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Unspoken Wounds: Gendered Realities in the Lives of Sri Lankan Tamil Women

Subham Choudary

Research scholar

Department of Indian Languages & Literary Studies
University of Delhi

Abstract

Unspoken wounds refer to the hidden and often silenced experiences of pain and trauma faced by women during conflict and displacement. These include emotional, psychological, and cultural struggles that are not always visible but deeply impact their lives. This fiction and stories hold significant value as they bring to light experiences and issues that are often overlooked or left unspoken in society. Sri Lankan Tamil fiction emphasises the physical violence and societal challenges women endure during the civil war, such as forced recruitment and loss of autonomy. Through techniques like symbolic imagery and fragmented storytelling, these narratives reveal the complexities of women's experiences and their resilience in the face of hardship.

By bringing these repressed memories to the light, Meena Kandasamy's book *The Order Were to Rape You* shows how sexual violence was not only common throughout the conflict, but also accepted and legitimized. In doing so, the book reveals the untold suffering of Tamil women, suffering that has long been suppressed, ignored by society, and often excluded from popular accounts of the conflict. Meena Kandasamy places women's unspoken suffering within broader discourse of memory and resilience, exposing the depth of gendered suffering by establishing these hidden wounds in literary evidence

By examining Sri Lankan Tamil fiction, this study highlights how literature brings these experiences to light and helps in understanding the unique challenges women face. It also highlights the role of literature in preserving memory and fostering healing for those whose voices are often marginalized in mainstream discourse.

Keywords: Unspoken wounds, Loss, Memory and Silence, Conflicts, Experiences, Cultural memory, Suffering

Introduction

Women's experiences remain hidden in silence because wars and conflicts are often remembered through military strategies, political disputes and the bravery of men. But not every wound bleeds in a noticeable way. Some remain silent, lodged in the heart and passed down through generations as silent but persistent memories of pain. These are unspoken wounds: loss,

trauma and grief that affect communities, relationships and identities but lack clear expression.

The nearly three-decade long Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2009) has left deep and complex wounds on the country and these wounds are more permanent or unspoken than those of the Tamil women caught in the crossfire. The lives lost, the physical destruction and the uprooting of communities are all well documented. On the other hand, the gendered scars of sexual oppression, cultural humiliation and enforced silence which became effective and destructive weapons of war are far less obvious. As victims of systematic violence and displacement Tamil women also shouldered the responsibility of being cultural custodians with the responsibility of preserving family, customs and memories in a time of destruction. Literature becomes one of the most powerful mediums where these silent wounds find a voice. An important response to this silence is Meena Kandasamy's book *The Orders were to Rape You: Tigresses in the Tamil Eelam Struggle* (2021), a compilation of observations and testimonies that highlight the experiences of Tamil women who were not just bystanders but also targeted victims and resistance fighters. The book records the fragmented voices of women fighters whose bodies were transformed into contested spaces of violence and power. However, it also has elements of autobiography, as Meena Kandasamy presents it as a personal and collective story by placing her own experiences of violence and vulnerability at the beginning. By combining the author's personal experiences with the testimony of victims, the narrative becomes more authentic and helps bridge the gap between testimony and silence.

In this context, silence serves as a form of testimony. Meena's narrative strategy acknowledges and preserves these silences, resisting the impulse to impose coherence on experiences that resist closure. Such an approach forces a reconceptualization of silence, not as a void, but as a meaningful presence, as an archive of unspoken wounds that continue to shape memory, identity and resilience. This article examines the ways in which conflict systematically marginalises women's voices

while also leaving a mark of violence on their bodies erasing their historical presence. Through engagement with Meena Kandasamy's text and other narratives of Sri Lankan Tamil women, this analysis brings to the fore the contradictory position of women in wartime: they are presented as both bearers of resistance and targets of repression. By situating women's stories within broader discourses of war, it examines how conflict both erases and highlights women's experiences and the critical need to engage with these shadowed voices as sites of resistance, resilience and historical meaning.

Women's Voices in the Shadows of War

The metaphor of "shadows of war" captures how women's realities are obscured within the margins of history hidden in refugee camps, muted within patriarchal households, or erased from the nationalist memory of the Sri Lankan conflict. Meena Kandasamy's *The Orders Were to Rape You* challenges this erasure by foregrounding the silences, fragments, and contradictions in Tamil women's experiences of war. Her work insists that women's suffering cannot be confined to visible scars alone; rather, it extends into psychological wounds, cultural stigma, and generational trauma. By transforming silence into testimony, Meena Kandasamy reclaims women's voices from the shadows, making them central to the political memory of war.

