

A chance to rewrite history: The women fighters of the Tamil Tigers

Sunday 27 May 2018, by [CHOKSI Mansi](#), [WALL Kim](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2018).

How during a brutal, 25-year civil war in Sri Lanka, the Tamil Tigers failed the women soldiers who sacrificed everything to fight for a sovereign state for the Tamil minority.

Contents

- [VELU](#)
- [SIVAKAMY](#)
- [RATHIKA](#)
- [AFTERMATH](#)
- [SIVAKAMY](#)
- [VELU](#)
- [RATHIKA](#)

Velu Chandra Kala was 17 when she charged into her school principal's office with a bag of milk toffees. She was small and jumpy, with dimpled cheeks and a woolly fringe. The principal took a toffee, briefly looking up from his desk, and assumed it was her birthday. Next, she was in science class, surrounded by howling classmates. They were hugging her, weeping into her palms, begging her not to leave. The cookery teacher took a toffee, and teared up. Next, the vice principal. Afterward she left the toffees in her mother's kitchen, by the stove. She was on her way to join an armed conflict.

* * *

Eight years earlier — on July 23, 1983 — Sri Lanka had descended into civil war after decades of simmering tensions between the Sinhalese, the country's ethnic majority, and its Tamil minority. After independence from British rule in 1948, the Sinhalese consolidated power and introduced policies that marginalized Tamils. The government declared Buddhism, practiced predominately by the Sinhalese, as the country's official religion, while Sinhala became the country's official language, even though roughly 2 million Tamils did not speak a word of it.

Velupillai Prabhakaran, a Tamil student leader from a northern coastal town, created the Tamil New Tigers, an armed insurgency to demand Tamil Eelam, a separate Tamil homeland in the country's north and east. The Tamil New Tigers — later renamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or simply the Tamil Tigers — quashed rival factions and emerged as the dominant group fighting for Tamils.

In 1983, the Tamil Tigers ambushed an army convoy and killed 13 Sri Lankan soldiers. An anti-Tamil pogrom began across the country, killing between 400 and 3,000 Tamils and forcing thousands to flee the country. The incidents came to be known as Black July.

Over the next two decades, the Tigers attacked government installations, airports, and hotels, assassinating political figures including a Sri Lankan president and an Indian prime minister. They made suicide bombings their trademark. With funding from Tamil nationalist groups abroad, it was the only terrorist group in the world with an air force and a navy.

The Tigers also boasted the world's fiercest army of women, even as Tamil society imposed a culture of subservience. In the early years of the war, women were assigned roles in recruitment, propaganda, medical care, and fundraising. But slowly, women made up a large contingent of commandants, especially in suicide squads.

After six rounds of failed peace talks brokered by Norway, the Sri Lankan government launched a military offensive and on May 18, 2009, declared victory over the Tigers, ending a war that had killed more than 40,000 people and displaced 300,000 more.

In the winter of 2016, we traveled through what would have been Tamil Eelam and spoke to women about the rich and complicated personal histories that had led them to the Tigers. Years after the war had ended, these women continued to fight privately with the ideas that had drawn them to the movement in the first place — a desire to exercise their right to self-determination, the blinding rage of wanting to avenge their oppression, suffering, and humiliation, and the dream of creating a new order for women in the promised homeland.

* * *

VELU

It was 1991. In Velu Chandra Kala's hometown in Mannar, a thumb-shaped island off Sri Lanka's northwestern coast, the call for a sovereign Tamil state — separate from the ruling Sinhalese majority in the south — was intensifying.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the guerrilla army leading an offensive against the Sri Lankan government, had called Velu's parents. She was at their gate, refusing to go home. Her brother had already enlisted, and the LTTE promised Tamil parents that only one child would be sent to the frontline.

First, a sister came to collect her. Velu removed her gold earrings — an act of quiet renunciation in Tamil culture — and sent her home. Then a brother-in-law came, pleading. Then her mother came, furious, dragging her younger sister. "Take her with you," she told Velu, dissolving into tears. Finally, that evening, Velu came home and went straight to bed.

