

# THE MIDDLE PASSAGE: MIGRATION AND DISPLACEMENT OF SRI LANKAN TAMIL WOMEN OF THE DIASPORA

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*The article attempts to grapple with different facets of marginalisation produced by a specific type of Diasporic activity – as women, as Sri Lankan Tamils, and as participants that must negotiate a process that is at once transnational and postcolonial. Through the examination of different cultural modes of expression, novels, stories, and pamphlets, it attempts to answer as to how the Sri Lankan Tamil woman, away-from-home, makes sense of her world and how she sees it vis-à-vis her 'homeland.' Though displacement itself contains the liberatory potential, is this 'truth' of a better world often distorted by the indirect and direct controls imposed by a hegemonic West? Through the metaphor of the woman's body, the author attempts to map the contours of identity-politics that are at play on trans-border women. By marking the different phases in the process of Tamil migration, she notes the change that has come about in the constitution of 'nationalist' identities, the role of transnational locations, and in the final phase, the reformulation of identity with changes in class. Of particular interest here is the continuation of the Tamil nation, and the role it plays in the re-production of the marginalisation of women. What way out is there then? For the author, there is a 'middle passage,' one that re-negotiates the contours of her own body, and thus her nation, through her own modes of expression, not radically or transgressively, but less violently.*

## Introduction

The primary aim of this essay is to locate the different productions of a postcolonial feminist consciousness among Sri Lankan Tamils of the Diaspora. I look at the migration of Sri Lankan Tamil women to western countries from the '80s to the present, in the context of the discursive and material structures of Tamil nationalism, the Tamil national liberation war in Sri Lanka, and the ensuing displacement of people from their 'homelands.' I approach the movement as signifying both migration toward and displacement from an imagined and constructed and yet social (socio-political) space of nation and homeland. For Tamil women, both the movement away and toward a renewed negotiation with the concept of Tamil nationalism, emerging from the metropolises (cosmopolitan centers of the west) of postcolonial space, implies a negotiation with manifold structures of how the transnational dynamic works. The production of nationalism and feminism emerge from within the metropolis and form a community of both marginalised and empowered people (women), who are still at the stage of migration and therefore are inexorably in transition. Specifically, I look at cultural expressions of these women, communal organizations, pamphlets, entertainment, and overt political engagement in order to seek out practices that are in constant dialogue with postcolonial feminism as it has been explored by Gayatri Spivak, Gloria Anzaldúa<sup>1</sup> and others. Much of my study is intertwined with my own diasporic activity in the late-'90s when I resided in the USA and traveled

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<sup>1</sup> G. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* in P. WILLIAMS AND L. CHRISMAN, Ed., *COLONIAL DISCOURSE AND POSTCOLONIAL THEORY*, 66-110(1993); G. ANZALDUA, *BORDELANDS/LA FRONTERA, THE NEW MESTIZA* (1987).

between diasporic spaces and in that regard is more a close discursive study of the political expression of women than a descriptive sociological one. As I continue to negotiate with the diaspora from the displaced status within Sri Lanka, displaced from the war-ridden and war-ravaged north of Sri Lanka that I call home, I see that the diasporic space of Sri Lankan Tamils is ominously visible and powerful within the national, the transnational and the postcolonial. Different studies of the diaspora speak to the powerful hold that the nation and the transnational has on the diasporic imagination and how that impacts on events 'back home'.<sup>2</sup> But very few have focussed on women and their negotiations. The negotiated positions of displaced Tamil women entail a differentiated interpellation of these women within the postcolonial space. I study these negotiations as exemplifying but at the same time, producing the constructs for a postcolonial space within both the metropolis and the 'homeland.' Tentatively I call this process, 'The Middle Passage'.<sup>3</sup>

Transnationality shakes up the foundations of a logo centric mapping and division of the globe into First world and Third world, North/South, and East/West. It exposes on the one hand, the Third World at the very door step of the white portals of the First world, and on the other, the First World within the belly of the Third World in the form of money lending agencies, NGOs, gun-running and technologies. It questions the linearity of travel by positing multiple narratives of migrations. In this regard, Arjun Appadurai creates 'scapes' of flows of capital, ethnicity, media, and ideas that criss-cross the world in multiple paths and do not fit any narrative of economic flow.<sup>4</sup> The disjunctures are massive and peculiar. He calls them 'ethnoscapes, mediascapes; technoscapes, finanscapes and ideoscapes' and disjunctures within disorganized capitalism.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Specifically, Tamils of the diaspora and in Sri Lanka have had to negotiate both with the dominant Sinhala state of Sri Lanka and the rigid control of community exercised by the Tamil militant organization 'Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam' (LTTE) whose extremist and militarist stances have created a culture of fear and anxiety among the Tamil polity. Politics within the Tamil people is always a negotiation with the national spaces controlled by the LTTE. ['Eelam' or 'Tamil Eelam' is the imagined state fought for by the militants]. See R. HOOLE ET AL., *THE BROKEN PALMYRAH: THE TAMIL CRISIS IN SRI LANKA—AN INSIDE ACCOUNT* (1991) for a crucial activist critique of Tamil Nationalism and for specificities of women's participation refer one of Rajani Thiranagama's chapters called 'No more Tears Sister.' It is widely recognized that Rajani Thiranagama, an academic attached to the Medical Faculty of the University of Jaffna, was killed by the LTTE in 1989 for her co-authorship of this book. For other critical accounts of gendered nationalism. Also see N. Rajasingham, *Construction of Gender and Political Agency in Nationalism: The Experiences of Tamil women*, MA Thesis, London, SOAS, (1998); S. Maunaguru, *Gendering Tamil Nationalism: The Construction of 'woman' in Projects of Protest and Control*, in P. JEGANATHAN & Q. ISMAIL, Ed., *UNMAKING THE NATION: THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY AND HISTORY IN MODERN SRI LANKA* 158-175 (1995); S. SUMATHY, *MILITANTS, MILITARISM AND THE CRISIS OF TAMIL NATIONALISM* (2003) and S. Sumathy, *The Rise of Militant Tamil Nationalism, its Assumptions and the Cultural Production of women*, in S. H. HASBULLAH AND B. MORRISON, Ed., *SRI LANKAN SOCIETY IN AN ERA OF GLOBALISATION* (2004). For an account of the Diaspora, See R. CHERAN, *THE SIXTH GENRE: MEMORY, HISTORY AND THE TAMIL DIASPORA IMAGINATION* (2001). This document is quite an extensive description of the mobilization and control of the Tamil community by the LTTE.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term 'Middle Passage,' which describes the arduous and tortuous passage of slaves from West Africa to the Americas across the Atlantic to connote the passage of Tamil women's passage across nations, consciously. See L. BENNETT, JR., *BEFORE THE MAYFLOWER: A HISTORY OF BLACK AMERICA* 48-51 (1982). Although these different groups of people are situated in different historic moments of colonialism and postcolonialism, the passage of women as illegal refugees force them to travel in material and ideological conditions similar to those of the times of slavery.

