

**WHY SHE DID IT: BATTLE FOR THE MEANING OF THE FEMALE SUICIDE  
ATTACKERS OF THE LIBERATION TIGERS OF TAMIL EELAM**

By

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## ABSTRACT

Suicide bombings are quickly becoming the tactic of choice for resistance groups around the globe, and increasingly, women are becoming the chosen perpetrators. However, the continued strength of gender roles and stereotypes has created resistance to these new roles. This project argues that narratives surrounding the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) female suicide attackers have been politically effective only when they do not depart significantly from traditional conceptions of women. Narratives that depict female suicide attackers in traditional gender roles are contrasted with those of typically masculine roles. Using narrative theory, two case studies are examined: the LTTE's first and last suspected female suicide attackers, Dhanu and Anoja. A deeper understanding of the manipulations of women's images will potentially help us understand the growing trend of female suicide attacks around the world.

## INTRODUCTION

In Sri Lanka, female combatants of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) wear battle fatigues, move through jungles with Kalashnikovs strapped to their backs, kill the enemy, and are prepared to swallow a cyanide capsule to avoid compromise or capture. They work tirelessly and are prepared to kill any who stand in the way of the Tamil cause, an independent Tamil nation known as Tamil Eelam. They embody characteristics in utter opposition to those reserved for women in conservative Tamil society, and have a reputation for being more ferocious than their male counterparts.

As the Sri Lankan civil war raged on, the LTTE employed more and more women as suicide attackers as part of their larger military strategy. The LTTE female suicide attacker is an extreme departure from the traditional Tamil role. As Arjuna Gunawardena bluntly states, “Women are traditionally seen as ‘life-givers’ rather than ‘life-takers’: the LTTE has turned them into human bombs.”<sup>1</sup> The very existence of the female suicide attacker posed a threat to the conservative society from which she arose. The tensions created by the use of female violence in a conservative society demand a rhetorical explanation. Striving for political popularity in this context, the LTTE found creative ways to frame their female suicide attackers. The LTTE is “one of the few criminal, terrorist, or guerilla groups to fully exploit every element (or stereotype) of womanhood from dutiful daughter to mother to rape victim to ferocious fighter.”<sup>2</sup> Understanding the images that are created and take hold in the larger society has much to tell us about the power of particular rhetorical strategies.

As one scholar noted, “The LTTE’s inclusion of women has also been the focus of global attention, moving between an awe-inspired fascination and a deeply disdainful judgment of the existence of these female combatants.”<sup>3</sup> Between fascination and judgment, narratives have

sprung up around the LTTE's "life-takers" in an attempt to explain these new roles for Tamil women and more palatable for conservative society. The narratives created are typically depictions of disturbed or vengeful women or of motherhood gone overboard. Both of these representations contain justifications for using suicide against an aggressor.

In this project, I study the LTTE's first and last known female suicide attackers. The LTTE's first female suicide attacker, Dhanu, successfully assassinated Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. Her memory has been dominated by claims that she had been raped and was seeking revenge by targeting Gandhi. The LTTE's last known female suicide attacker, Anoja, attempted to kill Sri Lankan Army Commander Serath Fonseka in 2006. Her memory has been dominated by a debate over her suspected pregnancy.

I make several arguments in this project. First, I argue that some of these manipulations, or narratives, have been more effective than others. By this, I mean that the narrative of the rape victim, Dhanu, was an example of effective exploitation by the LTTE because it was reflected in the wider society and picked up and disseminated, almost entirely without critical examination. The mother warrior narrative surrounding Anoja, on the other hand, remained effective mostly within the LTTE community. The backlash to this narrative suggests that it was ineffective in garnering support from external audiences. I argue that both of these narratives were intended to cater to traditional society, and so include representations of women that close off possible avenues for agency and counteract the realities of the women's violence.

Second, I argue that the interpretation and remembrance of female suicide attackers is a political process that robs them of agency. Confronted with the violence of female suicide attackers who break so dramatically with traditional notions, the narratives surrounding them aim to resolve these tensions by rationalizing their motivations for violence. The purpose of this

project is to shed light on these narratives as a rhetorical means to neutralize the threat that female suicide attackers pose to the conservative Tamil society. If women are capable of committing extreme acts of violence, then conservative gender roles lose their explanatory power. Understanding this rhetorical strategy will add to discussions of the importance of narrative to ease our anxieties about material violence as well as for women's agency.

Thus, rhetorical analysis is necessary. How people get remembered is just as, if not more, important as what they actually were. The narratives we create, in turn, create the women that they describe and ought to be examined. While we can't answer questions about the truth of another's subjectivity, we can try to discover how narratives function. As de Mel says, "Given their journey towards becoming a regular, if not still spectacular, form of violence that attracts immediate global media coverage, there is much at stake in controlling how the suicide bomber is represented and apprehended."<sup>4</sup>

In Chapter One, I will provide an overview of the conflict that ravaged Sri Lanka for decades, the rise and fall of the LTTE, and the appearance of the LTTE's suicide attacker. Additionally, I will review the existing literature and the topic and describe my theoretical approach.

Chapter Two is a study of a related but distinct narrative about sexual violence and female suicide attackers. I examine the narrative constructed about Dhanu, the female suicide attacker who assassinated Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. The narrative that arose around Dhanu is dominated by claims that she had been raped by Indian Peace Keeping Forces. Discussions of female suicide attackers as vengeful victims of sexual violence is another attempt to "justify" their violence outside of the political realm. In both cases my analysis suggests that these two narratives strip female suicide attackers of political agency.

Chapter Three is a study of the motherhood narrative as it relates to female suicide attackers. In this chapter, I discuss the interactions between narratives about motherhood in Tamil culture and female suicide attackers. The LTTE exploits narratives about motherhood to optimize success of the suicide missions as well as justify women's violence to the larger conservative society. Through their manipulations of narratives about women, the LTTE effectively controls how the world remembers those women.

Finally, I conclude by explaining the importance of how we remember these particular women and how my study contributes to the field. My study will reinforce what we know about the power of narrative as well as the interactions between narrative and agency.

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<sup>1</sup> Arjuna Gunawardena, "Female Black Tigers: A Different Breed of Cat?," in *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?*, ed. Yoram Schweitzer (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2006): 87.

<sup>2</sup> Alisa Stack-O'Connor, "Lions, Tigers, and Freedom Birds: How and Why the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam Employs Women," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19 (2007): 44.

<sup>3</sup> Tahira Gonsalves, "Media Manipulations and Agency: Women in the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) of Sri Lanka," *The Ahfad Journal* 22, no. 2 (December 2005), 36.

<sup>4</sup> Neloufer de Mel, *Militarizing Sri Lanka: Popular Culture, Memory and Narrative in the Armed Conflict* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 197.

**CHAPTER ONE:  
THE LTTE'S FEMALE SUICIDE ATTACKERS**

## INTRODUCTION

The history of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is marked by the use of strategic suicides. In 1974, an LTTE member swallowed a cyanide capsule during a failed bank robbery to avoid arrest.<sup>1</sup> In 1987, seventeen LTTE commanders were arrested by the Sri Lankan army. All took cyanide capsules in prison; twelve died. This mass suicide incited a three-year-long war between the LTTE and the Indian Peace Keeping Forces. Soon, each LTTE member was required to wear a glass cyanide capsule around their neck to bite down on if they were captured or compromised. Rather than potentially become a prisoner or a source of information for the enemy, all members of the LTTE were prepared to end their lives.<sup>2</sup> At least 600 LTTE members have died from biting down on their cyanide capsules.<sup>3</sup>

Suicide, even in the military context, took on an almost spiritual importance for LTTE members. Prabhakaran, the LTTE's founder and leader, described it this way:

It is this cyanide that has helped us develop our movement very rapidly. Carrying cyanide on our person is a symbolic expression of our determination, our commitment, our courage. It gives our fighters an extra measure of belief in our cause, a special edge; the cyanide has instilled in us a determination to sacrifice our lives and our everything for our cause.<sup>4</sup>

The use of cyanide was a practical policy to avoid compromising the secrets of the group as well as a symbolic commitment to the common nationalist cause. Suicide became heroic. It was “a well-known and *legitimate* response to suffering,”<sup>5</sup> not a desperate act.

In 1987, the “special edge” of the LTTE was transformed into concrete military advantage. An LTTE member drove a truck filled with explosives into a Sri Lankan military camp. This surprise attack was followed by a larger military offensive that successfully defeated

a Sri Lankan Army operation.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the personal, defensive suicides that protested suffering at the hands of the Sri Lankan state, suicide was transformed into an aggressive military tactic. They have carried out more suicide attacks than every other group in the world combined, and more suicide attacks with women perpetrators than every other group.

This study focuses specifically on female suicide attackers in the LTTE. I show that in conservative Sri Lankan society, the narratives surrounding these women counteract the realities of the violence that they perpetrate. Narratives of female suicide attackers are overwhelmingly concerned with gender and aimed at neutralizing the link between women and violence.

There has been very little work about female suicide attackers from a rhetorical perspective. Yet, this work is important for two main reasons. First, political scientists have unquestionably dominated the conversation. Studies on this topic have asked and attempted to answer impossible questions, centering on the “truth” of female suicide attackers’ subjectivity. Research that focuses on these questions is unmistakably misdirected, especially in this context. Suicide missions and the identities of suicide attackers are very secretive—making judgments about them would be an impossible task. Any conclusions drawn about their experiences are necessarily conjecture.

In the case of LTTE female suicide attackers, narratives are created that rationalize and depoliticize their violent actions. Faced with the disturbing juxtaposition between the peaceful woman stereotype and female suicide attackers who commit extreme acts of violence, people seek explanation. Media in the U.S., Sri Lanka, and around the globe contemplate and debate the motivations of the female suicide attacker, as do we in academia. The narrative created is overwhelmingly one of disturbed or vengeful women or of motherhood gone overboard. In this study, I argue that we have much to learn from these narratives. For, as I shall make clear, the

interpretation and remembrance of female suicide attackers is a patently political process. Such remembrance serves a wide range of political purposes and has drastic implications for women's identities and agencies. Even though this study is focused on the LTTE's female suicide attackers, these images have ramifications for all women. Morrissey, undertaking a similar but distinct study about women murderers, says this about the importance of understanding the approach to women's violence:

It is important to recognize that representations of *all* female killers have an impact on understandings of what being a woman means, and that, therefore, *all* such portrayals are important for study.<sup>7</sup>

Second, and related to the above concept, female suicide attackers get disproportionate media coverage. It signals to us, at least, the discomfort and allure of female suicide attackers demands explanation. The combination of limited knowledge and excessive media coverage about them inspires extreme and distorted understandings. Reid explains this phenomenon aptly:

The fact remains that women who kill, or threaten to kill, or at the very least fight for what they believe in, are hot news. It is a reaction that knows no state or religious boundaries. Women soldiers in any army are a thing of horror and fascination, both feared and jeered. Female murderers are reviled. Terrorists glamorised. Anywhere in the world, a woman who takes life with violence is a thrilling curiosity (and one who steps into the male territory of aggressive suicide *especially* so).<sup>8</sup>

My interest here is not in proving the strength of gender stereotypes, which is apparent, or reifying them by displaying a chauvinist fascination with female suicide attackers. Instead, I highlight some trends in the nature of the attention, and explain the implications of *how* they are talked about. The characteristics of the narrative surrounding female suicide attackers are

important, and as de Mel says, “Given their journey towards becoming a regular, if not still spectacular, form of violence that attracts immediate global media coverage, there is much at stake in controlling how the suicide bomber is represented and apprehended.”<sup>9</sup> This discussion has much to tell us about the increasing trend of female suicide attackers and societal reactions.

As a background to the coming chapters, I discuss the context that gave rise to Sri Lanka’s female suicide attackers and the method of the project.

## EMERGENCE OF THE LTTE SUICIDE ATTACKER

The emergence and fall of the LTTE has complex historical roots. The LTTE is a separatist group fighting for a separate ethnic Tamil homeland on the island of Sri Lanka. They had been in battle with the Sri Lankan government for over 25 years until their charismatic leader, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, was killed in the spring of 2009. His death, along with most of the LTTE leadership, has undeniably damaged the group’s separatist goals. It is impossible to know the fate of the LTTE or of Sri Lanka, but an examination of their past can help us understand the historical circumstances that pushed them into a bloody civil war.

Sri Lanka’s civil war was primarily an ethnic conflict. Today there are several ethnic groups residing in Sri Lanka. The Sinhalese are the numeric majority.<sup>10</sup> They are overwhelmingly Buddhist and speak Sinhalese.<sup>11</sup> The next largest ethnic group is the Tamils, who are majority Hindu and speak Tamil.<sup>12</sup> The Sinahalese are typically represented by the Sri Lankan government, and the LTTE arose to represent Tamil interests. The next largest ethnic groups are the Moors, who are of Arabic origin and typically speak Tamil, and the Malays, who were brought by the Dutch during colonial rule.<sup>13</sup> There are also Burghers, who are those with Portuguese and Dutch ancestry who are typically Christian and speak English.<sup>14</sup> Other ethnic

groups include the Chetties, Borahs, and Parsees.<sup>15</sup> Despite this diversity, and the fact that the effects of the civil war are undeniably shared by all Sri Lankans, it was mainly a war between Sinhalese and Tamil. Thus, I will focus on those two groups.

For much of Sri Lankan history, Sinhalese and Tamil peoples co-existed peacefully. As Nissan and Stirrat argue, “For long periods of time groups which would now be characterized in terms of the Sinhala-Tamil divide lived more or less at peace with one another...Sinhala-Tamil communal violence dates from after Independence.”<sup>16</sup> Before colonialism, ethnic harmony was the norm. Sri Lankans were aware of distinct ethnicities and groups, but mixed marriage was common, and so were conversions between different language and religions.<sup>17</sup>

The colonial period disrupted this harmony. Sri Lanka (or Ceylon until 1972) was under colonial rule from the 1500s until its independence in 1948.<sup>18</sup> The Portuguese controlled coastal areas from 1506 to 1658, the Dutch from 1658 to 1796, and Britain controlled coastal areas and then the entire island from 1796 to 1948.<sup>19</sup> At first, ethnicity remained a relatively unimportant signifier. The Portuguese and Dutch were more interested in spice supplies and sea trading routes than with interfering too much with Sri Lankan lives or culture.<sup>20</sup> As Sabaratnam states, “Ethnic difference was indeed recognized; ethnic groups were categorized by both the colonized and the colonizer, but ethnicity did not figure significantly in the colonial political economy.”<sup>21</sup> When ethnic difference was emphasized, it was more on the differences between the colonizers and their colonized population.<sup>22</sup>

This changed in 1796 when the Dutch signed over control to the British.<sup>23</sup> With the British came the influence of the industrial revolution with emphasis on labor, trade, politics, and more importantly, identity formation.<sup>24</sup> The British, unlike the Portuguese and the Dutch, took power over not only territory but also ethnic labels. The colonizers considered linguistic and

religious differences to be signs of racial difference and categorized the Sri Lankan populace into several different “races.”<sup>25</sup> They used their racial categories as the basis for representation when they began allowing Sri Lankans government positions.<sup>26</sup> In this communal system, the British believed that the biggest threat to their rule was the ethnic majority, the Sinhalese Buddhists. As a result, the British favored the Tamils in government and education to minimize risks to their power.<sup>27</sup>

Sri Lankan gained its independence in 1948.<sup>28</sup> The British relinquished power peacefully in part because of the relatively good relations between the ethnic groups.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, leftover representation policies from British rule caused Sinhalese and Tamil political leaders to spar about unfair access to public service.<sup>30</sup> Low-level political sparring turned into all-out fighting in 1956. Sinhala became the official language of Sri Lanka with the passage of the Official Language Act of 1956.<sup>31</sup> Also known as the Sinhala-Only Act, it had widespread ramifications for those who spoke only Tamil. Tamils who didn’t speak Sinhala were fired from their jobs, and it became more difficult for Tamils to gain access to public service.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, a process of “standardization” instituted a new system for university admissions that required Tamils to meet higher standards than their Sinhalese counterparts for university admission.<sup>33</sup> The combination of being barred from public service and university education created new Tamil alliances and eventually the impetus for a separate Tamil state, Eelam (meaning freedom).<sup>34</sup>