After an LTTE camp supervisor sent word that an exception would be made to the Tigers' one-child policy for Velu's perseverance, she joined a camp run by and for women.

The war had disrupted Velu's entire life, forcing her to jump between eleven schools, three refugee camps, and four homes. "Why should I sit and waste my time?" she told us. "Instead of four people doing a job over forty days, forty people can finish it off in four days. That was my thinking."

When Velu was 7 years old, in 1981, government-sponsored militias set fire to the Jaffna Library, a majestic structure that served as a symbol for Tamil pride, turning thousands of manuscripts, books, and newsletters into ash. Weeks later, an army jeep thundered into her village, dragging the corpses of her neighbors. She saw them from behind the netted screen of a chicken coop, where she was hiding. When they rumbled past, she clenched her eyes shut.

Two years later, in 1983, in response to an LTTE ambush on Sri Lankan soldiers, anti-Tamil pogroms spread across the country. In retaliation, the LTTE massacred Sinhalese and Muslim residents, claiming that the north was the exclusive homeland of Tamils. The government, in turn, began shelling. The flowering plants in Velu's backyard crumpled, then her cattle died, then her home turned to rubble, and as violence continued to tear through her town, her family fled to India.

By the time Velu joined the movement in 1991, women made up nearly a third of the LTTE's army. The LTTE — also known as the Tigers — had a military wing and a political wing overseen by a central committee headed by the supreme leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, who was known as Annan, or big brother. Each battalion had a women's unit. Women were assigned the same roles as men — on the frontline, in suicide squads, medical units, political wings, publishing divisions, walkie-talkie units, administrative departments, intelligence wings, media, communication departments, and kitchens. The LTTE had an international reputation for having the world's fiercest army of women.

In training, Velu was assigned a nom de guerre: Vetrichelvi, meaning "the one who wins at everything" in Tamil. Her new capacity gave her a sense of courage. She wasn't used to this power. Even men flocked to Tiger women when they visited a village. "The uniform, the hairstyle, the confidence," Velu told us. "It made them look smart." They rode motorcycles, wore their hair short, operated weapons, and communicated on walkie-talkies. But more crucially, their lives gained a meaning greater than the typical, mundane domestic roles traditionally assigned to them because of their gender. A good Tamil girl made herself small, but a Tiger woman was ferocious. These women had the power to contribute to the birth of a state that would rival the West's prosperity and the East's cultural legacy. In the Tamil Eelam, no one would starve, steal, or rape. Women would be equal to men. Velu saw it as a chance to rewrite history.

Velu awoke at dawn, ate rice and yam curry for breakfast, and practiced long jumps, military crawls, squats, rope-walking, and running. She learned how to handle, clean, and repair rifles. She joined the LTTE band as a side-drum player, so that when victory came, the grandeur of the Tamil Eelam would be ready for display. The supreme leader took special care of women fighters, she told us, importing ships full of sanitary napkins and bras without metal clips so that they could comfortably sling their guns over their chests.

But war was mostly waiting. "So we joked around, teased, and bored each other," she said. She met two sisters from her village, and they adored her, whispering secrets, feeding her, coiling her hair into braids. She teased homesick comrades and wrote poems to cheer them up, until one morning when she woke up in Jaffna Hospital, knowing that she would never be able to fight. She had been inspecting a bomb recovered from a battlefield when it accidentally exploded, blinding her in one eye and blowing off her right arm. Overnight, she had gone from being a young girl aspiring to change a destiny assigned by her gender to a woman faced with the grim reality of her physical limitations.

"A bomb can't distinguish between master and enemy," she later told us. "It's brainless and it does brainless work."

In the months that followed, her comrades returned from battles bearing gifts — harmonicas, bullets, books, and other souvenirs stolen from defeated government camps. So what if she could not fight, they told her; they were fighting for her. She received them with a mix of gratitude and frustration with her own helplessness because they became physical reminders that even before she had a chance to serve the cause, she had become a liability to it.