<sup>4</sup> A. Appadurai, *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy*, in P. WILLIAMS AND L. CHRISMAN, Ed. *COLONIAL DISCOURSE AND POSTCOLONIAL THEORY* 324-39 (1993).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, at 328

Appadurai theorizes the transnational as global cultural economy. The persuasiveness of his framework, which performs the cultural and political disjunctures of the narratives of transnationality lies in drawing out differentiated movements that redraw the map of the globe. Yet, in my view, Appadurai here avoids dealing with the specifics of class, gender, and ethnic relations that may be in disjuncture, but not necessarily so. As Stuart Hall says the connections between the disjunctures become clear when one examines the specific contexts within the micro-political.<sup>6</sup> For example, within the specific instance of Sri Lanka, its politics and political economy, the intersections of class, gender, ethnicity, among other factors, play a major role in creating certain conditions of movement. Only a macro theory of global cultural economy is possibly residing in disjuncture. The more specific perspectival analyses and approaches cannot afford to celebrate or even merely delineate that disjuncture when points of contact are in movement among the disjunctures.

My intention is not to provide a holistic approach; rather, I hope to foreground the dynamic of gender relations in the movement of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora and look at the intersections of those with other points of disjuncture: class, ethnicity, and those of the nation. I look at the gendering of the nation and of class relations and the nationalization of Sri Lankan Tamil women, as they move along points of disjuncture and yet at the same time carry Sri Lankan passports. There may be no holistic approach; nor is there a vacuum between points of disjunctures that allows the imagined community of Sri Lankan Tamils (women) to negotiate freely with borders and boundaries. The postcolonial global remapping has redrawn the lines on the globe. Yet these lines are entrenched in the structure of the international arrangement of the globe. It is important to recognize that, even as transnationalism seeks to question the basis of neat demarcations of nations and borders, flows of 'scapes' insist on the nation, the transnational and the inter-nation(al). The nation is predicated upon the viability of the international, the power and political relations so manifest in a UN resolution and trade negotiations. This entrenched nationalized politics of the inter-national may be over run by the flow of transnational capital, but precisely by that same logic, keeps firmly in place a colonial discourse of borders and boundaries. Where Europe is concerned this is clearly evident in recent events. Michael Mann calls the EC (European Community) a 'capitalist club' with great potential for increasing Euro-racism, targeting immigrants in particular.<sup>7</sup> The borders are closed to immigration from the south and east which bears testimony to the difficult terrain of the transnationality itself. Even as walls are being brought down within an increasingly eurocentric Europe, border patrol is stepped up in the South West of USA to keep Mexican immigrants

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<sup>6</sup> S. Hall, *The Local and the Global: Globalisation and Ethnicity*, in A. McCLINOCK, A. MUFTI AND E. SHOHAH, Ed., *DAUGHTERS OF THE DIASPORA: GENDER, NATION AND POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES* 173-187 (1997). For a critically political view of the diaspora, see K. Toloyan, *The Nation-State and its Others: In lieu of a Preface*, 1 *DIASPORA* 3-7 (1991).

<sup>7</sup> M. Mann, *Nation State in Europe and other Continents: Diversifying, Developing, Not Dying*, in G. BALAKRISHNAN, Ed., *MAPPING THE NATION* 308 (1999).

out. In other words, the migrant woman is subjected to a euro-centric renationalization of the world in which the First World multinational borders become active.<sup>8</sup>

The scenario for women migrating from the multi-national Third world to western spaces of nationalist hegemonic power is set within this double bind of border and boundary. Borders can be crossed but boundaries are circumscribed. When Gloria Anzaldua came up with an expressionist and productionist use of the term *Borderlands* as the space of postcolonial predicament, she emphasized the need to approach the negotiation and resultant power of women's movements with the structures at hand, emphasizing the borderland as a vantage space of the disadvantaged, the marginalised and the disenfranchised. For the migrant transnational, the vantage point of the borderland resides not so much in its transgressive power as in the unavailability of the nation and the inter-national as empowering trajectories for migrating, non-traveling women. In the Sri Lankan case, the contested borders of Sri Lanka and the borders of Tamil nationalism prepare the case for the general undermining of borders, rendering the nation unavailable.

### I. The Crisis of the Nation: Cruising the International

The very interesting formulation about the nation here, the 'unavailability' of the nation, I draw from Valentine Daniel's theoretical musings on the constructions of the Sri Lankan and Tamil nations after independence.<sup>9</sup> Following his own development of the term, I use it to reflect on the borderland status of Tamil women within the larger community of the Tamil nation. According to him, the unavailability of the Sri Lankan nation for Tamils is crucial in the general undermining of the nation. In the Sri Lankan case, the contested borders of Sri Lanka and the borders of Tamil nationalism prepare the case for the general undermining of borders, rendering the nation unavailable. This adds to the layers of inquiry, contestation, and remapping, respecting the multinational.

The increasing marginalisation of the Tamil population from the imagination of the Sri Lankan nation, from the 50's onwards, has increased the possibilities of the population to traverse a transnational space within and outside Sri Lanka. This displacement of the national has far flung consequences, both for the national and the inter-national: the transnational space. Displacement through migration and migration through displacement are the pivots in a process of remapping the globe. In doing this, I am not I hope, invoking and privileging notions of 'exile' and 'hybridity' as

<sup>8</sup> The borderland problematic reminds me of the poetic lines of Sri Lankan-Canadian Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta who mourns the loss of 300 South Asian refugees drowned when a boat to Italy sank. Many of these refugees were from Sri Lanka.

*'am I one of those three hundred south Asian 'fugees  
drowned in this January of '97 so that  
Italy can pass into a Europe without borders, and a world in chains.'*

Aay what kinda Indian Arr U: an epic poem. Chapbook 13 (1997).

<sup>9</sup> V. DANIEL, CHARRED LULLABIES: CHAPTERS IN AN ANTHROPOGRAPHY OF VIOLENCE 166 (1996). The starting point for Daniel is the narratives of Sri Lankan Estate Tamils, perhaps the most marginalised of all the Tamil groups in Sri Lanka. Given my cultural and praxical distance from the estate Tamil, or Up Country Tamils, I do not actively engage with their writings here. Occupying a uniquely disenfranchised position within Sri Lanka, many of them being stateless, the community has had very little recourse to migrating westward although many have been forced to 'expatriate' to India. Daniel too uses women's narratives centrally although he does not make any distinctive point about gender relation.

sites of discourse that break down and intervene in dominant discourses of nation, nationalism, borders, and boundaries. To do so would be to reduce the postcolonial to a one-dimensional level of operation which has been contested, but also at the same time been accepted by many who see postcolonial theory as emanating from metropolitan sites of power. While I recognize the subversive strategies of displacement, I emphasize its fraught nature and want to be cautious about possible appropriations by a complaisant academy.

As I cast my remarks on the movement of Sri Lankan Tamil women to the west and their renewed intervention in the politics of colonial and postcolonial mapping and remapping, I cannot help but muse on how messy nationhood, borders, and boundaries have become and yet how tenaciously they are being reinscribed by immigration, language, marriage, and refugee laws that protect traditional and expansionist national boundaries. For the migrant woman who has undergone untold hardship in negotiating the middle-passage, the opportunities and the liberatory potential provided by 'hybridity,' available to empowered literati are curiously missing. Similarly, feminism as it is articulated through a performance of the individual's body also lacks credibility, as the body is reduced to the land and through land to the nation. This curious lack of available positions reasserts the viability of the borderland that Anzaldua speaks of, for transnational women, transnational Sri Lankan women, who have lost all claims to the space of the national and yet are compelled to reimagine it. This space becomes an active and dynamic borderland of the transnational. The 'middle passage' sums up in many ways the fraught nature of crossing, passing, and redrawing the nation differently. In the process, the woman of the borderland, tangential both to the nation and to the universal, emerge as the collective vantage point of departure for me.