These divisions were the catalyst for the long-running Sri Lankan civil war.<sup>35</sup> Sinhala-Tamil violence took place sporadically over the next decades, mostly in the form of riots. In 1956, shortly after the Sinhala-Only Act passed, Tamils displayed opposition by painting out Sinhala characters on license plates, and Sinhalese retaliated by painting over Tamil-language

signs.<sup>36</sup> Rioting, spawned by an attack on a train filled with Tamil passengers, escalated and four hundred people were killed and 12,000 ended up homeless. The victims were overwhelmingly Tamil.<sup>37</sup> Spurts of violence like this continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

The LTTE rose to prominence in this violent environment. Several groups were formed, but the LTTE's strategic dominance and dedication brought them to the head of the pack.<sup>38</sup> The LTTE began operations in northern Sri Lanka on government officials, military, property, and even Tamils that they believed sympathized with Sinhalese.<sup>39</sup> The reaction to Tamil violence escalated again into riots in 1977, when over one hundred people were killed.<sup>40</sup> The Sri Lankan government responded with the Prevention of Terrorism Act, passed in 1979, which gave Sri Lankan military and police officials the power to arrest and detain people for up to eighteen months without trial. Military and police used this power to intimidate Tamil populations, and naturally it intensified the enmity between the two ethnic groups.<sup>41</sup> The violence continued in June 1981 with another episode of riots. Sinhalese police were stationed to keep watch over local elections, and ended up killing Tamil civilians and burning down the Tamil cultural center, the Jaffna Municipal Library.<sup>42</sup>

The conflict reached a tipping point in 1983. Riots broke out, and were the most intense up to that point in Sri Lankan history.<sup>43</sup> On July 23, the LTTE killed thirteen Sinhalese soldiers. The LTTE maintained that the killings were in retaliation of the Sri Lankan Army's killing of two LTTE soldiers and rape of a Tamil girl.<sup>44</sup> When the soldiers' bodies were transported to Colombo, the violence escalated.<sup>45</sup> Sinhalese rioters, aided in many ways by the Sri Lankan Army, beat, killed, and raped Tamil civilians. In the end, attacks on Tamil business, property, and Tamil people<sup>46</sup> caused four hundred to two thousand Tamil murders and thousands of refugees.<sup>47</sup> Tamils fled to the north and east part of the country,<sup>48</sup> which incidentally is now the

area the LTTE claims as their own. Lack of action to stop the riots by the government, and blatant government perpetration of some of the violence, radicalized the Tamil population.<sup>49</sup> In fact, the riots were a boon for recruitment for Tamil resistance groups among youth.<sup>50</sup> Before the 1983 riots, Tamil resistance groups typically had around fifty members; afterwards, hundreds of Tamils clamored to join the resistance.<sup>51</sup> 1983 is often identified as the defining year in Sinhalese-Tamil relations. The 1983 riots are widely recognized as the beginning of Sri Lanka's civil war.

Attempts at a ceasefire and peace talks failed in 1985 and again in 1986.<sup>52</sup> During this time, the LTTE was receiving monetary support, training, and supplies from the Indian government, who decided to sponsor the group in hopes of increasing stability in the region.<sup>53</sup> Ironically, the Indian Peace Keeping Forces became embroiled in the conflict to enforce a ceasefire in 1987, and the LTTE turned against them. 1,157 Indian troops were killed by LTTE attackers and India withdrew three years later.<sup>54</sup> Seen as an act of retaliation for occupation of the Indian Peacekeepers, the LTTE assassinated the Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, in May 1991.<sup>55</sup> The female suicide attacker who carried out the attack is the subject of Chapter Two.

The 1990s was characterized as a similar period of broken ceasefires and multiple assassination attempts on Sri Lankan leadership. In 2002, Norway brokered a ceasefire between the government and the LTTE. It didn't last. A suicide attack in 2004 killed four police officers, and a 2006 bombing of a bus killed 63—and prompted the Sri Lankan government to retaliate with air strikes in Tamil areas.<sup>56</sup> 2006 peace talks in Geneva failed, and the conflict continued to escalate.<sup>57</sup> That year, a female suicide attacker, Anoja, attempted to assassinate Sri Lankan general Fonseka at a military hospital.<sup>58</sup> Anoja inspires the content of Chapter Three.

Sri Lankan government finally pulled out of the 2002 ceasefire agreement in 2008.<sup>59</sup> In the spring of 2009, war-weary and sensing defeat, the LTTE declared a ceasefire. Believing the pledge of nonviolence to be deceitful, the Sri Lankan military continued operations and killed Prabhakaran, the LTTE's leader. This functionally meant the end of the violent civil war that had lasted over a quarter of a century.<sup>60</sup> Almost every Sri Lankan has been affected by the conflict either as victims, relatives of victims, LTTE members, Sri Lankan army members, refugees, etc.<sup>61</sup> In 2008, it was estimated that over 65,000 people have died as a result of the conflict. There are also an estimated 700,000 IDPs and the refugees number in the millions.<sup>62</sup>

As is clear, tensions between Sinhalese and Tamils had been building for decades. Ethnic divisions made salient by British colonization have resulted in the devastation of Sri Lanka, lives lost, and constant warfare. This is the environment that gave rise to the civil war and to the group that deploys the most successful and destructive suicide attacks in the world. Moreover, it is difficult to argue that this conflict is "over" for the Sri Lankans, even with the recent cease fire. The resistance has been so extreme and so long-lasting that its total disappearance from Sri Lanka seems unlikely. Long-set enmities don't simply disappear, and despite Prabhakaran's death, the resistance is likely to come back. The spring 2009 round of fighting may very well be the latest set of events, not the last.<sup>63</sup>

## SUICIDE ATTACKS AND THE LTTE

Out of this brutal civil war arose the deadly LTTE suicide attack. The LTTE's deployment of the suicide attack is unique for three reasons: their leadership, their strategic use, and its secular nature. As mentioned earlier, the LTTE is widely considered the world leader in this method.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, they are the only group to have successfully killed two world

leaders, Indian Prime Ministerial candidate Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa.<sup>65</sup> One scholar notes, they've killed "one president, one presidential candidate, the State Minister of Defence, the Navy Chief and various area commanders. No country has lost so many leaders in such a short period of time as Sri Lanka has to the LTTE suicide bombers."<sup>66</sup> In this process, they have lost approximately 241 of their suicide attackers, known as Black Tigers.<sup>67</sup>

The LTTE is also unlike many other groups because they are focused primarily on military effectiveness, not religious martyrdom or terrorizing populations. There is much evidence for this. Except for the attack on Gandhi, the LTTE has stayed within Sri Lanka and targeted political and military targets, not civilians.<sup>68</sup> The LTTE uses suicide as an attack method precisely because it can achieve the most targeted results.<sup>69</sup> As Hopgood states, "For the LTTE, the Black Tigers have not been a weapon of last resort but an integral part of, even an intensification of, a strategy of insurgency."<sup>70</sup>

The LTTE's suicide attackers also carried out their missions with the knowledge that military victory was an attainable goal.<sup>71</sup> First, unlike many other groups, the LTTE has employed suicide attacks not as a desperate tactic against a much larger and advanced army—until the recent ceasefire, the LTTE had basically kept toe-to-toe with the Sri Lankan army and functioned much as a working army themselves—but as a military method to access difficult-to-reach targets.<sup>72</sup> Second, suicide attacks are typically more successful than military coercion. In fact, the success rate for conventional military means is a meager 30%. For suicide attacks, that rises to about 50%—a great statistic by any measure.<sup>73</sup> The LTTE has certainly had concrete successes using this method. One example for this is the IPKF's stint in Sri Lanka from 1987-1990. Their coercive method failed to defeat the LTTE or compel them to surrender; violence

merely strengthened their hand. Using suicide attacks during guerilla warfare, the LTTE got the Indian Peace Keeping Forces to withdraw from the country in March 1990.<sup>74</sup> They also got the Sri Lankan government twice to agree to negotiations using the suicide attack.<sup>75</sup> One notable exception to the LTTE's success was their attempted assassination of President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who survived, but lost an eye.<sup>76</sup>

Suicide attacks are more destructive, more flexible, and more likely to destroy their targets than conventional military means. And most of all, they work psychologically, as the signal of more and escalating violence to come.<sup>77</sup> Joshi states, "In carrying out these desperate acts, the suicide bombers are more than just a particularly effective weapon in the Tigers' arsenal. They become a powerful symbol of control—the ultimate weapon with which to hold society to ransom."<sup>78</sup>

Unlike many sensational media reports about other violent groups, the LTTE's suicide attacks are largely secular. Despite the religious element to the ethnic conflict, it is not considered to play a large factor in this case. As explained above, the main purpose of the suicide attack is military effectiveness, not death for death's sake.<sup>79</sup> The LTTE tries to avoid the death of the attacker if the military goal can still be achieved.<sup>80</sup> In fact, their first suicide attack in 1987 may have been accidental. There is no evidence that the attacker had intended to die, and may instead have made a last minute choice to sacrifice his life for the success of the mission.<sup>81</sup> As Perez states, "The LTTE does not recruit suicide bombers as religious or ideological martyrs. Their goal is not a sacrifice or political statement, but an attack on a target. If the attack can be achieved more efficiently and effectively through conventional means, suicide missions are not employed."<sup>82</sup> Black Tigers are "disciplined, skilled and battle-tested," not suicidal.<sup>83</sup> In fact, the

LTTE screens and then trains its Black Tigers for months, making unnecessary deaths a waste of time and resources. Hopgood points out,

Black Tigers embody the sacrifices required to win Tamil liberation, and thus they play a prominent role in boosting Tamil resolve and morale. It is important, therefore, that they are a disciplined and impressive military unit. They are an inspiration for Tamils. This too, is a reason for emphasis on high-quality training, personal discipline, and preparation: if they are to be a source of pride, they must be soldiers one can be proud of.<sup>84</sup>

There is some contention about the role of religion concerning suicide missions, but most evidence points to them as a secular, military phenomenon.<sup>85</sup>

Though not explicitly religious, there is undeniably a religious-like admiration for the Black Tigers in the Tamil community: “[f]rom the time a cadre is singled out to be a Black Tiger, he or she acquires a mythical admiration.”<sup>86</sup> Overwhelmingly Hindu, the LTTE’s suicide attackers don’t look forward to an afterlife, but to the way that they’ll be remembered. Ceremonies are held, candles are lit and garlands are draped on their graves, and the LTTE often supports the attackers’ families financially.<sup>87</sup> Every year, the LTTE celebrates Black Tigers Day on the anniversary of their first suicide attack.<sup>88</sup> The reverence for LTTE suicide attackers is so great that one scholar noted, “Young Tamils know the names of the martyrs the way young American kids know the names of sports stars.”<sup>89</sup> This holds for female suicide attackers as well. As one scholar colloquially stated,

Death, not life, is celebrated. The greatest feat for a woman is to die a martyr. This celebration of heroic death is an aspect of most nationalist movements, but in the LTTE it

is a major factor which determines and conditions the life of women who have dedicated themselves to the cause.<sup>90</sup>

## FEMALE BLACK TIGERS

Women in the group did not always enjoy this special status. At first, the LTTE turned to women combatants through necessity. Sri Lanka's civil war, which began in 1983, was having severe ramifications for the Tamil separatists. With more and more combatants falling in battle and emigration from Sri Lanka depleting the pool of potential recruits, the LTTE was hurting for cadres. Eventually the LTTE opened itself up to women's participation in combat roles. In 1985 women starting combat training alongside men and participating in combat.<sup>91</sup> Several estimates had women composing about one-third of the organization.<sup>92</sup>

No longer could Tamil women support the nation symbolically—they had to participate personally. Instead of sending their husbands and sons into combat, more and more women were donning battle fatigues and carrying Kalashnikovs. Further, more and more women were donning suicide belts and sacrificing their lives for Tamil Eelam.<sup>93</sup> Women's increased participation was reflected throughout the group, especially in its suicide unit, the Black Tigers. In fact, while women composed about one-third of the group overall, they accounted for about two-thirds of the Black Tigers.

Female suicide attackers are more attractive than their male counterparts for several reasons. First, missions involving women are more likely to succeed. Women are not seen as the "typical" aggressor, and so are less likely to be suspected or searched.<sup>94</sup> In fact, women can conspicuously carry explosives around their torsos to feign pregnancy, putting them even further above suspicion: "a woman's ability to get pregnant and the attendant changes to her body

facilitate concealment of weapons and bombs using maternity clothing, as well as further impeding inspection because of impropriety issues.”<sup>95</sup> In fact, the LTTE invented the suicide belt to specifically fit the shape of the female body.<sup>96</sup> Second, missions carried out by female suicide attackers have the greatest psychological impact on a society. The radical departure from what is traditionally expected of women means that women are “garnering even more notice from the media and further publicizing the demands of the LTTE.”<sup>97</sup> Female suicide attackers can carry the separatist message of the LTTE stronger and further than their male counterparts:

The use of women as suicide bombers has proven to be even more effective than that of male suicide bombers because the practice contrasts so sharply with most gender stereotypes. Female terrorists attract more media attention, and perhaps inspire more fear, because they are unexpected and contrary to traditional female gender roles.<sup>98</sup>

This was not lost on Prabhakaran: it is claimed that the LTTE’s leader would hand-pick recruits, and would pick three women for every two men.<sup>99</sup>

I have chosen to talk about the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam’s female suicide attackers for three reasons: the high prevalence of female suicide attackers in the group, discussed above, the nature of the conflict that produced them, and their role as a model for other violent groups. The LTTE emerged from a conflict situation that may repeat itself in many other areas of the world. As Kaldor explains in *New and Old Wars*, globalization has inspired a new type of conflict. States are losing their monopolies on violence and para-military groups are becoming more common. These “new wars” are fought over identity, not ideology, and are less state-based. As new wars become identity-based, resolution becomes even more out of reach. If a conflict can only be solved by neutralizing the importance of ethnicity, recent history has taught

us that the outlook is grim, at least in the short term. Negotiation is stymied by what are perceived to be static identities.<sup>100</sup>

Third, groups around the world model the LTTE and its practices. LTTE cadres were present for the first modern suicide attack during their training with Hezbollah in the 1980s. They witnessed Hezbollah's attack on U.S. Marines in Beirut in 1983.<sup>101</sup> The LTTE adopted the method, and perfected it. As one scholar noted, "They professionalized, and institutionalized, suicide bombing."<sup>102</sup> Now groups in the Middle East and around the world study and emulate the LTTE's methods. Given that the LTTE is responsible for more than half of the world's suicide attacks, they have many examples. Just as the LTTE copied Hezbollah, modern groups now copy the LTTE. It is believed that Al Qaeda's attack on the USS Cole in 2000 was a copy of an LTTE attack on a Sri Lankan naval ship in 1991.<sup>103</sup> As one scholar stated, "no one studies the LTTE, except other terrorist groups."<sup>104</sup> Even if the LTTE never reemerges with the same power it once had, other groups may borrow their effective suicide tactics, and perhaps their useful narratives about their female suicide attackers. This can already be seen, at least, in the media coverage of Russian female suicide attackers, the Black Widows. After their most recent spate of attacks this March, explicit comparisons with the LTTE were being made.<sup>105</sup>

## THE EXPERIENCE OF LTTE WOMEN

Rhetoric seems the most appropriate course to examine these narratives. Most work concerned with LTTE women takes a political science perspective, and is dominated by questions of empowerment. As mentioned earlier, this angle is probably misguided, but many scholars have been pulled in this direction. There are basically three trends in the literature: those

who argue that women's participation in the LTTE is empowering, those who disagree, and those who take issue with this question in the first place.