After leaving the hospital, one day Velu was in a heaving crowd at the training base, coming to terms with her new reality. Prabhakaran, the supreme leader, was addressing cadres on International

Women's Day. "The women's liberation movement is forging ahead as an integral part of our greater struggle," he said. "For the awakening of the nation and the salvation of the women, the Tamil Eelam revolutionary woman has transformed herself into a tigress. Fierce and fiery, she has taken up arms to fight injustice!" The crowd erupted and Velu's grief bubbled like an undercurrent. "Our struggle shines as a superb paradigm of women's ability to accomplish anything." Velu sat down on the ground and wept inconsolably. What good was a fighter without a chance to fight?

* * *

SIVAKAMY

In the late '90s, Sivakamy Sivasubramaniam, who went by the nom de guerre Thamili, meaning "a woman devoted to her Tamil identity," rose to become the head of the Women's Political Wing in the LTTE, the only woman with a hotline to the supreme leader. She walked every road of the Eelam, the promised Tamil homeland, to talk to women about a force inherent in them. She refused to carry a gun when she approached them, so that they could see themselves in her. Her speeches widened the cracks in the foundation of an age-old patriarchal culture, as young women joined the armed struggle often in defiance of their families.

"We too, as human beings, want to live a free and ordinary life," she told them. "But we were robbed of this life by a succession of racist Sinhala regimes. The necessity to fight has arisen, to regain that free and ordinary life. We, too, are fighters and have to bear that responsibility."

When the Sinhalese army came, neither a father, a son, a relative, nor a husband could protect them, she warned. The men would be tortured and killed first, then they would molest and murder the women. Women had not only a right, but also a duty, to pick up guns to defend themselves.

Through the struggle, women could reclaim confidence in their own powers, which the patriarchy had tried so hard to erase, she said. Sivakamy too had grown up taking inequality for granted: Scolded for laughing too loud, for climbing trees, taking too much space, and once, for allowing the low-caste man who worked in the garden to drink water from the family's vessels.

The war Sivakamy waged was as much against the patriarchy as it was against the enemy forces. She refuted the idea of war as a male prerogative. Wasn't expecting women to be on the sidelines, merely wailing for peace, the same as calling them cowards? If peace was for everyone, so was war, she said.

Tamil women would be liberated doubly: They would no longer be "domestic slaves" dedicated only to bearing, looking after children, and attending to a husband's sexual needs. Only through joining the Tigers, Sivakamy insisted, could they change society and finally be free.

"Women are not only acquiring the combativeness to face an invading army," she promised, "but also the wisdom to face life itself."

* * *

RATHIKA

Rathika Pathmanathan radiated a joyful sincerity whenever she talked about her time as a Tiger cadre. The first time we met her, she was sitting inside an empty church in Colombo, the Sinhalese-

majority capital. She was 27, with creamy skin and waist-length hair gathered to one side.

In 2007 — eleven years after the Women's Day speech that shattered Velu's ideas of what she could contribute to the movement — Rathika, then 17, was dragged away to join the war. It was the last phase of a war that had raged for two decades, and the Tigers' diktat called for compulsory conscription of at least one child from each family. Even married men were enlisted now; parents locked up their children, afraid they would be spirited away as they traveled to school.

At first, Rathika was as talented a warrior as she was reluctant, unable to shake her bitterness over being forced to join a war she did not believe in. When new batches of forced recruits cried with homesickness, Rathika thought of her late parents, her sister, and her childhood house, where she learned to ride a bicycle around a guava tree. She even missed the orphanage she had lived in since age 6, where children could never play outside and were taunted by caregivers ("your mother left you because you're not good").

One morning, six months into conscription, Rathika escaped, climbing up a fence. Those days, almost no one managed to leave the Tigers.

She had devised her escape the second she learned of her promotion. The news came via an overheard walkie-talkie conversation; she was destined for the Malathi unit, notorious for its cruelty and draconian discipline. Sometimes girls were beaten for misbehavior and sent to the frontline even when suffering period cramps. If you ran away from Malathi, comrades were ordered to shoot you in the leg.

"I only had the fear of being caught," she said. "Rather than the fear of getting shot and dying, I was scared of falling into Sinhalese hands. If I got caught alive, the torture would be unbearable."

