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Emerging from Conflict: Portrayals of 'Self' in the Digital Life Narratives of Sri Lankan Women Archived in *I Am Sri Lanka*

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ABSTRACT

The role of life narratives in making individual experiences part of the socio-political history of a nation is significant as it ensures that stories, especially alternative narratives, that might otherwise go unrecorded are included in the recorded history of a country. These auto/biographical accounts can contest the dominant hero myths and triumphalist narratives by creating more inclusive historical accounts. The present study analyses selected life narratives by women who have experienced the 30-year war and related ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka, extracted from the digital archive *I Am* curated and archived by Kannan Arunasalam, in order to understand how self is constructed in their life stories, and its significance for digital life narration. The study intends to understand how self is constructed in the narratives of female survivors of war and conflict in Sri Lanka; and to understand how Sri Lankan women from different communities manoeuvre the construction of their identity and selves within the socio-political and cultural settings they inhabit vis-à-vis war and ethnic conflict situations. This qualitative analysis subjected the selected narratives to a close reading and in-depth analysis using concepts in post-conflict life narration and discovered that war is the catalyst that resulted in changes of selves and identities. The exposure to war and conflict has made the women narrators develop a shared resilience irrespective of their socio-economic or cultural backgrounds. However, the narratives archived in *I Am* cannot be considered holistic since it only promotes the image of strong and hopeful women without a trace of defeat or embitterment in the post-war and reconciliation context. These can be considered re-representations of selves which are made to align with the curator's aims and perceptions, probably influenced by the brand of women desired in postwar Sri Lanka. Further, the study revealed the use of exoticism in presenting the narratives in an audio-visual manner, which could appeal to a consumerist audience. Nevertheless, the works archived in this digital repository are important because they contribute to dialogues on post-conflict life narration and peace and reconciliation

Keywords: self, digital life narration, post-conflict life narration, women survivors of war

INTRODUCTION

Life narratives play a significant role in incorporating individual experiences and histories to the socio-political fabric of a nation. Especially in post-war contexts, such auto/biographical accounts are instrumental in challenging the dominant hero myths and triumphalist narratives by creating more inclusive historical accounts. In this collaborative study, we aim to analyse selected life narratives by Sri Lanka women from the digital archive *I Am Sri Lanka*, an online repository created for promoting reconciliation, in order to understand how self is constructed in the narratives of survivors of war and conflict in Sri Lanka, and its significance for digital life narration. Since the research focuses on the intersection between war and life narration, only the narratives by Sri Lankan women with exposure to war and conflict will be selected for analysis.

The present study recognizes the significance of understanding these life stories for the field of life writing. Because these narratives promote inclusivity and allow otherwise unheard of and unrecorded lived realities of women affected by war, analysing them could provide insights into creating a space for these women in postwar Sri Lanka. In doing so, it is crucial to understand how their identity has been shaped in terms of 'self'. The study, therefore, aims to analyse selected life narratives from *I Am Sri Lanka* in order to examine the construction of self in the archived narratives and its significance for digital life narration. Its main objectives are to understand how self is constructed in the narratives of female survivors of war and conflict in Sri Lanka and to understand how Sri Lankan women from different communities manoeuvre the construction of their identity and selves within the socio-political and cultural settings they inhabit.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Narration is an act of storytelling, and a narrative is a story whether it is done orally or in writing, or in online or offline contexts. Life narrative is "a general term for acts of self-representation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer's life as their subject" (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 4). Due to the inherent complexities in the act of sharing the story of one's life, life narration is complicated by nature, especially when the narrated life stories are related to war, violence, or conflict. This becomes further nuanced when the act of life narration is done in the digital sphere because "…cyberspace represents a discursive place, where different kinds of people can express their "voices" (Gradinaru, 2015, p. 66). When creating digital life narratives, the role of co-creators can influence how the narrator is positioned as well as how the narrative is organised. This points to the significance of examining the concepts of self and identity vis-à-vis digital life narratives.

