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THE ROLE OF THE 20TH CENTURY SRI LANKAN WOMEN IN RELATION TO THE CONCEPTS OF CULTURAL DYNAMISM AND CULTURAL MODERNITY

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Twentieth century Sri Lanka has seen many significant social, cultural, political, and economic changes. Before 1948, politically, the importance of national thinking and native culture had been overly emphasized. Yet, after 1948, the political element of this emphasis was slowly removed and it paved the way for some sort of independent cultural dynamism. Political conflicts, constitutional amendments, the open economic policy, the free education policy and globalization exposed the country to cultural modernity during this era. This research paper intends to study the role played by Sri Lankan woman in the above mentioned cultural change and modernization.

The colonial Sri Lankan female was considered to be the symbol of nationalism regardless of their ethnicity and therefore their cultural behaviour was controlled. When it comes to the post-colonial era this suppression was relaxed but the act of symbolizing remained the same. The most vivid feature about the 20th century Sri Lankan female is her openness toward other cultures. Compared to males, females were more easily able to interact with the contents of these cultures. This tendency which had been suppressed during the colonial rule became more expressive after gaining independence. How this flexibility and adaptive behaviour can be understood and on what this openness is based needs to be understood. Theoretically, present Sri Lankan culture is patriarchal. In any patriarchal society, the woman is rather tortured and her freedom of movement is limited. Consequently, the woman yearns for a change in the cultural setup, whereas the man does not. Based on this yearning, the woman, compared to the man, is more open to other cultures which appear to be more liberal.

With education opportunities opening up, women started entering the public sphere as professionals, workers, writers and also as activists, regardless of their ethnicity. All Sinhala, Tamil, Burger women including a few Muslims, engaged in radical political movements to gain political rights such as universal suffrage, equal wages for labor etc. as early as the 1920s. Women responded critically to almost all the conservative objections or criticisms that arose island wide against their political demands and ‘inappropriate’ behaviour. In these responses we can see their conscious fight against the substantial and structural obstructions against female cultural independence.