"To be or not to be: that is *not* the question": a study of suicide in university discourse

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Suicide is generally conceived as a way out, a decision taken in desperation to escape the agony or misery caused by some heart break, betrayal, or disillusionment – some sort of bleakness that overwhelms life. Certainly, the discourse on suicide is dominated by the inkling that people commit suicide since life is not worth living or, perhaps due to their inability to face challenges in life. However, this view overlooks resistance articulated through suicide. In such a background this paper underscores the need to read suicide as a form of resistance: disavowal of forced subjectification, and an attempt to interrogate technologies of power which ostracize and oppress individuals who refuse to be reduced to nonentities.

This study focuses on two cases of suicide as symbolic gestures which challenge structures of power and strategic modes of inhibition operating in Sri Lankan State Universities. This investigation is theoretically supported by Michele Foucault's analysis of knowledge, discipline and power, and Judith Butler's theoretical approach to identity politics, death and mourning. Moreover, it draws from newspaper articles, individual and focus group interviews and information gathered through informal conversations. The University community, in terms of its socio-cultural and economic representation and entrenched hierarchies represents the broader Sri Lankan society. And my positionality as a university teacher and a former student who was subjected to different forms of violence propelled me to revisit and reread the contextual significance of two cases of suicide, as reported from the University of Peradeniya and University of Sabaragamuwa in 2014 and 2015 respectively.

This study concludes that the cited suicide cases can be read as formidable decisions made by individuals as forthright attempts to resist being swallowed up by a violent, brutalized social group which attempts to (re)socialize them with a vengeance. In fact, it is a premeditated attempt to make their presence felt, to articulate their agency and to disrupt the taken for granted "order" in the University community.