Though different studies have investigated life narratives of Sri Lankans of different ethnicities who have experienced war, it is often done with a view to exploring areas such as reconciliation, war crimes and justice, empowerment, and socio-economic impacts etc. (Chawade, 2016; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2001). But when approaching these survivors' narratives from a life writing perspective, interesting insights into the act and politics of life narration can be gained. Hence, the present study deviates from the more common trajectories of analysing the stories of Sri Lankans exposed to war and conflict.

The life narratives this research aims to analyse belong to the broad category of post-conflict life narratives, as they are personal histories revealing on issues such as identity, placing histories on record, exposure to war and violence, loss, survival etc. that co-constitute the core of conflict and post-conflict contexts and texts. These narratives form a chain that links the past, present and future of a community exposed to conflict, and hence, it is interesting to examine how the narrators' self emerges from the context of war and conflict as it could generate insights into creating sustainable peace and an inclusive society.

The notion of self is often explored in relation to identity, which is "one of the functions and motives of writing a life" (Brockmeier, 2001, p. 455). A unified understanding of self, however, has not yet been possible, owing to the fact that human experience is rather subjective and there are endless possibilities for the ways in which self and identity are understood and constructed. This, Brockmeier (2001) explains, is "an essential quality of human identity itself: namely, its open, fleeting, and elusive nature" (p. 455). It is generally agreed that being a multidimensional concept, identity is a complex condition that is constantly in a state of becoming and therefore not static (Macedo et al., 2013). In fact, identity is considered a discursive construction which emerges via people's narratives and memories (Macedo et al., 2013), and so, it is of interest to examine how the exposure to war has affected people's notion of identity and self. Such an examination would also reveal whether the identities constructed by the survivors of Sri Lanka's thirty-year war are fluid,

fragmented and resulting from a process of negotiating diverse perspectives, and their significance.

Hence, the present study intends to contribute to the understandings of the self, by examining the notion of self in the life narratives of Sri Lankan survivors of war; particularly how the exposure to war and the digital sphere has influenced the construction of self in their narratives.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research follows a qualitative approach, and the selected narratives are subjected to a close reading and textual analysis within a life writing framework using theories related to war life narration, digital archival practices, and mediation.

The primary texts of the study are selected life narratives that reflect Sri Lankan women's experiences of war and conflict, which are extracted from *I Am* (2010- 2012) by Kannan Arunasalam, one of the key repositories that digitally archives life narratives of Sri Lankans. Accordingly, five narratives from *I Am* are studied here (*The Nun, The Independent, The Fisherman's Wife, The Nice Burgher Girl,* and *The Bridge Player*). The texts deal explicitly with personal tragedies and experiences resulting from war and ethnic violence, and they are recognized internationally and locally as stories that generate discussions of ethnic harmony and reveal dark periods in Sri Lankan history (*I Am* Comments, 2012; Bandara, 2013). While displaying strong linkages of personal life narratives to larger socio-political realities of the country, the texts have the potential to offer insights into the construction of self in relation to life narration in the digital sphere. Also, these texts display both autobiographical and biographical elements since they are mediated by the curators/producers, which further problematizes the act and politics of life narration. The textual data is further supplemented by insights gained from secondary data, i.e., scholarly articles on life writing.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The concept of self is integral to the act of life narration as it is one element which connects the narrator, narrated content (matter), and manner of narration (see Figure 1). This paper explores how 'self' is constructed in the selected life narratives and whether the exposure to war and violence has influenced the construction of 'self' in those.

