



Sharika Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka*

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THE TITLE OF THIS book points to the author's personal connection with the decades-long Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, which ended abruptly in 2009 after much of the manuscript had been written. Her mother was a Tamil academician and human rights activist assassinated by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in 1986 in Jaffna because of her outspoken condemnation of brutalities committed by the Tamil Tigers as well as by the Sri Lankan armed forces. This volume offers a scholarly analysis of the deep effects of the civil war upon a generation of displaced Sri Lankan Tamils and Tamil-speaking Muslims, but the author's family history will be immediately recognized by many readers familiar with Sri Lanka.

Based on fieldwork conducted in Sri Lanka during the later stages of the Eelam War (2002–2004), plus shorter periods of research in London and Toronto (2003–2006), the book presents an interwoven series of interviews and conversations with Muslims expelled from Jaffna and Mannar districts by the LTTE in 1990, and with Hindu and Christian Tamils forced to flee from Jaffna by the LTTE in 1995. These two brutal forced migrations—the “eviction” of 70,000 Muslims and the “exodus” of 400,000 Tamils—form a backdrop to many of the stories Thiranagama recounts. They also explain the difficult circumstances under which her field research was conducted, both in IDP camps for dispossessed Muslim refugees from the northern districts and in the private homes of nervously fearful Tamils in Colombo and abroad. The rarely-heard voices of these traumatized survivors, permanently scarred by the events of a decade earlier, are what give Thiranagama's book such credibility and poignancy.

The book has six chapters, each exploring a dimension of Tamil and Muslim wartime life recounted through personal experiences and memories of survivors, especially women. Chapter 1, “Growing up at War,” focuses primarily on Vasantha, a childhood friend of the author growing up in Jaffna whose mother was killed by an LTTE bomb. Her story bitterly describes the surveillance and censorship imposed by the LTTE, as well as her family's forced displacement and hardship during the exodus of 1995, eventually ending up in the Tamil diaspora in London. Chapter 2, “House of Secrets,” focuses on Malathi, a high-caste Jaffna Tamil woman whose mother's home in Colombo was destroyed and whose father and brother were killed in the 1983 anti-Tamil riots. After fleeing north to Jaffna for safety, Malathi and her mother were forced south to Colombo by the internecine violence of the LTTE. Now, a decade later, Malathi's estranged mother has decided to rebuild the house she lost in Colombo as a dowry for her granddaughters. Here we learn how essential it is for Sri Lankan Tamil women to possess a house as dowry property to anchor their families in space and time.

Chapter 3, “From Muslims to Northern Muslims,” explores the conditions of Muslim refugees from Jaffna and Mannar who have been stuck in IDP camps in Puttalam District for well over a decade. The eyewitness accounts of how the LTTE stripped these Jaffna Muslims of their jewelry and property during the 1990 eviction are heart-wrenching. Largely neglected by the Sri Lankan government and by fellow Muslims elsewhere in the island, their current plight has given them a totally new ethnic identity: “Northern Muslims.” For the older generation of refugees, this has reinforced their yearning to regain their homes in Jaffna or Mannar as part of their ancestral village identity (Tamil: *ūr*). Chapter 4, “Becoming of this Place?,” explores the contemporary inter-generational dilemmas of these Northern Muslims, whose children have no knowledge of life in Jaffna or Mannar and have little eagerness to “return” to such a dangerous and unknown place. A number of Muslim women IDPs have retained the deeds to their abandoned houses and lands in Jaffna, hoping eventually to give them as dowry to their daughters. Meanwhile, many daughters have grown up and married locally in the IDP camps or in adjacent areas, posing a dilemma for their aging parents who still hope to return to Jaffna.

Chapter 5, “The Generation of Militancy,” addresses the youth culture of Jaffna during the early years of the Eelam Wars, when a diverse set of militant groups were active in the fight for Tamil separatism, each attracting loyal recruits. Thiranagama’s sources tell of the idealism and excitement they felt in rebelling not only against the Sri Lankan government, but also against the rigidities of traditionally-enforced Tamil kinship and gender rules. When the LTTE ruthlessly seized the upper hand in 1990, killing members of the rival armed Tamil groups, the bitterness and disillusionment of the survivors was profound. Chapter 6, “Conclusions from Tamil Colombo,” returns our attention to Colombo, the commercial center and capital city of the island, a metropolis where Sinhalese mobs attacked Tamil neighborhoods in 1983 and where the LTTE staged suicide assassinations and bombings. Surprisingly, the population of Colombo city today (excluding the surrounding metropolitan region) is composed of 55 percent Tamil-speaking Tamils and Muslims, while the Sinhalese are a slight demographic minority. The chapter concludes with a provocative suggestion that it could be multicultural Colombo, rather than monocultural Jaffna, that will point the way toward ethnic coexistence between Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims in Sri Lanka.

Anthropologically speaking, this book provides a rare glimpse of Tamil and Muslim kinship and marriage bonds under conditions of extreme duress and displacement. Perhaps the one thing missing is a fuller discussion of the impact of the civil war upon the Tamil caste system in Jaffna, a topic for which a prewar ethnographic literature exists and which was a target of revolutionary ideology. Nevertheless, the deeply-affecting memories and troubled thoughts of Thiranagama’s interlocutors remain essential even as the war recedes into the past, because the urgent question of postwar reconciliation in Sri Lanka remains far from solved. It is the vivid stories and experiences of Thiranagama’s Tamil and Muslim acquaintances—in the IDP camps, in the recesses of Colombo’s minority neighborhoods, and in the global diaspora—that make this book so exceptional.

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