

WOMEN, POLITICS AND POISON: A COMPARISON OF THE JULIO-CLAUDIAN EMPIRE AND THE ANURADHAPURA AND POLONNARUWA PERIODS OF SRI LANKA

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Introduction

Roman women played an important and a decisive role in politics during the Julio-Claudian Empire (14-68 AD) of Rome despite the commonly held view that the female energy and activity in Roman politics had been suppressed by male political chauvinism.¹ In ancient patriarchal Sri Lanka, men had narrowed down the space where women could exercise and exhibit power². However, during the Anuradhapura (377 BC-1017 AD) and Polonnaruwa (1055-1255 AD) periods, several powerful queens showed great dynamism through their direct and indirect political participation.³ Interestingly, women in Rome and Sri Lanka used poison and conspiracy as the means of demonstrating their political power.

Objective

The purpose of this study is to examine how the political dynamism of the ancient royal women found expression through poison and conspiracy in the world of men. This study will focus on a comparative study of the empresses Livia Drusilla and Agrippina the Younger from the Julio-Claudian Empire and the queens Anula and Leelavathi of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa periods of Sri Lanka. Though references have been made in various works referring to women's resort to poison and conspiracy in their political activity in ancient Rome and Sri Lanka,⁴ the

1 Jayasekara, "Femininity and the Position of Women in Ancient Rome", 1987, p. 36; Cartwright, "The Role of Women in the Roman World", 2004; Richard A. Bauman "Although never allowed to hold office or to vote, Roman women played an important, and often -in spite of determined resistance- decisive role in public affairs." *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome* (1994).

2 Kiribamune, "Women at the Crossroads: A Sri Lankan Perspective", 1990, p. 16.

3 *Sri Lankawe Ithihasaya*-Part I, 2003, pgs. 119, 190.

4 Jayasekara, "'Women in Politics during the Julio - Claudian period of the Roman Empire'", 1999, pgs. 94,99. Kiribamune, "Women at the Crossroads: A Sri Lankan Perspective", 1990, p. 18.

two contexts have not been brought into one platform where a parallelism could be drawn. Also, the subject has not been studied with adequate reference to male political chauvinism.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative research using both primary (ancient sources) and secondary (modern scholarly analyses) literary sources such as Mahawamsa (5th C CE) and the works of Tacitus (109 A.C.E) and Suetonius (121 AD), and the works of Bauman and Kiribamune respectively. Analysis of qualitative data, categorization and streamlining of those data to definite patterns of female reliance on poison and conspiracy, and comparative analysis of the two female groups were used in this study.

Results and Discussion

Richard A. Bauman says “Although never allowed to hold office or to vote, Roman women played an important, and often -in spite of determined resistance- decisive role in public affairs” *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome* (1994). This is a positive view opposed to Sirima Kiribamune's oriental ideology that features women's “precarious”⁵ position in politics and in which the Sri Lankan queens are viewed as “mere pawns in the game of politics”,⁶ despite their exhibition of great scale political dynamism. Citing Tacitus, a reliable source among modern critics, Jayasekara mentions that emperor Augustus' wife Livia led conspiracies against Augustus' potential successors, intending to make Tiberius, her son from the previous marriage, the successor.⁷ According to Tacitus, Livia allegedly poisoned Augustus⁸ to ensure Tiberius' enthronement and gradually exercised limitless power hindering Tiberius' imperial authority.⁹ Similarly, Agrippina the Younger, the wife of Emperor Claudius, led conspiracies against her enemies and, with her overbearing persona, persuaded Claudius to declare Nero, her son from a previous marriage, his successor.¹⁰ Referring to Suetonius's

5 Ibid. p. 19.

6 Ibid.

7 Jayasekara, “Women in Politics during the Julio - Claudian period of the Roman Empire”, 1999, p. 94

8 *Annals*, 1.5.

9 Tranquillus, Suetonius, “The Lives of the Twelve Caesars”, Tiberius L22.

10 Ibid., 24.

view of Agrippina as an “ambitious, masculine and despotic” empress, Jayasekara reflects on the political dynamism explicit in Agrippina who even killed Claudius with poisoned mushrooms.¹¹ Further, the fact that Nero assassinated her¹² shows the extent to which Agrippina's use of overweening power challenged the male political chauvinism. Thus both these women played a decisive role in politics through their resort to poison and conspiracy.

In Sri Lanka, queen Anula of Anuradhapura (48-44 B.C) used her seductiveness as a tool of self-empowerment and wielding sovereign authority.¹³ Based on *Mahawamsa*, Kiribamune mentions that during her rule of four months, Anula killed five husbands, the last of whom she killed in favor of political autonomy yet, by means of overrating the notion that kingship was “a man's preserve”,¹⁴ Kiribamune seems to downplay the female energy manifested in Anula, as she remarks that Anula assumed control only after her husbands.¹⁵

Leelawathi of Polonnaruwa, who ruled the country thrice from 1197-1209 AD, obtained power owing to the conspiracies of the supportive generals¹⁶ and exercised sovereign authority over the country. In this regard, Kiribamune's view of women being “political pawns” and owing their empowerment to a chaotic situation where men had no “legitimate right” to rule, is noteworthy. For, Kiribamune seems to have disregarded the female might and potential that facilitated queens such as Leelawathi to come to power repeatedly amid resistance. Further, with regard to both these queens, Kiribamune's view of female empowerment as the “last resort” is contestable since similar to the powerful Roman empresses who were resisted by males, both Anula and Leelawathi were challenged by males for the political dynamism they exercised despite their gender.¹⁷

Thus, the Roman women showed an advanced political dynamism in overthrowing a powerful male through poison and conspiracy in order to empower another male. It signifies subordination to male dominance but,

11 Ibid., Claudius, 44.

12 Ibid., Life of Nero 34

13 *Mahawamsa*, 34.

14 Kiribamune, “Women at the Crossroads”, 1990, p. 18.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid, p. 19.

the very subordination was challenged by these women by dominating over the new rulers.¹⁸ The Sri Lankan women succumbed to men but exercised power by manipulating them through feminine charm. All the examples of royal women, however, show how female political dynamism survived amid male political chauvinism, though with resistance.

Conclusion

As shown above poison and conspiracy facilitated the ancient Sri Lankan queens to exercise more power and authority than Roman women, as they directly ruled the country themselves, while the latter empowered their sons and found legitimacy for self-empowerment. In both contexts the desire for self-empowerment, due to which they inflicted harm upon males, and sometimes upon women, drove them to exercise immense political dynamism. The fact that all these females experienced a wave of resistance by males suggests the intensity of female political dynamism in the two highly male chauvinist backgrounds. Thus, from the position of mere “pawns” the ancient Roman and Sri Lankan women's position can be elevated to a sphere where they played a decisive role in politics as they displayed political dynamism against male political chauvinism.

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18 Jayasekara, “Women in Politics during the Julio - Claudian period of the Roman Empire”, 1999, Pages 96, 107; Kiribamune, “Women at the Crossroads”, 1990, p. 18.

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