In the opening section of the text, Meena Kandasamy situated her own story within the larger cultural and political context of Tamil identity. She recalls how her parents' everyday acts of solidarity, her mother assisting refugee students and her father contributing his skills to Tamil militant publications mirrored the collective mood of Tamil resistance (14-15). Yet these gestures of support existed alongside betrayal and brutal repression, particularly at the hands of the Indian Peace Keeping Force, which she recalls Tamils renaming as the "Indian People-Killing Force" for its massacres and sexual violence against civilians (16). This duality-resistance on one side, silencing and atrocity on the other sets the stage for the unspoken wounds that the testimonies of Tamil women will reveal.

The testimony of S, the militant's wife, exemplifies how silence functions as both burden and survival. She recalls enduring humiliation, torture, and likely sexual violence, yet refuses full disclosure because, as she explains, "Tomorrow, I do not want this child to carry the shame" (47). Her silence thus protects her daughter while simultaneously testifying to the crushing weight of patriarchal stigma that equates women's suffering with dishonor. Meena Kandasamy underscores this impossibility of justice when she reflects that for women like S, words such as "justice" and "retribution" have lost all meaning (38). Silence becomes the only possible form of testimony, an archive of pain that speaks by refusing to be spoken.

By contrast, the female Tiger transforms her silenced wounds into explicit speech. Her harrowing testimony recounts repeated rapes in army camps, where soldiers made clear that "the orders were to rape you" (52-53). Unlike S, whose silence shields her child, the Tiger insists on survival as exposure, declaring, "I stay alive to expose the army" (54). In her account, the female body becomes both the battlefield and the archive, marked by violence but also weaponized as evidence against the perpetrators. These two women's stories reveal the paradox of Tamil women in war: simultaneously central to nationalist imagination as Tigresses and yet marginalised as dishonored victims once the struggle collapses.

Meena Kandasamy's reflections complicate these testimonies further by exposing how cultural expectations deepen women's wounds. As the militant's wife bitterly observes, "This Tamil society is useless... All of this because I do not have a husband" (48-49). Here, war is not the only force silencing women; cultural codes of respectability, shaped by patriarchy, ensure that women without male protection widows, abandoned wives, single mothers are further stigmatized. Similarly, the very term *Tigress* carries a dual meaning: it elevates women as symbols of courage, yet simultaneously exposes them to state violence and sexual retaliation. Meena Kandasamy highlights this paradox when she remarks that the IPKF, through its brutalities, became the "biggest recruiter of women for the Tigers" (17). Vio-

lence against women thus not only silenced them but paradoxically propelled them into armed resistance, transforming trauma into militant agency. Meena Kandasamy also inserts her own experience of marital rape and institutional indifference, drawing a parallel between intimate violence and wartime violations. When doctors dismiss her suffering, her silence mirrors the silence of the women she interviews, showing how unspoken wounds extend beyond the battlefield into the private realm. This self-positioning makes the text more than an ethnography of survivors; it becomes a layered exploration of how trauma, gender, and silence intersect across contexts. At the heart of these narratives lies the politics of Tamil identity and cultural silencing. The suppression of Tamil language, traditions, and demands for autonomy functioned as collective wounds that shaped women's realities. Meena Kandasamy's recollections of her family's struggles with caste, displacement, and accusations of "destabilise India" (22-25) illustrate how Tamil women bore not only the burden of war but also of cultural survival. Women were custodians of language and memory, yet simultaneously denied public voice. Their silence thus carried both the weight of personal trauma and the responsibility of cultural preservation.

Together, these voices disrupt dominant histories of the Sri Lankan civil war, which often glorify military heroism while ignoring gendered suffering. The militant's wife embodies silence as protection, the female Tiger transforms survival into exposure and Meena Kandasamy bridges their testimonies with her own experience of patriarchal violence. In this interplay, silence ceases to be absent: it becomes a form of presence, a testimony of unspoken wounds that unsettles nationalist narratives and insists on the centrality of women's experiences. By situating these voices within the shadows of war, Meena Kandasamy redefines silence as both an archive of trauma and a site of resistance, ensuring that women's stories are neither erased nor forgotten.

Conflict and the Erasure of Women's Experiences

War does not only destroy homes and lives; it

also erases voices. Women who lived through the Sri Lankan conflict are often remembered only through their relationships to men “the militant’s wife,” “the fallen fighter’s sister,” or “the widow.” Their personal histories, struggles, and traumas are sidelined within dominant narratives of war. In *The Orders Were to Rape You*, Meena Kandasamy confronts this silence directly, demonstrating how women’s experiences are pushed to the margins not because they are irrelevant but because they threaten patriarchal and nationalist memory.

The testimony of *S*, the wife of a Tamil Tiger, illustrates this dynamic with painful clarity. Her life is shaped not only by the violence she endured but also by the silence she must maintain. She confesses, “*Tomorrow, I do not want this child to carry the shame.*” The refusal to narrate is itself an act of survival, one that spares her child the burden of inherited stigma. Here, silence is not an absence but a heavy inheritance, passed from mother to child as both protection and erasure. Meena Kandasamy’s decision to film *S* amidst household chores folding clothes, pruning plants, and cleaning underscores this invisibility. War has pushed her voice into the private realm, translating extraordinary violence into the ordinariness of domestic labor.