She recalled what the Sinhalese army did to Tamil women — leaving them with their breasts cut off, assaulted even after their death. The Tigers avoided the topic, but sent fallen comrades home to their families in sealed containers, sometimes without arms and legs, insisting bodies were not in a condition to be seen.

At the time, enemy forces had trickled deep into what was to be Eelam, and the horrors had become less abstract. Another girl who had been at the frontline with Rathika came back from captivity covered head to toe in cigarette burns, barely alive.

Now, the sun rose behind monsoon clouds as Rathika caught her breath where she was hiding inside a betel bush on a plantation near the camp, shivering behind a thick screen of leaves. Rain fell hard all day, and her tiger-striped garb clung to her skin, water dripping from her long braids.

She was overcome with guilt as the women she thought of as sisters called her name only meters from her hiding place. She stayed silent, knowing that the LTTE's iron fist could come down on its own ranks, too: The fear that caused fighters to run away was best cured with shock therapy, the logic went, as recaptured runaways were dispatched straight to the frontline to "gain courage."

Rathika waited until evening before she revealed herself to the plantation owner's wife, who sent a note to Rathika's brother-in-law to collect her. She relocated to her sister's family bunker and left it only for meals.

The air thinned in the claustrophobic warren, and she reminded herself of what she left behind: all the insects of the forests, and the breakfast — rice flour rolls layered in coconut flakes — always stale and often snatched by monkeys. She felt sick remembering the raw eggs she was forced to swallow each morning and how she, a vegetarian, was forced to kneel with her rifle raised over her

head for hours as punishment when she vomited. But it was the only time in her life that she felt needed, as if she was not alone in the world.

Rathika held out for two weeks before surrendering to the Tigers, only months before their own surrender in the spring of 2009. She was still unsure which side of the war she hated most, but even the frontline was better than being held hostage underground.

“Rather than be stuck there, it would have been better to be in the frontline,” she said. “In the LTTE, I found happiness, comfort, and many more things that I didn’t find at home.”

When Rathika was sent back to the front in January 2009, her militia was even smaller. She was surrounded by new faces, many of them children recruited to replace those injured or dead. The enemy reminded her of ants as they advanced, sticking to their formation even when their comrades were squashed.

In a moment away from the battlefield, she darted into a temple, haunted by visions of women with pregnant bellies ripped open or hips split in half. She begged Vishnu, the Hindu deity, to let it be in her arms or legs or at least not her face should she be hit.

In early 2009, the war was almost at its end, and Kilinochchi had fallen. The Tigers were retreating into to an ever-thinner slice of the homeland in northern Sri Lanka, sensing the game may be over. They fired desperately through the blown-out windows of abandoned houses in remote villages where there were no bunkers left for shelter.

On Pongal, the harvest festival in January, Rathika sucked on sugar crystals she found in an empty home to mark the occasion. These days, everyone was hungry and thirsty, surviving on biscuits and water filtered through uniform jackets.

The shells came from a clear sky. Rathika knew them well enough to tell their varieties apart from sound and behavior. This must have been a cluster bomb, she remembered thinking before everything went blank, because instead of blasting, it opened like a flower.

She came to her senses, upside down over the shoulder of a man zigzagging through gunfire. She pummeled his shoulders, demanding to be put down. He scolded her; she would either get captured or die. She persisted, until he finally obeyed, and her leg folded underneath. Then she saw the blood.

She was fading in and out, in a medical tent, looking at her crushed toes. If they did not move, they would be amputated. “My toes are moving, right?” she asked. They were not. Bullets flew past as she was loaded onto a tractor. Then there was darkness.

Rathika woke up three days later, her leg strapped to what appeared to be a TV antenna. She was in Puthukudiyirippu Hospital, where patients had been placed underneath their beds as the building crumbled under shelling. (U.N. officials later claimed that GPS coordinates for civilian targets were deliberately bombed in a clear violation of international humanitarian law.) Soon, Rathika and other patients left again when a final counterinsurgency push ordered the evacuation of Tamils, herding even the injured into a no-fire zone which was later shelled. The government framed this atrocity as a “humanitarian operation” and denied access to medics, aid workers, and the media.