For women, the unavailability of the nation is an expression of their being removed from the public sphere of its enunciation. Yet within the complex structure of the flows of 'scapes,' women have to negotiate with one or more of them in their inter-national movement. Migrant women embark on unsafe journeys that put under erasure the distinctions of gender and thereby increase the dangers faced by them.

In the case of the woman, this 'denationalization' leads to a form of de-subjectivization of postcolonial gender in the transnational space, as she struggles with both the insistence and the erasure of her identity in the process. They embark on arduous journeys in which they face, in addition to the risks of death and deportation, rape, other forms of sexual harassment, imprisonment by travel agencies, in all of which they lose control of their *own* agency; and possible social and political ostracization. Yet these novel travelers, who newly chart unknown routes to a 'New World' also, chart new routes toward a feminist consciousness; this consciousness arises from the migration and displacement of postcolonial (Sri Lankan Tamil) women who traverse the middle passage, the borderland, and continue to work within that space of the transnational.

The lines of the border and boundaries, whether drawn on the global map or delineated in the contours of the woman's body, are part of a national and inter-national political make-up where the postcolonial is always already gendered in its visibility. This complexity of borders and boundaries and strategies that transgress and undermine their ideologies are the legacy of the postcolonial woman who crosses not as a subject of the international order but as a migrant subject to its delineations. Her identity is derived from this network of postcolonial mapping that defines my subject not as the human subject but as the migrant woman. To reiterate: she carries the land on her back wherever she goes.

The transnational movement of Sri Lankan refugees of all ethnicities from the urban centers and villages of the war-torn north and east is a particular performance of the national space within their inter-national movements. Tamil migrations crisscross across the globe through Singapore, Moscow, Nairobi, Ports in the West Indies, traverse a non linear pattern of travels to elude the logic of ever-tightening immigration controls against those signs that mark the migrant as Sri Lankan, who is particularly targeted for scrutiny at immigration ports.<sup>10</sup> The internationalized travels of these nontraditional postcolonial explorers are expertly handled by travel agencies of legendary ill repute and fraud, a machinery that dehumanizes and denationalizes the product smuggled through and across as contraband.<sup>11</sup> This entails in theoretical terms a particular form of *denationalization* of the migrating peoples. The migrant as contraband is de/re/nationalized in peculiar ways. Thus illegal travelers from Sri Lanka try their best to hide all markers of their Sri Lankan nationality, especially Tamil nationality, in border crossings into the 'west.' When the migrant crosses illegally from the national site of Sri Lanka into the transnational, the 'ritual' of denationalization marks the postcolonial political drama of the high seas and the 'friendly skies.' It is required that she, the bearer of a 'valid' Sri Lankan/non-Sri Lankan passport (perhaps Indian, many of which can be purchased), shredded it and flushed it down the toilet of the air craft taking her to the country of the final destination, so that the countries of origin and departure would not be easily traceable by immigration authorities.

## II. Borders and Lands: The Woman at the Crossways

But these women still manage to operate with all those odds against them, as active postcolonial women engaging with these trying issues. In one of the transnational Tamil periodicals, *Manitham*, published from Western Europe, Switzerland in this case, I come across a story by Ananthi, tracing the path of the migrant across nations, narrated in the voice of a woman. This is a retelling of a marriage process where the mother sends her daughter off to an unknown land and an unknown bridegroom. For the mother left behind, the daughter's fate can be discerned only through a snapshot, a representation of happiness relayed from abroad. For the daughter in the new land, the simplicity of the mother's request stands in contrast to what is unexplainable about the mother-daughter bond and relationship, the ties with the land left behind. In Ananthi's words:

*Amma, what could you do? After I came away to Colombo you would have heaved a sigh of relief; at least your duties by one child are done and over with. 'A photo, both standing together, you must send,' amma said. How she suffered to bring us up. My thoughts came in waves.*<sup>12</sup>

When the national and the international trajectories become disempowering and desubjectivizing processes, the land becomes unmarked. In this instance here, Anzaldua's borderland marks, not a heightened sense of one's marginal subjectivity, but a retelling of the story of the woman's body through a reinscription of the Middle Passage. Thus, we have a fictionalized account of the Middle Passage. Mild as it may appear, when compared to some of the horrific details of crossing the borders that I have heard, as cultural production, I find it tellingly circumspect. The story continues:

<sup>10</sup> DANIEL, *supra* note 9, at 175-189

<sup>11</sup> DANIEL, *supra* note 9, at 176.

<sup>12</sup> Ananthi, *Maraiyatha Thuyarangaal*, 16 MANITHAM 27-28 (1992). The texts of Ananthi, Bhamathi, Nirupa are translated from the Tamil by me for the purposes of this study.

*"Be ready by ten the borderman said. We set out at night. For about 2-3 hours there was a car ride. We had to get off some where unknown; unmarked. Terrible dead of night. But in the snowfall everywhere we could see each other's face, ghostly pale stiff. We did not know what could happen. On top of the unbearable cold it appeared we had to walk up the hill. The cold whooshed through piercing my ears, my feet were plain numb; the sapaathu<sup>13</sup> were bought in Ceylon. We did not know where we were. Do not talk to the others were the orders. My feet stumbled, amma!!! and the next moment I was rolling; somebody ran down, held me. The river below flowed peacefully (27-28)."*

The fragmented narrativity marked by shifts between a collective 'we' to an unsaid 'I' brings up the problematic of the speaker's subjectivity for me. It speaks to me of the unmarked territory of the postcolonial woman, thrown headlong into a space of marked territory and marked subjectivity, at the point of the illegal border crossing. I see the narrative as disjunctured in its linearity, following patterns of an exteriority (as opposed to the interiority) of images. Colloquially, narrative Tamil does not have a marked self-conscious first person, which emphasizes the fragmentation, particularly in translation. I recognize this is as a general feature of much of Sri Lankan Tamil writing in its colloquial form. Yet, I also see a more marked form of this problematic in the contradictions of the transnational space, as women's articulation grapples with the boundaries of the 'self,' so crucial to the discourses of the centers of power that they encounter and so insistently emphasized by the photographs they carry, the passports. The self-consciousness of the desubjectivized and denationalized narrative of the migrant woman, refugee, illegal, immigrant, wife, sister, bride-to-be, calls for a politics of the gendered self of the borderland. But at the same time, what I find is the non-integrated self, the woman who is on the continuum of belonging nowhere and is increasingly placed within a non-national and yet nationalist diaspora.