Peter Schalk and a short list of other scholars are rather lonely in their defense of the LTTE experience as an empowering one. Schalk argues that the LTTE has its own unique brand of feminism, which he calls "martial feminism." This type of feminism recognizes that issues of peace and war concern both genders; thus, women's participation in the group proves their equality to men.<sup>106</sup>

Again, not surprisingly, this is not a popular viewpoint. The list of scholars who oppose women's participation on the grounds that it is an exercise in oppression is much longer: Coomaraswamy, Stack-O'Connor, Jayamaha, Chenoy, Ramachandran, Jordan and Denov, Davis, and many more. Most in this camp agree that participation in the LTTE can have some positive aspects for women, but those are always temporary and even more, restricted by the LTTE's nationalistic goals. Women in the group are largely pawns that are subject to strict sexual control, confined to using violence as an emancipatory tool, overly militarized, and have no decision-making powers. These scholars also tend to agree that any positive factors are only temporary. Once the women leave the group they must retreat back into the conservative Sri Lankan society, which has not much changed, gender-wise, as a result of women's participation in the LTTE. Overall, they believe that the mere presence of women doesn't guarantee the group a feminist outlook.<sup>107</sup> Coomaraswamy is a particularly biting critic, calling LTTE women "cogs in the wheel" of a nationalist project that has nothing to offer them. Moreover, she argues, women have more to lose with the loss of traditional Tamil values than they gain with militaristic service.<sup>108</sup>

The list of those who oppose women's participation in the LTTE grows when we consider women's role as suicide attackers. De Mel, Reid, Gunawardena, Skaine, Schweitzer, Beyler, Bloom, and more imagine female suicide attackers are the epitome of patriarchal expression. While some, like de Mel, argue that there could be potential for real empowerment, this may be overshadowed by the loss of control over sexuality and individuality. Women are operating in the public sphere in ways that they previously never could, but their avenues for expression (i.e., death) could merely be fulfilling patriarchal ideals like female sacrifice.<sup>109</sup>

These scholars argue that female suicide attackers are not empowered, they are merely disposable. They are effectively used as human bullets against the enemy, "cannon fodder on the battlefield."<sup>110</sup> For these scholars, this is an example of extreme exploitation that sacrifices women for a nationalist goal that they have no voice in. More evidence for their claims is the fact that female suicide attackers often come from traditional or conservative societies.<sup>111</sup>

Coomaraswamy says female suicide attackers offer no hope of empowerment, and bluntly states, "the complete annihilation and mutilation of the female body in pursuit of a political cause, is...unusual and disturbing."<sup>112</sup> Mia Bloom echoes this sentiment when she says, "In a sense, martyrdom is the ultimate and twisted fulfillment of these [patriarchal] ideals...The message female suicide bombers send is that they are more valuable to their societies dead than they ever could have been alive."<sup>113</sup>

The third trend in the literature is the scholars who believe that questions of empowerment are unanswerable. Alison and Rajasingham-Senanayake both believe that it isn't productive to investigate empowerment, because relationships to conflict are simply too complex. No two women can have the same experiences, and other identity markers muddy the ground even further. Both wish to avoid doubly victimizing women by risking claims about

material conditions that may be inaccurate or denying them agency only because of disagreement with their methods.<sup>114</sup> Instead, both defend the idea of “ambivalent empowerment” and Alison even states, “the debate over whether LTTE women are agents or victims, liberated or subjugated, emancipated or oppressed strikes me as an unnecessary and unsophisticated binary.”<sup>115</sup>

I agree. Questions about women’s empowerment based on material conditions in the LTTE or Sri Lanka simply can’t be answered with any accuracy. All women come from different classes, ethnicities, and have different relationships to their own gender experiences. Adding to the complexity is the multitude of ways that women can relate to conflict. More bluntly, our lack of knowledge of women’s experiences before they become suicide attackers is shallow, and their deaths close them to us even further. My project is concerned with representations of, rather than the “truth” of, female suicide attacker’s experiences.

## THE FEMALE SUICIDE ATTACKER AND NARRATIVE

Examining these narratives seems worthwhile. Most broadly, narrative is how people come to understand the world. Narrative is used to create coherency out of seemingly random and unconnected events. The importance of narrative in understanding has been highlighted by several scholars, most notably Walt Fisher, Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur. Fisher argues that humans are essentially story telling animals and that narratives make arguments and judgments about our world.<sup>116</sup> While Fisher has been criticized for over-emphasizing the importance of narrative, his basic premise that narrative makes arguments about society suggests the importance of their study.<sup>117</sup>

Hayden White adds to this conversation the universality of narrative. He tells us that narrative is a method that all cultures use to make sense of their surroundings. Narratives are necessary to create meanings, particularly for historic events. They give random events coherency.<sup>118</sup> As he says, “We may not be able fully to comprehend specific thought patterns of another culture, but we have relatively less difficulty understanding a story coming from another culture.”<sup>119</sup> We also know from White that no historical account can be “true” or “accurate.” All events considered history are bound up in the time that they are told.

Paul Ricoeur echoes White’s emphasis on narrative, and his conceptions of history are additionally useful. He argues that narratives are used to make history easily understandable and acceptable: “events are properly transformed *into* history” through narrative.<sup>120</sup> Ricoeur reminds us that it is impossible to study history objectively, because any “true” characters or events have been altered to make them agreeable (or disagreeable, depending on the context).<sup>121</sup>

Narrative has a defining role in Sri Lanka’s civil war. There are dominant narratives on both sides about history, ethnicity, and the nation. Within these emerge sub-narratives about gender and the nation that produce female characters. Female suicide attackers are an evolving part of the Tamil history that are approached via narrative. As Maunaguru explains,

Gender emerges, than, as a central category in the history of latter day Tamil nationalism, in both its peaceful and militant moments. It is not that ‘women’ must also be included as an ‘add on’ in this narrative; it is rather that relations of gender and power, central as they are in any historical narrative, produce the position of ‘women’ in their operation.<sup>122</sup>

Nationalism is unquestionably the core of the Tamil project, and women are central to their particular brand of nationalism. Without an examination of the role of women, we cannot fully

understand the role of other narratives in the conflict. This project seems an appropriate starting point.

As may be evident, this study requires the inclusion of a multitude of texts. Narratives about female suicide attackers are found in many places. They appear in Sri Lankan media, LTTE documents, US and global media sources, blogs, investigative reports, and even a US women's fashion magazine. I will analyze the representations of the LTTE suicide attacker in these media. Many of these representations, chronologically, began with the LTTE and have made their way into wider media. Whether the narratives that the LTTE created have been picked up by other outlets, or all of these sources have independently come to create the same images and characters, the power of the narrative is evident.

I approach these representations as a rhetorical analyst with political aims. I examine the narratives surrounding these particular women because I find them troubling from a feminist point of view. This concern is shared by other feminists as well. As de Mel notes,

[A] feminist representation of the women combatant/suicide bomber would also ask that she be assessed according to her political choices; to make visible her agentive and resourceful moments; to understand the terms on which she negotiates with patriarchy; to see her actions as strategies of coping and (symbolic) survival.<sup>123</sup>

While I skirt explicit questions of women's agency, there is clear overlap which will be discussed later.

As with any study, there are limitations. First, as referenced earlier, the LTTE is a secretive organization. Many potentially revealing texts are simply unavailable because of the organization's policies. Second and most problematically, I am a Western, white, English-speaker. I do not have access to texts printed in Tamil or Sinhala because of language barriers as

well as availability problems. I also do not, and cannot, have the same vantage point as those native to the culture. This study had to be undertaken with the utmost care to avoid the tempting, yet colonizing, judgments that one can make about another culture.<sup>124</sup> Despite these drawbacks, this is an important and worthwhile study. These are narratives that are lasting and have impact. In the coming chapter, I analyze the case of Dhanu, the LTTE's first female suicide attacker.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Hopgood, "Tamil Tigers, 1987-2002," in *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, ed. Diego Gambetta (US: Oxford University Press, 2006): 68.

<sup>2</sup> Neil DeVotta, *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 170.

<sup>3</sup> Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005): 143.

<sup>4</sup> As quoted in Sumantra Bose, *States, Nations, Sovereignty: Sri Lanka, India and the Tamil Eelam Movement* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994): 117.

<sup>5</sup> Hopgood, "Tamil Tigers," 69, emphasis in original.

<sup>6</sup> Hopgood, "Tamil Tigers," 50.

<sup>7</sup> Belinda Morrissey, *When Women Kill: Questions of Agency and Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2003): 27, emphasis in original.

<sup>8</sup> Melanie Reid, "Myth That Women Are the Most Deadly Killers of All," *The Herald* (Glasgow), January 29, 2002, LexisNexis, emphasis added. Reid explains that this fascination with female killers is chauvinistic—the fascination is rooted in ideas that women are peaceful or fundamentally different than men. I hope to avoid this trap by taking my examination a step further and explaining *how* this fascination plays out.

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<sup>9</sup> Neloufer de Mel, *Militarizing Sri Lanka: Popular Culture, Memory and Narrative in the Armed Conflict* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 197.

<sup>10</sup> Wimala de Silva, “The Family, Continuity and Change,” in Women in Post-independence Sri Lanka, ed. Swarna Jayaweera (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002), 212.

<sup>11</sup> de Silva, “The Family, Continuity and Change,” 213.

<sup>12</sup> de Silva, “The Family, Continuity and Change,” 214.

<sup>13</sup> de Silva, “The Family, Continuity and Change,” 215.

<sup>14</sup> de Silva, “The Family, Continuity and Change,” 216.

<sup>15</sup> de Silva, “The Family, Continuity and Change,” 216.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Nissan and R. L. Stirrat, “The Generation of Communal Identities,” in *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict*, ed. Jonathan Spencer (New York: Routledge, 1990), 24.

<sup>17</sup> Lakshmanan Sabaratnam, *Ethnic Attachments in Sri Lanka: Social Change and Cultural Continuity* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 10.

<sup>18</sup> Swarna Jayaweera, “Fifty Years Since Political Independence: An Overview,” in *Women in Post-Independence Sri Lanka*, ed. Swarna Jayaweera (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002): 16.

<sup>19</sup> Sabaratnam, *Ethnic Attachments in Sri Lanka*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Sabaratnam, *Ethnic Attachments in Sri Lanka*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Sabaratnam, *Ethnic Attachments in Sri Lanka*, 2-3.

<sup>22</sup> Sabaratnam, *Ethnic Attachments in Sri Lanka*, 40.

<sup>23</sup> Sabaratnam, *Ethnic Attachments in Sri Lanka*, 73, and Nissan and Stirrat, “The Generation of Communal Identities, 26.

<sup>24</sup> Sabaratnam, *Ethnic Attachments in Sri Lanka*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Nissan and Stirrat, “The Generation of Communal Identities,” 27.

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<sup>26</sup> Nissan and Stirrat, “The Generation of Communal Identities,” 28.

<sup>27</sup> DeVotta, *Blowback*, 29.

<sup>28</sup> DeVotta, *Blowback*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> DeVotta, *Blowback*, 22.

<sup>30</sup> Sabaratnam, *Ethnic Attachments in Sri Lanka*, 113.

<sup>31</sup> DeVotta, *Blowback*, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Michael P. Arena and Bruce A. Arrigo, *The Terrorist Identity: Explaining the Terrorist Threat* (New York: New York University Press, 2006): 176.

<sup>33</sup> Arena and Arrigo, *The Terrorist Identity*, 176.

<sup>34</sup> Arena and Arrigo, *The Terrorist Identity*, 177.

<sup>35</sup> DeVotta, *Blowback*, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Nissan and Stirrat, “The Generation of Communal Identities,” 35.

<sup>37</sup> Nissan and Stirrat, “The Generation of Communal Identities,” 36.

<sup>38</sup> William Clarence, *Ethnic Warfare in Sri Lanka and the UN Crisis* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 43 and DeVotta, *Blowback*, 169.

<sup>39</sup> Nissan and Stirrat, “The Generation of Communal Identities,” 37.

<sup>40</sup> DeVotta, *Blowback*, 149.

<sup>41</sup> Paige Whaley Eager, *From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists: Women and Political Violence* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 135.

<sup>42</sup> Nissan and Stirrat, “The Generation of Communal Identities,” 38.

<sup>43</sup> DeVotta, *Blowback*, 150, and Coomaraswamy, “Violence, Armed Conflict and the Community,” 91.

<sup>44</sup> Arena and Arrigo, *The Terrorist Identity*, 177.

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<sup>45</sup> DeVotta, *Blowback*, 169.

<sup>46</sup> DeVotta, *Blowback*, 151.

<sup>47</sup> DeVotta, *Blowback*, 152.

<sup>48</sup> DeVotta, *Blowback*, 169.

<sup>49</sup> DeVotta, *Blowback*, 153.

<sup>50</sup> Clearance, *Blowback*, 45.

<sup>51</sup> Arena and Arrigo, *The Terrorist Identity*, 178.

<sup>52</sup> Miranda Alison, *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2009), 52.

<sup>53</sup> Eager, *From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists*, 136.

<sup>54</sup> DeVotta, *Blowback*, 173.

<sup>55</sup> Eager, *From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists*, 137.

<sup>56</sup> Eager, *From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists*, 137.

<sup>57</sup> Alison, *Women and Political Violence*, 56.

<sup>58</sup> Mia Bloom, “What the Tigers Taught Al Qaeda,” *The Washington Post*, May 24, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/22/AR2009052202033.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Pickert, Kate, “A Brief History of the Tamil Tigers,” 2009.

<sup>60</sup> BBC, “Sri Lankan Leader Hails ‘Victory,’ May 19, 2009,

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<sup>61</sup> Radhika Coomaraswamy, “Violence, Armed Conflict and the Community,” in *Women in Post-Independence Sri Lanka*, ed. Swarna Jayaweera (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002), 91.

<sup>62</sup> Eager, *From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists*, 134.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Pape, “Tamil Tigers: Suicide Bombing Innovators,” Interview with Robert Pape by Lynn Neary, *National Public Radio*, May 21, 2009,

[www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104391493](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104391493); Simon Montlake, “The Fate of Sri Lanka’s Tamils After the Tigers,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 31, 2009.

<sup>64</sup> Rohan Gunaratna, “Suicide Terrorism: A Global Threat,” *Jane’s Security News*, October 20, 2000, [http://www.janes.com/security/international\\_security/news/usscole/jir001020\\_1\\_n.shtml](http://www.janes.com/security/international_security/news/usscole/jir001020_1_n.shtml).

<sup>65</sup> Gunaratna, “Suicide Terrorism,” 2000.

<sup>66</sup> Gunaratna, “Suicide Terrorism,” 2000.

<sup>67</sup> Hopgood, “Tamil Tigers,” 44.

<sup>68</sup> D. Suba Chandran, “Suicide Terrorism in South Asia: From Promised Land to Presumed Land,” *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, July 26, 2003, <http://ipcs.org/article/suicide-terrorism-in-sri-lanka/suicide-terrorism-in-south-asia-from-promised-land-to-presumed-1085.html>; Arena and Arrigo, *The Terrorist Identity*, 96.

<sup>69</sup> Christoph Reuter, *My Life Is A Weapon: A Modern History of Suicide Bombing*, trans. Helena Ragg-Kirkby (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004): 161.

<sup>70</sup> Hopgood, “Tamil Tigers,” 46.

<sup>71</sup> Hopgood, “Tamil Tigers,” 74.

<sup>72</sup> Ami Pedahzur, *Suicide Terrorism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005): 72.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Pape, “The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 3 (2003): 346-347.

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<sup>74</sup> Pedahzur, *Suicide Terrorism*, 76.

<sup>75</sup> Pape, *Dying to Win*, 139.

<sup>76</sup> D. Suba Chandran, “Born to Die: The Black Tigers of the LTTE,” *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, October 7, 2001, <http://ipcs.org/article/suicide-terrorism-in-sri-lanka/born-to-die-the-black-tigers-of-the-ltte-599.html>.

<sup>77</sup> Pape, “The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism,” 346-347.

<sup>78</sup> Charu Lata Joshi, “Ultimate Sacrifice,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* 163, no. 22 (June 1, 2000): 64.

<sup>79</sup> Hopgood, “Tamil Tigers,” 52.

<sup>80</sup> Hopgood, “Tamil Tigers,” 50.

<sup>81</sup> Hopgood, “Tamil Tigers,” 50.

<sup>82</sup> Margaret Gonzalez-Perez, *Women and Terrorism: Female Activity in Domestic and International Terror Groups* (London: Routledge, 2008), 63.

<sup>83</sup> Jessica Davis, “Gendered Terrorism: Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE),” *Minerva Journal of Women and War* 2, no. 1 (2008): 29.

<sup>84</sup> Hopgood, “Tamil Tigers,” 65.

<sup>85</sup> Pape, *Dying to Win*, 146-154.

<sup>86</sup> R. Ramasubramanian, “Suicide Terrorism in Sri Lanka,” *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, August 2004, IPCS Research Papers, 10.

<sup>87</sup> Christoph Reuter, *My Life Is A Weapon: A Modern History of Suicide Bombing*, trans. Helena Ragg-Kirkby (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004): 160.

<sup>88</sup> Chandran, “Born to Die,” 2001.

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<sup>89</sup> Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005): 64.

<sup>90</sup> Ramasubramanian, “Suicide Terrorism in Sri Lanka,” 12.

<sup>91</sup> Tsjeard Bouts, Georg Frerks and Ian Bannon, *Gender, Conflict, and Development* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Publications, 2004), 13.