Rathika left the no-fire zone on crutches to look for her sister, finding her and her 9-month-old niece among the exodus of 100,000 other Tamils, mainly civilians, while hell unfolded around them. There were soldiers on either side, hitting her to move faster, shooting randomly into the crowds. Bodies floated in the lagoon — many of them children — and its water turned red. No one paused to pick up the dead.

As shells continued to rain from the sky, she was trapped underground again, in one of countless bunkers in a mile-thick strip of sand between Mullaivakkal's lagoon and the Indian Ocean. The thirst was unbearable and soon her sister's baby stopped crying for water. The United Nations estimated that at least 40,000 people died in the killing fields. The Tigers, who shot Tamil civilians trying to escape, called it genocide.

When the cease-fire finally came on May 18, 2009, Rathika wondered if she was spared because of Vishnu's divine intervention or because she still looked like a child. She was mistaken for a civilian, and was suddenly grateful for her long hair and injury. When her LTTE comrades were loaded onto buses destined for what human rights activists later described as concentration camps, she was dispatched to Colombo National Hospital.

"Our only regrets are for the lives lost and that we could not hold out for longer," an LTTE spokesperson said, after the Sri Lankan government announced victory, releasing images of supreme leader Prabhakaran's dead body.

In Colombo, amid fireworks, President Mahinda Rajapaksa announced a national holiday. "We have liberated the whole country from LTTE terrorism," he said. "Our intention was to save the Tamil people from the cruel grip of the LTTE. We all must now live as equals in this free country."

* * *

AFTERMATH

Margaret Trawick, a professor of social anthropology at Massey University in New Zealand, lived and worked in Sri Lanka. She wrote in her book "Enemy Lines: Warfare, Childhood, and Play in Batticaloa" that she was "skeptical that a woman might attain liberation by joining the LTTE." In 1993, Trawick interviewed a woman fighter named Sita to understand whether the Eelam war was just another man's game. "It is no trivial thing to want a place in history, as opposed to being confined to the realms of reproduction, and Sita saw this quite clearly," she wrote. "In addition, she had achieved a privileged degree of physical power and mobility; she could operate machinery — motorbikes, tractors, and guns — that freed her from some of the constraints of a mortal, gendered body. Most important, perhaps, she was liberated from the helpless anger expressed in the laments of so many traditional Tamil women I know."

According to Trawick, in modern Western societies, trained combatants who enter civilian society often experience problems "because in the military they become something the civilian world cannot tolerate." Trawick did not ask her subjects about how the war had damaged them.

Unlike men, female combatants who returned to civilian life were uniquely disadvantaged. "The men had never ceased to be real Tamil men, thus they needed no reintegration," Trawick wrote. "But the girls had ceased to be what a real Tamil woman is supposed to be."

After the war, as Velu, Sivakamy, and Rathika slowly emerged from the shadows, carrying physical scars from the struggle. Their reintegration into society, where they became second-class citizens, was paved with stigmatization, patriarchal suppression, and ethnic violence — a world away from the utopia promised to them when they joined the movement decades earlier.

The politics of these three women, along with their war experiences, were vastly different and complicated. Sivakamy was motivated to fight for a sovereign Tamil homeland; Velu joined so that peace would come sooner; Rathika saw the war as her only chance to survive. But each of them was

failed by the movement, which forced them to tumble back into the very systems they had tried to escape. And each of them adapted to what they saw as their roles in the new world.

* * *

SIVAKAMY

In 2013, Sivakamy was released from Menik Farm, the country's most dreaded rehabilitation camp, insisting she had been treated decently, getting to study bridal dressing and cake decoration. After months of exchanging letters and phone calls with Jeyakumar Mahadevan, a political refugee with whom she had mutual friends, he flew in from London and they married in Colombo the day she was released. For her wedding she wore a sari draped in the Tamil style. Having worn fatigues for her entire life, it was the only sari she would ever wear.

