

**Trenches, Vadai, and Puttu:
Food Memories of Combatant Women in Sri Lanka**

Geetha Sukumaran

York University, Canada

Abstract:

Contemporary conflict zones blur the boundaries between home and battlefield as well as masculine and feminine roles. Rita Manchanda argues that women caught in armed struggle move beyond victimhood by negotiating their lives as insurgents, family heads, peace builders, agriculturalists and activists (2001). While women participating in insurgent militancy are trained in combat masculinity, they still find themselves performing the feminine role of food work. In Sri Lanka's long civil war women became victims of violence on one hand whereas on the other, perpetrators of violence as members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Their prolific writings provide interesting insights into resistance, food work and war. These understudied life writings form a discursive site of a messy, contentious, and violent past mediated by the female rebels. This paper analyzes such narratives, and weaves several fields—gender studies, memory studies, food studies and conflict studies together – which are not commonly used in conjunction. This essay also attempts to shed light on the way the women moderate the tensions between performing masculine roles of combat and feminine food labour.

Keywords: Life writing, gender food memory, cooking, war, resistance

Introduction and Background

Recent studies about the armed conflicts in South Asia have focused on the complex issues of gender, violence and peace, and illuminate the complex ways women exercise their agency.¹ There is an existing body of work that moves beyond war zone food insecurity and examines the interconnections with the gendered memory of food and war² as well as sexual violence and food.³ In this context, this essay focuses on the writings of the female insurgents in Sri Lanka's prolonged war, which ended in 2009. This paper explores the life writings of Tamil female fighters and looks at how eating, hunger, and the acts of cooking contribute to performing gender, while examining the ways food memories intersect their war lives. This study analyzes the following literary works: *Malaimakal Kathaikal* (Stories of Malaimakal) by Malaimakal, and the collective voice of *Vizhuthaaki Verumaaki* (To become roots and prop roots).

In post-independent Sri Lanka, the state repression of the Tamil minority saw the rise of insurgency, with women playing a crucial role in the resistance movements as early as the 1970s. Beginning in the 1980s, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, emerged as a powerful armed movement, that fought against the state until its defeat in 2009. Young women were initially recruited for community work, women's empowerment, and other social issues. Later they received arms training and some of them were trained to become suicide bombers, the black tigers (Thamizhini, 2003; Alison, 2003: 38). Only a few research articles, drawn from interviews, examine the role of the women combatants in the armed conflict (Alison, 2003; Jayamaha, 2004; Hellman-Rajanayakam, 2008; Brun, 2008; Gowrinathan, 2012, 2021; Herath, 2014).

A vast array of writings by women in the Tamil insurgent movements are yet to be explored and this paper is based on such narratives.⁴ As an Indian Tamil poet, translator, and academic married into a Tamil family from Sri Lanka and living in Toronto, I am closely engaged with Tamil writings from Sri Lanka and the diaspora. I write this paper with the acknowledgment of my limitations and my lack of lived experience in Sri Lanka while also in proximity of the war narratives that I am surrounded by.

Majority of the women who joined the movement were rendered without financial resources owing to the restriction of mobility resulting from increased state militarism and counter weaponry (Hellman-Rajanayakam, 2008). Hunger and food insecurity along with many other factors – such as, displacements, ideology, broken families, caste oppression, state repression and fear of sexual violence – made the women join the LTTE (Brun, 2008; Gowrinathan, 2021: 4). This paper delineates the multiple representations of the acts of cooking, fasting, and eating and attempts to expose the tensions between notions of women's emancipation and gendered labour. In the process, the essay interrogates their writings as a site of struggle between articulations of performing “food femininity” (a term borrowed from Kate Cairns & Josée Johnston, 2015) and “war masculinity” (influenced by the Jaclyn Cock, 1991; Cynthia Enloe, 1988, 2000).

I first lay out the concepts and literature which inform the contours of my analysis. I then move on to a close reading of the texts followed by an analytical interpretation that locates my observations in the realm of the existing literature and research in this field, before offering concluding remarks.

