the applicability of the western theatrical mode in which he had previously been working, started to reach people through the traditional and familiar rituals of the Tamils in Sri Lanka so as to get engaged with the people more closely with his plays that were designed with the consideration of theatre for social service and therapy. His team went into the villages and constructed multi-day rituals involving drumming, singing,

dancing, and meditation, facilitating a process in which people could express their inmost sentiments.

Theatre is a community activity of connecting, communicating and expressing with each other. It enables the participants to express their deepest concerns about the issues they face and to become aware of the causes of their troubles of the oppressive mechanism. Apart from that, while being the platform of the people's participation, theatre could be a therapy to the victims of war as it would somewhat console them from the war scars that the war affected people have. Thus, it enables the people to hold effective discussions and work for an action plan to tackle the issues that they face through getting actively engaged in this form of participatory theatre, which is a platform for the people by the people, and which comforts in encouraging a community centered problem solving and actions. According to Paulo Freire (2000), the theatre can bring the community together, building community cohesiveness, raising important issues and creating a forum for discussion of these problems and stimulating group action. This form of theatre is for people where people are the prominent participants in it instead of being imposed by distant arts. During the latter part of 1980s in Sri Lanka, tens of thousands of people were uprooted following the brutality unleashed on the Tamils by imposing bans and economic sanctions by the Sri Lankan government. People have been suffering from many hardships since they were in short supply of the basic things as food and other essential goods. Barbarous conducts of Indian Peace-Keeping Force and the Tamil militants who became as the Para-military groups worsened the lives of Tamils. Women were being raped, children were being abducted and many were being disappeared in that period.

In the Sri Lankan Tamil theatre, theatre is as a tool to make the people aware of the oppressions to which they are subjected, to give a platform for the people to express their concerns, to make the people aware of the potential that they have to resist against the oppression, to be a community centered forum for the people to work for an action plan and also to provide a therapy to the victims of war.

Many literary works such as dramas, poems, novels, short stories, songs among Tamils in Sri Lanka appeared addressing the cruel war, atrocities and brutality, military repression, rape as the weapon used by the military soldiers against the Tamil women and the inhumanely killing of many in the battlefield. Dramas speak out the pathetic plight of the Tamils and the lives of Tamil

community in the midst of cruel war in their war-torn homeland which is northern and eastern part of Sri Lanka during the period of 1977-2009. Drama is the art of interacting with society more than any other art forms. The war ferociously took its vigorous form following the barbaric acts against the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Theatre during that times especially speak up about the mental illness, trauma and pain of the Tamil communities in Sri Lanka that have been subjected to the barbaric acts committed against the Tamils in Sri Lanka by the Sinhala chauvinists since 1975. The impact of the war on women is inevitable because of patriarchal nature of state and military forces.

Women: War and Symbolism

In a male dominated social system, women are seen as the symbol of patriarchal pride and control of a community and when there is any problem or community conflict women's sexuality are targeted to down the pride and courage of the community so that the men feel looser, lesser, weak and non-masculine to the other community that is again of men for men. Women also represents a society's culture and civilization therefore, Women are raped, sexually harassed in the wars because the violent disruption of women's sexuality symbolizes the meaning of masculine determination and a matter of pride of the oppressor. Also, women are the center of community's reproduction system and cultural capital and by destroying women's sexuality symbolizes destroying socio-cultural capital of the targeted, oppressed and vulnerable community, thus violence against women becomes the political matter to down a particular ethnic community, race, caste, religion (Thomas, Dorothy Q. and Regan E. Ralph).

Wartime sexual violence

Wartime sexual violence is rape or other forms of sexual violence committed by combatants during armed conflict, war, or military occupation often as spoils of war; but sometimes, particularly in ethnic conflict, the phenomenon has broader sociological motives... During war and armed conflict, rape is frequently used as a means of psychological warfare in order to humiliate the enemy (Wartime Sexual Violence, Wikipedia). Wars are the political acts of violence and suppression, battle of land, resources, property and cultural capital acquisitions. Consequently raping women becomes a symbol of raping their willpower, their culture, their masculinity, and their pride and making a community to migrate leaving their lands and all

resources to the oppressors and image of raped women becomes the symbol of their men's inefficiency of protecting the community, culture and lands, the defeat of oppressed (Suzanne Moore, 2017). Having no culture becomes having no defense for the oppressed community.

