

Blending Myth and History: An Analysis of T.D. Ramakrishnan's *Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki*

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Abstract

Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki is a much discussed novel in the present scenario by T.D.Ramakrishnan, author of *Francis Ittykora*. The author has made a valorous attempt to analyze the aftermath of civil war between Sri Lanka and LTTE with the collaboration of myth and fiction. Most of the stories about war are often the violence against women. Hence the novel has a powerful narration on how women were treated in the during the wartime period in Sri Lanka. Deviating from the common notion, the novel mixes fantasy, myth and history in single frame work, and also portrays the pathetic condition of women, who suffered during the long term of violence. The present paper aims at exposing the plight of women during the war years between 1980's to the present and it is also focusing on their mode of resistance during the scuffle. It sheds lights on empowerment and strength of women in the battlefield through the character study of the female protagonist, *Sugandhi*, and other characters like *Julie*, *Gayathri*, *Arul* and *Yamuna*. The whole analysis is based on the text itself. This paper also examines how the novel has portrayed the helplessness and vulnerability of women at the hands of state during Sri Lankan civil war.

Keywords: Empowerment, Civil war, History, Myth, Resistance

Introduction

Renowned writer T.D Ramakrishnan, is awarded with many honorable Awards including the 'Basheer Award' for his acclaimed novel *Francis Ittykora*. His *Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki* published in 2014, is written in a style similar to his earlier work, *Francis Ittykora* –blending history, myth, folk tales, and the present, creating a very interesting book,

which analyses the civil wars between Sri Lankan government and LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). The history-fiction thread in the book follows the eventful life of the fictional character Devanayaki, who was the daughter of a trainer of martial arts at Kanthallur during the 10th century. The other thread, set in present day, follows the attempt of a group of film-makers to make a feature around Dr. Rajani Thiranagama, human right activist who was murdered supposedly by the Tamil tigers. This paper tries to examine how myth and history has been collaborated in the novel. It deals with the history of Sri Lankan civil war and how it affects the life of Sri Lankan people particularly on women community and also focuses on hope of Sri Lankan people, for a land without bloodshed and bombing, a land without fear of living, more above a land with all happiness and peace. This paper attempts to analyze the position, identity and also the suffering ended by the Sri Lankans during the civil war. It sheds light on the 'women's part in wars' which analyses, women's enduring and their transformation from a house keeper to a fighter during the war time, especially in the case of Tamil women, which also links it with novel's character Sugandhi and others. It's a journey through their life, their dreams, their hopes.

Portrayal of women during the civil war in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is an island country in South Asia located in the Indian ocean to the south west of the Bay of Bengal and to the south east of the Arabian Sea. Sri Lankan Tamils, as ethnic minorities in Sri Lanka, have been struggling for more than thirty years of civil right and for the safety and security. Due to their demands, Sri Lankan Tamils are still trapped in barbed wire fences. Their demand for accepting the role and function of a Sri Lankan Tamil as a population in the Sri Lankan constitution is still be denied. Due to the conflict between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils, the country has entrenched into civil war for two decades.

In the 1950's, Ceylon was dominated by English speaking Tamils, but by the mid-1970's it was dominated by Sinhalese, and has resulted in the birth of a new act, named 'Sinhala Only Act' which is introduced to the Ceylon parliament in 1956. As a result of this, thousands of Tamils were forced to resign from the government jobs and seek career elsewhere. 1970's witnessed the emergence of new groups in Sri Lanka, including the rise of rival Marxist socialist party called JVP (Janta Vimukthi Peru mana) under the leadership of Rohan Wijeweera, EPRLF (Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front)- a part of the

TNA (Tamil National Alliance), under the leadership of K. Pathmanabha and TLO (Tamil Liberation Organization) etc. The most prominent of these groups was TNT (Tamil New Tigers), which is born in 1972 under Velupillai Prabhakaran with anti- Sinhalese stance, which changed its name to LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in 1976. The LTTE initially carried out a campaign of violence against the state particularly targeting policemen and also moderate Tamil politicians who attempted a dialogue with government. There was an event which fuelled the Sri Lankan conflict into its esteem. That was in May 1981, the burning of the Jaffna library, by politicians from the ruling party using police and Parliamentary forces resulted in the destruction of more than 90,000 books, including 'Palm leaf scrolls' of immense historical value. It was a warning for the Tamil People that the government could not protect them or their cultural heritage and that persuaded many of them to back a separate state.