Conceptual Framework

The writings discussed in this essay reveal the tension between the performances of masculinity and femininity among the female rebel fighters. In any combat organization, the male fighter body is expected to be the epitome of physical prowess and arms handling, and when it comes to female fighters, the women are required to match the men's physical endurance and they go through the same training as their male counterparts. In other words, combat training for men and women are equal in most cases which demands that the physical fitness of women meet the standard set for men (Szitanyi, 2020; Enloe, 1988). As Cock (1991) observes, war does not require women to prove they are women; instead, wars signify the testing zone of manliness and patriarchy (Cock, 1991: 235–36), the women combatants are expected and trained to mimic the male fighters. It is a similar notion echoed by Enloe who, in her feminist approach towards the military points out that the military is “run by men for men according to masculine ideas” (Enloe, 1988: 7). This paper is inspired by the arguments on war and manliness of Cock and Enloe which can be termed as war masculinity.

My approach to the writings of the rebel women is informed by literature on gender performance, the body and memory. In their role as female insurgents the women shift between gender roles: the masculine role of military maneuvers and feminine acts of food work. This essay does not interrogate the essentialization of masculinity as being prone to war and femininity as being a sign of peace. Since women's combat training is modelled after the male fighters (Szitanyi, 2020; Enloe, 1988) I refer to war masculinity as the way women incorporate masculine aspects when they are trained in warfare. I use femininity in the context of food, as feminine subjectivities are embodied and enacted in combat life.

Scholars including Marjorie De Vault (1991), Manisha Roy (1975), Meah (2014) and Inness (2001) challenge the existing notions of women as nurturers, food provisioners and caregivers among various cultures and deconstruct the gendered kitchen labour. These authors critically examine the unequal labour and power dynamics in women's domestic food work. Women's kitchen work is glorified and at the same time, it is also seen as unrecognized labour, something that exists between the extremes of celebration and subordination. In looking at how the female combatants perform femininity, I borrow Cairns and Johnston's “food femininity”, a term used to look at the construction of femininities through kitchen practices including, cooking, eating and buying food. I will be using “food femininities”, however, to study the embodied labour of doing gender in the context of nationalist struggle, physical work and gendered food memory.

Scholars argue that gender is closely connected to food and memory and unfolds a feminine reminiscence – of mothers and daughters in the kitchen (Holtzman, 2006; Counihan, 2002, 2004; Katto, 2020). Drawing on this notion of gendered memory, this essay explores food femininity. It is pertinent to note that female combatants perform war masculinity without the presence of gendered memory of military roles. However, their acts of food femininity engage with intergenerational food memory and combat tasks of which there is no such memory. In the conflict zones, women enter the political sphere as victims and activists and move beyond their traditional ‘womanly’ roles (Manchanda, 2001, De Mel, 2001); that recall gendered memories of domestic labour. For instance, women have become anti-war activists, have joined the armed

rebel groups across many geographical locations including Mozambique, Palestine, Nepal and run households without men, accessing public spheres while negotiating with the state army, rebel groups and relief workers. As a result, during civil wars, gender roles become fluid when homes are disrupted, public and private domains are blurred.

The Background, the Texts and the Analysis

Before examining the world of insurgent women, it is crucial to understand the socio-cultural context of traditional Tamil women in northern Sri Lanka. Although, plenty of research works speak about South Asian women in general, women's experience in each country and region varies. Along the similar vein, Tamil women in India and Sri Lanka differ significantly while there are also traits that are common between them. Women in Jaffna had better social positioning, compared to the Tamil women in India (Tiruchandran, 1998: 76). Tiruchandran asserts that since northern Sri Lanka was never under Brahminical hierarchy and instead it followed the Vellala (landowners) hegemony and therefore, brahminical gender ideology, which restricted widow remarriage, and such oppressive practices never took root in Jaffna. However, in Jaffna, motherhood was a dominant gender role (Thiruchandran, 1998: 79).

Jaffna women enjoyed more power within the family structure, although their recognition sprung from their roles as mothers and nurturers and kept them restricted to the domestic space (Thiruchandran, 1998; Thiranagama, 2014; Thamizhini, 2016). The LTTE's approach towards "gendered reconstruction of womanhood" liberated the women from the private space (Schrijvers, 1999: 308), allowed them to access the restricted public space through militarization and yet their sexuality was controlled by the movement to keep with the cultural norms of the Tamil society intact. Women's empowerment in the new gender identity was ambivalent, however, their experiences of femininity was totally altered. Now the women were able to create new identities outside family and participate in the Tamil nationalist struggle. It is this shift from the inner realm to the outer realm, renegotiation of gender roles and the experiences of multiple selves that are registered in their writings.