Sexual violation of women erodes the fabric of a community in a way that few weapons can. Rape's damage can be devastating because of the strong communal reaction to the violation and pain stamped on entire families. The harm inflicted in such cases on a woman by a rapist is an attack on her family and culture as in many societies women are viewed as repositories of a community's cultural and spiritual values (sexual violence as a weapon...Unicef).

Effects of family damage and the killings of male family members on women are also divesting their lives because in most of the cases women are culturally, economically dependent. The psychological trauma women go through and male members fight on the line of border with arms, women take the charge of making cultures and resisting against the oppression, violence, and acquisition. Women's take on to the theatre culture represents the resistance as well as the culture of creating a counter culture. In the conflict zones, women become the creator and patrons of the community's culture and pride and on the other hand making defense, identity, awareness and sociopolitical claims of the oppressed community. Here, theatre of women in conflict zone becomes the voice of the whole community and. Theatre performed, created or staged by Tamil women becomes the subject of great attention and observation for the existing cultures and arena of investigation for the cultural-theatre scholars.

Tamil Sri-Lankan Plays and voices of women

i. MaathoruPaagam¹

Staged in 1984, the play "MaathoruPaagam" is a term referring to the Ardhanareeswara (believed to as half-male and half-female, equally split down the middle) style having focus on woman. When the screen of the stage un-wheeled, Manonmani is seated as the symbol of mess and faded in the middle of the stage while her six girl children standing around her. The drama begins with the lyric line '*Great Penance Should be Performed to be Born as Woman*' written by the great Tamil poet Bharathiar.

¹ Tamil Union Chundukuli. *Ezhu Nadakankal- A Collection of Dramas*. Jaffna: St. Joseph's Catholics Press, 1987, March.

Through the family headed by Manonmani, consisting of six girl children, displaced to Jaffna from Colombo after the demise of her husband in the anti-Tamil riots unleashed by the Sinhala thuggish mob in 1983, ethnic and social repression were reflected as the voices of girl children of this family. The depiction of women in this play questions both social and ethnic repression. By stating ‘all those who pulled our father into the road and set him on fire by pouring petrol on him were men’, they question both; their community and the chauvinism. The scars of the war do not heal even after the war came to an end. Those scars have changed as the psychological-mental scars. Uma’s role in the play, specially her screaming “Oh... They are coming with knives and batons. Run away...”, is recorded as the voices of the people mentally affected in anti-Tamil riots.

The character of one of the girl speaks once, if saying it correctly; she does not speak but only screams. Throughout the play, the girl lays on the mother's feet. At one point, she gets giddiness out of being shocked after screaming that “they are coming with knives and batons”. When her mother and sisters attempt to calm her, she seems as the one who slapped by devil. “Maathorupaagam” is a play based on the story of a family living in Jaffna after losing the head of the family in anti-Tamil riots unleashed in Colombo. It is not exaggerated if it is said that the girl’s character in this play helps to depict the fears of the Tamil community during wartimes.

ii. Man SumanthaMeniyar -Sons of the Soil (M. Shamugalingam, 1988)

The Eelam Tamils' national liberation struggle took another dimension in the 1980s. The political and military dimensions of the struggle sharpened. People’s dialectical space was much narrowed due to the increased military interventions into the public affairs, curfews and ‘Emergency Act’. The ways to express the sufferings of the people who were denied the freedom of expression were reduced. When there had been a need to express the sufferings of people, who get engaged in the liberation struggle, through drama, ‘Man SumanthaMeniyar’ was staged. ‘Mann SumanthaMeniyar’ written by KulanthaiShanmugalingam and staged by the Jaffna university cultural group, is one of the most influential and widely recognized dramas in the Tamil staged in mid 1980s, was staged in Jaffna for over sixty times during the interferences of Indian Peace Keeping Forces, which slowed down the movement of the cultural activities in the north in 1987.