Any study of this continuum of migration and displacement entails an examination of the historical movements of migration. The diaspora of Sri Lankan Tamils are made up of several differentiated phases of migrations.<sup>14</sup> Although Tamil migration from Sri Lanka dates from the '50s, immediately after independence and the onset of the break down of the Sri Lankan nation, the self conscious articulation of a publicized political Tamil nation has its beginnings only in the migrations from the late 70's onwards, when larger numbers of middle-to lower middle-class students migrated. The routes of these later phases of migrants as students/refugees on forged passports and assumed names are necessarily many and non-linear. They are circuitous. The transgression of national states and the assumed natural conditions of class and gender by new migratory patterns undermine the sanctity of world class travel, tourism, and colonial explorations or the travels of an earlier generation of upper middle-class professional Tamils who sought the conditions of the pre-independence English-only environment for their children.

For these later phases of postcolonial marginalised diasporas, whose migrations are sparked by economic issues as much as political issues, the entrenched crisis of the Sri Lankan nation and the crises of the boundaries of the inter-national, the European borders for instance, render an articulation of the Sri Lankan nation, unsafe and unviable. Thus, the increased postcolonial

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<sup>13</sup> A form of colloquial Tamil/Sinhala for shoes, borrowed from, I believe, Portuguese.

<sup>14</sup> DANIEL, *supra* note 9, at 154-93

consciousnesses of these later phases of migrants are necessarily subversive of the borders of the Sri Lankan and the European nation.

But this in turn leads to a quest for the 'Tamil' nation within the transnational. To survive in the non-Tamil national space, a reimagination of Tamil becomes necessary. In the context of marginalisation within the metropolis, transnational 'hybridity' acts as a space to reimagine the safe space, the national space, with a crucial difference from the one left behind: it is a space drained of contradictions. In other words, this phase of immigrants, students, and small numbers of refugees are more consciously postcolonial, marking their relations to the empire and the predominantly Sinhala Sri Lankan state by proclaiming an assertive nationalism that harks forward to the Tamil state and Tamil nationalism. Hence we have the birth of the Tamil nation, 'Tamil Eelam' in the diasporic imagination.

### III. Reimagining the Nation: Balasubramaniam and the Eighties

The diaspora of the first, and more importantly, second phases of migrants, construct a space of a community through the *availability* of the Tamil nation-state, corresponding to the emergence of the militant nationalist *cry* in the late '70s and early '80s forwarded primarily by student and disillusioned middle-class leftists. This space of the nation merely follows the public space of a masculine discourse of nation: the nation as deeply, dichotomized between the male and female principles. Even the active participation of women is centered on the sublation and subsuming of the discourse of the woman's body into a discourse of masculinist metaphysics of the active male and passive woman/land. Given the structure of the gendered discourse of the nation (Tamil), gender politics find only an oblique and tactical expression within it.

In this regard, I would like to look at one instance of this brand of gendered nationalism that serves to re-territorialize the space of the transnational as a gendered national space: Rajeswari Balasubramaniam's novel *Oru Kodai Vidumurai* (One Summer Holiday).<sup>15</sup> The story, set in the early '80s, is about a young Sri Lankan Tamil man, Paramanathan's, eager but hesitant *journey* back to his country where he runs into his former lover, who after being raped by the Sinhala army is offered the hand of marriage by a young nationalist reformer. Paramanathan's sister, in the meantime, has resolved to marry a man of a lower caste against her family's wishes. At the same time, Paramanathan's marriage to an English woman founders as they both grow apart, the Tamil national space acting as a rift between them. This set of male-female relationships, negotiated through the nation, is compounded by another British (white) woman, Lisa, Paramanathan encounters on the plane *journey*, who stands for the 'liberated' feminist who travels, can travel, and stay outside the reach of marriage; she occupies the marked transnational space.

What strikes me as significant about the novel's narrative is the way in which it forces the issue of nation through gender relations. This has been the dominant narrative of Tamil nationalist discourse. Balasubramaniam's take on this is not very different from other texts of nationalist discourse. What interests me here is how the text adapts that consciousness in a particular relation to the burgeoning feminist consciousness of the time. Developing three or four points of stasis for feminist discourse in the constructions of the female figures in the text, she uncompromisingly

<sup>15</sup> R. BALASUBRAMANIAM, *ORU KODAI VIDUMURAI* (1981).



moves them around so that both the Tamil women in Sri Lanka are heterosexually wedded to the reformist nationalist zeal of the times. The nation reformed and cleansed of oppressive class and caste relations is imagined into a community of activists, while those residing in England, including the male protagonist, are torn asunder from one another.

To understand her text better, we need to look at her own location in the diasporic space of England in the early '80s. The beginnings of a militant nationalist consciousness are part of the diasporic activity in England. The beginnings of a highly bourgeois form of Tamil nationalism, tied to language and dispossession, particularly with respect to university admissions, spurs the migration of students and youth in search of education, a middle class activity. But once in Britain they are inserted into a general syndrome, imposed by the colonial commonwealth administration, where the distinctivity of Tamil national sentiment is undermined by the common wealth of immigration. The assertions of growing nationalism during this phase speak of a need to keep the distinctions alive.

The movement of Tamil youth during this phase is productive of a diasporic nationalism, which has been eminently influential in globalising the Tamil national struggle.<sup>16</sup> The networking, organizing support groups and financial arrangements managed by groups like Tamil Refugee Action Group (TRAG), lobbying UN and state organizations to provide support to the struggle, have been part of the phase of self consciously articulating the postcolonial nation of a (Sri Lankan) Tamil 'Home' (land) in the transnational space of Britain. In fact, the directions that the Tamil national struggle has taken may be due, in part, to the transnational space in which it has been fostered, and which, consequently, has led to an intense ideological alienation of its leadership from the people of the north and east of Sri Lanka in its later development in the '90 s. This is starkly evident in the blatant indifference to and disregard for the welfare of the Tamil population on the part of the LTTE. The documents of University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR-J) critically examine the relations between the Tamil people and the militant nationalist movement, the LTTE (Tigers) and other organizations from a human rights perspective, charting the increasing distance between the aspirations of 'civilian' populations and the leadership of the combating groups, particularly the LTTE<sup>17</sup>. The increasing dependence of the Tamil national struggle on the support of expatriates has its class and gender dimensions. While I do not want to simplify a very knotty process, I shall venture thus far to say that the influential sectors of the first and second phases of migrants and immigrants, privileged class wise and dominated by a gendered discourse of land and its signifiers, mobilize the energies of the national from the transnational space of western centers.

Balsubramaniam's reformist-nationalist novel thus makes a case for the mobilization of the expatriates in Britain to help out and 'save' the beleaguered Tamil (woman) nation. In formulating this problem of the nation in 'western' spaces, the text mediates its nationalist ideology through the constructs of the passive raped woman and of the liberal 'western' woman inhabiting the diasporic space of the Tamil male. It is interesting that the male protagonist through his expatriate and selfish individualism is caught between these two countervailing forces of womanhood. But despite this easy dichotomy the novel also hints at a more ominous future.

<sup>16</sup> B. Anderson, *Exodus*, 20 CRITICAL INQUIRY 314 (1994).

<sup>17</sup> UTHR is a small group of ex-university activists and others associated with them operating from spaces of displacement after they were hounded out of the north by the undemocratic practices of the LTTE. The leading members of UTHR are two of the co-authors of *The Broken Palmyrah*.