They moved into a two-bedroom apartment in Colombo, far from the Tamil neighborhoods so that Sivakamy, who felt she still embodied the LTTE's failures, would not be recognized. Tamils living in Colombo — many who had formerly revered her as a cadre — turned away. She heard them muttering "this one could have swallowed cyanide, rather than being alive," she wrote in her memoir, "Under the Shadow of a Sword."

The newlyweds spent time in the kitchen, and Jeyakumar taught her to cook. A curry was like poetry, he told her, just use your imagination. She reciprocated by opening his eyes to the daily struggles of women on public buses and in marketplaces.

With sadness, her husband told us, she watched Tamil women gravitating to traditional roles as if they were never liberated. She noted that training the female body was one thing, changing minds another. Sivakamy tried watching Tamil soap operas, but she found the female leads too absurd and lacking self-respect.

To her husband, she described forests so untouched, otherworldly, and sanative that she came away feeling more beautiful. Other times, she complained; she had wasted her life, not helping anyone. She wondered why the Tigers lost the war, growing bitter with the men in charge — too old, too fat, unable to run even a mile.

"Once as female combatants we dreamed of bending the sky like a bow," she wrote in her memoir. "Now all our dreams have vanished; we have fallen flat on the ground of reality."

Marital bliss was cut short. When Sivakamy fell fatally sick only two years after her release, rumors circulated that she and thousands other cadres were subject to mysterious injections.

When her book was released a year after her death in 2015, it criticized the LTTE, and observers insisted that she had not written it herself. On its cover, she was transformed into a Sinhalese woman, they said, wearing silver jewelry and her hair gathered in a low bun.

* * *

VELU

In 2016, in one corner of the Tamil Eelam that never came, Velu was 42 and slumped in a plastic chair in her childhood home, watching a Tamil soap opera with her mother.

She had recently returned from a trip to India veiled in nostalgia. She began wearing shirts and pants again, cut her hair into a pixie cut, the way Tiger women wore it, and tied a talisman around her neck, reminiscent of the cyanide capsule she carried through the war. It reminded her of her defiance as a young Tamil Tiger. She refused to make herself invisible again.

Velu first returned home nine months after the war, in the winter of 2009, when she was released with a group of disabled detainees. Days earlier, a shell had landed outside her sister's tent, killing her and her two children. She had picked up the corpses, cleaned them, and buried them near a church. She remembered placing a stick on the graves so she could locate them when peace came. But those sticks disappeared, and she was never able find the graves again.

After losing her eye and her arm, Velu worked as a producer for LTTE radio and travelled with theater and dance troupes on recruitment drives, delivering motivational speeches and extolling the sacrifice of the Tigers. "Who are these Black Tigers?" she told crowds of villagers. "They were one of us. They were our neighbors. Nobody wants to die; we want to live. It is to live that we are pursuing the struggle."

She produced radio programs that were broadcast across the country, even in Sinhalese Sri Lanka. But still she felt inadequate because she could not fight at the frontline. "If a soldier doesn't go to war," she said. "How can there be respect for her?"

Now, neighbors asked about her time in detention. They had read reports about sexual violence, so they assumed something unspeakable must have happened to her too. Officers of the Criminal Investigation Department routinely showed up at her door. Who had Velu been talking to, they wanted to know. Who had sent her money?

In 2016, Velu started a copy and print shop, spending her days writing poetry. Some of her poems are about the beauty of life and resistance, some of them about a failed utopia. The ones she does not publish are about a man who betrayed the dream of the Tamil homeland. He was a Tiger she loved for seven years, who fled abroad after the war was lost.

One day, she spent the afternoon at a funeral. The father of the LTTE's first woman fighter, Malathi, had died. She joined a crowd trailing a hearse dragged by a tractor, a son wailing at the coffin. Plainclothes officers of the CID infiltrated the mourning crowd.

"He raised a revolutionary who inspired women like us," Velu said. Was Velu a feminist? "Yes," she said. "But not the stupid kind."

* * *

RATHIKA

When Rathika woke up in the capital in July 2009 after surviving the cluster bombing, no one knew she had been a Tiger until she told them. The stigma was still there, with nurses tugging at her bandages when they changed them, pulling the transfusion cords already attached to her veins. Was she too good to receive Sinhalese blood, they mocked. She was scolded in a language she didn't understand and felt as if she was fighting a new war.

