Majoritarian discourse, masking and the female suicide bomber in Chandrasekaram's *Forbidden Area*

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Abstract

Sri Lankan theatre productions featuring war rarely place importance on the suicide bomber. As such, Visakesa Chandrasekan's play *Forbidden Area* is unique as it revolves round a female LTTE suicide bomber who is on a mission. Thus, investigating the representation of female militancy is important with relevance to cultural studies as well as security studies given the pervasive presence of 'wars on terror'. Consequently, this paper attempts to discuss whether Chandrasekaran subverts majoritarian discourse which dehumanizes the female suicide bomber, and for this analysis I use the concept of masking.

Masking, as viewed by Elaine Savory (1999), is a series of codes signifying multiple levels of personality, indicated by ritual ways. While Urmila dons a 'mask of courage and defiance', as the time for the mission dawns she unveils mixed emotions. The complexity of Urmila's character is heightened as she subverts gender politics and 'femininity'; she also draws divine inspiration from the Hindu goddess *Kali*. Although Urmila's character doesn't fall short of being "human" her final action is far from being dialectical. In this text, masking functions as a protective and subversive strategy given her precarious situation.

Keywords: Dehumanization, Female Suicide Bomber, Masking, Tragedy, Gender

Introduction

Militant weaponisation of life is a complex area of study. In modern psycho-political warfare, the suicide bomber has become one of the most potent weapons. Since the first suicide attack on 5th July 1989 when Captain Miller drove a truck laden with explosives into a Sri Lanka army camp at Nillady in Jaffna, blowing himself up, suicide attacks have been regularly used by the LTTE (Narayan Swamy cited in de Mel, 2007, p.193). In public discourse, the suicide bomber is often perceived as the "other", a menacing threat to society who is "morally culpable of great crimes, thus less than human and deserving of punishment" (Boudreau & Polkinghorn cited in Macleod, 2010: 1). Often, successful dehumanization of the suicide bomber is established "in relation to ethnicity and race, with the 'enemy' cast as being savages or barbarians lacking in culture, cognitive and rational capacities, morality, and self-restraint" (Haslam cited in Macleod, 2010: 1). Sri Lankan theatre productions featuring war also rarely give importance to the female suicide bomber. As such, Visakesa Chandrasekarm's play *Thahanm Adaviya* or *Forbidden Area*, is unique as it foregrounds the character of a female suicide bomber on a mission. Here too, the sudden sexual urge the suicide bomber develops towards Raman, her handler, allows her to be portrayed as a "savage [that] has brutish appetites for violence and sex, [who] is impulsive, and prone to criminality"(ibid.). However, when women become human bombs, their intent is to make a statement and not only in the name of the country, a religion, a leader, but also in the name of their gender (Bloom, 2005: 145). In line with this perspective, Neluka Silva (2010: 21), in her reading of *Forbidden Area* raises the question whether her act of death, or martyrdom, is an act of "victimhood" in view of what motivates her and agency. However, as Dorrit Namman (ibid.) foregrounds "when women opt to fight alongside men, they challenge the dichotomy of woman as victim/ man as defender" as it challenges the "dichotomy of gender stereotypes". Just as much as the female insurgent departs from, yet reaffirms the "essentialist assumptions of femininity", because female sexuality, especially feeding into the archive of purity and virginity re-establishes her as a "Madonna". Also, the imagery of motherhood of a suicide bomber dressed as a pregnant woman plays a major role in confirming martyrdom. The advent of women suicide bombers has transformed the "womb into an exploding one" (Bloom, 2005: 145), attracting more media attention than of the male counterpart.

Research Objectives

This paper examines whether Chandrasekaram (1998) subverts the majoritarian perspective which dehumanizes the female suicide bomber and whether her multiple personality traits can be read in terms of "masking".

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study employs "masking" as a concept through which the female suicide bomber's actions could be analysed in the text *Forbidden Area*. Masking in postcolonial discourse, as viewed by Elaine Savory (1999), is a series of codes signifying multiple levels of personality, indicated by ritual ways in which gods can temporarily occupy the physical plane of human existence, thereby heightening and solemnifying the ordinary human decisions (or) a code for disguise, deceit, (and) retreat from self exposure. Especially the mask's effectiveness as protective and subversive strategy in politically dangerous contexts is foregrounded in this respect. Moreover, Aristotelian Coercive System of Tragedy (Boal, 1979: 36) is used to ascertain the didactic impact that the character has on the audience, in changing their perspectives: the stages hamartia, anagnorisis, catastrophe and catharsis are used for this purpose.

