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Poetic Narrative of Women's Suffering and Survival in Conflict Zone

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Abstract

Poetry provides a profound way to express the emotions and struggles of individuals during conflict, with a special focus on the unique challenges faced by women who are unable to express their stories clearly. Poetry becomes a medium for them to express what they feel and experience. Women often bear the brunt of displacement and violence, while at the same time they also serve as caretakers and guardians of culture. Poetic narratives bring forth their pain and resilience, serving as both personal and cultural record. The selected poems from Sunita Raina's *A walk through the Mist* and the anthology *Lost Evenings Lost Lives: Tamil poets of the Sri Lankan Civil War* capture the experience of women affected by the conflict based on themes such as grief of losing their homeland, the strength needed to run families, and the silent resilience displayed by women in the midst of unimaginable hardship. Displacement, in particular severs women's connection to their identity and roots, leaving them emotionally disoriented. Nature, once a source of solace becomes meaningless in the face of loss. Their poetry not only reflects personal grief but also offers a broader critique of social degradation and moral decline. Through powerful imagery women poets have exposed the paradox of those entrusted with protecting humanity yet bringing powerlessness in the midst of devastation. At the same time these poems celebrate women's strength as they maintain traditions and hopes for a better future. The paper explores how poetry captures women's experiences of suffering and survival. It highlights themes of motherhood in displacement, sense of loss, and cultural preservation, demonstrating how women's voice in poetry transform pain into strength and resistance. By presenting these gendered perspectives, the study reveals women's crucial role in maintaining hope, identity, and resilience in times of crisis and how poetry becomes evidence of their enduring spirit.

Key words: Suffering, Survival, Loss, Strength, Poetic narration, Displacement and Motherhood

Introduction

Emotions are essential to human feelings, but expressing or understanding them in words is a difficult task. The words chosen often do not convey the true essence of our feelings. A poem evokes a variety of emotions simultaneously—sometimes even emotions that the poet may not have consciously felt. Wordsworth famously described poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity” (Wordsworth, 33). It goes beyond the limits of words and provides individuals with a medium to express their innermost thoughts, struggles and experiences. However, the reader interprets these emotions based on personal experiences and circumstances. Poetry not only expresses emotions but also reflects the surrounding environment. Connecting emotions to nature is one of the fundamental characteristics of poetry, as nature expresses human emotions without any prejudice or discrimination. The poem captures the condition and pain of the individuals. In those fleeting moments when words are put into poetry, new emotions are born and a new perspective emerges each time. This can be clearly seen in the works of Sri Lankan Tamil poets and Kashmiri Pandit writers where their pain, courage and struggle have been profoundly expressed. Themes of displacement, motherhood and survival resonate deeply in their works and provide insight into the struggles of women and the essence of human nature.

Tamil women poets often resort to the image of the *Veerathayar* or “brave mother”, who symbolizes strength, sacrifice and resilience amid the hardships of conflict. These poets link individual and collective struggles to mythical and cultural symbols portraying the mother a powerful guardian of existence. Similarly, Kashmiri Pandit women poets such as Sunita Raina weave together the pain of losing their homeland and a deep connection to their cultural heritage. In poems such as *I have no roof over my head now; it does not matter that my house is destroyed*, Raina captures the

deep pain in exile, while simultaneously reflects the resilience of her people. Her poems contrast the quiet beauty of their lost homeland with the harsh realities of displacement, creating an interplay of emotions that resonates across generations.

For both Tamil and Kashmiri poets, the maternal figure transcends her traditional role to become a symbol of survival and cultural preservation. These poets use their voices to record the collective experiences of their communities, transforming their individual emotions into universal expressions of resistance and hope. Through their poems, they offer a glimpse into the enduring power of humanity in the face of unimaginable challenges.

Conflict and the transformation of women's roles

Identity is the foundation of existence, shaped by experiences, roles and social expectations. For women, it is often associated with caring, nurturing and preserving cultural traditions—which provides them with a sense of belonging and stability. However, war and displacement fragment this identity, pushing them into unfamiliar roles. As emphasised by Mulk Raj Anand in his seminal work *Across the Black Waters*, “to dispossess any one of land is to deny him an identity” (Naikar, 116). The loss is not just of home, land or family, but of themselves as well, forcing them to redefine their place in a world that is no longer the same as they knew it before.