The liberal freedoms of the English women, particularly of Lisa, Paramanathan's friend, are not necessarily criticized; they occupy an alternative space outside of the Tamil nation. The author here distinguishes between women of different national identifications; and in that renders the romanticism of the national space as passively accepting; opposed to this passivity, the metropolitan space of the two English women allows them to project a more assertive individualist 'feminist' sensibility-women who can break away from marriage or can refuse offers of heterosexual partnership are represented as dynamic.

At this point, I would like to see where exactly does the woman of the diaspora act out within the polarities of the novel? I go to the author here. Rajeswari Balasubramaniam, a nurse, a former Labour Party activist, and a divorced single mother, who has also campaigned for the release of women (Tamil) in detention in Sri Lanka<sup>18</sup> disappears into the dominant discourse of nationalism with its acute forms of gendering. While Paramanathan, the protagonist turns into an emotional destitute, the figure of the 'transnational' Sri Lankan woman, uneasily present by way of the writer, disappears altogether. In the textual signification of the novel, the postcolonial woman, bearing the scars of the land, is yet to speak out oppositionally; the land continues to belong to sons and husbands, the woman bringing the dowry of land along. She could, as Balasubramaniam does, speak in confirmation and affirmation. Tamil nationalism at this point is yet to develop a conscious space for the postcolonial woman where her activity would not be submerged by the metaphors of male/female dichotomies.

#### IV. Victims and Rebels: Toronto Women in the Nineties

Diasporic activity, from the mid-'80s onwards, has increased with the escalation of war, disorder, and dispossession. As refugees from the war torn north and east trickled in and later poured into the urban centers of Southern Sri Lanka, a multitude of those with even the most meager means looked toward shores away, to spillover. While hundreds of thousands of fleeing Tamils seek refuge in South India, those with connections and 'means,' however small they may be, seek a safer place away from the state of dispossession and inactivity surrounding their refugee status in Southern Sri Lanka. Increasingly, a large number of people fleeing persecution, not from the long arm of the state, but from the militarism of various Tamil militant organizations have also compounded the space of the national within the transnational and the global cultural economy. We enter here the third phase, where its overt class overtones are marked by the migration of a non-English speaking 'skilled' and 'unskilled' people. They transform/modify the transnational space of Tamil nationalism, highlighting the class structure of national and inter-national spaces.<sup>19</sup>

The third phase of refugees, who come in the wake of a general dispossession of land and nation, are generally inserted into the 'national' as rebels or as subordinate participants; those who might give money to Tamil militant movements if coerced enough and/or through fear of further dispossession. For these recent migrants, positioned marginally, class wise and in many cases, gender

<sup>18</sup> When Nirmala Nithiyanandan (now Rajasingham) was arrested and imprisoned under the Prevention of Terrorism Act in Jaffna, Sri Lanka in 1982, Balasubramaniam, for whose novel Nirmala wrote the foreword, campaigned for her release in England.

<sup>19</sup> DANIEL, *supra* note 9, at 169- 73.

wise, the nation of 'Eelam' provides the most marked crisis of the transnational. The nation, even the Tamil nation, is an unavailable commodity.

How do women then as doubly displaced and dispossessed survive within these strange contradictions of the nation? The visibility of women and the emergences of women within the transnational spaces plays peculiar role in inter-national politics. They threaten the spaces of the nation and of the inter-national within the transnational. The threats posed at existing structures of borders lead to a retrenchment of those structures where women serve as the markers of the boundaries. Within it the women of the diaspora become the markers of the boundary of the nation both for those within the community and for those outside of it like the British or Canadian State. 'The One Year Rule' of British immigration is a telling example of the way metropolitan national boundaries reaffirm gender distinctions by manipulating the existing structure of gender relations, and thereby participate in the further victimization and marginalisation of immigrant women.<sup>20</sup> According to the 'One Year Rule,' which was in operation in 1999 a person entering the country on the basis of marriage has to stay within the marriage for 12 months before s/he can be given indefinite leave to remain. This has been only slightly modified since then. The definitions of gender and nation and their intersections here mark the boundaries embedded in postcolonial structures and discourse.

This double bind is curiously played out in a number of ways. As women consciously step outside the borders, they carry the nation aboard and, within their own communities, are compelled to keep the flames of the national space alive. The communal is always, negotiated through the national because the national grants them access to the transnational. The oppressive conditions of war and dispossession grant the Sri Lankan, especially the Tamil access to asylum proceedings; national networking opens up possibilities of marriage to unknown and 'never met before' partners abroad. Ethnic and predominantly linguistic marginalisation keeps women of the Tamil diaspora heavily dependent on communal networking and organizational structures based on the construction of the nation. Transnational efforts to help the national back in Sri Lanka become extremely sensitive areas controlled by powerful nationalist groups. Newspapers, news letters, radio services, and even the internet become monopolized by those proclaiming the nation through a rigid control of dissent and through providing services for the community. As Pradeep Jeganathan says nationalist activity has spilled over into cyber spaces, where the construction of the Tamil national space has led to an internationalism that foregrounds the national more than ever before.<sup>21</sup> By asserting the unchallenged dominance of a monolithic Tamil-Sri Lankan space, the transnational becomes monolithic or politically neutral and therefore non-threatening: The nation is the cultural capital of the transnational space. Thus the nation is already a given, even before the asylum-seeker or the immigrant arrives.

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<sup>20</sup> For an explanation of 'The One year Rule' See pamphlet of South Hall Black Sisters, *Abolish the One Year Rule*, London, 1997 and AGAINST THE GRAIN; A CELEBRATION OF SURVIVAL AND STRUGGLE, (1990.) In her essay *Speaking of Women's Lives and Imperialist Economics: Two Introductions* in H. BANNERJEE, Ed. SILENCED, RETURNING THE GAZE : ESSAYS ON RACISM, FEMINISM AND POLITICS 242-260 (1993), M. Silvera examines the way Temporary Employment Visas provided by Canadian Immigration to Caribbean women entering Canada as domestic workers perpetuates the awful working conditions and bondage of these migrant women workers in Canada.

<sup>21</sup> P. Jeganathan, *eelam.com: Place, Nation, and Image-Nation in Cyber Space*, 10 PUBLIC CULTURE 115 (1998).

The nation carried through the passport, through heritage, and through global economic relations into the transnational space goes through mediation with structures at the metropolitan centers where the diaspora may find empowerment largely by proclaiming it. In Toronto, a city that receives the most number of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees and immigrants today, outside of Southern Sri Lanka and South India, the crisis of the woman is acute. Let me give the background to this. Toronto is a city teeming with the activities of the Tamil diaspora. There are several groups that have organized the community socially. Politically, the LTTE and various small independent groups opposed to the LTTE are in operation. Daily Newspapers like *Ullagath Thamilar* (Tamils of the World) sympathetic to the aims of the LTTE and small-scale periodicals like *Thayagam* (Motherland), and *Thedal* (Seeking), opposed to the LTTE, are some of the political expressions of this activity.<sup>22</sup> Yet the mobilization of women as independent political agents within the national-transnational space is slow to take off. The ordinary activities of the diasporic woman are invisible until they reach the level of tragedy and shock. Between 1995-September '97, around eighteen Tamil women have flung themselves down to their deaths from the high-rise apartment dwellings of Toronto. Activists work with social workers and South Asian networks to confront the increasing problem of domestic violence and suicides among Tamil women. This highly disturbing detail of a particular performance of women's bodies and the destruction of women themselves signify for me the ultimate in the crisis of the nation and the crisis of negotiated gender relations with the nation.