Malaimakal's World of Combat and Dreams

Malaimakal was a female fighter who joined the LTTE in the early 1990s and died in the final war of 2009. During her time in the movement, she wrote a few poems and several short stories. Although her collection is titled "short stories of Malaimakal" the writings are auto fiction that emerged from the lived experience of a woman combatant in the long ethnic conflict. The short story "Until When" was written in 1999, with a backdrop of the frontline trenches (Malaimakal, 2004: 11-15). The story begins with a group of girls digging up a trench to build their hideout. As work proceeds, one woman exclaims, "We are tired now, bring the rolls and the tomato sauce," (12) creating a culinary moment of fantasy.

The grave description of digging a hideout is being interspersed with the fond memory of comfort food of the past. Based on Sutton's argument that cooking and consuming are practices that evoke sensory memories of the past (2001), one can say that the above imagination kindle soothing remembrance of the past. The body, which serves as an agency for political aspirations and dreams of a free homeland, turns into a site of physical desire. Beyond being a substance to

feed a hungry body, rolls, the breaded cylindrical cutlets, are seen as a semiotic tool for pleasure that appeals to a weak body. In her work on Tamil combatant women, Gowrinathan states that the women have noted that hunger and lack of food were one of the many reasons for joining the movement (Gowrinathan, 2012; Malathy, 2019). It is possible that rolls are a luxury existing only in their imaginary memories. The nostalgic memories, imaginary or not, connected to rolls, a food signifying happiness and social occasions, echoes Abarca and Colbys' argument that the foremost connection between food and memory is sensory and it is rooted in socio-cultural practices of when and how a particular food is consumed (Abarca & Colby, 2016: 5).

In the LTTE movement, food was usually centrally prepared adjacent to the civilian areas so that the smoke would not give away their location. Meals and snacks were then sent to the front lines using supply paths and were usually collected by the cadres at selected locations. Food insecurity is at its peak in any armed conflict since supply paths are often the first target to withhold enemy's food (Collinson & Macbeth, 2014). As the US war veterans testify, even if there is abundant food, one lives in the perpetuity of food shortages owing to the limited quantity one can carry to the frontlines and the impermanence of the supply chains (Smith, Klosterbuer & Levine, 2009).

It is in this context that Malaimakal's narrative continues to engage with snacks including vadai, highlighting the commensal moments of the women. Malaimakal's description parallels the memories shared by ex-combatants in the Mozambique liberation war. For instance, in her essay on rebel women of Mozambique, Jonna Katto observes that the women rebels in Mozambique fondly recalled the times they ate with fellow female rebels and reminisced their childhood days of eating with family (Katto, 2019: 972). The Tamil women fighters create such imaginary commensal moments to rekindle childhood happy memories of tasty snacks and the social or family occasions when such eating together happen when in reality their life is exactly the opposite. The women in Malaimakal's story recall memories of taste and social gathering, both being absent in the current moment.

Food memories of the past joyous times are reimagined to cope with the stress of the warfront and the unfamiliar world of war gets familiarized with such acts. The women interweave memories, fiction and realities as survival tactics and the body is central to their experience. Lupton (1996) argues nostalgic food memories might also be used to generate a fabricated past which can be extended to Tamil women's imaginative food moments. Malaimakal's accounts draw attention to the various acts involved in warfare as she narrates the fighting techniques of the women while recalling memories of battlefront situations: "every single sound was sent to brain to recognize what it is...and then there was this unusual sound...as if someone dragging something (80)." She continues to record her memories of instructions to "bend, crawl and duck walk" given in the training and the way that particular memory is not applied in the current situation, "nothing can be followed...we ran upright (76)."

The war memory is explicitly evoked in a collective voice, it is a collective remembering. While the tongue exists as the archive of taste and maternal memories of past foods, the ears turn into repository of sounds and silences before an explosion and the nose remembers the sulphurous acidic smell of bombs and bullets. Scholars have engaged with the role of memory in battle history and have argued that, to remember a battle scene intact is almost impossible and

can only be done in collectivity (Hynes, 1997; Holmes, 1985). Yet, Malaimakal's narrative displays the performance of communal reminiscing, retelling and bearing witness to the moments of the battlefield which is not present in eliciting transgenerational kitchen knowledge.