Conflict transforms the very essence of womanhood, forcing them to walk unknown paths. The responsibilities they once shared with men are now entirely on their shoulders, not by choice, but by necessity. The hands that once nurtured now toil to survive, struggles in times of crisis and in some cases even take up arms. Cynthia Enloe has observed the changes in women's roles during times of conflict: “Women's identities are recast in war: from caregivers to combatants, from protectors of life to participants in its taking—not by choice, but by the coercion of circumstances” (Enloe 212-213). The change is not just

physical, it is an emotional battle, where enduring hardships becomes more important than personal pain, gradually causing them to lose a sense of who they were before. Women suddenly face the immense burden of continuing to live their lives alone after losing their husbands or other male family members to war. In the process, their personal identity is among the first things to be lost. They frequently put aside their own desires and requirements in favour of the roles and obligations that are thrust upon them, sometimes voluntarily but more frequently due to social pressures.

Their responsibilities can be understood in three key areas:

Household Management

Conflict and displacement significantly altered women's roles, and their responsibilities now extended far beyond the traditional home. When men were unavailable due to conscription, internment or death, women took over the care of the home. In addition to managing unstable households and raising children without a support network, they also cooked limited meals. Despite ongoing uncertainty these tasks provided families with stability and sustainability at a time when both were under threat.

Financial Responsibilities

To survive many women also had to take on economic roles they had never played before. They were forced to work outside the home in factories, domestic work, and agriculture, often under dangerous and exploitative conditions. Alongside these changes displacement also resulted in the rupture of long-standing community bonds. As villages, neighbourhoods, and public spheres were destroyed, people lost the bonds of trust, shared memories, and everyday companionship that held them together. Displacement, therefore, is more than just a physical shift; it makes a deeper break, a separation from the roots and ties that once formed a person's sense of self and place in the world.

Caring for Children and the search for belonging

Women also had responsibility for the lives well-being of children. In addition to meeting their basic needs, mothers had to safeguard their mental health and ensure they received an education, often at their own expense. The grief of losing a familiar home, the confusion of becoming a stranger in unfamiliar surroundings and the challenge of establishing a sense of belonging in temporary camps or remote urban areas marked these responsibilities as performed in the shadow of exile. The strength required to perform these duties and the intense desire for connection of which relocations constantly deprived them, are both expressed in the women's words. The silence of exile is echoed in lines such as:

"Emptiness

Behind the closed doors of the school.

In the classrooms, the drawings

Of despair....

Not even his words remain.

We have no words either." (Cheran 85)

This lack of voice is similar to the voicelessness endured by women in an attempt to safeguard the identity of their children in unfamiliar land.

Along with these responsibilities women frequently face social scrutiny and the possibility of being exploited when they are alone. Yet, many women become stronger, more sympathetic, and incredibly tough in spite of these huge obstacles. They form the backbone of the household, but are never prioritised. The impact of war on women extends far beyond the visible marks of destruction. In Virginia Woolf's articulation "War is a man's game... the killing machine has a gender, and it is male. Yet women suffer most from it, and they do not choose it" (8-14). It transforms their inner world, demanding emotional tolerance that often goes unrecognized. This silent suffering is powerfully expressed in a Kashmiri poem, where the speaker laments:

“There may be a strong yearning
to settle well at a place.
But what can one do
When the place itself has become
One vast barrenness?
On all sides there is hopelessness.” (Raina,
poem 8)

Maternal identity often central to a woman’s
role, is fragmented in war-torn landscapes,
forcing women to suppress emotions and
adopt resilience. The expectation to endure
and nurture, even amid destruction, further
isolates them, rendering their suffering invis-
ible. Similarly, the Tamil poem uses land as a
metaphor for the internal fragmentation
caused by war:

“There. That was my home,
the house where my mother gave birth to me,
where my father carried me on his shoulders
and played with me.

They broke up this house; we don’t know
why.

Yet the keys to the house we locked up are
still with us.” (Seyyid 143)

Just as the land loses its vitality, so do the
women who once found comfort in its em-
brace. The destruction is not limited to the
tangible; it extends to their emotional and psy-
chological state forcing them to take on roles
they never imagined.