In a few years things would change drastically in Sri Lanka which dragged the nation in three directions, as the Government, JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) and LTTE (The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). Initially the LTTE gained prominence due to devastating attacks such as the Kent and Dollar farm massacres of 1984, where hundreds of men, women and children were attacked during the nights as they slept and were hacked to death with fatal blows to the head from axes and the Anuradhapura massacre. Peace talks between the LTTE and the government began in Thimphu in 1985, but they soon failed and the war continued. The Sri Lankan military launched an offensive, called 'operation liberations' or 'vadamarachchi operation.

In July 1983, the LTTE carried out their first suicide attack. Captain Miller of the Black tigers drove a small truck carrying explosive through the wall of a fortified Sri Lankan army camp reportedly killing 40 soldiers. The LTTE carried out over 378 suicides, one of the largest suicide campaigns in the world, and the suicide attacks became a trademark of the LTTE and a characteristic of the civil war. Bloodsheds had continued. One of the suicide bombers of LTTE had killed Sri Lankan president, 'Ranasinghe Premadasa' in May 1992. Beginning in December 2005, there was increased gorilla activity to the northeast, including Claymore mine attacks which killed 150 government troops, clashes between the sea tigers and the Sri Lankan navy and the killing of sympathizers on both side including Taraki Sivara

(pro-LTTE journalist) and Joseph Pararajasingham (a pro-LTTE MP) both killed allegedly by the government Sri Lanka.

The LTTE finally admitted defeat on 17 May 2009. The Sri Lankan armed forces claimed that the leader of LTTE, Velupillai Prabhakaran, was killed in the morning of 18 May 2009, while he was trying to flee the conflict zone in an ambulance. It was presented as a beginning of new era of peace, reconciliation and development. It's Remembrance Day in Sri Lanka. On May 18 the seventh anniversary of the end of a long civil war. In South, the members of the Sinhalese majority celebrated the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In the north and east, minority Tamils gathered to mourn their dead thousands of civilians killed by the state security forces, during shelling of hospitals and the supposed "no-fire zone", at the end of the war.

T.D Ramakrishnan, the author of *Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayki*, has successfully put forward this dilemma into the forefront. The novel revolves around post-VP (Velupillai Prabhakaran) period of Sri Lanka, which witnessed a genocide unequal in world history. T.D Ramakrishnan, has made bold attempt to analyze civil war between Sri Lankan army and LTTE with the aid of myth and history with large layers of fiction. The Sri Lankan political atmosphere is captured with an intensity never seen before in Malayalam literature. Published in 2014, it had received wide critical acclaim and is one of the most sought-after books. It has great relevance in today's world as it deals with intricacies and devastation caused by war. The ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka and pleas of the minority (Tamils) were still unresolved. Most of the stories about war are often the violence against women. Hence the novel had a deep narrative on how women were treated in totalitarian government.

The novel shed lights on different issues including human right violation that happened or happening in Sri Lanka, and at the same time it discussed aftermath of war and how it affects the women community. Women and girls suffered disproportionately during and after war, women traditionally responsible for taking care of their families, watched helplessly as Colombo's final military advances in early 2009 forced their loved ones to become refugees. Tamil women struggled throughout the assault, which consisted of a ground advance, aerial bombardment, heavy artillery shelling etc.

