

Review - Women and Militant Wars: The Politics of Injury

Written by Zuzana Hrdličková

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Women and Militant Wars: The Politics of Injury

By: Swati Parashar

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In her new book, Swati Parashar looks at the subjectivities of militant women in two protracted South Asian conflicts: Kashmir and Sri Lanka. She reveals that women who do not fit the stereotypical bill of wailing victim or mother are silenced by a dominant social discourse, which translates into the absence of women in peace building processes and post-war politics. Parashar draws on her qualitative research, International Relations, feminist literature and a vast number of multidisciplinary sources on gender and war to shed light on the mutual effects of politics and gendered understandings of female identities and bodies. Her book is divided into several chapters introducing the topic of silencing, gendered nature of wars, issues connected to her fieldwork, her findings from Kashmir and Sri Lanka, and finally the politics of remembering.

According to Parashar, the story of war is never complete without hearing people's voices. She is critical of the writing on militant women, which often misrepresents them as manipulated 'suicide bombers' lacking politics. Women make their contributions in many domains of war including politics and in the perpetration of violence. Her book shows that idealism, emotional commitment and rational choice work together in the lives of militant women. The constant framing of women's violence as odd and in need of investigation presents a gendered bias.

Parashar analyses the power of remembering and forgetting –within wars and after them. On memories of various groups in Kashmir and Sri Lanka, she demonstrates that post-war stories produce silences, inclusions and exclusions and thus help build nations through remembering 'sacrifices'. In the two cases she studies, women's sacrifice is acknowledged only in their conventional roles and the sacrifices of militant women remain ignored; often women who were militants have to forget their roles after the fighting is over. Many are complicit in this process of gendered forgetting – a topic discussed for example by Chris Coulter (2009), in her work on lives of former bushwives of Sierra Leone.

Parashar points out those women whose stories do not quite match the dominant views are often disbelieved and silenced in one way or another. Women have innumerable stories and trajectories which led them to and through militancy, where the personal and the political have often been closely intertwined, and not hearing their stories means having an incomplete picture of what war is about. Parashar's book is definitely making a step towards more nuanced understanding of war by sharing these women's views.

The Kashmiri insurgency saw women take on a variety of roles. The mainstream narratives often portray them solely as victims of human rights abuses and patriarchy. However, women have been involved in militancy indirectly since the beginning as facilitators and providers of logistical and ideological support. Parashar provides testimonies of five women who have in one way or another contributed to the campaign against the Indian state, yet their views present a wide spectrum of positions which sometimes oppose each other. This shows that women and their politics cannot be seen as one category. On the controversial case of the death of Yasmeena Akhter, Parashar successfully

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demonstrates the confined modes in which female participation in militancy is allowed to take place in the mainstream Kashmiri discourse – that is within their accepted gender roles of mothers, wives, daughters and sisters. Kashmiri women's accounts of militancy are being erased from public memory, despite the fact that militant movements would have failed without their support

The three decades of war in Sri Lanka have deeply impacted Tamil society, which has been experiencing major changes, including the subversion of gender roles, a crisis of masculinity and a rupture of traditional family ties. Women have taken on a range of new roles, including as heads of households, administrators and fighters in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the 'Tamil Tigers'). The LTTE women attracted much attention, especially as combatants and suicide bombers. However, their politics were rarely discussed. Parashar thus sheds much needed light on the political views of her 16 ex-LTTE female interviewees from the East of the island – their sense of homelessness, their political dream of Eelam (Tamil homeland), and their discovery of new area of agency. She shares their bitterness too – about the shattering of their dream, as well as the ungratefulness of a society which refuses to accept them. Former LTTE women face multiple exclusions and anthropological literature would provide a good reference as to why this is the case (e.g. Hrdličková 2008).

Although I liked her chapter on Sri Lanka, I found a few minor shortcomings: First, Parashar would benefit from Stanley Jayaraja Tambiah's (1986) nuanced analysis of the history of the island. Second, I would approach her assertion (pp.121-123) that the apparent gradual dilution of caste boundaries can be attributed solely to the conflict with caution, as other factors may be contributing to the process. Third, she argues (p. 137) that notions of 'protector' and 'protected' may have changed because sometimes families chose to send their daughters to the LTTE, rather than boys, in order to fulfil the LTTE demands – that one child per family should enter the militant movement. This reading is perhaps weighed by the general pro-boy bias evident in most parts of South Asia. However, in Sri Lanka girls are valued much more than elsewhere in the region (c.f. Hrdličková 2008, 2011). Sometimes sending them to the LTTE happened precisely so that girls could be protected from sexual violence (Watchlist 2008).

Doing research in a conflict zone is never easy or straightforward. Parashar is quite clear about the opportunities and limitations her identity (Indian citizen, feminist IR scholar) posed in the field and ultimately implicated her in the production of knowledge. Although I appreciate the way Swati Parashar introduces readers to her fieldwork, her accounts can be imprecise at times. For example, she makes the mistake of talking about 'Tamil Muslims' in Sri Lanka (p.68). Although the Muslims speak Tamil, they consider themselves to be an independent community. Sri Lankan Tamil nationalists wanted to incorporate them into their nation on the basis of language. However, these efforts have been persistently resisted by the Muslims.

Despite some imprecisions, I find Swati Parashar's book to be very insightful, bringing up a topic which has so far been under-discussed: the issue of the politics of militant women. Her two case studies show the diversity of female involvement in wars. She is unapologetic about women's violence and points out the processes of silencing. I would like to congratulate Swati Parashar on her publication and I would prompt everyone interested in gender and conflict studies to read it.

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Dr. Zuzana Hrdličková is an anthropologist with background in South Asian studies. Her PhD thesis titled “The Impact of Sri Lankan Civil War on the Social Status of Tamil Women” (2009, Charles University in Prague) was based on three years (2005-2008) of fieldwork in Sri Lanka (North, East and Colombo). She has published several articles in journals and edited collections. Her interests include gender, conflict, disaster and development. She has worked for humanitarian organizations in contexts of disaster, war and conflict reconciliation. Currently, she is a post-doctoral researcher at Centre for the Study of Invention and Social Process, Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London.