Another short story by Malaimakal (2004), "A Cup of Tea," begins with the description of the everyday food the group of young women receive and the way it deteriorates as days go by. A single day meal starts with puttu (a staple made of steamed rice flour) and curry for breakfast, rice and curry for lunch, and then again puttu and curry for dinner. Soon it turns to puttu in the morning, followed by rice and curry at lunch and dinner. Quickly enough, all three meals comprise just rice and eggplant curry. Later, the everyday food is reduced to nothing but gruel in the morning and eggplant curry and rice for lunch and dinner. The women, who are now used to this, refuse to eat. However, being aware of the food insecurity in a conflict zone, the women fighters create efficient, economical uses of rice by drying it in the sun and then turning it into coarse flour to use as snack.

Holtzman notes that gender is an interconnecting thread since food memory is often shaped by feminine forms and argues that women's unique relationship with food offers memories that are otherwise inaccessible (2006). Similarly, the Tamil women fighters draw on gendered culinary memory to negotiate the tough food circumstances they face as combatants. The works of Gvion (2006) and Katto (2019), are used to illuminate the associations of violence, memory and food. Malaimakal's description of the creative usage of the rice flour sets in motion women's traditional knowledge of sustenance. In her essay on Palestinian women, building on the culinary practices from the Caribbean slavery, urban poverty in India and African-American "soul food," Gvion defines recipes and foods created using "gender based domestic stocks of knowledge" as "cuisines of poverty" which assure "survival and self-reliance" (Gvion, 2006: 300).

The young LTTE combatant women employ the memory of their mother's domestic knowledge of food to make provisions for their meal without wastage and thereby continuing the memory and performance of gender. However, female fighters in various conflict zones recall maternal food knowledge in various ways. Katto, for example, based on her interviews with the Mozambique ex-combatants, notes that the women fighters in the Mozambique war fondly recount their early pre-war years as their first acquaintance with cooking with their mothers (Katto, 2019: 972) and the women carry out this memory in their collective cooking in the warzone. Unlike the Mozambique ex-combatants, Tamil female insurgents do not recall their food experiences with the maternal. Instead, it is implicit in the LTTE women's memory and performance of the inherited creative ways of conflict zone sustenance and is visceral in their creations.

Malaimakal's entire narrative is about food and the lack of it. And yet in its discursive pattern it assumes a tone of masculinity which glorifies the activities involved in preparing for an attack or defending an attack. Her account includes a note on the male counterparts complimenting the women's physical strength as they work through starvation. In the LTTE's publication, which is closely monitored by the movement, women cadets constantly wrote about their achievements, roles in combat, and liberated selves in poetry, essays, and short stories in which food memories and narratives were marginal. The writings mentioned in this essay were

initially printed in the movement's publication and then compiled into a book. The LTTE's censorship allowed little choice in the women's recounting of their experience. This restriction is evident in Malaimakal's description of food insecurity as a challenge bravely and creatively overcome by the women. Malaimakal's story does not reveal the loss of lives due to lack of food during that period and instead it focuses on the achievements of the women and the LTTE.

Thamizhini, the head of the female wing of the LTTE, gives a contrasting account in her memoir about the same period that "A watery curry of beef or brinjals in the afternoons, and at night some puttu and a watery tomato curry, filled the stomachs of the fighters engaged in the rigorous work of battle but gave them little nourishment. So, on the frontlines, where the ground shook from time to time, the fighters were injured or killed in large numbers" (Thamizhini, 2021: 13). Since Thamizhini's memoir was written after the war's end, she was able to reflect on her experiences on a critical level and connect that period with nutritional deficiency when she notes that at least two cadets died of anemia. Food studies scholars set forth the way health concerns, and culinary practices complicate femininity (Lupton, 1996; Cairns & Johnson, 2014). Accordingly, Thamizhini's revisiting of her memories reveals this complexity.