In this context, I place and analyze the significance of the work of the Toronto based women's group called Justice for Sri Lankan Women (JSLW), which was active during 1997-2000. It was a group comprising a small number of dedicated Sri Lankan Tamil and Tamil-associated women, whose feminist consciousness is defined by a framework of the Tamil nation. Many of the women in JSLW were feminist activists who took on the tasks of working with the concerns of Tamil women in Toronto. Also, many of the same women have and/or are in the process of struggling with the gendered signifiers of the nation and with the impact of these signifiers on their own lives. Others in the group have struggled against and have been victims of both the Sinhala dominated Sri Lankan state and Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka. Yet, lacking a strong support system outside of the tenuous family and national networks, the Tamil women in Toronto struggle with the means of articulation of a personal and political consciousness-the articulation of being transnational; in turn, the struggles and the boundaries of those struggles consent to the demands of the nation.

In March 1997, the group launched a 'Vigil to End War Crimes Against Women in Sri Lanka.' This protest and demonstration of the group against violence against women in Sri Lanka is a stark expression of the contradictions of the postcolonial feminist consciousness in the transnational. The group is active and conscious of the national violence around them in Toronto and in the homelands of Tamil nationalism, aimed at marginalised Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhala women. Yet, in proclaiming the Tamil woman as the object of their women's agency, the group leaves out the atrocities committed against women by the dominant militant group the LTTE. At this moment of solidarity with the nation-'Tamil'-their cross-national awareness of violence against women in Sri Lanka is erased and their feminist consciousness is displaced onto a narrowly nationalist rallying call

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<sup>22</sup> See R. CHERAN, *THE SIXTH GENRE: MEMORY, HISTORY AND THE TAMIL DIASPORA IMAGINATION* (2001).

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against the brutality of the Sri Lankan army's rape of women in Jaffna. The national within the transnational space is considered too delicate and threatening for the articulation of a transgressive women's consciousness.

To this day, the group remains conflicted over the uncritical nationalist agenda of its protest march. It is significant that the space of Tamil nationalism remains one of the most marked strangleholds for the diaspora. In the flyer announcing the protest march, the graphic of a very 'feminine' woman, chained, calls up the image of passive victimization.<sup>23</sup> This constructed passivity and victim status of women, postcolonial Tamil women, facing the ravages and male dominated atrocities of war, are recouped into a consenting trans- national postcolonial consciousness answering the needs of a militant Tamil nationalism. Yet, I would like to seek in that same constructed passivity, a note of reflection on the state of the diasporic Tamil women's status. But this takes me to another point in the transnational.

The redrawing and remapping involved in migration are subversive and transformative of the boundaries of the nation state as Catherine Nash may say.<sup>24</sup> Yet very often, this process takes place only by draining the transnational of the 'nation' and the 'international.' In other words, displacement takes place through dispossession of land, of all land. Dispossession of land is crucial to all migrators within the Sri Lankan nation- state. Dispossession may hark back to times even before the colonial era. But during colonialism, dis/possession took on overtly territorial connotations continuing onto the fragmentation of nation/s; the Sri Lankan, Tamil, and Muslim nations contest one another for the postcolonial nation space, displacing one another. In this context the dispossession of land leads to displacement: migration, leaving. For some, this entails intense negotiations with fraudulent agencies; for others, fearful and awkward arrangements of marriages with distant subjects. For some, packing bags overnight and leaving; and for yet others, fleeing into the night in terror and walking their way through to safety wherever it might be. But what does it mean for women to be dispossessed within this climate of territorial/national dispossession? Always already dispossessed, how do they negotiate the dispossession of land with which they have been conflated in nationalist discourse and remap their bodies? In order for us to ponder this point more; I would like to bring out instances of the reconstruction of land, even as it is in the process of being dispossessed.

Within the state of dispossession and resultant displacement of the migrant, the ideological crisis of the nation and its unavailability are translated through the body of the woman of the nation. The crisis of the nation precipitates the crisis and the loss of the woman as well. For Regini David, who has a long history of involvement with women and women's issues both in Sri Lanka and in Canada (as member of JSLW as well) and as a former organizer for UNITE (Union of Needlework and Industrial Textile Employees), working with women who daily confront abuse at many levels, at home and in the work place, as factory workers and as home workers, is a crucial part of the postcolonial transnational space in Toronto. In reading the performance piece of Regini, 'I Believed' reproduced here, part of a collaborative effort of women who came together to commemorate the

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<sup>23</sup> JSLW, *Vigil to End War Crimes against Women in Sri Lanka*, Pamphlet, Toronto, 1997.

<sup>24</sup> C. Nash, *Remapping and Renaming: New Cartographies of Identity, Gender and Landscape in Ireland*, 44 FEMINIST REVIEW 39 (1993).

death of several university women killed in Montreal a few years ago, I try to make connections between her text and her own work as a Sri Lankan women's issue activist.<sup>25</sup> In my view, this piece speaks of the connections she makes between the national and the international, and the family and the collective. In a series of questions recalling a catechism, she makes certain connections between the woman and the social space.

*Regi: (in Tamil) I believed, my friend, don't you think we have to work for women's rights?*

*Friend: Excellent. You're modern. So you'd like to sleep with me then.*

.....

*Regi: I believed my sister. Why did you abort your baby?*

*Sister: Because girls are unlucky.*

*Regi: I believed, asked my mother. Why is this happening to us?*

*Mother: Because we are women.*

*Regi: And then I asked my heart. Wake up, it said. So I awoke with a body badly bruised, a spirit nearly broken, a heart burdened with pain. . and I saw myself surrounded in a pot of burning oil.*

Her performance here conjures up for me ideas about how the postcolonial woman's body is performed in alliance with other women's issues. I read Regini's performance, where it swings between the 'I' and the pedagogical 'Woman' and between Tamil and English, as mourning the loss of all the bodies of postcolonial migrant women. The final lines of Regini's performance say:

*Deciding to fight, I escaped to a path of thorns, cutting and clearing a path towards justice and freedom for the next generation.*

Reading these lines laden with a form of universal Christian imagery, I put my literary analyst's mind to work; where do we see evidence of a universal form of 'justice and freedom' for the next generation in these lines? Internationalism is an important movement for anybody interested in praxis. The performance is rooted in the praxis of 'internationalism' through which the narrator and the body of the narrative voice make their peculiar alliances with murdered and abused women. Regini's activism allows her to appropriate the markers of international humanism, words like 'freedom' and 'justice.' Through this impersonal humanism of the body, and by implication, the collectivization of the body, the narrative voice of the postcolonial woman is able to articulate the loss of the subject and body of the abused Tamil woman. The collective identity of women performed here is non-postcolonial, non-Tamil. The bruised and murdered body of the woman is the mediating force of this hope of the postcolonial woman to be assimilated, to be part of the great idea of humanity in the next generation at least: to be woman and to be human. In that case what does the voice speaking in Tamil signify? Where does it reside and whom does it speak to? About what? The voice, mixing Tamil and English together, speaks both to those of the linguistic mainstream and the women of the Tamil diaspora who may be linguistically marginal. Given this bilingual complexity and insecurity, the narrator can only speak in terms of a mainstream universal

<sup>25</sup> R. David, *I Believed*, Performance Manuscript, 1996.

language of 'woman,' 'injustice' and 'freedom.' Paradoxically, Regini's discourse here becomes a performance of the postcolonial body as well, but not necessarily of a conscious Tamil subjectivity. Subjectively, I hear in the narrative, the voice of a woman who has worked with abused women in Toronto; the voice of a woman who publicly mourns the loss of women in Montreal and privately that of Tamil women in Toronto. But again the 'nation' is where her subject position may reside when caught among cultures of multi-layered marginalisations. The loss of the national space for the postcolonial migrant woman in Toronto marks her entry into the discourse of internationalism difficult. Her place is always under erasure.