In this novel, the author has successfully intermingled Sri Lankan socio political condition and fiction. The entire story of the novel is narrated from the perspective of the protagonist, Peter Jeevanandam, a script writer who was assigned with the mission to write a screenplay for a movie titled “Women Behind The Fall Of Tigers”, to give a clean chit chat to government sponsored Human Rights Violation, mixing memory and myth, his narration detangled the political realities through the eyes of a sympathetic beholder. Peter Jeevanandam, the Indian script writer had another motive to locate Sugandhi, the former tiger and his erstwhile lover during his previous stint in the country who has since, then disappeared. As they travel across the country, Peter learns that Sugandhi has taken on the name of ancient Andal Devanayaki, a legendary figure in the medieval history of Kerala, Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka.

Originally the concubine of the king of Kanathallur, a small kingdom in the present-day Kerala in south India, she subsequently becomes the queen of Raja Raja the famous Chola king, the lover of Rajendra Chola, his son, and becomes incidental in the downfall of king Mahinda of Anuradhapura in Lanka. She is a true femme fatale, and uses all the gifts at her disposal to twist men around her little finger. However, attaining moksha through tantric sex and liberated of base emotions and her human body, she flies into the realm of fantasy. The mythical story told in the blogs by the enigmatic Meenakshi Rajarathinam is interspersed with history of Sri Lanka’s civil war and its aftermath. Ultimately, the mysteries are revealed and Sugandhi really becomes a modern Devanayaki. The mythical character, Sugandhi who gives a thread line between the past and present forms the historical outlook of kingship and reality. Myth is not simply a matter of fiction and fantasy. It is the absolute antithesis of factual reality. As myths are transmitted overtime, through different historical and cultural circumstances, from those in which they arose, they may gain increasing autonomy, a life in their own.

The novel *Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki* gives a similar mythical and historical narration through the character of Sugandhi. Though written by an unknown woman named Meenakshi Rajarathinam, he (Peter) happens to read the story of mythical Devanayaki, in which a small village in Kerala also place a crucial role. While talking about the myth itself, the story of Devanayaki, it ridesback to centuries before. Kanthallur- known for its greatest scholars, trained each disciple with sheer diligence. Devanayaki was the fourth

daughter of Periya Koyikkan and Chamba, and later became the eight wives of Mahindra Varma, the king of Kanthallur. Her potentialities were not restricted to the narrow circle of her beauty, but also for her intelligence and ability in taking over the responsibilities equal to that of king itself while making into this deal. When Kanthallur was conquered by Chola king, Raja Raja Chola, she becomes the queen of Cholas. Several stories were prevalent based on her, following most was, her acceptance of throne as the queen of Chola. Later Devanayaki delivers a baby girl, named 'Kooveni' who was molested by Sinhala king Mahindra, which eventually makes Devanayaki out of a revengeful women. In her state of envy towards Mahinda, Devanayaki undergoes a kind of trauma but finally fails to surrender him, even though Devanayaki is still being worshipped as an idol by many of her followers for her great courageous deeds done for the Tamil community.

The ancient Devanayaki and modern Sugandhi have many things to say- many of political and also about her existence as a woman itself. In a way this novel is the mouth piece of the victims, especially women suffered some both the quarters whether it is Sugandhi, Gayathri Parera, Juliet, Yamuna or Arul, each one of them felt that resistance is inevitable, not for the survival but for life. Author has made a bold attempt to link these characters with the myth and the real Sri Lankan history.

Sugandhi who was born as the second child of Mr. Rathina Sabhapathi and Mrs. Kanakavalli in Colombo, had a wonderful childhood and found happiness in trips with her brother Sooryajith. But in one of such trips, that they made in 1983, July 24 took away everything that she possessed in the world. Her family was attacked by supporters of Sinhala government. This unfortunate event made her freeze, but was never ready to remain silent, rather she dedicated her entire life for resisting the military and government atrocities. She grew stronger and more empowered as a result of her participation in the battle. But even then, her self-determination for an independent land and also for her fearless existence make her to struggle even from her most pathetic state. As the story progress, she took Meenakshi Rajarathinam as her identity, which remains suspense to the reader. She controlled her vengeance for a proper chance. Sugandhi, only for one reason that she stood against the government. She had gone through many cruel tortures by them including the acid attacks and which extends to even more in cutting off her hands.