Embedded within Malaimakal's description is the way hunger is sidelined to undergo the challenges of the tough physical conditions to work like the male fighters. Malaimakal's observation is not specific to the LTTE women; citing Edgerton (2000), Fergusson notes that the precolonial elite women warriors of Dahomey considered themselves as men once they attack and kill an enemy (Fergusson, 2021: 5118). He adds, in contemporary nationalist struggles, rebel women work hard to demonstrate that they can perform like male fighters (5120). Expanding on the gender aspect of nationalist projects, Enloe argues that such movements sprung from "masculanized memory, masculanized humiliation and masculanized hope," (Enloe, 2000: 44) which is concurred by scholars including Chatterjee (1997), De Mel (2001), Jeyawardane (1986), Mounaguru (1995), and Nagel (1998).

Nagel deconstructs gendered roles in nationalism as drafted "by men, for men, and about men and that, women are by design, supporting actors whose roles reflect masculinist notions of femininity and women's proper 'place'" (Nagel, 1998: 243). By embodying the norms, expectations and the roles of militarized masculinity, the female fighters voluntarily disrupt "masculinist notions of femininity" by occupying the unfamiliar spaces of the forests, camps and frontlines. Domosh and Seager's essay establishes the way various geographical locations confine women's contact and activities within the spaces (Domosh & Seager, 2001). Malaimakal's narration demonstrates the corporeal activities including, digging, running, chasing and fighting—typical masculine war activities—through which the Tamil rebel women engender space.

Malaimakal writes about the abundance of food that was left behind when the women's group chased the Sri Lankan army out of their own camps: fresh vegetables in the fridge; canned soda; meat still cooking on the stove; cheese tins, fruits, and meals on the table, either half-eaten or left untouched. The description is used to accentuate the contrast between the bodies: the army soldiers, as the representation of the state, are set against the female bodies fed on gruel and eggplant gravy. She juxtaposes the emaciated, fragile bodies of the rebel young women deprived of healthy meal with the well-fed Sri Lankan army men who are capable of winning the women's

attack since they are expected to be stronger. In their introduction in *Food in Zones of Conflict*, Collinson and Macbeth observe that ambushing food supplies, destroying the supply paths and issuing embargo in the conflict zone are some of the ways food is used as a weapon (2014). The northern region of Sri Lanka suffered greatly from the state embargo (Sarvananthan, 2007: 44-48) and Malaimakal's fiction throws light on the impact of food insecurity.

The story concludes by highlighting Tamil nationalist hopes built by fragility and strength, food scarcity and memories of taste, consumption, and deprivation as experienced by the women: "the female tigers who fed on gruel chased the lions who ate cheese, dates, meat and yellow rice just ten minutes before the operation and they fled" (Malaimakal, 2012: 22). The operation Malaimakal mentions is the attack of the female rebels on the state army she calls the state army as lions (the Sri Lankan flag comprises of the figure of a lion). Embedded within this narrative is the framing of the enemy as the other marked by food abundance, health, nourishment and macho masculinity while the rebel army faction is characterized by perpetual hunger, endurance and performance.

Vizhuthaaki Verumaaki
(Becoming Roots and Prop Roots)-Voices of three female fighters

This book authored by Kantha, Puratchika and Malaimakal, is an account of collective voices which captures the lived experiences of the combatant women of the Malathi unit, elaborating on the arms training, military operations, and such. Food and related activities figure in many instances. In one episode, a women's unit was undergoing special training and the LTTE provided additional nourishment to the special unit by supplying extra servings of milk, eggs and snacks. Unable to digest the supplementary meals, the women buried the food under the soil and completed the special training by ingesting the regular portion they were already used to. When they revealed that the excess was left unconsumed, they were punished by their captain. By choosing not to eat the extra meals, the women opted to listen to their bodies, which became sites of negotiation.

The LTTE operated as a state as well as a military authority in which the rebels, regardless of their gender, are colonized. In that sense, the LTTE is a colonizer similar to the Sri Lankan state and a political order is created by continuous disciplining, surveillance and punishment of the body to make it "docile", to use Foucault's term. The fighting female bodies of the LTTE are subjected to the rules and regulations of the LTTE which direct their bodily performances and food ingestion based on modern medical discourses of health and nutrition.⁵

By refusing to eat the excess food, the female rebels turned their bodies into discursive fields which reclaim their agency, even if it is limited, and the quotidian act of eating allows them to own their bodies. It is an act of contestation against their colonizer, the state and the LTTE. The women's resistance reflects what Maria Lagunes describes with relation to coloniality and is rooted in the everyday lived experiences of food consumption: "the tension between subjectification (the forming/informing of the subject) and active subjectivity" (Lagunes, 2010: 746). The female rebels retrieve their bodies from the repressive state and from the LTTE's nutritional conditioning thereby resisting double colonization in a restrictive mode.