Paradox of the Female Suicide Bomber

Mainstream narratives on suicide bombers, especially in the aftermath of 9/11, portray suicide bombers as lacking in conscience and being cold blooded. Yet, *Forbidden Area*[1] appears to be a play that seeks to challenge the perspective of those who view the female suicide bomber as an inhuman cold blooded murderer. Nevertheless, subverting majoritarian perspective is not an overt objective of the playwright; he declares that:

> I do not seek to explain what themes are explored in the play. I have seen how the youth from the north as well as the south get affected by the cruel war. Instead I seek to recreate some real incidents that took place in the recent past that I found to be revolting and shocking[2] (Chandrasekaram 1997: 19)

1 The play revolves round the main character Urmila, a Tamil LTTE suicide bomber, whose assignment is to assassinate the President of Sri Lanka. She is sent to the site (they are temporarily using an old theatre as a hideout and the 'forbidden area' for the civilians where the stage for the ministers and VIPs is situated close by) accompanied by Raman, a forcibly conscripted LTTE cadre, who functions as voice of the "Tamil citizens living in the north" and the binary opposite of Urmila who is determined to die earning the honour of a martyr. As the play unravels it is revealed that Raman and Urmila have developed a romance and the dénouement of the plot is marked by the discovery that she is to change her target from the President to the old Tamil Minister who had worked all his life for the improvement of the Tamil community. As they debate the new development Supremo, the LTTE leader himself arrives at the scene to convince Urmila to fulfil her destiny. Coupled with suspicion and irrationality behind the change of plans and her newly sprouted sexual relationship and the desire for Raman unnerves Urmila and Supremo insists that she does not question him but executes her task as she promised when she became an LTTE cadre. Eventually, she relents and finally the sound of her blast is heard off stage, indicating that she has carried out his orders.

2 The playwright has been inspired to write this play after the publicizing of an incident of a woman, suspected of being an LTTE cadre, being stripped and raped at a checkpoint by the policemen who were in charge. (Chandrasekaram 1998)

Still deeper analysis foregrounds the complexity of the female suicide bomber, raising powerful questions on the function, psyche and the humanity of a terrorist.

The first appearance of Urmila concurs with the popular media image of a gun totting female militant. In light of her suspicion over Raman, her comrade, she appears threatening and ruthless, as she points the gun at her only support. She ridicules Raman's reservations on blindly following orders and reveals her hamartia, the tragic flaw, her blind faith in Supremo, the leader of the LTTE and her wish to die as a martyr. To Urmila, Supremo seems to offer the only salvation to oppression of the Tamils, retorting, "I love only him". However, gradually, the audience sees her changing as she reveals her past, drawing sympathy from the audience. It is her praxis which keeps her alienated from society; her social, economic class and caste as well as outward appearance contribute much to her marginalization. She is categorically described as 'dark-skinned' and belongs to a low caste, probably of the 'Sakkiliar caste[3]', as her mother goes to a Vellar doctor's house to "scrub the (chamber) pots". She retorts:

> Urmila: "....Because of this caste thing, school friends didn't get too close. I know I am not pretty. I was one of the ugliest girls in the class. A boy called Jemini sent me notes. Compared to me he was beautiful. He was also of our caste. So I thought there would be no problems...However, his mother demanded a dowry of 25,000/- rupees and to put the title to our family home in my name". (Chandrasekaram 1997: 16)

She resents her parents as they fail to find her the dowry to get married. Moreover, her higher education prospects are impeded as she falls short of eight marks for university entrance. She remarks that even if she did go to university she wouldn't have had the money to buy books. With her father dead and with three other female siblings in the family who need to be clothed, fed and married off, joining a militant group is the viable option for Urmila.

However, as the time for the mission dawns she seems to make the most of the time she has; she makes physical contact with Raman, to fulfil a basic human need, sex. Thus, the reserved and dismissive manner with which she treated Raman changes. Her sexuality is awakened when Raman helps her to put on the 'bomb jacket': she urges his consent to have sex, saying "I want that". She reveals that she had sex with Raman the night before, losing her virginity. Here, on the one hand, one can argue that the playwright subverts and challenges the majoritarian perspective of the female suicide

3 Tamil society is rigid in caste stratification and Vellar is considered the highest of all strata. They oppressed the lower castes and rioted against Pallar and dobhi castes in the 19th century ascertaining their hierarchical supremacy. Urmila's description of the discrimination that her family was subjected to is resonant of the sentiments of the LTTE leader Prabakaran, who also belongs to the Karaiyar, a relatively low caste, according to public perception.