<sup>92</sup> N. Manoharan, “Tigresses of Lanka: From Girls to Guerillas,” *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, March 21, 2003, <http://ipcs.org/article/terrorism-in-sri-lanka/tigresses-of-lanka-from-girls-to-guerillas-1001.html>.

<sup>93</sup> The history and issues with women in the LTTE is too rich to fully discuss here, but in the following paragraphs I hope to provide a synopsis of women’s roles as suicide attackers.

<sup>94</sup> Gunaratna, “Suicide Terrorism,” 2000.

<sup>95</sup> Karla J. Cunningham, “Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 26 (2003): 171-172.

<sup>96</sup> Reuter, *My Life Is A Weapon*,” 161.

<sup>97</sup> Gonzalez-Perez, *Women and Terrorism*,” 63.

<sup>98</sup> Gonzalez-Perez, *Women and Terrorism*,” 63.

<sup>99</sup> Joshi, “Ultimate Sacrifice,” 66.

<sup>100</sup> Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

<sup>101</sup> Pape, “Tamil Tigers,” 2009.

<sup>102</sup> Amy Waldman, “Masters of Suicide Bombing: Tamil Guerillas of Sri Lanka,” *New York Times*, January 14, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/14/world/masters-of-suicide-bombing-tamil-guerillas-of-sri-lanka.html?pagewanted=1>.

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<sup>103</sup> Waldman, “Masters of Suicide Bombing,” 2003.

<sup>104</sup> Alisa Stack-O’Connor, “Lions, Tigers, and Freedom Birds: How and Why the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam Employs Women,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19 (2007): 58.

<sup>105</sup> Andrew R. Kramer, “Russia’s Fear of Female Bombers Revived,” *New York Times*, March 29, 2010,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/30/world/europe/30blackwidows.html?scp=7&sq=Moscow%20bombing&st=cse>.

<sup>106</sup> Peter Schalk, “Women Fighters of the Liberation Tigers in Tamil Ilam. The Martial Feminism of Atel Palacinkam,” *South Asia Research* 14, no. 2 (1994): 163-183.

<sup>107</sup> Alisa Stack-O’Connor, “Lions, Tigers, and Freedom Birds: How and Why the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam Employs Women,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19 (2007): 43-63; Dilshika Jayamaha, “Partners in Arms: LTTE Women Fighters and the Changing Face of the Sri Lankan Civil War,” 2004, [www.jjay.cuny.edu/terrorism/womencombatants.pdf](http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/terrorism/womencombatants.pdf); Anuradha M. Chenoy, “Women in the South Asian Conflict Zones,” *South Asian Survey* 11, no. 1 (2004): 35-47; Sudha Ramachandran, “Dying to Be Equal: Women Militants and Organisational Decision-Making,” in Farah Faizal and Swarna Rajagopalan, eds., *Women, Security, South Asia: A Clearing in the Thicket* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005): 154-176; Kim Jordan and Myriam Denov, “Birds of Freedom? Perspectives on Female Emancipation and Sri Lanka’s Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 9, no. 1 (2007): 42-62; Jessica Davis, “Gendered Terrorism: Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE),” *Minerva Journal of Women and War*, 2, no. 1 (2008): 22-38; Radhika Coomaraswamy, “LTTE Women: Is This Liberation?,” *The Sunday Times* [Colombo, Sri Lanka], January 5, 1997, <http://sundaytimes.lk/970105/plus2.html>.

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<sup>108</sup> Coomaraswamy, “LTTE Women,” 1997.

<sup>109</sup> Neloufer de Mel, *Women & The Nation’s Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001).

<sup>110</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, “The Women of Terror,” *Asia Times Online*, January 29, 2004, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/FA29Ak02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/FA29Ak02.html).

<sup>111</sup> Reid, “Myth That Women Are the Most Deadly Killers of All,” 2002; Arjuna Gunawardena, “Female Black Tigers: A Different Breed of Cat?,” in *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?*, ed. Yoram Schweitzer (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2006): 81-90; Yoram Schweitzer, “Introduction,” in *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?*, ed. Yoram Schweitzer (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2006): 9; Rosemarie Skaine, *Female Suicide Bombers* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2006): 87; Clara Beyler, “Messengers of Death—Female Suicide Bombers,” *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, February 12, 2003,

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<sup>112</sup> Coomaraswamy, “LTTE Women,” 1997.

<sup>113</sup> Mia Bloom, “Female Suicide Bombers: A Global Trend,” *Daedalus* (Winter 2007): 102.

<sup>114</sup> Miranda Alison, “Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam,” *Civil Wars* 6, no. 4 (2003): 37-53; Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, “Ambivalent Empowerment: The Tragedy of Tamil Women in Conflict,” in Rita Manchanda, ed., *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), 102-130; and Darini

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<sup>115</sup> Alison, “Cogs in the Wheel?,” 52.

<sup>116</sup> Walter R. Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” *Communication Monographs* 51 (1984): 1-22; Walter R. Fisher, “The Narrative Paradigm: An Elaboration,” *Communication Monographs* 52 (1985): 347-367.

<sup>117</sup> Robert C. Rowland, “The Value of the Rational World and Narrative Paradigms,” *Central States Speech Journal* 39, nos. 3 & 4 (1988): 204-217; Robert C. Rowland, “Narrative: Mode of Discourse or Paradigm?” *Communication Monographs* 54 (1987): 264-275; Robert C. Rowland, “On Limiting the Narrative Paradigm: Three Case Studies,” *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989): 39-54; Barbara Warnick, “The Narrative Paradigm: Another Story,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 (1987): 172-182.

<sup>118</sup> Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 11 (1980): 5-27.

<sup>119</sup> White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” 5.

<sup>120</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Edited and Translated by John B. Thompson, 291.

<sup>121</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Edited and Translated by John B. Thompson.

<sup>122</sup> Sitralega Maunaguru, “Gendering Tamil Nationalism: The Construction of ‘Woman’ in Projects of Protest and Control,” in *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity & History in Modern Sri Lanka*, ed. Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail (Sri Lanka: Social Scientists’ Association, 2009): 171.

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CHAPTER TWO  
DHANU, RAPE AND RATIONALIZATION

## INTRODUCTION

On May 21, 1991, a crowd of supporters rushed to meet Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at one of his campaign stops in India. One member of the crowd, a young woman named Dhanu, emerged at the front, wearing thick glasses and a long dress, bulging at the waist. Dhanu approached Gandhi, placed a sandalwood garland around his neck, and knelt as a sign of respect. As Gandhi bent to raise her up, she activated her suicide belt, which was filled with thousands of steel pellets and plastic explosives. The explosion killed Dhanu, Gandhi, several others in the crowd, and injured many more.<sup>1</sup>

This attack made Dhanu the most prominent female suicide attacker of the LTTE and perhaps the world. First, as former and running Prime Minister of India, her victim was the highest profile of any suicide mission. Second, her attack was extraordinarily lethal. Robert Pape calls her one of the three most deadly suicide attackers in the past twenty years, along with Saeed Hotari of Hamas and 9/11 attacker Mohammed Atta.<sup>2</sup> Third, Dhanu was the first attacker to use a suicide belt. The success of the invention and her mission inspired many groups to begin using similar devices in their suicide attacks.<sup>3</sup> And last, some argue that the assassination is responsible for much of the LTTE's extreme reputation.<sup>4</sup>

The novelty of the assassination and the uniqueness of the circumstances inspired many reactions from a multitude of perspectives. What is interesting about Dhanu's case is that the emphasis is on her status as a possible rape victim. Many stories claim that she was a victim of sexual assault by the Indian Peace Keeping Forces, and sought revenge against their leader as a result. These accounts argue that she is unique not because of the notoriety of her crime, but because she was a woman who had been dishonored. In this chapter I argue that this narrative,

Dhanu as armed rape victim, was a rhetorical strategy adopted by the LTTE and accepted and spread by others in order to counteract the reality of her extreme violence.

To show the power of this narrative, I will first explain the relationship between rape and nationalism. Next I explain Dhanu's importance and how and where the narrative about her appears. Lastly, I will conclude with the implications of this narrative.

## RAPE AND TAMIL EELAM

In ethno-nationalist conflicts, rape is often treated as an ethnic crime, not necessarily a gendered one. When a Tamil woman is raped, it is perceived as bringing harm upon the culture, not on the individual woman.<sup>5</sup> When rape is used as a military tool in these conflicts, it is a method of permeating the boundaries between the two groups, as well as causing terror and pain against civilian populations. This damage to culture and woman is perceived to be permanent. Sympathetic friends and family will keep rape a secret to protect the survivor, while others perceive the damage as so severe that many women are murdered by their families when rape is discovered.<sup>6</sup>

If civilian women's chastity is a placeholder for the honor of the nation, then female combatants who have pledged to protect that nation are burdened with even more responsibility. As Herath explains,

[T]he gendering of nationalist discourse urges women to be sexually chaste. The combatant's womanhood is de-sexualised and her sexual desires are contained within that role where they accept the renouncing of sexuality unquestioningly and as justifiable due to forming a part of a constructed role of an armed combatant.<sup>7</sup>

As an agent of nationalism, the female combatant must protect her chastity with the same ferocity as she protects her nation. In Sri Lanka, as with many similar conflicts, the suffering group then exploits instances of rape to mobilize its population.<sup>8</sup> Ramachandran points out, “In a society where chastity is the ultimate virtue, linking rape with loss of chastity enables the LTTE to exploit the vulnerability of rape victims.”<sup>9</sup> This is certainly true in Dhanu’s case. As Herath further explains,

[E]thnic sentiments of the violation of female honour take precedence in public discourse, within which women are reconstructed as craving vengeance for the disgrace they suffered hence Dhanu was portrayed to the world as an avenging victim of a rape.<sup>10</sup>

Dhanu, as rape victim, became the representative for Tamil culture, and her act of vengeance became tied to protection of the Tamil nation. Interestingly enough, the LTTE is known for its abstention of rape as a military tactic, which is a rare phenomenon in modern ethnic conflicts.<sup>11</sup>

However, the LTTE was not unskilled in manipulating stories about women for its own gain. It is thought that rape victims were common recruits for the LTTE.<sup>12</sup> The LTTE is said to use cases of rape to foment anger and revenge in women, and encourage them to become martyrs. They convince women that attack against the enemy is the best way to avenge the attack on themselves.<sup>13</sup> As Sudha Ramachandran puts it, “That hopelessness makes her a valuable weapon in the LTTE’s arsenal, a willing martyr for the Tigers’ cause.”<sup>14</sup> A victim can live in fear of her life in the civilian community, or join a group that claims to be understanding of her situation and pledges to value her as a member of their armed struggle.<sup>15</sup> As Beyler puts it, “because they could not be considered women, they could undertake a man’s task that would redeem their status (of victims of rape) by dying for a good cause.”<sup>16</sup>

Manipulating the victim status of female suicide attackers was also a way that the LTTE could win the hearts and minds of its population. Placing a cause behind her actions, especially a cause that inflamed nationalist reactions like rape, was a way to justify them:

The group could attract new media attention by offering its female fighters up for interviews and contrasting their stories of abuse by the GOSL and later the IPKF with their empowerment by the LTTE. In this area, the LTTE has been remarkably successful. Media coverage of women in the LTTE is rarely critical of the group, and almost never critical of the women even when reporting on suicide bombers. Indeed, it tends to focus more on the women as women or victims rather than on their acts of violence.<sup>17</sup>

In this sense, it provided an outlet for anger and nationalist violence, but funneled it away from the LTTE itself.

Inside the LTTE, the narrative of Dhanu as a rape victim has successfully played on other women's fears and encouraged membership. Dhanu's actions became representative of a possibility of agency for other Tamil women. Herath explains,

By successfully carrying out such an onerous task she was elevated to an equal status with male combatants. Her action in targeted the key player in the ill-fated Indo-Lanka Peace Accord redresses a number of misdeeds, including the violation of her own and other women's bodies, as well as her country.<sup>18</sup>

She became the representative of the Tamil nation. Scholars have called her a "heroine and symbol of the LTTE," her image achieving "mythic proportions,"<sup>19</sup> a "mythical force,"<sup>20</sup> "a symbol of 'sacrifice' by the Tigresses,"<sup>21</sup> and an "iconic [image] of sexual violence."<sup>22</sup> Her image was the catalyst for a dramatic increase in female LTTE membership after the Gandhi

assassination.<sup>23</sup> In fact, LTTE women are said to carry a picture of Dhanu with them for inspiration and protection.<sup>24</sup>

## THE RAPE VICTIM AND SUICIDE ATTACKS

Obviously, stories about rape make for a very powerful narrative in Tamil society and the LTTE. Its influence explains its effectiveness in recruitment and propaganda for the LTTE. The power of rape stigmas also create a natural environment for suicide attacks to thrive in. As mentioned above, the cultural expectations for a victim of rape are grim. She is *at least* triply victimized; by perpetrator, culture, and self. In Tamil society, suicide is an acceptable response to a situation like this. As mentioned earlier, suicide is viewed as a heroic response to suffering, and rape is no different.

Rape and suicide are paired in many circumstances. During the Indian Partition in 1947 many family members encouraged women to commit suicide to avoid rape at the hands of Indian forces.<sup>25</sup> The LTTE perpetuates this same mindset. All LTTE members are encouraged to commit suicide using their cyanide capsules if captured or compromised in some way. For women, this includes committing suicide to avoid rape by the Sri Lankan Army forces.<sup>26</sup> As mentioned above, LTTE women are responsible for protecting their chastity, and often, they do this through sacrificing their lives. Herath explains: “The justification for this act of suicide lies in both the bodily integrity of the individual and in the collective morality of the revolutionary group as a whole.”<sup>27</sup> During an interview, one female member of the LTTE echoed this mindset, saying, “A man can be tortured...But a woman has more to lose—her virtue. Anyway, being captured alive is a blow to the pride of a Freedom Fighter. Suicide is an act of human dignity.”<sup>28</sup>

For a woman who has already suffered rape at the hands of the enemy, the solution is the same. Shunned from their communities, women can still serve the cause by sacrificing their lives. Davis explains,

[S]uicide bombings are an acceptable offering from women who can never be mothers.

The theme of the ‘soiled’ woman martyring herself for a cause is seen throughout secular and religious struggles. In this way, women continue to adhere to the gender norms of Tamil society while supporting the cause and providing important personnel to the LTTE.<sup>29</sup>

Even as victims, women who join the LTTE can continue to represent their nation and get a chance at restoring their honor.<sup>30</sup>

Unquestionably, rape and suicide are intimately tied in this context. After the IPKF’s deployment in Sri Lanka, the LTTE was the only available Tamil resistance group left. “And since there was no other militant group apart from the LTTE that was fighting the IPKF and the Lankan armed forces from 1987 onwards, it was natural that all women who wanted to pick up a gun would now join the LTTE.”<sup>31</sup> When the options are dishonor or murder at the hands of your family, joining the LTTE seems like a rational choice.

Even women who were not survivors of rape themselves but who had heard other women’s stories or simply wanted to be able to protect themselves from those experiences would also join.<sup>32</sup> Fear of rape is a commonly cited reason for joining the LTTE.<sup>33</sup> One Tamil source said,

Witnessing rape, witnessing or hearing about rape from other villagers and the Army’s killing of Tamil youth (girls and boys arrested by Sri Lankan Army)...and the feeling of

helplessness in not being able to defend against the Sri Lankan Army, are the main reasons for the girls joining the LTTE.<sup>34</sup>

A female LTTE member echoed this sentiment when she said, “Instead of being raped by the enemy soldiers and dying screaming, I can now defend myself with this weapon. For me, this is freedom.”<sup>35</sup> As de Mel points out, “In these speculations, motives of reclaiming lost honour and revenge for a sexual violation appear as a reiterated, circulating narrative. This is a discourse, markedly, that does not accrue around the male suicide bomber.”<sup>36</sup>

However, many argue that rape is not a deciding factor for the LTTE’s female suicide attackers. Gunawardena argues that, in known cases of women who were survivors of rape, they did not join the LTTE, much less become Black Tigers.<sup>37</sup> While acknowledging that rape was a common tactic of war for the IPKF during their stint in Sri Lanka, she maintains, “there is little evidence to suggest or support the contention that females raped by the IPKF turned to suicide terrorism as a means of revenge or as a redeeming option.”<sup>38</sup> She also notes that “while there have been instances of rape, in the known cases the victims did not become Black Tigers or even members of the LTTE. This was a myth advanced by the LTTE itself for disinformation purposes, but finds little corroboration in reality.”<sup>39</sup>

In fact, if Dhanu’s motivation was personal revenge, that certainly doesn’t explain the team dispatched to kill Gandhi, nor the other women on the scene as backup.<sup>40</sup> Four died during the explosion, and many of the rest, in true LTTE fashion, swallowed their vials of cyanide.<sup>41</sup> Other evidence suggests that the motivation for the assassination was organizational as well. The attack took place on Gandhi’s campaign trail. One of his policy platforms had been to send Indian troops back to Sri Lanka to teach Prabhakaran a lesson for breaking the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement.<sup>42</sup> Many believe that this was the true motivation behind the attack. She was not

alone on the scene nor with her intentions to kill Gandhi. The narrative that arose, however, told a different story.