The postcolonial women perform masculinity in combat training, while their resolve to achieve their goals in their terms renders them as “decolonial feminists,” to use a term borrowed from Maria Lagunes (Lagunes, 2010: 747).

While the book is an extensive narration of war strategies, military offences and defenses of women, the authors also mention their ability in cooking feasts for guests, a primary domestic trait: “Captain Kethusha who died in the battle of Mannakulam was from Batticaloa and possessed the generosity the region is known for” (V.V. 147) since Kethusha is a female from eastern Sri Lanka, a region where women are known for the warm way guests are received and fed. This sentence juxtaposes a postcolonial self which took to arms to rebel against not only the oppressive state but also the domestic identity and the familial stereotyped gendered labour of food production. Girija, a female insurgent, speaks about the traditional gendered care work and the current shift in their roles: “The whole concept of a Tamil woman’s life used to be caring for her husband, children and cooking. That is gone now” (Jayamaha, 2004: 19).

In her rejection of the traditional Tamil woman’s role, Girija discards the gender expectation in nationalist projects—women and their sexuality guarded by the men, are expected to make families with children and protect and impart culture—a point frequently addressed by feminist scholars. Cooking and caring were the women’s only mode of resistance against the state, which shows that such gendered food work is common in conflict zones, an argument put forth in the work of Shobha Gautam, Amrita Banskota and Rita Manchanda (2001).

However, the description of Captain Kethusha echoes the feminist theories of caring which were foundational for Marjorie De Vault (1991). While the theorists argue that care work is usually associated with women when it is not necessarily as such, “it is structured by social arrangements” (De Vault, 1991: 11). In her essay on the construction of womanhood in Tamil nationalist movements Maunaguru notes that most Tamil nationalist groups prioritized providing the base for Tamil women’s participation in the political struggle and promised to create a society in which women are treated equally even though such ambitions remained farfetched (Maunaguru, 1995: 162). She further states that the LTTE claimed to commit to a “radical transformation of women’s lives and social attitudes towards women” in the state they create (Maunaguru, 1995: 163).

Drawn by this propaganda, many female insurgents saw their struggle as part of Tamil nationalism as well as their own liberation from societal and familial discrimination. The women left their participation in nationalism as family caretakers and still perform the same task of caring in the movement. Within the movement, the rebel women, therefore, are recognized by female combatants for being good nurturers alongside being fierce fighters. In their writings, the women embrace the repetitive tasks associated with food as dictated by the culture and the newly adapted masculinity through embodied labour of kitchen and war. The rebel women’s role as evident in their writing is problematic because they reject the nurturing labour within the familial space and accept themselves as care workers for their “imagined nation” Anderson (1983).

Entrenched unconsciously in their narrative is the way the women’s labour is internalized by them. Sara Heinämaa who writes about the internalization of gendered labour notes, “the values and meanings that are crucial here are not the ones forced on us by others—the society—

but those that we realize in our actions. They are not external to the body, but its own (re)creations” (Heinämaa 1996 as cited in Katto 2020, 9). The female subjective experience of war places the jagged landscape of wilderness, weapons, forest and enemy alongside a home filled with aromas of food.

In another instance narrated in the book, the female rebels celebrate pongal, the harvest festival of Tamils. The description begins with the corporeal work of cleaning, drawing patterns known as kolam, fetching water, scrapping the coconut and all such familial labour for the festival. Here, their bodies undertake the conventional role of women as protectors of culture despite their rebellious roles in the movement. In *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawn notes in the introduction that “norms of behaviour by repetition” makes it possible for the continuity of a practice from the past (Hobsbawn, 1999: 1). As Fedwa Malti-Douglas argues, the body is a reality which does not possess “moral or social value” but is invested with a moral value which dictates “social conclusions” (Malti-Douglas as cited in Bart Moore-Gilbert, 2009: 35). These conclusions become traditions and often inscribed on female bodies and the combatant women participate in these gendered performances.