In contrast, the Tigress chooses speech over silence. Her testimony lays bare the brutality of systematic sexual violence: “*The days on which I was raped exceeded the days on which I was not... The orders were to rape you*” (51). Her words expose rape as a deliberate weapon of war, one that inscribes trauma onto women’s bodies. Yet, even her act of courage does not rescue her from erasure. After the war, she is unwanted in refugee spaces, transformed from a symbol of resistance into a figure of social shame. This paradox reveals how conflict reduces women’s lives to utilitarian functions: celebrated in wartime propaganda, discarded when peace arrives.

Meena Kandasamy situated these narratives within a larger struggle against cultural forgetting. She recalls her discovery of *Lovers and Comrades: Women’s Resistance Poetry from Central America* and the recognition that Tamil women, too, had used poetry as a form

of survival and political expression. Just as Latin American women guerrillas wrote to assert their humanity, Tamil women fighters Captain Vaanathi, Captain Kasturi, and Adhilatchumi inscribed themselves into history through verse. Their poetry counters the violence of erasure, insisting that women’s agency cannot be reduced to silence.

Captain Vaanathi explicitly links militancy with feminist emancipation:

“We will build the tomb

For women’s exploitation

We will dig the graves

For society’s backward ideas.” (77)

Here, armed struggle becomes inseparable from dismantling patriarchy. The battlefield is not merely a site of national liberation but also of gendered resistance. Similarly, Captain Kasturi’s poem “*Tea Baskets*” exposes the exploitation of plantation women and imagines a day when, “*marching as fire-gods they torch away their sufferings*” (92). Both poems articulate militancy as a refusal to accept gendered oppression, turning poetry into a weapon of transformation.

At the same time, the scarcity of biographical detail about these poets and the fact that they are remembered only by noms de guerre, dates of death, or the battles in which they fell underscores how conflict erases individuality. Captain Vaanathi and Captain Kasturi are both remembered simply as women who “*died on 11.07.1991 in the battle to capture Elephant Pass*” (75). Their lives are reduced to fragments, yet their poems stand as an archive that resists their disappearance. Adhilatchumi, who wrote of being left behind while her comrades died, asserts this tension poignantly: “*Me alone, with a pen in hand, a poet*” (96). The pen becomes both her isolation and her survival.

Meena Kandasamy connects this modern poetry of resistance with older Tamil literary traditions. In the *Purananuru*, women often appeared only as grieving mothers or widows, whose roles were defined in relation to male warriors. By contrast, modern Tamil women step onto the battlefield as fighters and poets, radically reshaping cultural memory. As Jeya,

leader of the LTTE Women's Front, wrote of Vaanathi: "*She stood as a woman, and fought as a Tiger*" (75). This shift marks not only a break with ancient tradition but also a rewriting of what it means to be both poet and warrior in Tamil culture.

The erasure of women's experiences, then, is double-edged. Their bodies are violated by systematic sexual violence, and their agency is erased from cultural memory. Yet, as Meena Kandasamy shows, women resist this obliteration through both testimony and creativity. Whether through the silence of S, the defiant words of the Tigress, or the revolutionary poetry of women fighters, their voices insist on survival. War may attempt to confine them to anonymity, but their stories, scarred, fragmented, and poetic, assert their place in history.

Conclusion

This examination of Meena Kandasamy's *The Orders Were to Rape You* reveals that "unspoken wounds" in the lives of Sri Lankan Tamil women are not mere absences but active sites of meaning-making and resistance. Through fragmented narratives, testimonial silences, and resistant poetry, Meena Kandasamy demonstrates that women's wartime experiences extend far beyond visible trauma into the intimate spaces of memory, identity, and cultural survival.

The testimonies of S and the Tigress, alongside the revolutionary poetry of Captain Vaanathi, Captain Kasturi, and Adhilatchumi, illustrate multiple strategies Tamil women employed to negotiate trauma and resist erasure. Whether through protective silence or defiant speech, these women refuse binary categorizations as either passive victims or idealized martyrs. Meena Kandasamy's work reveals how the erasure of women's experiences operates through dual mechanisms: physical violence coupled with cultural silencing and social stigma.

Perhaps most significantly, this study illuminates literature's function as both memorial and resistance, preserving voices while creating possibilities for recognition and justice. The fragmented structure of Meena Kandasamy's text mirrors traumatic memory

while refusing false coherence, creating space for multiple forms of testimony including silence itself as legitimate expressions of survival. As, Tamil women continue living with ongoing war trauma and displacement, works like *The Orders Were to Rape You* serve as essential interventions demanding that any engagement with the Sri Lankan civil war's legacy must center the experiences of those most harmed. By preserving unspoken wounds as archives of resistance rather than repositories of pain, Meena Kandasamy's text opens possibilities for new forms of solidarity and justice that honor the full complexity of women's wartime experiences.

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