Myths and narrations are easily reachable to the people well familiar with traditional performances and legends. The role of 'Panchali' is not only a symbol for the Tamil women, but

also the symbol of women who are risked for politics and society in general by the male repression. 'Panchali' symbolizes not only a harassed woman but has been put in the play as the symbol of the Sri Lankan Tamils community as a whole. After losing at the gambling, Pandavas risk Panchali. Krishna saves Panchali when Dushasanattempts to make her nude. This legend is generally a familiar story to all. After showing this as the performance at the stage, it is voiced in the drama by stating that 'This happened in Mahabharatham. Mahabharatham is an epic. It is not history. But our life is not an epic. It is our history'. Panchali is depicted here the symbol of repression of the Tamils. The pathetic plight of Tamils who are slaughtered by the Sinhala chauvinists is compared to the inability of Panchali who is about to be naked. The drama entitled "Man SumanthaMeniyar" begins with the symbolic question asking 'Like Krishna for Panchali, who is the savior of the Tamils?'

The audience of the drama standing like the tall trees to see the scene of Panchali being naked in the drama symbolically tells the strong message that those, who keep their mouth mum though they see the cruelties being committed in front of them, should change their positions from the audience to contributors for raising their voices against the oppression. Miseries were shown at the stage by showing many have died in the ongoing chauvinist attack whereas some have displaced. Above all the screaming of the mother reflects as the symbol of all miseries and loses of Tamils. The thought for the liberation is sown at the background of the screaming of the mother at the stage.

Palestinian poem stating that "I will proclaim the terrible war for freedom against the enemy" (Mahmaud Darwish) is sounded as the voice of younger sister. When the men were only taking part in the liberation struggle, the women's voices, which reflected equally to the men at the stage, laid a strong foundation for the uprisings of the thousands of women's participation in the continued resistance.

iii. Man Sumantha Meniyar-2 (M. Shamugalingam, 1998)

The drama entitled 'Man Sumantha Meniyar-2' begins with the story of Semmanachelvi who made the God Shiva to bear the soil for 'Pittu' (Pittu is a food prepared from rice flour). In the background of the play there is a river over flowing symbolically depicting the tormented Tamil community, and it is required for everyone to build a dam. Through the role of helpless elderly woman, it is depicted that they are going to be destructed by being over selfishly with the narrow thought of "My land, my house". When a male voice asking "is everybody working for their

portion only even when the damp is built even after the flood?”, the elderly women voiced asking “What can I do for doing my part?” No one has showed compassion to her. Neither the king nor the minister has showed compassion to her. In the continuation of this play when it is stated ‘with the brave of being safeguarded by the youth who gave protection as being like a fence’, some others speak that ‘harvesting of the baby child will not come to the kitchen’. Through these lines, the distorted social and family conditions have been depicted in the play where women are the most victims but they struggle all the odds throughout the wartime in Sri Lanka, that the character of the elderly women namely Semmanachelvi shows.

The phrase stating “The idiot air bombardment, which had killed your father and your elder sisters, took away your leg also!” reflects the lamentation of the miseries of the oppressed. Citralekha Mounagurusays about the “Man Sumantha Meniyar”, that conveying comments and message against repression through the artistic performances became widely popular after the arrival of the “Man Sumantha Meniyar”.

iv. AnnaiItta thee (M. Shanmugalingam, 1997)

AnnaiItta thee depicts the psychological disorders as one of the consequences of the war. This play speaks out about the psychoses due to the inevitable war as it was imposed on Tamils. The play was coauthored by one of the Medical Faculty of the University of Jaffna, portrays the women of three families in the wartime. The mother in the play refuses to accept the demise of her child though there were strong evidences available that her child was shot dead at the Thandikulam Crossing. Mangai lost her husband in the 1977 anti-Tamil riot and lost her son in 1987. Mangai’s daughter Gowri as of sudden screams saying “Shoot me. Don’t do anything to me” from the instance when she saw the dead body of her friend who had committed suicide after being raped by the military soldiers. Mangai’s another daughter whose husband was shot by the military soldiers. Mangai’s adopted son is also being tortured by the military soldiers. This play speaks of the horrors of war through the depiction of these above characters.

