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Echoes of Exile: Agency, War-induced Displacement, and the Politics of Belonging in Niromi de Soyza's *Tamil Tigress*

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Abstract

Exile creates a state of liminality in which identity is perpetually redefined, and the idea of home transforms into a locus of longing and loss. For those affected by war-induced displacement, memory and belonging become elusive categories, shaped by a complicated mix of trauma and desire for rootedness. Niromi de Soyza's *Tamil Tigress* offers an intimate account of loss, bloodshed, female militant subjectivity and the ruptures of displacement against the backdrop of the Sri Lankan civil war. Niromi's account of her adolescent years as a Tamil Tiger fighter captures the ideological zeal of armed struggle alongside the long-term physical, cultural, and emotional upheavals it caused. Her memoir immerses the reader in the ambiguities of militancy and the vulnerabilities of youth, while also charting her later path into the Tamil diaspora. It foregrounds exile as a persistent state that disturbs memory, identity, and self-perception rather than simply a geographical separation from homeland. The memoir is interpreted in this paper through the intertwined prisms of women's agency, trauma, identity, and domestic politics. Here, exile is shown as both a personal and collective experience: as Niromi chronicles her own journey, her narrative also speaks to the broader history of a war-torn community. The paper attempts to examine how Soyza's memoir redefines identity amid displacement, unveils the drama of domestic politics, and casts a spotlight on women's agency in the face of violence and exile.

Keywords: Exile, Trauma, Identity, Displacement, Memory, Conflict, Marginalization, War Testimony

Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict has an entrenched past, arising from persistent exclusion of the Tamil people at the hands of the successive government with a Sinhalese majority. The systematic marginalisation of Tamils and exclusion from political, economic and educational opportunities was a result of regressive anti-Tamil policies that promoted the Sinhalese language and Buddhism as markers of national identity. Simultaneously, the absence of strong Tamil leadership failed to safeguard the interests of the Tamil populace, paving the way for militancy to take over the Tamil struggle. The simmering resentment towards structural injustices and cultural alienation, combined with state-sponsored and social violence, fuelled the communal divide, laid the

groundwork for the creation of Tamil militancy groups like the LTTE, and triggered extensive displacement. As the civil war broke out, it forced many Tamil families into the situation of unwarranted exile.

The understanding of exile in this context was not limited to geographical condition; rather, it incorporates an existential state that alters one's identity, memory and relationship with homeland. As noted by Said, "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home..." (173). Literature on exile holds a significant place in postcolonial and conflict narratives and illuminates these processes, emphasising a complicated relation between historical rupture, collective identity and individual memory. Such narratives serve as a source of testimonial authority, reflecting the political, cultural and psychological impacts of displacement, revealing forced migration as more than a material condition—operating as a persistent crisis of selfhood.

Within this framework, exile functions as a historical event as well as a continuing state, shaping stories that intersect memory, cultural belongingness and politics of representation. This idea illustrates the psychological and cultural upheavals that define the displacement narratives in Narayanasamy Parameswaran's memoir *Tamil Tigress: My Story as a Child Soldier in Sri Lanka's Bloody Civil War* (2011). The memoir written under the pseudonym of Niromi de Soyza covers the turbulent period of 1987-88 in Sri Lanka's history and brings to life the personal account of how war and the ideological intensity of militancy shaped the lives of both Tamil militants and civilians. Niromi examines the effects of militancy while describing the changes that came about in the culturally and historically Tamil-dominated society of Jaffna in the following manner:

Having lost its innocence in Black July, it no longer had the ordinary hustle and bustle of a normal town. Against the backdrop of a dusk-to dawn curfew, its streets were now inhabited by anxious citizens, frightened refugees, arrogant military and furtive militants. Thousands of Tamils had fled the country, mainly to UK

and Europe, claiming political asylum. (31)

The lines depict the crude horrors emerging from the anti-Tamil riots that shook many cities of the country with unprecedented death and violence perpetrated by the mobs, which even saw public participation. Written in a style situated between autobiography and political testimony, the narrative deals with the author's recollection as a teenage recruit in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the final phase of the prolonged Sri Lankan Civil War. Published decades later after the protracted war, the memoir could be interpreted from the lens of post-war recollection and diaspora identity. As the first English account by a former LTTE female combatant, it investigates the issue of war memory, exile and women's agency from a diasporic perspective. The title *Tamil Tigress* is not a mere memoiristic label but functions as a historical signifier deeply ingrained in the upheaval and closely demonstrating how conflict zone narratives preserve cultural identity in the face of dominant historical erasures. It is a symbolic and political marker that encodes questions of identity, gender, and belonging. The word "tigress" in the title connotes both pride and terror, indicating the gendered nature of armed struggle and a difficult transition from combatant to exile.

