

TRACES OF THE UNRECOGNIZABLE: POETRY WRITTEN BY TAMIL WOMEN FROM SRI LANKA

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Introduction

In living through the Sri Lankan civil war, the 'everyday' is truncated with negotiations for recognition. The everyday in such circumstances is a minefield of both subtle and overt oppressive displays of power. The nation does not recognize all lives and there is a continuous negotiation for recognition. In these negotiations, certain aspects of the everyday life are left as unrecognizable. Unrecognizable because of the violence it contains (sometimes the violence inherent in revisiting / reminiscing these aspects) and also because of the dangers inherent in such recognition from the disciplinary forces of the State and apparatuses of the nation. Sri Lankan Tamils have had to produce various official documents to gain visibility as a legitimate citizen. The negotiations around the identity cards display power dynamics involved in fixing of certain identities which in turn is called in to persecute the "Other". But the official discourses of citizenship, which are produced through ID cards have traces of mis-recognition imbibed in them. There are traces which "dislocates, displaces and refers beyond itself" (Derrida, 1973).

In such a situation, I argue that as evidenced from the works written by women, poetry acts as one of the few mediums of tracing these traces of mis-recognition. Also, within poetry there is scope for recognition and acknowledgment of aspects of the everyday living through conflict and violence which are otherwise deemed unrecognizable.

Methodology

A close reading of poetry written by Tamil women during the years from 1981 to 2009 is done to understand how the grand narrative of the nation subsumes many experiences of living through the war and renders many such experiences as invisible or unspeakable. Using gender as a concept that is inflected by other categories of analysis like nationality, religion while being historically contingent, the paper will look at how through poetry women have produced alternative histories and given attention to experiences otherwise unspeakable. In this process, the paper highlights how a nationalist understanding of being a Tamil woman is constantly challenged and recast. In this regard the paper uses a feminist methodology.

Results and Discussion

Identity Cards

In attempting to authenticate themselves as the representative of the Tamil nation challenging the Sri Lankan Sinhala State the LTTE, ironically mimicked the same oppressive administrative structures perpetrated by the Sri Lankan government. ID cards are one such documentary representation of the State structure's mechanisms to encrypt a varied conglomeration of people as an identifiable population. Each ID card is for a specific official requirement and also produces an identity or subjectivity, sometimes, forcibly. In the politics of everyday, where there is a constant struggle to manage different aspects of one's identity so as it appeases the State's structures of surveillance, one single individual in her life will have to house different official requirements of different nations. A person is marked and made and unmade through these impersonal documents.

In this section I will look at poems written by Darmini, Nivedha, Nirosha and Sumathy Sivamohan to see how these poems chronicle the different ways through which the violence of the imposition of official identities works in the everyday life. For e.g. in Darmini's

poem ‘Adayaila Attai’, she marks the identity of Tamils living in war as temporal in nature. At different moments in time, the same individual’s identity shifts according to the “nation” that is exerting power over her. The bearing of these identities is not represented as an uncritical acceptance; at each juncture the poet is asking for a reason for carrying an ID. It is significant that the reasons are not articulated overtly as a matter of citizenship to a nation, but expressed in terms of “living”. The inevitability of ID cards lies in its ingenious incorporation into the everyday. It is a requirement to survive, to live through the everyday and in this process a population is created that will fit into the different categories that the nation has to invent for its continuance. It is therefore a mechanism to discipline a populace that might house different identities. Hence, people are reduced to certain indexes. It is therefore poignant that Darmini’s poem as much as it is a chronicle of the temporality of different identities, it is also an imagination of a fearless future. She marks out those specific aspects of disciplining in militarization that are imposed on her and imagines an island without all that.

Photographs,
Serial Numbers,
Nationality
District
Weapons
Jails
Without all this
A plan to steal a small island,
looking up at the sky for a
huge bird’s wings. (Darmini, 2010)

Traces Of The Unrecognizable

The second section of the paper looks at how Tamil women used poetry as a tracing of certain unrecognizable aspects of living through war. The section looks at poems inhabited by traces of such living, traces which taken together upsets the unifying logic

propounded by the construct of the nation. Some of these traces are housed in literary genres like Oppari (Elegy) and in epistolary poems; the logic of these forms of poetry is utilized and sometimes reversed radically to look at issues like disappearances, forced exiles, losses of certain aspects of one's self and deaths which are not officially recognized. Poems by Urvashi, Anar, Darmini, Sanmarga, Auvvai, Bhanubharathy, Sivaramani and Sumathy Sivamohan are used in this analysis. For e.g. a poem which deals with the indelible marks that state violence leaves on individuals is powerfully brought forth in Urvashi's poem "Their Night". The poem graphically describes the pain of witnessing an event like the capture of a loved one. Urvashi talks of a loss of their days and nights, which are claimed by violence when she writes:

*He walked away with them –
outstretched rifles pressing at his back.
The impressions made in me by the hands
bearing fifty rifles made a burden of sorrow.* (Urvashi, 2010)

Here the evening, which the armed men have claimed as "Their night", is a trace of a loss, saturated with sounds and images of dread. This loss of a night indirectly speaks of the many unutterable losses of one's agency in times of war. It speaks of a colonizing, a cold spreading of militarism's tentacles over a person's time where the person is also marked and claimed because impressions are left on her to carry.

Conclusion

Hence, through poetry, women act as witnesses and through intelligent and subtle traces refers to a reality which is left unrecognized by the structures of nation. As much as the Sinhala Sri Lankan State is implicated and the Indian State is criticised, the Tamil nation is also held to scrutiny. A layered and nuanced understanding of the different aspects of being a Tamil woman during the war is evidenced in the poetry of women writing during

this period; the readers are also implicated in this arduous journey of tracing the unrecognizable.

Reference

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