## THE LTTE'S MESSAGE

Despite her celebrity as arguably the most famous, lethal and innovative female suicide attacker in the world, very little is actually known about Dhanu. The LTTE is a very secretive group, and the Black Tigers especially so. First, the LTTE is known to remain silent after suicide missions, and rarely, if ever, takes credit for them. Second, the Black Tigers are chosen and carry out their missions in total secrecy. Often, only the LTTE's leader and his closest associate know who is being readied for suicide missions.<sup>43</sup> As in Dhanu's case, most Black Tigers are revealed only after their missions, if at all.<sup>44</sup> As de Mel notes, "The secrecy that surrounds the LTTE suicide bomber makes her subjectivity available to the public only at the precise moment in which she is silenced, and silences herself through her final act of violence."<sup>45</sup>

The LTTE deviated from their culture of silence to deny culpability *while at the same time* releasing a statement to rationalize the act.<sup>46</sup> That the LTTE would choose a narrative about rape is extremely telling. Dhanu was the first female suicide attacker tied to the LTTE--the rhetorical strategy chosen demonstrated recognition that this situation required some narrative support. After the assassination and her death, the LTTE released a statement that Dhanu had been raped at the hands of the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF), and that "her act of violence was a fitting revenge for her shame and trauma."<sup>47</sup>

The rape narrative was potentially a boon for the LTTE. They could deny culpability to a society still resistant to the idea of female fighters, as well as to the world at large. If Dhanu was in fact a victim of rape bent on revenge, then the LTTE could not have been the mastermind

behind the attack. As Davis explains, “In an effort to accommodate the traditional views in Tamil society about women in combat, women who join the LTTE are often portrayed by the organization as rape victims of the SLA or the IPKF.”<sup>48</sup> She explains further that “rape by IPKF soldiers was often cited as a motive for a suicide bombing, reframing the attack as a personal vendetta rather than a politically motivated assassination.”<sup>49</sup> For the LTTE, releasing a statement about Dhanu that vilified the IPKF while at the same time deflecting blame from Dhanu and their own organization was a no-lose strategy. As Gunawardena states,

By portraying the participation of the ‘weaker’ sex as the victim of circumstances (e.g., rape) that drove these women to desperate measures, women are in fact used (or abused) as a justification for suicide terrorism, or at the very least in the case of the LTTE to make Black Tiger operations/suicide terrorism acceptable to the world at large. This disinformation was the main justification put forward by the LTTE for the suicide attack on Rajiv Gandhi, wherein the bomber was portrayed as the victim of an IPKF rape and that the attack was more her personal vendetta rather than a politically motivated assassination.<sup>50</sup>

The LTTE’s narrative about Dhanu played on conservative conceptions of women to protect their reputation.

## DHANU’S MOTIVATION

When the LTTE first released their statement about Dhanu, “Little attention was paid to this statement in relation to the initial shock and confusion that was caused by the killing.”<sup>51</sup> Since then, however, it has been picked up in a multitude of places. It has taken hold in many different media, appearing in Sri Lankan newspapers, US academic works, Tamil websites,

major Asian news outlets, and even a US women's fashion magazine. It seems that there are two possibilities here. Either these media have picked up the LTTE's narrative about Dhanu and run with it or they have independently created the same narrative. Either way, the similarities of the narratives demonstrates its power.

The Dhanu narratives all use rape as a justification for Dhanu's actions, albeit with different rationalizations. The different narratives say her rape has made her a victim, exploited, vengeful, or even mentally ill. My argument is that all of these trends have two things in common: they all stem from the rape narrative and they all aim to rationalize Dhanu's violence, or, make it less dangerous.

The most obvious theme in the narrative is simply the importance of rape to female suicide attackers in general. *Marie Claire*, a popular women's fashion magazine in the U.S., ran an article called "When the Suicide Bomber is a Woman," by Jan Goodwin. The article then reappeared in several places, such as the *Asian Tribune*, *Lanka eNews*, and *Colombo Beat*, among others. The article describes the life of a captured LTTE female suicide bomber, Menake. Goodwin interviewed Menake, who was purchasing a shirt to conceal an explosive belt when she was picked up by Sri Lankan police. Interestingly, Goodwin explicitly ties Menake to Dhanu. Menake was the victim of rape and molestation at the hands of her father when she was a girl, and Goodwin believes that this connects her to Dhanu:

Rape is something many female suicide bombers have in common. Considered spoiled goods and unmarriageable in their patriarchal cultures, they view becoming human bombs as a form of purification by fire. Dhanu, Prime Minister Gandhi's assassin, was also allegedly raped by soldiers from the Indian Peacekeeping Force when it was posted in Sri Lanka for three years.<sup>52</sup>

Menake, like Dhanu, is a woman with a tragic background. The conclusion is that when women choose suicide bombing, it must be the result of a personal indignity that they have suffered.

The decision is framed as a selfish and personal choice by a woman for her own purposes.

Another aspect of the narrative is that Dhanu was a character who had been irreparably spoiled by her rape, and thus, easily exploited by the men around her. The article “Dishonor or Death—A Woman’s Choice” by Sudha Ramachandran makes this explicit, right in the title. Women who have been spoiled by rape can either live with their dishonor, or choose the path of suicide bombing. It frames the “choice” as one that only dishonored women have the option of taking. Ramachandran explicitly raises the issue of Dhanu’s alleged rape:

Dhanu, the suicide bomber who assassinated Indian [P]rime [M]inister Rajiv Gandhi, is said to have been a victim of rape by the Indian Peace Keeping Force. Rape victims, it seems are a valuable weapon in the arsenal of militant groups that carry out suicide missions.<sup>53</sup>

Here, Ramachandran adds something new to the narrative. Dhanu was raped by the IPKF, yes. But her rape readied her to become a victim again, this time to calculating men with nefarious plans. The allusion is that the LTTE had a political goal (to fight for Eelam), and that men in the group exploited her dishonorable status and used her for their dubious plans. It was not Dhanu who could have been an LTTE ideologue, but her male handlers:

Women like...Dhanu might have volunteered to become suicide bombers. But it is likely that their emotions, feelings of worthlessness and insecurities would have been nurtured and exploited to push them to volunteer. In the process, they became willing weapons in the hands of their leaders.<sup>54</sup>

This representation of Dhanu paints her as doubly victimized—she suffered at the hands of the Indian Peace Keeping Forces, and again at the hands of her organization, the LTTE.

Websites run by Tamils and LTTE sympathizers repeat this same depiction, with minor changes. The Tamil Nation website describes Dhanu’s involvement with the LTTE:

An experienced covert operative—whether a Sri Lankan Tamil guerrilla or a Sri Lankan intelligence operative—could have ‘persuaded’ a suitable young Tamil lady raped by Indian soldiers and thus enraged against Rajiv Gandhi, to act as a suicide-assassin. (The assassin, Dhanu, allegedly told her friend, Nalini, that Indian soldiers had raped her. The fact that Indian soldiers raped some Tamil women has been established beyond any doubt; if Dhanu was a rape victim may never be known for sure.)<sup>55</sup>

Here, Dhanu’s emotions and dishonor had such a hold on her that she was an easy target for “experienced” actors to persuade her to give up her life. Dhanu was a “suitable” (read: chaste, honorable) woman who had been stripped of her reputation by the IPKF. So angered by this injury to her character, she was easily driven to her role as suicide bomber. This depiction recognizes that the rape allegation could well be a fiction, but continues to emphasize it as the basis for the account.

Dhanu as a victim is a powerful facet of this narrative. On a Canadian Tamil website discussing the investigation of Gandhi’s assassination, there is a dialogue about whether Dhanu committed the act as a victim of rape, or as a young girl brainwashed by her LTTE-supporting father from birth.

Dhanu...was inspired by the Tamil liberation movement at a very young age. In fact, her father, A. Rajaratnam, who is described as Pirabhakaran’s mentor, played a crucial role in moulding the LTTE chief’s thinking during the movement’s formative years between

1972 and 1975. His articles were published in pro-LTTE magazines... And the SIT [Special Investigation Team] is now producing these articles as evidence to bolster its argument that Dhanu had been indoctrinated by her father and this is what motivated the crime rather than her reported rape by the IPKF which, the SIT believes, is part of a disinformation campaign spread by the LTTE.<sup>56</sup>

Here Dhanu is not vengeful, but a pawn of the LTTE. She had been brainwashed by her family and culture to commit the act. It was not her decision, but the result of actions of the men who surrounded her.<sup>57</sup> (In fact, Dhanu's father was given a medal by Prabhakaran after the attack.<sup>58</sup>)

A brainwashed Dhanu may make her actions more palatable, but a mentally ill Dhanu even more so. *Citizens*, a journalistic website in Sri Lanka, published this account of her mental well-being:

According to unconfirmed sources Dhanu was raped by the IPKF... She may have suffered from RTS or Rape Trauma Syndrome. RTS which is a form of interpersonal violence generates a wider range of conflicting emotions. The victims often have a loss of faith about their sense of safety in society and may feel powerless. Depression and anger after the rape are common features in RTS. Hence Dhanu's anger and frustration was projected to the former premier Rajiv Gandhi.<sup>59</sup>

In this depiction, Dhanu was prisoner to her emotions. She was a vengeful, hysterical woman whose emotions manipulated her into blaming Rajiv Gandhi instead of her attackers. Again, she is not rational or any kind of agent, but a victim.

In another article, this one by Tapan Kumar Bose, we discover that Dhanu's decision was the result of her rape and lack of retribution for the crimes that she suffered. Here the author states,

Dhanu, the young Sri Lankan Tamil woman who became the human bomb that killed Rajiv Gandhi, India's former Prime Minister was reportedly raped by members of Indian Peace Keeping Force in Jaffana. These allegations were denied. Through her action, Dhanu proved her complaint.<sup>60</sup>

Because the IPKF was not investigated or held accountable to the appropriate authorities for sexual assaults, Dhanu takes matters into her own hands. Here she is an agent, but only insofar as a reactionary force. She once again is a revenge-seeking woman.

The narrative can also be found in U.S. academic circles. Perhaps the most interesting appearance of this narrative was in the debate over Dhanu in the *New York Review of Books*. The question of Dhanu's rape became a controversial topic between two prominent scholars, Mia Bloom and Christian Caryl. This high-profile debate highlighted the salience of the narrative and the very existence of this debate tells us that something is at stake here.

Mia Bloom's book, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror*, has an entire chapter entitled, "Feminism, Rape and War: Engendering Suicide Terror?" She mentions Dhanu's rape explicitly in several places in her book, as well as articles that she has written. In one article, she writes,

In many instances, the women are seeking revenge. Consider, for example, the women who join the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)...According to anthropologist Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, the government has committed organized violence against the Tamils through a systematic campaign of disappearances, rape, checkpoint searches, and torture—as well as the elimination of whole villages in remote areas.<sup>61</sup>

In another,

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many women bombers have been raped or sexually abused either by representatives of the state or by insurgents—thereby contributing to a sense of humiliation and powerlessness, made only worse by stigmatization within their own societies.<sup>62</sup>

Clearly, Bloom believes that rape is a common motivating factor for many female suicide attackers. She explicitly makes this link to Dhanu in her book,

Dhanu herself was supposedly the victim of rape although other sources claim that it was her mother who was raped by Indian security services during the Indian Intervention between 1987-1990 and that she was avenging her mother when she killed Prime Minister Gandhi...Fighting for Tamil freedom might have been the only way for such a woman to redeem herself.<sup>63</sup>

Bloom does admit, however, that Dhanu's rape "remains one of intense debate and controversy."<sup>64</sup> The reason, however, is not that she was not a victim. The controversy, Bloom argues, is whether or not she was raped, or her mother was raped or brother had been killed!<sup>65</sup> In any of these possible scenarios, Dhanu is a victim.

In a review of Bloom's book, "Why They Do It" by Christian Caryl, he overstates Bloom's claim and tells readers that Dhanu was certainly gang-raped by Indian Peace Keeping forces and this was her primary motivation:

Mia Bloom in her study *Dying to Kill* suggests that having been a victim of sexual violence may be a motive for the surprisingly large number of female bombers. Dhanu, Gandhi's assassin, had been gang-raped by enemy soldiers...For such victims, there may be no way back into traditional society, and a suicide attack on the enemy may be one

way to restore lost ‘honor.’ Male bombers often seem to be seeking retribution for a broader sense of humiliation, perhaps at the hands of an occupier.<sup>66</sup>

Bloom responds, also in the *New York Review of Books*, this way:

In Christian Caryl's review ‘Why They Do It’...he alleges that I have written that Dhanu, the woman who assassinated Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, was gang-raped. Allegations of Dhanu's rape have never been proven and sources within the Indian government assert that she was still a virgin at the time of her death. Although such sources have cause to lie, in my interviews with the Tamil Tigers, they too do not think she was actually raped. There have been questions raised about whether her mother might have been the victim of sexual abuse by the Indian Peacekeeping Forces (IPKF) when they intervened in the country in 1987–1990, but the main reason why Dhanu became a Tiger is that her brother was a well-known cadre who had died and she was carrying on the family tradition... the story as it stands now in the current issue attributes to me an exaggeration of the facts I would not make.<sup>67</sup>

Here, Bloom, while aiming to deemphasize the rape allegation, continues to defend the non-political motivation for Dhanu, revenge. Caryl replies:

My apologies to Ms. Bloom. I did indeed overstate the case in my paraphrase of her description of Dhanu. It is by no means a firmly established fact that Dhanu was gang-raped by Indian soldiers. It would seem, however, that some sort of sexual violence—either against her personally or someone in her family—may have served as an additional motive for her attack on Gandhi. In any case, I stand corrected.<sup>68</sup>

We see the importance of the rape allegation for Dhanu. Bloom objects to Caryl's avocation of the rape story, and while he apologizes, he reasserts that she must have been a victim of sexual

violence, or someone in her family was. Despite the author's objection to the distortion of their work, this reviewer cannot understand Dhanu's actions outside of her being a victim.

That this debate took place in the *New York Review of Books* demonstrates the importance of this narrative. Neither author knows the truth of Dhanu's experience. But the tension over the subject indicates that both understand the importance of the narrative.

The Sri Lankan newspaper, *The Island*, which appears to have quite a Sinhalese bias, offers a different picture of Dhanu. Every article in their archives that mentions her does so only in passing and some do not mention her gender much at all. Referring to the LTTE's plan to assassinate Gandhi, it states, "Being a one-track minded militant group, it pre-empted Rajiv's come back through the simple expedient of physical annihilation. Dhanu, a young suicide bomber, was sent to do the job, which she did with amazing precision."<sup>69</sup>

This depiction is different from other Tamil and Western sources. As an LTTE enemy, a Sinhalese source would seek to demonize an LTTE agent as much as possible, and do little to blame her circumstances. I found a single reference to sexual violence: "The LTTE and its sympathisers [sic] had suggested that a woman suicide cadre was used to avenge the humiliation the Tamil women suffered at the hands of the Indian Army. The LTTE had accused the Indian Army of rape of a large number of Tamil women."<sup>70</sup> This makes the rape allegation sound doubtful and unconvincing, rather different than the certainty we find in Caryl and others. The Sinhalese source seeks to place all blame on Dhanu. It does not allow for the same forgiveness or recognition of mitigating circumstances. The blame falls squarely on the rational, and effective, suicide bomber. Ironically, these accounts give her the most agency and responsibility for her actions.

Even if the LTTE's statement following Gandhi's assassination were true, it does not deny the power of the narrative about Dhanu. Even if Dhanu was raped, and acted alone or with the LTTE, the focus on the rape is still telling. Rhetorically speaking, the narrative surrounding Dhanu is much more important than the truth of the matter. Narratives, the representations of a society's heroes, are what are remembered most. If people believe it to be true, it is. In Dhanu's case, the narrative has had real ramifications.