War does not just away-it reshapes. Women,
often marginalised in historical narratives suf-
fer its consequences in silence. Their pain is
suppressed considered secondary to the loss of
men, land and nation. Yet, their suffering is
just as deep, if not more so, because it shakes
the essence of identity. The pain deepens
when betrayal comes not from outsiders but
from one’s own:

“Casting a roasting look at the home I left,
I prayed for the security
Knowing full well I had
Lost its ownership right.

Yes, forever.

Just one last glimpse of flowers filled me with
joy.

What need do I have of a spring...” (Raina,
poem-17)

The absence of the male protector leaves the
women vulnerable. Similarly, in Tamil poetry,
the destruction of the home is a direct reflec-
tion of the emotional turmoil inside:

“I don’t know why they did it,

I don’t know what use my home was to them;
but they broke it.” (Seyyid 143)

The confusion and helplessness implicit in
these lines mirrors the experience of countless
displaced women, who struggle to understand
the senseless destruction of everything they
once held dear. This pain is not just external;
it is internal, intangible, and often latent.

Motherhood, a role deeply tied to female iden-
tity, is also disrupted in times of conflict. The
nurturing earth once a symbol of growth and
security, is now devastated by violence, just as
the image of the mother is left to suffer while
the woman has to preserve what remains. The
son who returns is no longer the child she
once held close but a soldier hardened by con-
flict. Her identity as a warrior supplants her
identity as her son and in that transformation,
her role as a mother becomes obscured. The
hands that once guided her become powerless;
the voice that once comforted her now goes
unheard. In this brutal revelation, she has to
ask:

“But now I know

I cannot any longer

Be a mother.

Won’t he, one day,

Believe me to be his enemy

And bury me, too?” (Avvai 43)

These words highlight the ultimate loss, not
just of life, but of identity. War doesn’t just
separate; it erases, and leaves behind the rem-
nants of roles that were once considered sa-

cred. Even so, amid this conflict, women don't just survive, they adapt, they endure. The struggle changes them, but it doesn't erase them.

Women's voices preserving culture in exile

Poetry is not merely a form of emotional expression, it is a powerful force that enables social and cultural transformation, especially when shaped by women's voices during times of conflict and exile. In such circumstances, poetry becomes a space where women revisit their identities, question inherited traditions and reconstruct cultural narratives that resonates with broader cultural, social and historical realities. The lines from the poem *The Homecoming* "In our front courtyard the neem-tree has burst into flower and the children play cricket under its shade..." (Avvai 95) and *Keys to an Empty Home* "That neem tree you see by the side of the well-it was there I played on my swing. Look, a scrap of the red rope from which the swing was hung is still suspended there..." (Seyyid 143) captures the emotional weight of memory. The neem tree becomes more than just a tree; it transforms into a symbol of home, rootedness, and childhood innocence. Even in exile, such poetic imagery preserves the landscape of memory and resists the erasure of identity.

In Tamil cultural thought, women have historically been defined in relation to the household, where the home is viewed as the moral and social foundation of female identity. Reflecting this, Herath notes that women are classified into two categories based on their relationship to the house: *Kula Makal* ('women of the family'), who remain within its confines and are idealised as virtuous, and *Vilai Makal* ('women available for a price'), who step beyond it and are cast as deviant exceptions (Herath 36). Those who maintain physical and symbolic boundaries are considered ideal daughters and wives, while those who step outside its limits are often outcasted as transgressors. The household, therefore,

represents not only physical shelter but also the locus of virtue, responsibility, and honour. The displacements caused by Sri Lanka's conflict fractured this framework. With many men recruited or detained during the war, women found themselves leading families and taking on responsibilities that had traditionally been associated with male authority. This shift disrupted hierarchical roles within the family and simultaneously pushed women into the centre of cultural preservation, as they were now the ones who carried forward traditions, language, and the idea of home, even in its absence.