Though depicting a woman who was continuously subjected to many such tragedies is something exaggerating, the history of miseries faced by the Tamils due to the war against them is well spoken out through the character of the Mangai. The freedom of speech that was denied, is

voiced through Janaki's role who voices saying, 'I dared to speak of which is not spoken out. I dared to ask for a boon which is not asked'.

V. Velvi Thee

The play 'Velvi Thee' powerfully depicts the sexual assault on a woman by both Sri Lankan military and Indian Peace Keeping Force. The horrific events that took place in the 1987 were inducing to consider the sexual violence against women and children during the war. Approximately ten years later, it evolved into Velvi thee. Apart from the psychological impact of the one who was subjected to sexual violence, the play loudly speaks about social and cultural psychology of the victims connected with sexual violence. The play touched examples from the legendary legends and Shakespeare's plays to reinforce the theme of the play.

Propagandist Plays

Street plays and Sanganatham (Sound of war tone) were the two popular kinds of street performances played with the sole intent to mobilize the people for freedom struggle. In this form of theatre, the group of artists interacts with a broad section of audiences directly, with the intention of not merely entertaining but to prompt activism. PuduvaiAnpan, Baby Teacher, N.Yogendranathan and Thamilkavi were among eminent who used theatre for mobilizing the people towards the liberation struggle. Uyiththelukai, UyikudikkumParavaikal, Vellaipurasivappanathen?, VazhvilanthaManitharkal, Maayamaan, Viduthalai Kaali, Thiruvizha, PaarayoBharathame? etc. are recognized street plays which politicized the people by the performances, which symbolize the Sinhala chauvinism and military repression as a symbol of destruction. The humiliation of Tamils' mother language, mother and sisters triggered the liberation struggle among the youth. However, Sinhala chauvinism ruthlessly murdered the Tamil women after their rape. Psychological uprisings will happen with the thought of safeguarding the mother when the symbolic representation of woman being tortured and raped in the drama is seen visually as seeing such horrible scene to make greater impact on one's mind. In all propagandist plays, it could be seen that the screaming of women are the victim of rape by the military, who are the widow or who is a mother of the lost sons. On the other hand, the heroic voices of mothers who sent their children to the battle front for the national liberation have been depicted in the streets of Tamils.

Pongu Tamil

PonguTamil is a cultural event organized by the Department of Fine Arts of the University of Jaffna, and the Theatre Action Group. A large number of university students, school girls and theatre activists participated in the “Pongu Tamil” which emerged in the 2000s as the theatre event. Dialectical space for women was considerably high as the men were mostly targeted by the Emergency laws, disappearances and bullets. Women’s voices filled the political vacuum of emancipation though the men were targeted by the military and its intelligence operatives. With the slogan begins, ‘We all are the topes, and the elderly son of the world’, women’s voices globally sound as the uprising of Tamils equal to the men.

Conclusion

The stage becomes as the voice of oppressed beyond pleasure. Sri Lankan Tamils had been fighting against ethnic oppression for more than three decades through various mediums, in many forms and places. Ethnic oppression was the theme of almost all the artistic creatures during the national liberation struggle of Tamils. Theatre also voiced for the liberation and voiced against the oppression. Among those voices, voices of women also sounded loudly. Women voiced against the sexual and as well as the ethnic oppression through street plays, theatre performances and “Pongu Tamil”. Masculine repression and gendered face of war and conflict get space in women’s voices in theatre, and simultaneously it creates feminist perspective towards theatre, culture and society in broad senses. Women’s voices in theatre raised for ethnically oppressed Tamil community in Sri Lanka are not only the dissent voices for communal or war justice but these are the voices against patriarchy where women have been fighting against mental and sexual harassment in patriarchal system to bring about the justice, peace and gender equality. Women’s voices are the assertion of ethnic identity, culture and Protest against violence and rights violation of Tamil community in theatre performance and have served the feminist agenda and the agenda of justice and peace simultaneously in Sri Lankan Tamil theatre. The functionality and effectiveness in resilience and development of the theatre is not doubtable. It has the power to influence thought and opinion, and can serve as a popular and effective means of political propagation, economic empowerment, and culture diffusion. Songs and dance were employed in the theatre to reach the people easily.

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