Peter Jeevanadhm, the main protagonist of the novel has once mentioned “Women are the ones who are the most affected by fascism and dictatorship. It is not the dictator’s aestheticism, but his concept of power that is at work here. the thought that all beauties are to surrender to him originates from this concept” (Ramakrishnan 238). Even though these kinds of tortures are not surprising for the women in the battlefield as many are driven through such humiliation. While talking about the myth of Devanayaki, the same kind of ruthless attitude is shown by the Sinhalese king, Mahinda, who used her body at maximum and finally abandoned her with cutting of her breast. Such examples are needed to be checked as the history itself is smeared with the blood of innocent women, who neither got any social respect nor any recognition.

Gayathri Parera, character who is a major victim of Sri Lankan civil war, who lost her family and all her good moments with them. She was brutally raped by the government supporters. This novel unsettles every sensitive reader who reads about the policy of interrogators, “first rape then question.” (289) Arul and Yamuna, daughters of Meenakshi Rajarathinam, also gone through such a devastating situation and as a result they protest against the government and its reign. Though, it is specific, that how much extents these women in the battle field had to suffer from the hands of the lion, one who represent ruling government, make suffer each woman who had stood against the government or the rule. The prime weakness a man found in women is her sense of chastity. Hence within their strength they demand the whole from the women which cannot ever return. Although the Sri Lankan civil war left thousands of Tamil women in a position of helplessness and vulnerability at the hands of the state, there are many others who grew stronger and more empowered has result of their strong participation in the conflict. Julie, another major character in the novel, is an inspiring character who has gone through all atrocities, took a firm decision to stand against the government. ‘lion’ the master brutally raped her and gave her a child for remembering all these punishments, and later the child was killed by himself. These incidents never make her to yield, but make her bolder to stand against them.

While making a thorough analysis of the novel, it become evident that the women community show strength and will power in their resistance towards the state. The novel is dedicated to ‘Rajani Thiranagama’, who says; “One day some guns will silence me, and it will not be held by an outsider, but by the son born in the womb of this very society, from a

woman with whom my story is shared” (Ramakrishnan). It is quite convincing fact that, Rajani was a true heroine of the time. Two and a half decades have failed to erase the memories of Rajani among those who knew her. This novel itself a dedication to this heroic woman. She envisioned a time when the Sri Lankan Tamils would live in peace and dignity enjoying democratic rights and freedom. Standing against oppression and brutality in all its forms, she is a beacon of light for a community living in fear and struggling for self-respect.

Representation of Resistance

By examining women’s experience during and after the war, covering the first half of the twentieth century, it is evident that women were actively involved as participants in many armed conflicts around the world and have break all the gender assumption regarding a woman by playing a great part in war, throughout the histories. Most nations called upon and celebrated women as mothers, the representative of family life and domesticity. Women could support the military effort and the nation’s men in uniform as nurses, female military auxiliaries, ambulance drivers, farm workers, and factory labours as well as in many other occupations, something has evident in many of these documents. However, they were also celebrated for their quiet heroism in keeping the home intact whilst their men were absent.

It is the traditional conception that, the victory of war is in the hands of men while they knowingly or unknowingly neglect women’s contributions as nurses or even as warriors. But it is the second -world war that highlighted women role in the German and, British forces. In the case of Soviet Union, it is evident that their direct participation in the fighting as members of all services and units “constituting 8% of the total armed forces.

T.D Ramakrishnan, has done a fantabulous work, in associating the concept of women empowerment during the war time in the framework of a large fiction in his work, *Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki*. This post- modern novel in Malayalam, has at its core a real-life incident from 1989 when Rajani Thiranagama, a prominent Sri Lankan human rights activist was brutally gunned down, reportedly by rebel tigers. Thus, by dedicating this novel to Dr. Rajani, the writer has aimed to speak about the women’s role in war, and how women face the resulted attributes, violence and pain.