Inside displacement camps, women's voices became crucial in sustaining community life under precarious conditions. Food shortages and lack of basic amenities after the war and the 2004 tsunami created circumstances where survival itself became a cultural act. Women often sacrificed their own meals for children and elders, walked long distances to fetch water, and stood in lines at distribution centres despite facing risks of harassment at checkpoints. These burdens reinforced their role as cultural custodians, for caring for the vulnerable and maintaining family structures, they also maintained the values of duty, sacrifice, and endurance that underpinned Tamil cultural identity. Even in overcrowded camps, where privacy and hygiene were compromised women adapted daily practices to ensure that rituals of cleanliness, feeding and caregiving were not abandoned. In exile, the ordinary work of survival became a way of carrying fragments of home and culture into disrupted spaces. The poem powerfully reflects the rupture in cultural continuity caused by war, where children inherit silence, fear, and violence instead of play, storytelling, and rituals of faith:

"Oppressed
By nights of war
Our children
Become adults.
Across the pathways

of their bright
fledgling-mornings
.....

In these foreshortened days

They have long forgotten

How to play hop-scotch

And to make temple-carts from palm-fruit
shells..." (Sivaramani 45)

Against this backdrop, women efforts to preserve traces of cultural life, through food, hygiene rituals, and caregiving, stand as a form of resistance against the erosion of memory, tradition and childhood. In exile, the simple act of survival thus became a way of carrying traces of home and culture into chaotic spaces.

Herath states that women's participation in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) added another layer to the preservation and transformation of culture. Traditionally imagined as peaceful and nurturing, Tamil women's involvement as fighters and suicide bombers unsettled cultural expectations. The LTTE sought to legitimise this shift by framing women combatants as survivors of sexual violence whose acts of vengeance restored honour to themselves and their nation. This narrative, however, reduced women to symbols of victimhood and purity, silencing their political voices. Many female combatants themselves described their participation not merely as revenge but as a conscious offering to the collective dream of Tamil Eelam and as a gift for future generations. By interpreting their sacrifice as an act of contribution rather than purification, they asserted a voice that challenged patriarchal readings of their roles.

Thus, whether as caregivers in camps or combatants in the struggle, Tamil women preserved culture in exile through resilience, sacrifice, and reinterpretation. Their everyday practices of survival kept the moral and familial core of Tamil life intact, while their voices as fighters redefined honour and duty beyond patriarchal constraints. In displacement, where the physical house was lost, women carried

the symbolic 'house' of Tamil identity within their bodies, labour, and testimonies. Their stories show that exile is not merely a space of loss—it is also a site where women's voice sustain and reshape culture for future generations. The poem becomes a bridge between the lost homeland and the unfamiliar present.

Similarly, the exile and displacement of the Kashmiri pandits compelled the community to use memory and artistic expression as survival strategies, with women in particular playing a crucial role in preserving their culture. Poet like Sunita Raina captures both the anguish of relocation and the will to preserve cultural identity for future generations. The verses frequently alternate between resistance and regret, re-inscribing wee-known places into memory while recording their breakdown. In her poem she writes:

"Here in the country side

Spring will not appear again;

No roaring music will be heard
.....

Here our aspirations are crushed,

And they lie like unhealed wounds." (Raina 89)

Portray a world devoid of vitality, where exile silences both landscape and community. Such imagery preserves a record of cultural belonging even in its absence.

Through poetry, women not only express grief, loneliness, rejection, or displacement, things they may not be able to say aloud in society, but they also assert their agency. They show that women are not merely victims but agents of cultural preservation and transformation. Even in exile, they protect traditions, modify them where needed and create new meanings.

Conclusion

Women's creative expressions serve as essential tools for preserving culture in times of violence, exile and resettlement as Kashmiri pandit writers and Sri Lankan Tamil women

poets have demonstrated. They redefine trauma as a collective memory that transcends simple recollection, maintain identity across broken histories. Tamil poets portray women as witnesses, survivors and custodians of memory, giving voice to unspoken wounds of conflict. Similarly, Raina's poems often marked by the painful absence of an abandoned nation, emphasise poetry's role as a cultural achieve and a form of resistance. Despite coming from different geographical locations and historical contexts these practices demonstrates that women are active contributors to cultural preservation rather than passive victims of forced migration. Women's responsibilities as resilient bearers are explored in both parts, which is an identifiable concept. They emphasize women's crucial role in maintaining families and communities while also drawing attention to the unsaid emotional responsibilities they face. They ensure that shattered groups preserve a common sense of continuity and identity by creatively shaping stories of survival and belonging from experiences of grief.

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