bomber where she is viewed as devoid of human feelings and cold blooded, as she seems to insist on the fulfilment of a basic human need. Here, Urmila even transgresses a "well-entrenched cultural norm amongst the conservative section of the Hindu Jaffna society" (Herath 2012: 1). Also, premarital sex between LTTE cadres was taboo and the violation of such resulted in receiving the punishment of death. On the other hand, Urmila, perhaps conscious of her impending death, resorts to violate the rigid LTTE code of conduct. Thus, the complexity of Urmila's character is aggravated as she subverts gender politics and 'femininity', assuming "the phallic function of exercising reason and control" (Wright, 1994: 118). She decides not to accept orders blindly but, the final appearance of Supremo breaks her will. She finally agrees to keep her end of the deal intact. Thus, although Urmila embraces 'humanity' her final action is far from being dialectical as she is forced to blow up herself killing the Tamil Minister.

Unmasking the Female Suicide Bomber

The performative function of masking is used to shed light on the multiple personality traits of Urmila, the female suicide bomber. Even her 'femininity' can be read in light of masking which allows her to survive the 'hostile powers' that control her.

As the feminist critic Joan Riviere (1986) foregrounds womanliness is a "cover-up to conform to social constructions of femininity" (Wright 1994: 118), and thereby the attributed 'female' characteristics function as an excuse to her submission to Supremo's request and his onus becomes her object, to further the LTTE cause. As Riviere (ibid.) points out womanliness is a mask to hide the possession of masculinity: both Lacan and Freud repudiate 'femininity' and the woman becomes what she is by parodying and mimesis, by the practice of 'being' a woman. Thereby Urmila's sudden conversion to 'womanly behaviour' can be considered a 'feint' or 'cover up': suggesting that there is no absolute 'femininity' beneath the veil of toughness, although one may argue that femininity and masculinity are not self-evident categories. Yet, from the outset, Urmila is described as a tough woman carrying a pistol in her pockets, bragging about her heroic deeds from her past in confrontations with the militia of the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL). She reiterates that she "is not scared" and she smirks at death as she sees it as a "speck on the horizon," (Chandrasekaram, 1998: 12). She expresses disapproval of Raman's idea of going back to his mother and living a 'normal' life. She accuses him of being sentimental, tapping into the archive of male machismo and ironically her sarcasm makes him feel intimidated and appear in an effeminate light. She says:

> Urmila: You are a gutless bastard. If you have come to fight, you must forget everybody- your mother, father, brothers and sisters. Everybody. Don't be so selfish! To think of only your family. Your own small needs…" (ibid, p.15)

Here, considering the performative aspects of gender, one can observe that Urmila constantly camouflages herself with the mask of 'masculinity' concurrent with popular media's portrayal of militancy as 'masculine' and everything non-militant as 'feminine'.

Urmila's mask of 'femininity' concurs with stereotypical gender roles and hence 'humanity'. She, as any rational human being would, empathises with Raman as he narrates how deep distrust between the two ethnic groups prompt him to take refuge under the wings of the LTTE. Listening to Raman, Urmila vaguely retorts, "Are you that old?" (ibid., p.14). From this moment on, she begins to shed her mask of aggressive and unruly behaviour, and dons the mask of 'femininity'. This masking is important in terms of purging the hamartia of blind faith in the minds of the audience, which is in Boalian terms called anagnorisis, because masking allows her to see the dialectical truth. Thus, as the catastrophe of her unwilling death takes place, in the minds of the audience catharsis is executed, which is the purification of the hamartia, her blind faith which leads to believe in martyrdom after her human sacrifice.

On the other hand, Urmila drawing inspiration from the Hindu goddess Kāli dons the masks of both annihilator of evil forces and benevolent mother goddess, because in Hindu mythology she is representative of both. "The figure of Kāli conveys death, destruction, and the consuming aspects of reality. As such, she is also a 'forbidden thing', or even death itself" (McDaniel, 2004: 257). Thus, Kāli temporarily in the physical plane of human existence, aids in Urmila's human decisions. If this is another one of the multiple masks that Urmila dons, her true self is hidden behind this mask. In this way, masking helps even to de-demonise the suicide bomber while making her appear more human.

Conclusion

The textual evidence foregrounds the disintegration of the fallacies and myths that are woven round the LTTE militants; the worst type of them being the suicide bomber. As Chandrasekarm himself points out, this play closes the chasm that separates the LTTE Tiger from the militia of the GoSL, which he further explores in his latest novel, *Tigers Don't Confess*. However, while the audience sympathises with Urmila for her fate, she is criticised throughout the play for being a cog in the wheel, and for the hysterical craze with which she follows Supremo, aspiring martyrdom.

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