By using the tiger imagery associated with the LTTE, the author places her story squarely within the collective history of militant struggle of the Sri Lankan civil war. From 1983 until its military defeat in 2009, the LTTE ceaselessly fought to establish Tamil Eelam in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka in order to create a Tamil homeland and a symbolic refuge of identity. As a resistance against Sinhala majoritarian nationalism, for Tamils the idea of Eelam represented territorial autonomy and cultural reclamation. Around this historical pretext, the reference to the feminine epithet "tigress" in the title reconfigures the LTTE emblem to emphasise women's role and agency in the field that is usually dominated by masculine narratives of war. The self-designation of "tigress" stands paradoxical, as the author's autobiographical reflections show empowerment of militancy while disclosing complexities of the LTTE's ideological and patriarchal structures that con-

strained that freedom. In this respect, the title complicates agency and containment and reveals tension between fighting for identity and fear of displacement.

The author set her story during Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict in December 1987; after defying her middle-class upbringing and leaving school, she joined LTTE, becoming one of their first set of female fighters. In an interview with John Purcell, the author recalls her evolving self at different stages of her life while stating that "at twelve, I wanted to be a writer; at eighteen, a freedom fighter; and at thirty, to make a positive contribution to the community" (Purcell). The narrative illustrates reflections on the day-to-day life of a guerrilla and reveals how the author's youthful conviction was soon crushed by the traumatic realities of life amid the violence of war. At an early age Niromi became aware of the miserable condition of her community as she paid attention to conversations among her family and friends and grew up reading about the Tamil struggle in magazines circulated among Tamil youth. Therefore, her entry into militancy was not through direct recruitment but through reading and writing poetry that glorified Tamil identity and its fight for survival amid war and violence. As a schoolgirl she started writing patriotic poems with great admiration for LTTE fighters who were deemed as martyrs. Her poetic venture was the first glimpse of her revolutionary spark, which allowed her to register her dissent and resistance towards Sinhala oppression, which reflected the growing resentment of her generation. It was also because of her poetry that she came into the spotlight of Tamil militant groups who preferred to recruit intellectual young individuals that helped to mobilise and inspire the young minds.

Initially, it was unlikely for militant groups to recruit female fighters. Niromi was most inclined towards the LTTE, and its founder, the "charismatic" Prabhakaran, had garnered enormous prominence among the young generation (Niromi 37). As a decisive and visionary leader, he was a heroic figure and a symbol of Tamil resistance. People considered him a saviour under whose leadership Tamils will achieve an independent homeland. This enchantment with him combined with ideolog-

ical indoctrination enticed Tamil youth who were seeking some sense of identity and belonging. Their fascinations dragged them into the dangerous realms of militancy. Under the spell of revolutionary fervour, many Tamils were ready to overlook the darker side of the crimes perpetrated by Tigers on those who were accused as traitors, such as the killing of Anandrajah, the college principal in Jaffna who was assassinated because of opposing the militant propaganda in school and for discouraging student recruitment in militant groups.

His chilling murder sent a clear message across in public in Jaffna that no one was immune from suppression, reminding everyone that even educators were not safe if they tried to interfere in the cause, which highlighted the horrors of the militant movement and the moral dilemma that had caught those who thought they were standing up for justice. The French historian Georges Sorel states in *Reflections on Violence* that "the myth must be judged as a means of acting on the present; any attempt to discuss how far it can be taken literally is devoid of sense" (126). As it is applied to the author, the militant myth of Tamil liberation imposed a moral framework where violence metamorphosed as justice and individual identities were ensnared beneath collective sacrifice. Therefore, for young recruits like Niromi, the collective mythmaking absorbed their individual selves, which led to corruption of moral judgement and blurring the line between justice and brutality. A shift much manifested in the displacement of individual identity into the greater cause.

The incessant instability caused by war, curfew, emergency, killings and bombing had convinced many to justify militant actions. For Niromi, militancy was an alternative that carried a promise of liberation from uncertainty and one that empowers. This also led her to believe in its idealistic purity and that joining armed struggle is the only righteous path to attain freedom. She got thrilled upon discovering that female Tiger militants were accepted in a poem that appeared in a pro-Tiger newspaper that said, "The hands that wore bangles now carry weapons" (Niromi 61). This revelation was further confirmed after the issue of Kalathil, an official Tiger magazine, featured the female guerrilla dressed in full military

uniform. Excited, Niromi, along with her friend Ajanthi, approached two local Tiger leaders, requesting to enlist them as combatants, but they were dissuaded, emphasising that it's a very physically challenging pursuit, fraught with injury, unforeseen danger and hunger.

A peek into Niromi's initial idealism is reflected in her letter to her mother declaring she decides to join the militant movement not as her daughter but as the "child of an entire people" (72). Her words demonstrate how intensely she had internalised the rhetoric of collective fight and shared responsibility that had influenced the Tamil youth during the entirety of the civil war. This letter devastated her mother and sister Shirani, reflecting the agonising conflict between personal life and political obligation. This seemingly admirable decision for an abstract cause came at the cost of breaking her familial bonds and leaving behind all worldly comforts. With experience, Niromi and Ajanthi came to the realisation that life as a fighter was not a cakewalk and adapted to every physical and mental demand without any huff. The daily routine at the Thenmaraadchi camp for recruits involved early wake-up calls, long hours of physical training, limited food options and construction of shelter using resources available around. Recruits survived in a highly disciplined environment with harsh penalties on error and the psychological stress of death that increased during ambush drills.