Scholarly works focus on the role of gender in representing ethnicity and cultural identity in nationalist struggles and the formation of nations in various geographical locations (Yuval Davis & Anthias 1989; Enloe, 1989; Jayawardana 1986). The celebration of the Pongal festival which entails a good deal of domestic labour and cooking pongal shows rebel women as the keepers of culture revealing the “complex ways” women embody kitchen work and their “voluntary participation” in it, as DeVault (1991) puts it. The women’s food and food related festive work alters the war space into a domestic communal space. As rebel fighters, the women are expected to dress in a certain way that removes their identity as Tamil; they wear trousers and long shirts with a waist belt and renounce pottu (a red or black mark worn by Hindu Tamil women) or jewelry, usual cultural markers that identify a Tamil woman in Sri Lanka. Yet, on the day of pongal, still devoid of such external embellishments, they perform the task of protecting Tamil culture. By undertaking these acts, the female insurgents conform to the LTTE’s nationalist enforcement of women as the embodiment of Tamil identity and culture.

This gendering of nationalism is an argument commonly held about women’s representation in constructing a nation by scholars such as Partha Chatterjee (1997), De Mel (2001) Jayawardana (1986) and de Alwis (1996) and widely prevalent in liberation struggles across the globe. The bodies of the female rebels become the site of embodied cultural memories by collectively engaging with the repetitive labour of cooking and cleaning associated with performing rituals and customs. The women’s labour on the day of pongal reproduces the image of a traditional mother or woman of the house since each unit is headed by a senior member who reflects the maternal figure of a household and yet it is not an individual familial home, but a shared one. For the women in the movement, the narrative of this collective performance of doing gender is a way to communicate their adherence to the expectation of the gendered norms and their willingness to preserve a tradition.

The celebration demonstrates the way the combatants negotiate their identity as Tamil women and recreate a sense of home and a past familiarized from their childhood by their mothers. The body of the female fighters is a site of identity which oscillates between performing

the external tasks of war (men's world) and the internal toil (women's world). It is through the collective bodily labour that the female combatants narrate their experiences and negotiate their multiple identities as insurgents, culture protectors, embodiments of prosperity and nourishment.

An episode in *Vizhuthaaki Verumaaki* elaborates on the suicide bombers known as the black tigers which is the LTTE's most coveted operations (Vizhuthaki Varumaki: 75-80) Cadets chosen to become suicide attackers in battlefields and political assassinations receive extensive special training. Once their training is completed, they wait for their orders to carry out the attacks and in most cases, they receive additional training for such specific attacks. Initially the LTTE was hesitant to use women for suicide attacks, but later expanded the operation to include women.

The organization which used suicide as an indefinite strategy held black tiger operations at its highest esteem and women in the early period willingly became suicide bombers. A group of women selected for the special training were kept in a camp where they had been waiting for months, but they were not called upon. Within the LTTE, black tigers were always given delicious meals and when a mission was assigned to them, their last camp meal was an elaborate one which included their favourite dishes. The women waiting for orders were treated in the same way with the best meals, snacks and tea. Demanding additional training and specific mission, the female black tigers went on a hunger strike and the higher authorities sent them for further training immediately.

For the LTTE, the physical fitness and the health of the suicide attackers were crucial. The hunger strikes by the women selected for the black tigers could be argued as a feminine form of agency against the reluctance of the LTTE in training them for missions. Such strikes originate from feminine religious practices of fasting during the medieval period and have been used in manifold ways. Gandhi, for instance, used hunger strikes extensively for political reasons and attributed his practice to his mother's frequent religious fasting (Ellman, 1993; Roy, 2010). The hunger strike by the black tigers challenged the LTTE's notions of health and nutrition, since the movement consistently emphasized the provision of nutritional meals. By refusing the very core necessity for healthy food the women exercised limited agency. However, Coomaraswamy (1996) identifies women as those who foster care and growth and contends that the LTTE does not recognize women as nurturers, since the group doctrines death as celebratory (10). The women's agitation refutes this claim, and their hunger strike towards becoming black tigers underscores the gendered way of revolting and challenges the Coomaraswamy's essentialist view of women as food provisioners.