## CONCLUSION

The specificity of this rhetorical explanation should concern us. As I argued above, the secrecy of the LTTE and lack of record of Dhanu before her death make it highly unlikely that *any* reliable history or account of her motivations would exist. In almost no instance did I find an account of Dhanu's beliefs, ideology, or involvement with the LTTE prior to her existence as a suicide bomber. Despite the fact that this act was extreme and violent, she is described almost universally as a victim. She was a victim of rape, brainwashing, and even of her own delusions. Many of these conceptions place Dhanu at the mercy of men's harmful decisions to rape or manipulate. Others, appealing to the common stereotype of the hysterical woman, put her at the mercy of her emotions and irrational thoughts. None depict her as a rational decision maker or political agent. The vacuum of her history was filled only with depictions of her as victim.

Women like Dhanu break almost all stereotypes of traditional women, especially when they emerge from extremely patriarchal societies. Instead of giving life, they take life. Instead of working for peace, they escalate violence. However women come to choose this path, many do choose it. Dhanu's case proves that a dominant reaction to women's violence is to create an image that paints the woman as the "real" victim of violence. And given the lack of information,

all we have to go on are the realities that we create with our depictions of women like Dhanu, female suicide bombers. Dhanu silenced herself just as she became open to us. By defining female violence as only acceptable as a reaction to a personal grievance, these discourses effectively close off the possibility that Dhanu could have been a rational perpetrator of violence. Mia Bloom asks and answers, “Was Dhanu seeking to avenge her ruined honor, to achieve status within her culture, or to express her personal rage? It is impossible to know for sure.”<sup>71</sup>

As I mentioned above, Dhanu was the first suicide attacker in the world to use the suicide belt. The belt was designed to make her look pregnant,<sup>72</sup> and yet, mention of this is scarce in coverage of Dhanu and overshadowed by the debate over her status as a rape victim. In the next chapter I discuss the narrative of the mother warrior as a more recent rhetorical strategy by the LTTE and examine its effectiveness, and aim to explain why this obvious physical trait seems to have been lost in her narrative.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005): 226.

<sup>3</sup> Pape, *Dying to Win*, 227; Christian Caryl, “Why They Do It,” *New York Review of Books*, September 22, 2005, 29.

<sup>4</sup> Christoph Reuter, *My Life is a Weapon: A Modern History of Suicide Bombing*, trans. Helena Ragg-Kirkby (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 156.

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<sup>5</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, “Dying to Be Equal: Women Militants and Organisational Decision-Making,” in *Women, Security, South Asia: A Clearing in the Thicket*, ed. Farah Faizal and Swarna Rajagopalan (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 167.

<sup>6</sup> Patricia Lawrence, “The Watch of Tamil Women: Women’s Acts in a Transitional Landscape,” in *Women and the Contested State: Religion, Violence, and Agency in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Monique Skidmore and Patricia Lawrence (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 113.

<sup>7</sup> Tamara Herath, “In My Honour: Contextualising Rape in Suicide Bombing,” Women’s Global Connection Conference Proceedings, 2006,  
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<sup>8</sup> Radhika Coomaraswamy, “A Question of Honour: Women, Ethnicity and Armed Conflict,” Lecture delivered at the Third Minority Rights Lecture, May 25, 1999, Hotel Intercontinental, Geneva, <http://www.sacw.net/Wmov/RCoomaraswamyOnHonour.html>.

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<sup>10</sup> Herath, “In My Honour,” 2006.  
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<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Jean Wood, “Armed Groups and Sexual Violence: When is Wartime Rape Rare?,” *Politics & Society* 37 (2009): 131-161.

<sup>12</sup> Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 87.

<sup>13</sup> Ramachandran, “Dying to Be Equal,” 169.

<sup>14</sup> Ramachandran, “Dying to Be Equal,” 169.

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<sup>15</sup> Herath, “In My Honour,” 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Clara Beyler, “Messengers of Death—Female Suicide Bombers,” *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, February 12, 2003,  
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<sup>17</sup> Alisa Stack-O’Connor, “Lions, Tigers, and Freedom Birds: How and Why the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam Employs Women,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19 (2007): 48-9.

<sup>18</sup> Herath, “In My Honour,” 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Bloom, *Dying to Kill*, 159.

<sup>20</sup> Karla J. Cunningham, “Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 26 (2003): 180.

<sup>21</sup> N. Manoharan, “Tigresses of Lanka: From Girls to Guerillas,” *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, March 21, 2003, <http://ipcs.org/article/terrorism-in-sri-lanka/tigresses-of-lanka-from-girls-to-guerillas-1001.html>.

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<sup>23</sup> Manoharan, “Tigresses of Lanka,” 2003; Cunningham, “Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism,” 180.

<sup>24</sup> Herath, “In My Honour,” 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Anuradha M. Chenoy, “Women in the South Asian Conflict Zones,” *South Asian Survey* 11 (2004): 40.

<sup>26</sup> Neloufer de Mel, *Women & The Nation’s Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001): 221.

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<sup>28</sup> William Dalrymple, “After the Gandhis: Dignity and Death with the Freedom Birds; William Dalrymple on the Merciless Tamil Tiger Girls for Whom Suicide is Just Another Guerilla Tactic,” *The Independent* (London), May 26, 1991.

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<sup>30</sup> Anuradha M. Chenoy, “Women in the South Asian Conflict Zones,” *South Asian Survey* 11 (2004): 40.

<sup>31</sup> Ramachandran, “Dying to Be Equal,” 161.

<sup>32</sup> Mirand Alison, “Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam,” *Civil Wars* 6, no. 4 (2003): 43.

<sup>33</sup> Alison, “Cogs in the Wheel?,” 42-3.

<sup>34</sup> As quoted in Mia Bloom, “Female Suicide Bombers: A Global Trend,” *Dædalus* (Winter 2007): 96.

<sup>35</sup> As quoted in Ramachandran, “Dying to Be Equal,” 171.

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<sup>37</sup> Arjuna Gunawardena, “Female Black Tigers: A Different Breed of Cat?,” in *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?*, ed. Yoram Schweitzer (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2006): 85.

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<sup>39</sup> Gunawardena, “Female Black Tigers,” 85.

<sup>40</sup> Gunawardena, “Female Black Tigers,” 86, Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005): 227.

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<sup>41</sup> Stephen Hopgood, “Tamil Tigers, 1987-2002,” in *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, ed.

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<sup>42</sup> Rohan Gunaratna, “The LTTE and Suicide Terrorism,” *Frontline*, 17, no. 3 (February 5-8, 2000), [www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl1703/17031060.htm](http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl1703/17031060.htm); Hopgood, “Tamil Tigers,” 57; Pape, *Dying to Win*, 154, 226.

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<sup>44</sup> Hopgood, “Tamil Tigers,” 64; Pape, *Dying to Win*, 143; de Mel, *Militarizing Sri Lanka*, 199.

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<sup>46</sup> Herath, “In My Honour,” 2006.

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<sup>48</sup> Davis, “Gendered Terrorism,” 30.

<sup>49</sup> Davis, “Gendered Terrorism,” 30.

<sup>50</sup> Gunawardena, “Female Black Tigers,” 86.

<sup>51</sup> Maunaguru, “Gendering Tamil Nationalism,” 168.

<sup>52</sup> Jan Goodwin, “When the Suicide Bomber is a Woman,” *Marie Claire*,

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<sup>55</sup> Dr. Norman Baker, “Who Really killed Rajiv Gandhi?” TamilNation.org, August 22, 1992, <http://www.tamilnation.org/intframe/india/rajiv/92baker.htm>.

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<sup>61</sup> Bloom, “Female Suicide Bombers,” 95.

<sup>62</sup> Mia Bloom, “Mother. Daughter. Sister. Bomber.,” Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (November/December 2006): 58.

<sup>63</sup> Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005): 159-60.

<sup>64</sup> Bloom, “Mother. Daughter. Sister. Bomber.,” 59.

<sup>65</sup> Bloom, “Mother. Daughter. Sister. Bomber.,” 59.

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<sup>66</sup> Caryl, “Why They Do It,” 30.

<sup>67</sup> Mia Bloom, “The Truth About Dhanu,” *The New York Review of Books* 52, no.16, October 20, 2005, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/18369>.

<sup>68</sup> Bloom, “The Truth About Dhanu,” 2005.

<sup>69</sup> P.K. Balachandran, “Lankans Ignore Gandhi,” *The Island Online*, May 22, 2005, <http://www.island.lk/2005/05/22/news22.html>.

<sup>70</sup> Shamindra Ferdinando, “International Day for Elimination of Violence Against Women HR, ‘human bombs’ and their victims,” *The Island Online*, November 22, 2007, <http://www.island.lk/2007/11/22/features8.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Bloom, *Dying to Kill*, 160.

<sup>72</sup> Bloom, *Dying to Kill*, 159.

CHAPTER THREE  
ANOJA, MOTHERHOOD AND NATIONALISM

## INTRODUCTION

For three weeks, an LTTE female suicide attacker, Anoja, attended maternity classes at a Sri Lankan military hospital. Posing as the pregnant wife of a Sri Lankan army official, the attacker blew herself up in front of the hospital in an attempt to kill Sri Lankan Army Commander Lt. General Serath Fonseka. He survived the attack, but eight others died.<sup>1</sup>

This is a remarkable case. The LTTE had been deploying suicide attacks for nineteen years, and female suicide attackers for fifteen of those years. Sri Lankan officials were well aware of this threat; yet, an LTTE suicide attacker was able to gain access to their military headquarters in Sri Lanka's capital. The woman, now believed to be named Anoja, successfully gave the impression of a pregnant woman, and used that impression of innocence to allow her to successfully carry out her suicide mission.<sup>2</sup> This attack is also cited as the game-changer in the Sri Lankan civil war; it catalyzed the final assaults that led to the LTTE's eventual demise.<sup>3</sup> In this way, the female suicide attacker played an important and unique role in the conflict.

Posing as an expectant mother, she is the perfect example of the “mother warrior” narrative that permeates LTTE messages about its female suicide attackers. In this chapter I argue that the mother warrior narrative has been ineffective in lending legitimacy to the suicide attacker’s actions. The LTTE’s mother warrior has successfully married the two roles of mother and suicide attacker, and was effective in that it appeared in many representations. However, it backfired when it overstepped its bounds; when it attempted to transfer from female combatants to female suicide attackers and when it was considered to be deploying actual mothers instead of a motherhood metaphor.

To explain the importance and implications of this narrative, first I will discuss the foundation of this particular narrative, the interactions between gender and nationalism. Next, I

will analyze the narrative itself and its functions. Lastly, I conclude with the importance of this narrative and what it means for the women who are represented.

## THE MOTHERS OF TAMIL EELAM

Women are integral to the LTTE's brand of nationalism. Skaine notes, "Women's identity is a core symbol of the nation's identity, and to the LTTE, their nationalism."<sup>4</sup> Even more, *mothers* occupy a special place in the quest for Tamil Eelam. De Alwis makes this connection:

In Sri Lanka, where much of the nationalist rhetoric was, and continues to be phrased in terms of a Motherland and a mother tongue, the idealisation of womanhood signified through the construction of the 'respectable lady,' the repository of tradition and domesticity, is based on a valourisation of motherhood: as the creator and protector of the home, as the chaste and industrious wife and as the iconic representation of the nation.<sup>5</sup>

The mother is a symbol of the nation. She represents the common homeland, language, and tradition. And in Tamil society, a mother's duty is to look after others, and this duty changed only slightly with wartime.<sup>6</sup> Women were to protect the home, take care of children, and rebuild when the conflict was done. Women were the bastions of peace while men battled around them. Schrijvers echoes this, stating women were expected to "be brave: in times of conflict, mothers should be willing to send their husbands and sons to the battlefield for the well-being of their nation."<sup>7</sup> Women's participation in the nationalist war was to plead for peace or produce sons to fight, not to fight.

This dominant representation had to change when the LTTE began including women among its fighting forces. Traditional notions of gender weren't compatible with women taking

up arms or using explosives to kill themselves and others. Especially in South Asian conflicts, according to Chenoy, “The mother becomes the ‘mother of the nation’; she can plead for justice on behalf of herself and the nation and give her sons up for the nation. She can ask for peace or sustain the nationalism necessary for war. This image conforms to the feminine ‘other’ of the warrior.”<sup>8</sup> Traditionally, the role of the mother was set in opposition to that of the warrior. As Schrijvers explains:

The prevailing discourses in the Tamil community contain completely contradictory images of ‘woman’ and ‘womanhood.’ The ‘ideal woman,’ both traditionally and as a reaction to the presumed ‘collapse of family values,’ is represented as the secluded, male-dependent housewife. In contrast, the aggressive woman soldier and suicide bomber stands out as a pillar of LTTE ideology.<sup>9</sup>

The LTTE needed a safe representation of its female combatants to keep the support of its Tamil population base. In fact, several scholars argue that the LTTE was able to gain popular support and remain the leading Tamil resistance group *because* of its explicit support of traditional values. In order to win the propaganda battle, while maintaining the shock value of their female combatants, its growing ranks of female fighters needed acceptance by the larger society. As Gonsalves explains,

Whenever social mores are transgressed, to avoid chaotic backlash, explanations and justifications have to be carefully constructed to assuage society and walk members through to the new model. New paradigms never emerge without an anchor to their predecessors and this is especially true in strongly patriarchal societies.<sup>10</sup>

Naturally, the narrative emerged that attempted to tie the popular conception of the nationalist mother to the nationalist fighter of the LTTE. To smooth the transition to female combatants, the LTTE latched onto an existing narrative that was comfortable, familiar, and acceptable.

## THE MOTHER WARRIOR

The “mother warrior” united traditional, nationalist conceptions of the mother with the new roles of female combatants. Brun describes the mother warrior:

The warrior mother is an image integrating expectations of women being brave mothers and warriors fighting for their nation and children. The image of a woman cadre with a baby in one hand and a gun in the other is a common image of woman fighters worldwide. The picture not only conjures images of the ‘can-do-everything superwoman’ but also implies that warfare can transform women’s role and sense of self-worth while also sustaining the social order that has ensured the reproduction and nurturing of the next generation.<sup>11</sup>

The mother warrior appears in Tamil messages explicitly. The mother warrior, often seen as the mother holding a baby in one arm and a rifle in the other, appeared in LTTE literature. The image was a visual representation of the mother warrior narrative, which was a union of traditional feminine roles with the new, violent one.

This double role clearly appears in LTTE messages. The head of the LTTE women’s political wing, described her female combatants this way,

In our homes we all have poultry. The mother hen looks after her chicks with love and care. When you look at the mother hen she looks gentle, soft and very loving. But if a hawk comes down to catch one of the chicks, the mother hen will immediately jump up

and fight with the hawk to protect her chicks. So the strength she gets to fight with the hawk comes from her gentleness and her motherhood. We also love our community. And we want to protect them because we felt the responsibility to protect our community we had to become fighters.<sup>12</sup>

The message is quite clear. Female combatants are mother hens, protecting their chicks, the Tamil community, from the onslaught of the Sri Lankan hawks. Despite the obvious contradiction between traditional motherhood values and the actions of the female combatant, this image has been pervasive in LTTE and other literature.

The charge of a proper nationalist woman, in a civil war with declining male combatants, was to take up the nation's cause directly. In this way, "Women were then not just reproducers of potential heroes but also heroes themselves...the image of the mother remained embedded within this new role of the militant."<sup>13</sup>

As the definition above hints, the mother warrior is traditional in many senses. She reproduces, protects, and sacrifices, just as traditional mothers do. I will discuss these characteristics in turn. First, she continues to be focused on reproduction. As Maunaguru states,

The role of woman as the biological reproducer...was not abandoned. In fact, a currently dominant construction of the Tamil woman that has evolved, is one of a supernatural being performing two different but inter-connected duties for the ethnic group. The woman who holds an automatic rifle in one hand and a child in another has become a popular image of this supernatural Tamil woman.<sup>14</sup>

The mother warrior retains her role as one who reproduces for the nation. According to this image, she is expected to keep up her childbearing duties while simultaneously taking up arms to defend Tamil Eelam. This image could also be read substituting the nation in for the child:

The symbolism here is potent, for the image of the mother protecting her child is a highly emotive one—it is after all our original ‘protector’/‘protected’ relationship. On one level it may be read as the Mother Country protecting her people...<sup>15</sup>

The mother warrior also nurtures and protects. As Herath states,

Women are symbolically linked to the roles of nurturer, regardless of their participation in violent acts such as suicide bombings. In times of war women do not lose their ability to be nurturers but narrow it down to their own hegemonic group, and focus their nurturing qualities to protect Tamil nationals and Tamil nationals only.<sup>16</sup>

Through these images the mother-child relationship is grafted onto the combatant-nation relationship. The combatant is doing her national duty in protecting the nation, just as the mother hen protects her chicks when they are in danger.