## **V. The Middle Passage of Feminist Praxis**

Inter-national activism thus can take different forms remarking on the postcolonial differently. At one level, the inter-national predicament of migrating women bestows upon them an international (universal) identity; they become *travelers* as well as migrators. This dynamism inserts them into postcolonial spaces in the metropolitan centers of western powers as 'subjects' of an internationalized trajectory of feminism as well. Sri Lankan Tamils of the diaspora have for years organized themselves internationally through the national space. During the hey day of high flying nationalism the national space of the Tamil homeland or Tamil nationalism acted as a crucial and dominant signifying structure for Tamil-postcolonial articulations. From western Europe, North America, and Australia alone some 35-40 odd periodicals, like *Undha*, *Thoondil*, *Thayagam*, *Pani Malar*, *Thedagam* were being published monthly and periodically by the politically engaged diaspora in the 90s. While they do not have long life spans, other small journals, pamphlets and texts have sprung up that touch upon the diasporic consciousness. For postcolonial women the nation is a structure to mediate from within their own locations. Through a dominant structure they find articulations that lay claim to their own emergences within nationalism. Yet, these emergences were and continue to remain precarious. The marginalisation of prominent women like Nirmala Rajasingham (Nithiyanandan), a one-time Tamil nationalist activist affiliated to the LTTE, bespeaks of the difficult roles that women's bodies play within the national and inter-national spaces. Nirmala's critical appraisal of Tamil nationalism after she left the LTTE in antagonism in 1985, has led to her increased marginalisation and unacceptance within the Tamil community, while her earlier affiliation to militant Tamil nationalism (LTTE) and detention by the Sri Lankan government under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), sparked wide spread campaigns that raised her to the status of a goddess. Her checkered career within and across Tamil nationalism reflects on the contradictory and problematic texture of the postcolonial feminist trajectory. Her activism, which at present has little to do with the national space overtly, have nevertheless secured for her, through her location, a peculiar inter-national space, namely her work with immigration law and participation in the activities of South Asia Solidarity Group. This contradicts Peter Schalk's assertion that Nirmala along with other prominent Tamil feminists Rajani Thiranagama, Sitralega Maunaguru and others are 'western' feminists.<sup>26</sup> Nirmala's dangerously intimate relation to Tamil nationalism then and today nodally sums up the complexity of the competing social conjunctures of the postcolonial trajectory.

<sup>26</sup> P. Schalk, *Women Fighters of the Liberation Tigers in Tamil Ilam: The Martial Feminism of Atol Palacinkam* 14 SOUTH ASIA RESEARCH 163 (1994).

The transnational space brings together the women of the diaspora electronically and in certain instances as travelers as well. For several years now activists and cultural workers in western Europe and Canada have met together to exchange ideas and narratives and to work together politically, examining the reimagination of the nation. The intermediate indeterminacy of the transnational space provides a space of praxis for women to reimagine the national transgressively. In the summer of 1997, I was invited to participate in the events of *Desh Pardesh* in Toronto, a week long celebration of South Asian diasporic activity from across the globe including the sub-continent itself. I became a traveler, traveling to meet fellow Sri Lankan women and men in their activist spaces: the transnational space. My primary contribution was an excerpt from 'In the Shadow of the Gun,' a one-woman performance of women's narratives in the context of war.<sup>27</sup> 'As I conceive it, the performance, which is highly critical of Tamil nationalism, nevertheless carves out a space of the nation as its location of praxis for a politics of postcolonial feminist remapping. In the process of remapping and renaming the woman and the nation, both entities become destabilized.

In the mean time, as part of the festival for *Desh Pardesh*, the Sri Lankan groups were getting ready with their own cultural expressions. Along with performing from 'In the Shadow of the Gun,' I happened to work with JSLW on another play, 'An Old Wives' Tale,' a play on rape in Jaffna in the militarist conditions of the eighties. As the original writer, director, and translator, I saw myself as the transnational translator here. As I flew across the USA from Washington State, where I was temporarily based as a diasporic academic, and across Canada into Toronto, I was struck by my mediator role, the in-between, forever. The play itself interestingly dealt with rape by the army and went onto examine 'rape' of the woman's body and mind by nationalist politics. The Tamil women there appropriated the 'rape' scene of Jaffna and lovingly transformed that national space into the transnational; unlike the highly nationalist vigil the same group organized against rape by the Sri Lankan army in March that same year, in this instance, they brought in their own experiences of violence, strife, and stigma into the national scene of rape. The actors, women who took part in the play, added their own powerful, subversive voices of the Toronto space to those voices of the women who performed it originally in Jaffna, Sri Lanka.

Conferences that are called 'Women's Meetings' and 'Literary Events' have served to bring together Tamils and importantly Tamil women under siege from several quarters. This has helped foster the reimagination and the national and international spaces of women in radical and subversive ways. A literary text that has emerged out of these 'Events' is a volume of poetry called *Maraiyatha Marrupathi*, the title of which I have translated as 'The Persistent Half.' I quote from one of the poems by Nirupa:<sup>28</sup>

*nut*  
*Wbore*  
*unwomanly, virago they fling words to wound me.*  
*To redeem the land*  
*and the nation's rights!*

<sup>27</sup> S. SUMATHY, *THIN VEILS: PERFORMING ACT/IVISM; IN THE SHADOW OF THE GUN AND THE WICKED WITCH* (2003).

<sup>28</sup> Nirupa, *Palamagum Mudangal*, *MARAIYATHA MARUPATHI* 39 (1993).



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*the heroism of the women! These are the slogans.*

*To those who preached, set up doors and bars and built a prison-house for me.*

*Unto their deaf ears, I loudly announce*

*I am slowly gaining in strength even as they cripple me.*

These words of Nirupa crystallize in verse, the borderland, the middle passage of Tamil women's political space as it becomes gendered and engendered throughout the trajectory of the postcolonial conditions of nationalism. In the poem 'Aann' ('The Male'), another poet in exile represented in the anthology, Pamini, talks about the invading mercenary army, seen as violating the nation's/woman's body. She collapses the body of the land and nation and the body of the woman into one construct.<sup>29</sup> Nothing very novel here. But what may be refreshing is that she moves from the image of the invading army to that of the invasion of her body by the sons of the soil. This is where I see the twist and an appropriation of the metaphor of 'woman' from mainstream nationalist discourse.