Coming to the novel, it is conceived as a space where myth, fiction and history converge. Even though there are several novels, in Malayalam literature which uses such a narration technique, T.D Ramakrishnan's versatility help him to put a mark in the map of world literature, through this novel. Tracing the history of novels in Malayalam; there are many novels constructed following the method of mixing history and myth in the same format including M.Mukundan's, *Kesavante vilapangal*, (The Lamentation of Kesavan 1999), Sarah Joseph's *Alahayude penmakkal* (Alahas Daughters 1999) and N. Prabhakaran's *Thiyyoor Rekhakal*(*The Thiyyoor Documents*1999). In *Thiyyoor Rekhakal*, it is using the myth of place and time in order to raise questions about the knowledge status of history and the truth effect of fiction. *Kesavante vilapangal* too unravels mythic space constructed around historical locus. The historical locus here is the reality of empathy and adoration that an average Malayalee of the author's generation feels for the political leader, EMS Namboothirippad. In fact, this reality makes its first appearance in the novel in the form space, in the form of large a large photograph of the leader hung up on the wall overlooking the cradle, lying in which the protagonist of the novel, as a baby, gets addicted to the life and times of EMS. In a sense it is this photograph that gets enlarged in the course of narrative into the mythic space constituting the novel. Sarah Joseph's *Alahayude penmakkal* also construct a myth of place from the local lore and subjective histories of the land, Kokkanjara, a village that could be located historically in the neighborhood of Thrissur in central Kerala.

Taking *Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki*, as another example which uses the same narrative technique unravel the female resistance during wartime fuelled by the tales of mythical Sugandhi, her archetypal ancestors from a folkloric past, creating a throbbing tension between fiction and reality. In the novel there are lots of male characters, including the male protagonist Peter Jeevanandam who has never been ready to make fierce steps against government while women including Sugandhi, Julie , Gayathri, Arul, and Yamuna, actively participated in the protest against government. It is true that, women may also pay a high price for leaving their socially constructed 'household' roles to become fighters and there may be high costs for transgressing the culturally imposed boundaries between masculine and feminine behaviour. Men, who refuses to fight risk being ridiculed, imprisoned or even killed for their lack of courage or masculinity. Equally women who contradict female stereotypes by killing are often regarded as much more deviant or unnatural

than men. (Plight of female cadres) Meenakshi Rajarathianam, one of the major victims in the novel says;

In a society where majority of the people are fanatic or selfish and people fought for independence, they may be foolish but we can't sacrifice our life for that dream. For us there is nothing more than independence. We still dream of a day when people go to Columbia to seize power from the hands of the tyrant, with the hope that our lives will be motivated for continuous fighting. (Ramakrishnan 284)

Men become coward in such a pressurized situation, as Peter Jeevandam ran away from Sri Lanka in the final section of the novel, Arul, Yamuna, Julie, and Sughandi became martyrs for making their nation more powerful. Further, there are women who are at risk because of their presence among the armed forces, which is perceived as assisting them or being a part of armed group even if they are there completely against their will- abducted for sex, or to cook and clean in the camp. During the period of their abduction- and often afterwards- these women and girls can be in considerable danger from attack by the opposing forces as well as their abductors. The best-known large-scale example of such abduction was that of the so called "comfort woman" in the east during the second - world war. The situation in which Arul and Yamuna gone through, after they are caught by the hands of military groups made readers with tears.