Knowing that her leg was useless, hospital staff taunted her in front of other patients: "Get up and walk, you LTTE girl. Come get your food." Being branded a murderer when she only ever tried to survive infuriated her. "Yes, I'm from LTTE," she yelled back. Then she cried under her blanket,

leaving her tray untouched.

Rathika learned Sinhala from her bed. She eavesdropped on doctors and became friends with the Sinhalese girl next to her. Fear and humiliation sped up her studies; in four months, she could read letter by letter. The road to recovery felt impossibly long. Her leg had been fixed the wrong way and had to be painfully realigned. Her corner of the island was shelled beyond recognition, her alma mater was razed to the ground, “a paradise of natural beauty destroyed by mindless racism,” she wrote in her diary. She decided to stay in Colombo, and the everyday oppression she experienced explained what the Tigers had picked up arms against.

No one came to pick Rathika up from the hospital when she was finally released eight-and-a-half months later in February 2010. Her parents were dead and her sister had been diagnosed with cancer. A Sinhalese man took her in, pretending she was a relative, then made her a household maid in charge of cooking, cleaning, and even laundering undergarments.

Rathika was as old as his own daughter, who called her names and beat her, and she still walked with pain. She kept her hair waist-long and coconut oiled, but braided it Sinhala-style. She stacked her wrists with colorful bangles and painted her toenails a cheerful pink. Eventually, she walked with an almost undetectable limp. She was young, radiant, smiling; her pain was not obvious.

The war was over, the country was reunited, but being one of the capital’s 170,000 Tamils became unbearably lonely. The city was still on edge, scarred by decades of suicide blasts and hate crimes. Rathika began to realize that it was not just her people that were subjected to massacre, but also that the entire concept of humanity had been slaughtered. If society wanted to avoid another war, she concluded, minds needed to change.

Later that year, she took a job in a call center and lost it before long as she choked on the victor’s justice, the smugness of her Sinhalese colleagues who teased her — wasn’t Prabhakharan, the supreme Tiger leader, her uncle? Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa is God.

She tried to kill herself, twice swallowing entire jars of painkillers, and left that part out of her memoirs. After the war, the life of a warrior felt meaningless, her identity hollow. Her poetry became therapy:

“We were born Tamils,
And all hell broke loose
On our heads,
Because we were Tamils.
Condemned to death and destruction
And it defies
All explanations!”

When she moved into a single-room home, it dawned on her: Colombo was the only torture she had really experienced. When she closed her eyes, she was back in the jungle, freer and happier than in any house she had ever lived in. It was a place where mosquito bites, expired food, and impure water never made anyone sick. Everything except combat itself seemed like sheer happiness now.

There was no sisterhood in Colombo, and she missed her male comrades too, remembering how they ran to the spring to fill bottles of water for girls on their period, tearing rags of their own clothes for them to use. Her heart, she wrote, still yearned for the dawn of liberation, just like a bird whose wings are clipped.

Gratitude for her past washed over her — the things she would not have learned, the languages she

would not have spoken, the people she would not have met, had it not been for the Tigers. "I wouldn't have known about the world," she said. "In that life, I would have been selfish; individualistic. I wouldn't have had compassion."

And the alternative seemed unimaginable now. When she traveled back to Eelam, to meet her sister who had had another baby and childhood friends from the orphanage, they became mirrors of what she might have become without the LTTE: married, divorced, abused, battered, a mother of too many children, forced to sell their bodies to the military that still occupied the land. Tigers, too, had been swallowed by the patriarchy, some getting tickets out of rehabilitation camps in mass marriages. A wife and a mother, the government masterminds assumed, would not pick up arms.

"Because I don't have a mother, I would have been married off at 20 or 21," Rathika said. "And I would have lived a life of hell."

Kim Wall & Mansi Choksi

P.S.

*https://longreads.com/2018/05/22/a-chance-to-rewrite-history-the-women-fighters-of-the-tamil-tigers
/