Conclusion

For women, nationalist struggle is often interwoven with the oppression in the domestic space (Ranchod-Nilsson, 2000: 168). The female fighters perceive the kitchen space as a site of oppression and yet cannot escape the gendered narration of their experience in the resistance movements through food. Drawing from such discrepancies, women's participation in the rebel movements speaks for their fragmented identities and fissured selves repetitively by performing femininity and masculinity in the warfront. Their articulation is woven with women's

resourcefulness and creativity in food-making, performance of maternal memories, frontline brutality, and a body that is subject to masculine roles, and yet performs femininity in the culinary context. The writings discussed in this paper portray refracted selves, multiple subjectivities, and many layers of these women's lives in which their agency and resistance interact in complex ways with food and the body.

One could argue that combatant women in the LTTE believed in empowering women through militancy and in the process, food/starvation became their vehicle to counter the rules. They constantly keep negotiating their experiences of food, hunger, and the body and juxtapose these with warfront valour. Food nostalgia does not evoke home as a culinary space, the cultural zone of a typical Jaffna woman; instead, it elicits taste, flavor, entitlement, and fasting without the explicit nostalgia of a continuous women's kitchen tradition.

Close examining these writings, this essay highlights the significance of the multiple connotations of culinary experiences, the body, combat, and political activism. The embodied knowledge of warfare and food in a conflict zone expounds the various forms of control over the physique; these writings are reflections of those encounters. While in Malaimakal's stories, accounts of the battlefield take over foodscapes, the voices in *Vizhuthaaki Verumaaki* are a registry of the duality of conforming to the LTTE norms and resisting its colonization of their corporeal. These complex voices totally alter the meanings associated with food through feeding and fasting. By bringing the accounts of the women together, this essay illuminates the manner in which women perform culinary femininity and war masculinity and the numerous ways women in resistance movements negotiate gender acts.

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Notes

1. For example, N. Mookherjee. *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); S. Thiranagama. *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); M. De Alwis. "The Purity of Displacement and the Reterritorialization of Longing: Muslim IDPs in Northwestern Sri Lanka." *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*. Ed W. Giles and J. Hyndman. (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004) R. Manchanda (Ed). *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency*. (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001) to name a few.
2. For example, Adele Balasingham (1998); Neloufer de Mel (2001), Sitralega Maunaguru (1995), Malathi de Alwis (1998). Tamara Herath, *Women in Terrorism: Case of the LTTE*. (Thousand Oaks:

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3. For example, J. Katto. *Liberating taste: Memories of war, food and cooking in Northern Mozambique*. *Journal of South African Studies*, 46(5), 2020,965-984; N Mookherjee. "We would rather Have Shaak (Greens) than Murgi (Chicken) Pulao: The Archiving of the Birangona." *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 47-66. A. Suthanthiraja. *Handmade: Stories of Strength Shared through Recipes*. Sidney: Palmera, 2015.
 4. A vast body life narratives, auto-fiction, novels and short stories by male combatants exist in Tamil in which experiences of food and hunger is articulated alongside the fighting. The men's writing includes farm work which is concerned with food production than cooking and includes dealing with spoilt food. This aspect of gender and food experience is being engaged with in another essay and is beyond the scope of the scope of this paper.
 5. Phone conversation on August 25, 2022, with Tamilkavi, writer and former political member of the LTTE who mentioned that the decisions on food and nutrition were taken by the finance team comprising of doctors and each unit receiving training was accompanied by a doctor alongside periodical visits from another doctor.

About the author:

Geetha Sukumaran is a PhD candidate in the Department of Humanities at York University. She is also a poet and a bilingual translator in English and Tamil. Her current research focuses on Tamil writings from the conflict zone of Sri Lanka that connect with culinary practices, war and trauma. She is the graduate founder of the Conflict and Food Studies Group at the York Centre for Asian Research, York University. She is also a graduate intern in the Feeding City Lab project at the Culinarium Research Centre, University of Toronto. Her recent publication *Tea: A Concoction of Dissonance* published by Dhauri Books (2021) is a collaboration with the poet Ahilan and artist Vaidheki. She is the recipient of the SPARROW R Thyagarajan award for her poetry.

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