An image so grounded in traditional gender roles is unsurprising given the conservative nature of Tamil society. Tamil society is fairly traditional regarding gender roles, and has heavy constraints on women in the public sphere. The LTTE was faced with a problem. Either they could respect cultural Tamil norms and lose the most successful type of suicide attackers, or they could employ women and potentially anger their Tamil base. The “mother warrior” was a potential solution to this problem. The “mother warrior” blended traditional conceptions of motherhood with the extreme violence of the female suicide attacker. This union, Davis argues, was ideal for consumption by traditional society: “Using these images helped to serve as a transitional mechanism for both society and women by marrying traditional with nontraditional gender roles.”<sup>17</sup>

It is likely that the LTTE took the public relations offensive to counteract backlash, even from their own community. Despite the fact that so many Tamil women had joined the LTTE,

and their professed goal was to protect and promote the Tamil people, Tamils were still uncomfortable with LTTE women. “The Tamils...are uncomfortable about women taking up arms and killing, even if it is to protect them. Society is far more hostile to a female combatant than to a male combatant. A woman combatant who leaves the LTTE and returns home is rarely welcomed back or accepted by her family and neighbourhood [sic], even in areas that are supportive of the LTTE.”<sup>18</sup> For the LTTE, desperate for support in their battle against the Sri Lankan government, they would want to avoid serious incursions into Tamil culture. As Patricia Whaley Eager explains,

In order to understand how women are accepted as liberation fighters/terrorists/suicide bombers in extremely patriarchal societies such as Sri Lanka and Palestine, the leadership of these groups has to rationalize these otherwise forbidden acts by women so as not to upset the dominant cultural and gender norms.<sup>19</sup>

This was especially important for the LTTE, who relied on sympathy and support from a population that valued their traditional values platform. The LTTE often used family metaphors to perpetuate this ideal. Cadres were expected to think of one another as brothers and sisters.<sup>20</sup> All desire was supposed to be directed towards the nation, not other cadres.<sup>21</sup> In fact, people found to be having relationships were often executed. Two guards discovered to be in an intimate relationship suffered this fate, even though the woman involved was pregnant. Another woman found to be pregnant killed herself with her cyanide capsule to avoid discovery.<sup>22</sup> On the surface, the actions of LTTE women would be seen as a far cry from what is allowed of traditional Tamil women. Policies like these are an attempt to force LTTE women to embody the docile, feminine image of their civilian counterparts.

The traditional feminine image was the least threatening to the gender status quo. And the mother warrior was one way to achieve this. Davis points out that depicting female combatants as mothers allows them to break boundaries, but only temporarily:

Images and themes used in public-relations campaigns have interwoven this idea so tightly as to suggest that as soon as the immediate threat recedes, the woman in the picture will put down the rifle and keep the baby, re-establishing traditional roles.<sup>23</sup>

The representation aims to soothe opposition to female involvement in the LTTE by highlighting their innate feminine nature that will undoubtedly return when the conflict ends. As Macdonald says, this narrative is “a way of leaving women ‘holding the baby’ and excluding them from the political domain when the struggle is over.”<sup>24</sup>

This narrative served many other purposes for the LTTE as well. One was military effectiveness: there are numerous strategic benefits of deploying women as suicide attackers (discussed in Chapter One). Another purpose is to gain sympathy for the cause. The extreme sacrifices that women make draw attention to the persecution of the Sri Lankan government against Tamils. The very fact that the LTTE has turned to using mothers, the sacred, peaceful, protectors of their nation, as human bombs is meant to demonstrate the desperation of their situation. Gunawardena states this clearly when she says,

Although sending a female to self-destruct as a suicide bomber in itself departs from accepted conventions, against the backdrop of a three decade old ethnic conflict, it was condoned as a sacrifice, a necessity of circumstances, as an asymmetrical response to the much stronger adversary, the Sri Lanka military.<sup>25</sup>

Confronted with mothers-turned-suicide-attackers, a common reaction is to assume that the situation must be desperate.

The motherhood narrative also aids with recruitment. The mother warrior is a model for other women, and a positive image for the families that these women come from. Since female combatants are seen as “mother warriors,” not warriors alone, the societal support is much higher. Serving the nationalist cause through the LTTE is deemed a legitimate course. In fact, “The LTTE actively applies specific representations of women warriors for several purposes, particularly to recruit new cadres to the movement and to nurture and sustain the identity and support by the diaspora.”<sup>26</sup>

Women in the group are reputed to be the LTTE’s most violent and extreme members. They model and exceed the expectations set for male members. This representation is quite useful to recruit men as well. The group often uses images of these women to convince families to not only accept their daughters’ participation, but to challenge males to meet the bar that female fighters had set.<sup>27</sup>

All this is achieved without drastically challenging the gender status quo, and thus, Tamil society. As Gonsalves explains, “There is the underlying assumption that a wife or mother, no matter how radical she or her demands may be, will not pose a threat to the fundamental base of society.”<sup>28</sup> Many have argued that female suicide attackers have not changed civilian Tamil conceptions of gender roles in any substantial way. In fact, as de Mel notes, “the notion of warrior-mother did not displace deep-seated notions of normative female identity which, through popular culture, the media, educational texts and family conditioning, continue to instruct the Sri Lankan woman on her symbolic value as a sexually chaste, enlightened, altruistic and maternal being.”<sup>29</sup>

## THE MOTHER WARRIOR AND SUICIDE ATTACKS

The mother warrior narrative seems consistent with the nationalist project of the LTTE. Female combatants protect the nation as they would protect their children, and exemplify several of the positive characteristics associated with motherhood, such as nurturing and protecting. However, the LTTE seems to have erred in attempting to use the mother warrior narrative in regards to their female suicide attackers. While the narrative seems compatible with some characteristics of suicide attacks, as will be shown below, it ultimately backfired when applied to female suicide attackers.

The role of sacrifice in motherhood coincides neatly with the mother warrior narrative. Sacrifice is an ideal for mothers—they should sacrifice in order to fully care for their husbands and families. For at least one woman combatant, all concerns about even their personal well-being are less important than the cause for Eelam:

[W]e don't think about blood, think about dying or even think about our friends' death. The only thing that comes in our mind is we have been given an activity and we need to complete and achieve the activity...Being in the LTTE and going to fight we know that people are trusting us, they are waiting for us, so we must take their load from them.<sup>30</sup>

This combatant clearly believes that the Tamil nationalist cause should take precedence, and nothing else.

Each member of the group is prepared to sacrifice for their comrades, the Tamil community, and for Tamil Eelam. Famously, LTTE members are known for sacrificing their own lives to protect other combatants. Each member wears a cyanide capsule around their neck. If they are captured or compromised in some way, they can quickly end their lives, and the risk

to other LTTE combatants. They sacrifice themselves to avoid providing the enemy with information that could hurt the LTTE.

More concretely, many LTTE members claim to join to protect other Tamils. Most have joined because they have witnessed or heard about violence perpetrated by the Sri Lankan government against Tamils. They fight, sacrificing their lives for others. And lastly, as a nationalist movement, each member is fighting for a cause greater than themselves; the idea of a separate Tamil state, Eelam. Both men and women commonly cite fighting for Eelam as a motivation for joining the group.<sup>31</sup>

It seems consistent to link the ideas of sacrifice to the female suicide attacker. Suicide attacks are framed as a way that women, especially those who are not or cannot be mothers, can make sacrifices for the community:

The self-sacrifice of the female bombers is almost an extension of the idea of motherhood in the Tamil culture, [as] in this strongly patriarchal society, Tamil mothers make great sacrifices for their sons on a daily basis; feeding them before themselves or the girl children, serving them and so on. Acting as a human bomb is an understood and accepted offering for *a woman who will never be a mother*.<sup>32</sup>

For women who can't give to society in the strictly traditional ways, their suicides can function as that sacrifice. In fact, instead of calling suicide attacks "suicide," the LTTE prefers the Tamil phrase for "giving yourself."<sup>33</sup> They focus less on the lives that they end and more on the sacrifice that one has made for others through that action. Just as for the combatants who take cyanide capsules, each personal sacrifice that a female suicide attacker makes gives life to the Tamil cause.<sup>34</sup>

The message of motherhood in this narrative functions to neutralize the female suicide attackers' actions. The actions of a female combatant can be questioned as overly militaristic, violent, or unnatural—the actions of a mother can't be. What a mother is forced to do to protect her children, in this case, her nation, is above scrutiny. Ironically, “there was no evidence to suggest that any of the female Black Tigers were mothers or for that matter married.”<sup>35</sup> The “mother warrior” narrative is just that—a narrative. It is comfortable for society to imagine that those who are using suicide to kill others aren't radical or deranged. Instead, they are women who are protecting the idea of Tamil Eelam just as a mother would attack if her children were in danger. Unlike the rape victim narrative surrounding Dhanu, the mother warrior narrative did not take hold around the Anoja as intended or placate external audiences.

#### ANOJA'S PREGNANCY TEST

So far I have attempted to explain the consistency of the mother warrior narrative with the Tamil's nationalist project. The narrative appears compatible with traditional Tamil culture. She bears children, nurtures and protects them, and makes sacrifices to keep them safe. The narrative serves as a metaphor for motherhood to ease the material tension between motherhood and suicide attacks. Unfortunately for the LTTE, however, mothers-as-suicide bombers are not treated as the national heroes that they would prefer.

The strength of the mother warrior narrative ends at the boundaries of the narrative. That is, it has not been an effective rhetorical strategy to soothe societal fears about female suicide attackers. Anoja is a prime example. She posed as a pregnant woman in order to gain access to a high-security target, manipulating stereotypes about mothers in order to be a more effective combatant. According to the narrative, she should be championed as an effective mother warrior,

giving life to the Tamil cause and protecting her nation. Instead, a debate arose about her pregnancy status. Media coverage was obsessed with her supposed pregnancy, reading to denigrate the use of a “pregnant” woman in a suicide attack. The strength of norms about motherhood were simply too strong—even tying them to the nationalist project was not enough to overwhelm them. The mother warrior narrative was an effective rhetorical strategy in the abstract, perhaps with limited success for female combatants, but was not effective in neutralizing the opposition to mothers using suicide attacks.

In fact, the media coverage was dominated by discussion of this female suicide attacker’s “pregnancy” rather than the actual attack. An Indian Express article said,

The suicide bomber who blew up Sri Lankan Army chief’s motorcade used maternity day to enter the military compound in the heart of Colombo disguised as a pregnant woman...Mothers-to-be entering the Army hospital for a weekly maternity day are not subject to stringent security checks. Investigations had shown that the bomber—believed to be a member of the ‘Black Tiger’ suicide squad of the LTTE—had been driven from the gate of the high-security military compound to the Army hospital in an Army vehicle.<sup>36</sup>

Here the focus is on this attacker’s disguise and her use of motherhood to fool the Sri Lankan army’s security apparatus. The power of traditional gender roles is apparent, and reflected in Sri Lankan policy. As this article states, pregnant women are explicitly not seen as a threat to security and the government does not waste resources on security checks. In this case, the pregnant status of the suicide attacker placed her entirely above suspicion. In fact, a Sri Lankan military vehicle transported an LTTE suicide attacker to her target!

Much of the coverage reflects the discomfort with a woman taking advantage of a pregnancy for destructive purposes. A BBC article stated,

Military officials say the attacker was a woman who made herself appear heavily pregnant to conceal the explosives. She presented fake identification and said she had an ante-natal appointment at the army hospital inside the complex.<sup>37</sup>

Another article reflects this tone:

Tuesday's attack involved a female suicide bomber, dressed as a pregnant woman, who pretended to be visiting the army hospital near the heavily-guarded, high security zone. She waited for the arrival of army chief, Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka, and detonated her explosives, killing eight people on the spot and wounding 27 others, mainly military personnel.<sup>38</sup>

Another article entitled, “‘Pregnant’ Bomber Takes Isle to the Brink of Civil War,” phrased the attack this way: “Posing as a pregnant woman and showing forged identity documents, the Tamil bomber concealed explosives around her waist and set off her device next to a car carrying Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka.”<sup>39</sup> Here, the attacker was again deviously posing as a mother to take advantage of the situation and attack the army official.

Several articles reflect this sentiment, saying, “Fonseka survived an LTTE suicide bomb attack by a pregnant Tamil woman who infiltrated the army base by attending the regular maternity clinic provided for civilians”<sup>40</sup> and “The woman was able to enter the area by presenting fake identification and saying she had an appointment for a pregnancy examination at the army hospital.”<sup>41</sup> The words “forged,” “infiltrated,” “fake identification,” all jump out. Her attack was to be condemned because she manipulated the security forces into thinking that she was a “real” mother.

Shortly after the attack, a debate emerged about whether or not the attacker was in fact pregnant. One article claimed that she had gotten pregnant, and then took advantage of her circumstances for the Tamil cause: “The Tamil suicide bomber who targeted Sri Lanka’s top general used her pregnancy to meticulously plan the attack, an investigator said. Officials previously said the bomber had only pretended to be pregnant, but the investigator said hospital records showed she actually was.”<sup>42</sup> Other articles share this suspicion.<sup>43</sup>

However, several days later, the attacker’s pregnancy was again in question. An *Asian Tribune* article reported that the pregnancy was still under investigation. Labs were conducting new blood tests; they suspected that the previous samples may have been contaminated by the plastic explosives used.<sup>44</sup> Despite the serious injuries to an upper-level army official and the fact that a LTTE suicide bomber gained access to the military headquarters, one of the central questions of the investigation became if the suicide attacker was pregnant or not. Clearly, authentic motherhood was viewed as a vital question. If she was not pregnant, her actions would at least have been viewed as less destructive. The idea that a pregnant woman would carry out a suicide attack was simply too much to handle—the investigation reflected the need to return to traditional notions of gender. A non-pregnant suicide attacker is easier to come to terms with than a pregnant one. Then, at least she isn’t using the sacred power of motherhood as a destructive force.

Another telling trend in the coverage is language about abortion. One timeline of the Sri Lankan conflict included this line: “April 2006 –Army Commander Major General Sarath Fonseka is badly hurt in an abortive suicide attack on Army HQ in Colombo.”<sup>45</sup> Another said, The abortive attempt on Sri Lanka army [C]hief Lieutenant General Sarath Fonsenka by a suspected pregnant LTTE woman cadre inside the military headquarters in April 2006 in

a way can be termed as the beginning of the last war fought by the LTTE under Prabhakaran's command.<sup>46</sup>

The infatuation with the women's pregnancy led to the crass label of the attack as "abortive." Abortion rhetoric is too broad to discuss here, but it is viewed as an act that goes against the grain of motherhood and tradition. The LTTE themselves discourage abortion for Tamil women; they view it as an affront to the nationalist cause. They encourage women to produce as many nationalist fighters as possible.

As I tried to display above, much of the coverage took pains to explain that the suicide attacker was not, in fact, pregnant. Those that didn't debated Anoja's pregnancy status explicitly. The illusion of pregnancy was the defining feature of this suicide attacker, and the media, and Sri Lanka, was overwhelmingly aware of how motherhood was used to dupe the Sri Lankan security.

The mother warrior narrative is just that—a powerful narrative. Mother warriors as suicide attackers considered too dangerous, and often, repulsive. When the Sri Lanka All Party Women's Congress believed that the attack was committed by a pregnant woman, they issued a statement denigrating the attack.<sup>47</sup> Overall, this debate hurt the LTTE's popularity.<sup>48</sup> Gunawardena summarizes, "the revulsion at the decision of using a 'pregnant' woman has had adverse effects on the LTTE, both from the international community as well as from within the Tamil community itself."<sup>49</sup> The narrative is effective only when it demonstrates the importance of motherhood without putting real mothers at risk.

## CONCLUSION

This image is truly remarkable. Traditional notions of mothers and notions about modern suicide attackers are opposite; one is peaceful and one is bent on violence. I have attempted to show that the “mother warrior” narrative is pervasive in Tamil culture and influences how LTTE female suicide attackers are represented. Larger narratives about nationalism and gender have produced the mother warrior narrative in an attempt to make female suicide attackers acceptable to a more traditional society.