Women's courage, especially in the context of Sri Lankan civil war was un avoidable. From July 23,1983 to May 18 2009, Sri Lanka experienced a violent civil war between the Sinhalese majority and government of Sri Lanka and Tamil militant groups, especially LTTE. Research and media widely documented the Sri Lankan security apparatus' use of torture and rape. The UN secretary General's report found evidence that government forces deliberately shelled safe zones and that the LTTE used civilians as human shields and forcibly recruited civilians, including children. Prior to its defeat, the LTTE motivated and disciplined forces of male and female cadres. It became successful in suicide bombing through its black tiger's regiment, and was known for its follower's strong devotion to their leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran. Twenty percent of suicide bombers were women, and twenty-five percentage of LTTE forces is also women. (*History of war crimes*), Such a fact decides the background and atmosphere of T.D.Ramakrishnan novel. Sri Lanka is the right place for demonstrating

violence against Tamil women and at the same time, for portraying courageous women. For Tamil women, joining the militant (was a) liberating act, promising them more freedom and power and power. Tamils had always suppressed women into a subservient position. It was the war that has had a liberating role. LTTE also explicitly committed itself to gender equality and women's empowerment. The eleventh of October is celebrated as Tamil's Eelam women's day, which marks the anniversary of the first female cadre battle casualty in 1987.

T. D. Ramakrishnan such a fantabulous writer has successfully utilizes his opportunity to portray Tamil women in the contest of Sri Lankan civil war through the publication of his work, *Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki*, which focuses on the how war affect women in the context of Sri Lankan war. Picturizing Sugandhi, as a major character in the novel, the author wants to project the idea that, women should not be seen as powerless but rather as individual able to play a major part in the achievement of a long term and stable peace. By making Sugandhi as a boyish girl and Peter as a girlish boy, the author deconstructed the gender roles. The author has kept some hidden ideas, that the characters including Sugandhi, Arul, Juliet and Gayathri, they can help in the reconstruction of the society and can also help in the reconciliation process and prevent violence in the future if they fully included in the reconstruction process.

Conclusion

T.D. Ramakrishnan the author of *Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki* had come a long way from his novel *Alpha* a science fiction, one of the most imaginary creation in Malayalam which also had its setting at Sri Lanka. Analyzing the yearlong war between Sri Lankan government and LTTE, novel tried to criticize the persisting undemocratic and fascist ways of Sri Lankan government. The novel revolves around the post war period of Sri Lanka, which witnessed a genocide unequal in world history. It gives a reasonable insight to the pathetic condition of women who suffered in the long term of violence in Sri Lanka through the tale of Sri Lanka. Atrocities against women folk is a common theme that is used by the author, whether it is *Francis Ittikora* or the present novel *Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki*. Both the novels follow the same formulas. A modern-day story line superimposed upon a historical one, one which is composed in equal parts of myth, legend, history and fiction; there is a thriller like central thread, but with enough reference to provide a scholarly veneer.

Oppressive power relations, sexual assault, attack and disappearance of family members and the general insecurity on the streets, resulted in an overall loss of freedom for women. The impact of war on women is on the one hand, a very personal and powerful experience, on the other hand has a long-term social impact whereby the condition and prolonged suffering forces women to take steps and responsibilities that traditionally did not form part of her role. The war between government and LTTE, directed many women into the battle, their empowerment and strength are a representation for uplifting the entire women community. A parallel connection of myth and history with the contemporary social and political unrest are equally employed in the novel. It analyses the tale of Devanayaki, the legendary figure in the medieval history of Kerala, Tamil Nādu and Lanka. Originally the concubine of king of Kanthallur, a small kingdom in present day Kerala in south India. Though the novel had its setting in Sri Lanka and rooted in Tamil culture, Kerala becomes a significant place in its narration. On the issue of diaspora, the Tamils of Sri Lanka feels neglected as compared to the legitimate position of ethnic Sinhalese population. The government needs to implement a multifaceted approach covering political, economic and social effort with regard to the displaced, but they themselves being the reason for many to fled the place. For any individual who are unaware of the atrocities in the name of politics are evidently portrayed in the novel *Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki* in that sense the novel is a highly political one. The novel is a fine indication of its intensity on the part of retelling the myth and present power politics. In this 21st century of progression, women often try to unveil their restriction within the narrow space allotted to them. But they are still harassed by the lurking hands of male dominated society. In such situation, this paper gives an ample analysis and warning to those women who are still existed as a pearl and weed under the depth of the sea.

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