Migrations from east to west, south to north, and in reverse, are constructed through paths, the Middle Passage, which have structured nations within a global class and gender system. The international space is rendered a site of labor and importantly gendered labor relations. The translation of these inter-national relations into the transnational space becomes a difficult terrain; the Middle Passage of alienated labor. This is what I find in Ananthi's poem about alienated labor in an alien land published in the same issue of *Manitham* where the story about 'border crossing' appears.<sup>30</sup> Alienated labor is rendered in transnational terms of displacement and of displaced sensibility, transforming the narratives of class conflicts and class. In the words of the poem:

*Every day*

*These eyes,*

*poetic,*

*glance out the window, heavy with longing*

*delighting in the day outside,*

*As hands harden in familiarity*

*with,*

*machines on the line.*

*There is no heat in my breath.*

*It is cramped in the cold. Long Days.*

The alienation of the worker, the woman-worker here, signified through poetic allusions to the feminine, somewhat lost in translation, is spelt out in the fragmentation of the worker's and the narrator's subjectivity. It is alienated labor in an alien land. Its assertions are about non-personal struggle. Class here becomes a reflection about the alien land and the subject's displacement. The sensibility of the migrant laborer here can engage in production only through a disjuncture within her poetic discourse. The self is erased and re-erased producing the body of labor, collapsing the sensibility of the woman with that of the laborer.

Yet, as activists and workers, women find a form of identification with the political processes of activism and agency; it becomes the terrain of praxis. For the June 1996 *Dash Padres* festival Regina

<sup>29</sup> Pamini, *Aann*, MARAIYATHA MARUPATHI 47 (1993).

<sup>30</sup> *Mana Unarmagal*, MANITHAM 15, 16 (June/July 1992).

David, as the then UNITE organizer, presented a slide show of women's work and labor activities. The women workers she represented are predominantly South Asian with many of them being Sri Lankan. The slide show contained narratives of women's lives, their voices. Our contributions to Desh Pardesh for the '97 festival are a continuation of creating this space for women's transnational voices. My performance from 'In the shadow of the Gun,' the production of 'An old wives' tale,' the slide show of Sri Lankan women's paintings of war, coordinated by Rajmohan, a Toronto-based Sri Lankan and I, and Regini David's program on the workers of the company 'Peerless' of Montreal signify the continued participation of the labor of the diaspora within the transnational space of Toronto.<sup>31</sup>

This is our praxis. In pursuing this I take a glance at the journal *Teal* that I had picked up during my stay in Toronto in the summer of '97. *Teal* (Seeking) is the Tamil publication of the non-nationalist Let wing Tamil group 'Thedagam' based in Toronto.

Having a long history of engagement with left wing politics and being opposed to the declared and non-declared nationalism of most Tamil groups in Toronto, the 'Hexagram' group has in fact found it difficult to integrate with the un/willingly nationalist Tamil community at large. This alienation of the group's politics from that of the community has resulted in an interesting rift between some of the women's groups and 'Hexagram' itself. Women and women's groups in Toronto are still trying to find political expression through an independent postcolonial consciousness; in this process they are not exactly at ease with the male dominant public discourses, either of intense left wing or intense nationalist politics. Consequently, for women, politicized within the transnational space, as wives, women-workers, illegal migrants, women, and importantly, Sri Lankan Tamil women, the intense antagonisms between nationalism and left wing non-nationalist politics carry little meaning. On the other hand, the activities of 'Thedagam' do not fully grapple with the alienating discourses of their own practices with respect to the discursive structures of the woman/nation bind. Given the conflation of both within national and inter-national discourses and practices, any activism within the community will need to take account of the interpellation of women's bodies and selves into the global map.

In this climate of political confusion and discursive uneasiness, I enter the scene. As a feminist, who is publicly opposed to the right wing Tamil nationalism of the liberation fighters, LTTE in particular, I was warmly welcomed by the 'Thedagam' group with whose members, both men and women, I spent many long and fruitful evenings. They talked of and recognized their lack of understanding of women's issues and their own alienation. I got myself invited to lead a discussion on postcolonial feminism and nationalism. On another occasion, I was asked to conduct a theater workshop where we discussed feminist theater and women's performance.

While I mulled over the dilemmas and acute political crises of women and land, and their implications for postcolonial feminism, my eyes alighted on a lone poem in *Thedal*, (the journal published by 'Thedagani') by Bhamathi. The poem titled *Suvarotti* (Poster) is about, significantly enough, feminist assertions and collective assertions.<sup>32</sup> In the words of the poem:

<sup>31</sup> I add to this list the very powerful and uncompromising poetry of 'Alliyai' writing from Australia on women's issues. ALIYAI, URATHUP PESU (2000).

<sup>32</sup> Bhamathi, *Suvarotti*, 15 THEDAL 6 (1997).

*In these lines of verse, my poem stands,  
scribbled in a scrawl,  
in the pitch black night, on you, wayside wall.  
In the dawn of tomorrow,  
my sister who walks in modesty and in shame,  
will look up in hope.*

Tamil women and the Tamil people in general have lived through a culture of posters run amok; posters blazoning nationalist rhetoric and/or left-wing politics. It is the daily reality of life in the streets. Here, I see in these lines, a slight appropriation of that culture as the woman-narrator here attempts to insert herself and her narrative into the public sphere of national and poster politics; into the left wing politics of *Thedal* as well. By appropriating the space of the wall in the 'pitch black night,' under cover of the dark, she sees a way of developing a woman's consciousness that is tangentially positioned with respect to nationalism on the one hand and left wing politics on the other. It may see an alliance but one only paradoxical and uneasy.

## Conclusion

The Middle Passage is closely tied to the emergence of women's narratives and articulations as they perform gendered relations in the transnational space. Women travel in the inter-national arrangement of the globe, as migrators from north to south, east to west, and west to east in some contexts, carry colored pocket books called passports that (il)legalize the bearers' entry into western capital(s). The migrant bears her land on her back, in her pottu,<sup>33</sup> in her language, and importantly in her dispossession of land. In this process of traveling across nations, literally invisible as an illegal, and yet as the postcolonial subversion of the colonial, she redraws the contours of her own body, action, and discourse. It is *her* praxis.

The middle passage of migrating women serves to deconstruct the free floating metaphors of travel, 'traveling theory' as Bhabha calls it,<sup>34</sup> and of the transnational. The women make theory by acting out divergently, deconstructing the binary between theory and practice, travel and migration, nation and international. We may begin to forge a deliberate postcolonial feminist consciousness located in praxis and in articulations here. I seek this praxis in the collectivity of my sisters, known and unknown to me, who work through their own cultural articulations and thereby define their relations to me and others in the transnational space. As I conclude, you may wonder why I do not end with a radical and transgressive piece of women's assertion that redraws the map more violently and less obliquely. I could have done so, but then I would have lost sight of some of my own baffling political contradictions and complexities. My conclusive answer to my own question is that as women we have traced the paths of the Middle Passage and that is all I may know now. But I hold onto this as the moment of reflective and productive action through which a general discourse and desire of resistance can be articulated. The postcolonial may begin to refashion the national, international and the transnational here.

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<sup>33</sup> The vermilion dot that many Tamil women wear on their foreheads.

<sup>34</sup> H. K. BHABHA, *THE LOCATION OF CULTURE* 141 (1994).