This shows the importance of narrative in understanding female suicide attackers. Depicting them as mothers of the nation and protectors of the Tamil people is popular. It boosted recruitment and LTTE popularity, as well as ideologically supporting the role of female suicide attackers in the nationalist conflict for pro-Tamil audiences. But when the narrative translates into material experiences, such as “real” mothers killing for the nation, objections arise. People are comfortable with the narrative, but not the logical implications of accepting such a narrative. As Bloom bluntly states, “The advent of women suicide bombers has thus transformed the revolutionary womb into an exploding one.”<sup>50</sup> This transformation was not accepted by external audiences.

The “mother warrior” narrative explains women’s violence for easy societal consumption, and thus, neutralizes its political power. The fact that the narrative does not disturb conception of traditional gender roles makes this clear, even if the female suicide attacker does.

Of course, it would be a mistake to discount that the narrative has any potential for women. Gonsalves argues that the mother warrior narrative has encouraged media to take female suicide attackers seriously, and view them as “politicized beings.” She argues that “[w]ithin the comfort of associations with motherhood, various media reports do focus on agency...because

the starting point is the patriarchally sanctioned wife/mother role.”<sup>51</sup> The comfort with the motherhood role allows a different examination of the female suicide attacker.

However, I would argue that the fact that the mother warrior narrative merely displaces the focus onto the mother role, instead of recognizing the female suicide attackers’ actions at face value. While she may be depicted as an agent, as Gonsalves says, her agency is certainly tempered with a disproportionate focus on her gender.

While the mother warrior-turned suicide attacker was too dangerous, the rape victim-turned suicide attacker was a narrative that took hold in popular media. Both depictions utilize the ideas of sacrifice and nationalism. Where the motherhood narrative has failed, the narrative about female suicide attackers as rape victims has succeeded. I examine these differences in the following conclusion.

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<sup>2</sup> Asian Tribune, “Suspected LTTE female suicide bomber identified,” April 27, 2006, <http://www.asiantribune.com/suspected-ltte-female-suicide-bomber-identified>.

<sup>3</sup> Ajit Kumar Singh, “Target Colombo,” *Outlook India*, July 19, 2007, <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?235120>,

<sup>4</sup> Rosemarie Skaine, *Female Suicide Bombers* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2006): 87; Joke Schrijvers, “Fighters, Victims and Survivors: Constructions of Ethnicity, Gender and Refugeeeness Among Tamils in Sri Lanka,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 12, no. 3 (1999): 308.

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<sup>5</sup> Malathi de Alwis, “Gender, Politics and the ‘Respectable Lady,’” in *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity & History in Modern Sri Lanka*, ed. Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail (Sri Lanka: Social Scientists’ Association, 2009): 140.

<sup>6</sup> Schrijvers, “Fighters, Victims and Survivors,” 315.

<sup>7</sup> Schrijvers, “Fighters, Victims and Survivors,” 316.

<sup>8</sup> Anuradha M. Chenoy, “Women in the South Asian Conflict Zones,” *South Asian Survey* 11 (2004): 43.

<sup>9</sup> Schrijvers, “Fighters, Victims and Survivors,” 328.

<sup>10</sup> Tahira Gonsalves, “Media Manipulations and Agency: Women in the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) of Sri Lanka,” *The Ahfad Journal* 22, no. 2 (2005): 48.

<sup>11</sup> Cathrine Brun, “Women in the Local/Global Fields of War and Displacement in Sri Lanka,” *Gender, Technology and Development* 9, no.1 (2005): 66.

<sup>12</sup> Tamara Herath, “In My Honour: Contextualising Rape in Suicide Bombing,” Women’s Global Connection Conference Proceedings, 2006,  
<http://wgc.womensglobalconnection.org/Conf06proceedings/Herath,T.InMyHonor.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Gonsalves, “Media Manipulations and Agency,” 42.

<sup>14</sup> Sitralega Maunaguru, “Gendering Tamil Nationalism: The Construction of ‘Woman’ in Projects of Protest and Control,” in *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity & History in Modern Sri Lanka*, ed. Pradeep Jeganathan & Qadri Ismail (Colombo: Social Scientists’ Association, 1995): 162.

<sup>15</sup> Sharon Macdonald, “Drawing the Lines—Gender, Peace and War: An Introduction,” in Sharon Macdonald, Pat Holden and Shirley Ardener, eds., *Images of Women in Peace and War:*

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<sup>16</sup> Herath, “In My Honour,” 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Jessica Davis, “Gendered Terrorism: Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE),” *Minerva Journal of Women and War*, 2, no. 1 (2008): 29.

<sup>18</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, “Dying to Be Equal: Women Militants and Organisational Decision-making,” in *Women, Security, South Asia: A Clearing in the Thicket*, edited by Farah Faizal and Swarna Rajagopalan (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 173-4.

<sup>19</sup> Paige Whaley Eager, *From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists: Women and Political Violence*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 139.

<sup>20</sup> Neloufer de Mel, “Agent or Victim? The Sri Lankan Woman Militant in the Interregnum,” in *Feminists Under Fire: Exchanges Across War Zones*, ed. Wenona Giles, Malathi de Alwis, Edith Klein, and Neluka Silva (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003), 65.

<sup>21</sup> Yasmin Tambiah, “Turncoat Bodies: Sexuality and Sex Work Under Militarization in Sri Lanka,” *Gender and Society* 19, no. 2 (2005): 250.

<sup>22</sup> Neloufer de Mel, “Body Politics: (Re)Cognising the Female Suicide Bomber in Sri Lanka,” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 11, no. 1 (2004): 83.

<sup>23</sup> Davis, “Gendered Terrorism,” 29.

<sup>24</sup> Macdonald, “Drawing the Lines,” 14.

<sup>25</sup> Arjuna Gunawardena, “Female Black Tigers: A Different Breed of Cat?,” in *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?*, ed. Yoram Schweitzer (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2006): 87-8.

<sup>26</sup> Brun, “Women in the Local/Global Fields of War and Displacement in Sri Lanka,” 66.

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<sup>27</sup> Eager, *From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists*, 141.

<sup>28</sup> Gonsalves, “Media Manipulations and Agency,” 43.

<sup>29</sup> Neloufer de Mel, *Women & The Nation’s Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001): 215.

<sup>30</sup> As quoted in Miranda Alison, *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2009), 174.

<sup>31</sup> Ramachandran, “Dying to Be Equal,” 169.

<sup>32</sup> As quoted in Gunawardena, “Female Black Tigers,” 84, emphasis added.

<sup>33</sup> Herath, “In My Honour,” 2006.

<sup>34</sup> de Mel, “Body Politics,” 77.

<sup>35</sup> Gunawardena, “Female Black Tigers,” 84.

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<sup>39</sup> Richard Beeston, “‘Pregnant’ Bomber Takes Isle to the Brink of Civil War,” *Times Online*, April 26, 2006, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article709431.ece>.

<sup>40</sup> K. T. Rajasingham, “An Elegy for Sarath Fonseka,” *Asian Tribune*, November 14, 2009,  
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<sup>41</sup> Associated Press, “Army HQ attacked, air strike launched on LTTE,” April 26, 2006,  
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<sup>42</sup> *USA Today*, “Sri Lankan bomber was pregnant after all,” April 28, 2006,

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<sup>43</sup> *United Press International*, “Suicide Bomber Was Pregnant,” April 28, 2006,

[http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/2006/04/28/Suicide-bomber-was-pregnant/UPI-](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2006/04/28/Suicide-bomber-was-pregnant/UPI-22141146276356/)

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<sup>44</sup> *Asian Tribune*, “Suicide Bomber: Blood Samples to be Send Abroad for Pregnancy Test,” May 6, 2006, <http://www.asiantribune.com/suicide-bomber-blood-samples-be-send-abroad-pregnanc>.

<sup>45</sup> *Reuters*, “TIMELINE - Attacks blamed on Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers,” February 2, 2008,

<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSSP33257120080202>.

<sup>46</sup> *Rediff News*, “How the Lankan Army Crushed the LTTE,” May 21, 2009,

<http://news.rediff.com/slideshow/2009/may/20/slideshow-1-how-war-against-ltte-was-won.htm>.

<sup>47</sup> Neloufer de Mel, *Militarizing Sri Lanka: Popular Culture, Memory and Narrative in the Armed Conflict* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 209.

<sup>48</sup> Gunawardena, “Female Black Tigers,” 87.

<sup>49</sup> Gunawardena, “Female Black Tigers,” 87-8.

<sup>50</sup> Mia Bloom, “Female Suicide Bombers: A Global Trend,” *Daedalus* (Winter 2007): 95.

<sup>51</sup> Gonsalves, “Media Manipulations and Agency,” 43, emphasis in original.

## CONCLUSION

As the group with the most female suicide attackers in the world and nestled in an extremely conservative society, the LTTE deployed specific rhetorical strategies to make the attackers' choices, and thus the group's more acceptable. Two of the narratives that they created, the mother warrior and the rape victim, had similar intentions but different outcomes.

In Chapter One, I described the importance of suicide as a military method for the LTTE. It began as a defensive tactic to guard the secrets and integrity of the group but quickly became used for aggressive military means. I also outlined the historical events that led to the emergence of the LTTE suicide attacker, and the phenomenon of the female suicide attacker more specifically. Women have been integral to the success of the suicide attack. The power of gender stereotypes mean that they are more easily disguised, and thus, more military effective. They can reach the LTTE's most desired targets, political and military officials, with an ease that the male suicide attacker cannot.

Clearly, the LTTE has much at stake with how their members are presented. They benefit by reifying gender norms to keep female suicide attackers above suspicion, and thus, maintain their strategic edge. This has had mixed results. We know that both narratives had resonance, at least, with the Tamil community. Both were used to increase women's involvement in the group. The mother warrior was used to assuage families who were concerned about their mothers and daughters joining the group, as well as to encourage men to join and perform as well as the mother warrior superwoman. Dhanu's image, as an extension of the already resonant narrative and stigmas about rape, was an extremely effective recruitment tool, as female participation in the group skyrocketed during 1991 and 1992, and women were rumored to carry pictures of her with them to the battlefield. These narratives are powerful enough to inspire vast numbers of

women to sacrifice their lives. Only one of the narratives, however, seemed to be picked up by people outside of the Tamil community.

Chapter Two was a case study the “rape victim” narrative. The LTTE released a statement that Dhanu had been raped in an attempt to explain her motivations for the act. Given that rape is perceived as an ethnic crime in Sri Lanka’s civil war, it was a motif that resonated. The rape narrative surrounding Dhanu had multiple benefits for the LTTE. It aided in recruitment of young women who feared the same fate, further vilified the Sri Lankan government and Indian Peace Keeping Forces, and provided a rationalization for Dhanu’s actions. Rape stigmas are also compatible with suicide attacks—according to the narrative, women were to get revenge by targeting the enemies of the Tamil nation.

In this case, the narrative seems to have taken hold. It can be found in multiple forms of Sri Lankan and Western media, and even US pop culture. The LTTE’s message survived basically intact. Much coverage of Dhanu places the question of her rape as a central question, especially when discussing her motivations. Coverage of her is much more forgiving than coverage of Fonseka’s attempted assassin, despite the fact that Dhanu was successful in her mission and Anoja was not!

Chapter Three was a case study of this “mother warrior” narrative. The mother warrior narrative is consistent with the Tamil nationalist cause. She supported the nation as she would support her children. Mother warriors, with a baby in one arm and a rifle in the other, were the epitome of the nationalist supporter. This narrative was effective in some ways and ineffective in others. It created an image palatable to Tamil society. Traditional values were a cornerstone of the LTTE’s policy, and popularity. However, the strength of the motherhood role was too powerful to be paired with the female suicide attacker role. While the narrative was consistent

with much of their platform, it was not enough to ease the discomfort with mothers using violence, even if for the Tamil cause. The debate about Fonseka's would-be assassin, Anoja, was almost entirely focused on her pregnancy status. Her role as a suicide attacker was inevitably going to be denigrated; however, the obsession with the truth about the pregnancy indicated that while the narrative may be a comfortable depiction, "real" mothers using extreme violence are too dangerous.

Even though Dhanu was disguised as a pregnant woman, like the female suicide attacker in Chapter Three,<sup>1</sup> the rape narrative was the one to take hold. This suggests that it is easier for people to understand the motivations of a victim than a protective mother. While we could say both were effective inside the group, only the rape victim narrative really told hold and was widely accepted outside the LTTE.

From this study, I draw several conclusions. First, these examples reify the power of narrative. As Fisher, Ricoeur and White have already explained, narrative functions to explain what seems unexplainable and give coherency to seemingly random historical events. Female suicide attackers break with gender roles so significantly that narrative is necessary to explain this difference; for societies to comprehend this contradiction. In both cases, the reactions to extreme violence like suicide attacks are tied to the narrative that surrounds those attacks. The mother warrior narrative inspired a backlash, while the rape victim narrative inspired sympathy. Understanding these narratives has serious implications for how suicide bombers are apprehended in many societies. And these are narratives that aren't likely to change in the short term either. In cases of women's violence, narratives tend to repeat themselves. As Morrissey notes,

[T]raumatic events, such as murders committed by women, are never narrated only once.

Indeed, the need to repetitively narrate such events is their defining feature as traumatic.

The trauma resides in the structure of the experience of the event, yet condemning the traumatized society to repeat it over and over via the narrative representation.<sup>2</sup>

The intense interest in female suicide attackers is likely to hold, at least in the short term.

Fascination with female suicide attackers means that their narratives will likely be repeated.

Second, the narratives surrounding these female suicide attackers suggest the importance of narrative in explaining violence. Violence is not intrinsically political, but the narratives that surround that violence unquestionably are. These narratives focused almost entirely on the motivations of the female suicide attackers; Dhanu's alleged rape and Anoja's alleged pregnancy. This emphasis on the motivations of the women, instead of their actions, signals that we desire explanations for violence, and probably more so with cases of extreme violence like suicide attacks. Narratives fulfill our need by explaining causation. Like a story, we can only come to grips with violence by having access to what causes events, and characters that can be understood in simple terms. In these cases, the "backstory" of each of the women, ultimately, became much more important than any actions that they chose.

Third, these narratives tell us that the power of gender stereotypes is still overwhelming. While I reference the conservatism of Sri Lankan society, I suspect that many of these same themes would arise in many different contexts—in fact, we are already seeing similar themes arise in narratives about Russia's Black Widows.<sup>3</sup> The very nature of female suicide attackers seems to deny the truth of gender stereotypes. However, in this case, I found that the reaction to their violence is to bring these exceptional women back into the fold through narrative rather than to modify gender stereotypes.

Fourth, this study has also raised questions about the interactions between narrative and agency. These narratives about women, almost by definition, cannot be considered feminist. They were created in order to appease a conservative society, not challenge it. While I've already outlined the difficulties in asking and answering questions about women's empowerment in this situation, narrative does at least suggest how certain representations of women control their memory more than their chosen actions. This is evidenced by the fact that both of the narratives studied were concerned with the status of the attacker, as a victim or pregnant, instead of her actions, destructive as they were. Some may argue that isn't possible to have a positive narrative about female suicide attackers precisely because of their use of violence. However, I think it is possible to have a narrative that doesn't foreclose all avenues for agency, even if they are deploying a type of agency that we wouldn't necessarily approve of. While the scope of this paper prevents me from analyzing the narratives surrounding male suicide attackers, I imagine that analysis of an attacker without recourse to gender is one starting point for a new narrative.

Dhanu and Anoja's stories have demonstrated that women's violence can be used for specific material and rhetorical purposes. The LTTE tried to benefit from carrying out the attacks as well as controlling the narratives that surrounded their female suicide attackers, with limited success. I hope to have explained not only the power of gender stereotypes, even with a modern phenomenon like female suicide attacks, but the power of narrative as a political tool to encourage particular interpretations of violence. Since these women cannot tell their own stories, we ought to be careful with the ones that we tell about them.

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<sup>1</sup> Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005): 159.

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<sup>2</sup> Belinda Morrissey, *When Women Kill: Questions of Agency and Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2003): 10.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew R. Kramer, “Russia’s Fear of Female Bombers Revived,” *New York Times*, March 29, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/30/world/europe/30blackwidows.html?scp=7&sq=Moscow%20bombing&st=cse>.

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