However, soon Niromi's youthful idealism, for which she left home to join the struggle, got destabilised after witnessing the killing of an accused TELO member (Tamil Elam Liberation Organisation) from the rival organisation by her fellow male Tigers, who ridiculed and laughed, deeming his death "no different to killing a cockroach" (Niromi 222). With a firm belief in resistance and solidarity, Niromi had initially joined the struggle for the cause of Tamil liberation and to defend her community, which shattered after this incident. She recounts how the brutalities within Tamil organisations were destructive to the cause.

The memoir locates home as a contested idea and displacement as not only geographical change but emotional rupture. It is interesting to note that long before the protagonist de-

cides to leave, for her the idea of home and belongingness becomes precarious. In the initial pages she reveals severance in society and in her own home, stating that "we were Tamils living in the Sinhala neighbourhood with the threat that townspeople could turn on us any time" (Niromi 9). The idea of home from the beginning is fraught with fear and insecurity, leading to an early exile as she is sent far away to the Tamil-dominated Jaffna by her family for her safety, where she notes "communication was possible only through letters" (9). Although this mobility is to bring her a sense of security, it eventually marks the start of her displacement.

Even before her militant journey, she undergoes emotional and physical displacement as home becomes an unstable space. Later, when she joins LTTE, home takes the form of ideology instead of one fixed geographical space. Home is no longer limited to the idea of family or domestic space but enters a collective and political sphere through the imagined idea of the Tamil homeland or Elam. Being part of the militant struggle, she feels close to home in the comradeship emerging from the collective struggle towards safeguarding the remnants of Tamil identity and heritage. Niromi described Tamil Elam as a dream beyond reach, but her fellow comrade Akila frames Tamil Elam in collective terms as an independent homeland that they should resolve to fight for (247). For Akila, who comforts Niromi on the deaths of fellow comrades, the fight for the homeland is not just a political objective but the sacrifices in the process tied to a bigger dream that they must continue to live for.

The term 'war-induced displacement' includes the coerced form of displacement as a result of armed conflict which results in psychological traumas, loss of livelihood and community life disruption. As a consequence of the Sri Lankan civil war, mass displacement of the Tamil community happened, which affected both civilians and militants, as demonstrated in the memoir *Tamil Tigress*. Niromi's decision to become a female combatant depicts an interplay between individual agency and border forces of conflict. The memoir is written from a detached point of view of exile, which oscillates its narrative from the curiosity of

youthful rebellion and retrospection as a diasporic writer. Recent empirical research titled *Displacement-related stressors in a Sri Lankan war-affected population* (2022) offers factual proofs while examining the complicated effects of displacement on people. It names some key stressors, such as evidence of property loss, family separation and oppression, as prominent factors that trigger traumatic and mental health problems among the affected community members. Niromi's experiences narrated in her memoir align with these findings closely, where the psychological effects of loss amplify the physical strain of training camps. The essay has explored coping methods employed by displaced people, such as adapting to new environments and forming new social networks. Niromi's story demonstrates her tenacious nature of seeking purpose and belonging amid chaos as she navigates the difficulties of camp life and LTTE ideology.

The memoir originates from the grounds of the brutal yet enduring Sri Lankan civil war, which drastically transformed and shattered the lives of both civilians and combatants. Such a narrative emerging from the conflict-torn region serves to challenge prevailing histories in order to preserve vulnerable cultural identities. The tragic displacement of Sri Lankan Tamils during protracted war exhibits experiences of loss, estrangement, cultural dislocation and trauma. Its memoir genre emerges as a vital storytelling vehicle, functioning not merely as a chronicle of events but acting as a rich reconstruction of individual and collective histories. Memoirs arising from contexts of violence and displacement frequently do more than simply record events; they offer testimony to trauma as it occurs in various physical, psychological, and cultural locales, illustrating the persistence of memory and loss across diverse geographic locations (Ehrkamp, Loyd, and Secor 715–16).

In this respect, the form of memoir enables Niromi de Soyza to weave personal recollection into the larger political landscape by integrating the immediacy of testimonial with the sensitivity of lived experience. Rightly so, Smith and Watson describe memoir as "a mode of life narrative in which the narrator shapes recollections of the past into a coherent story, often engaging with collective histories,

traumas, and displacements" (Smith and Watson 14). *Tamil Tigress* presents a more episodic and dialogue-driven style characterised by a youthful perspective that expresses both optimism and disillusionment of the narrator's participation in the Tamil militant movement. Its narrative style itself influences readers' involvement with trauma, identity and memory, with Niromi revealing the vitality of a youth stuck in the whirlpool of political atrocity. In the end, the memoir makes a point that displacement is not just a rupture but also a place for asserting one's identity, introspection and a location that witness the human costs of violent conflict.

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