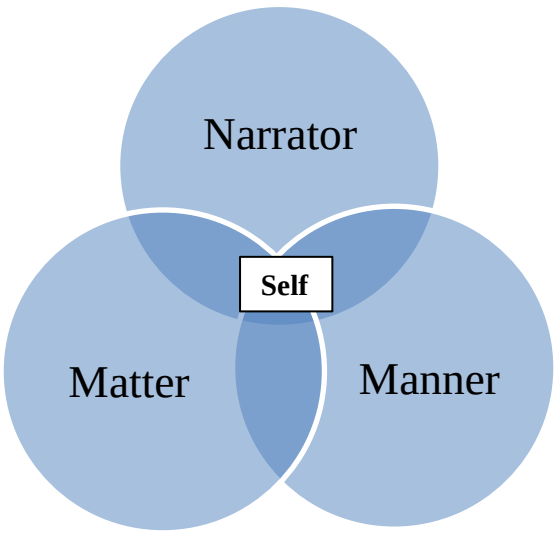

Figure 1: Self vis-à-vis narrator, manner, and matter of life narration (Willarachchi, 2018)

Self and the Platform

The digital platform where the selected narratives are archived needs to be taken into consideration as the platform influences how selves are constructed. This section explores how self, identity and life narratives are presented on *I Am* (2012)— a digital archive, and its implications.

The selected life narratives from *I Am* are presented as audio clips with a photograph of the narrator, and photo montages, i.e. brief clips (3-4 minutes) of narrative which comprise a series of images and a voice over. One narrator has one or more photo montages which appear as a series of clips on the interface. However, there is hardly any linearity or narrative sequence in them. Each clip focuses on a particular memory or episode in the narrator's life which gives the audience an insight into the theme of identity explored by the curator, "I'm looking at this question of identity and so I'm looking at their stories through that lense" (Arunasalam, 2017). The self in the stories is seen, therefore, through Arunasalam's (2017) perspective, which indicates that the construction of self in the narratives is significantly influenced by the curator.

All five narratives from *I Am* studied here; namely, *The Nun, The Independent, The Fisherman's Wife,* and *The Bridge Player* have women narrators from different walks of life, ethnicities, religions, and geographical locations. The life narratives reveal about their past, livelihoods, experiences of war, and how different communities interacted with each other before and during the war.

The tale of Mary Joana Vaas, *The Fisherman's Wife*, consists of one audio and two photo montages, and is a fine example of how the themes of identity, ethnicity, and conflict are weaved into the narrative of an individual's life. Though she is narrating her life from Negombo, she has had to move from place to place (ex: Pottuvil to Ali Oluwa, Seruwavila) as a result of LTTE attacks on civilians. Upon scrutiny it is seen that these experiences are part of her life and identity. It can be derived from her narrative that war-imposed mobility as well as immobility on them. She states that they were forced to flee from the places where they were settled in because of war, and simultaneously, they were restricted to the villages and were not able to travel due to the prevailing violence. She is presented as a civilian who focused on survival rather than any outward resistance when confronted by war. When listening to her description of war incidents, one feels that she considers war as something inevitable that *happened*, and rather than pondering over its political implications or protesting, their practical option had been to ensure their own survival. War, for them, was something that did not leave them much choice other than to flee for their lives. As a result of this, her self is presented as rather submissive, yet adaptive. Submissive, as they accepted their plight as affected civilians during the war, and adaptive, as they dealt with the shifting conditions for survival and safety of their children in whichever manner possible.

In the narratives, the viewers may recognize multiple identities and constructions of self of a single narrator, though the curator has highlighted only one facet of her identity by the tag '*The Fisherman's Wife*' assigned to her.

Commenting on the non-linear, non-unified nature of self, Smith & Watson (2001) write,

> "Readers often conceive of autobiographical narrators as telling unified stories of their lives, as creating or discovering coherent selves. But both the unified story and the coherent self are myths of identity. For there is no coherent "self" that predates stories about identity, about "who" one is" (p. 47).

According to this view, a coherent self cannot be constructed via life narratives about a person's identity. In Vaas' story her role as an obedient daughter, "we don't do it by choice- we did it [getting married] with our parents' consent"; a mother; and dedicated worker, "We need to put the fish out in the sun and turn them over. Then put them in baskets" (2012) are

intermingled. This leads to the question, why has the curator highlighted her as '*The Fisherman's Wife*'? It is a simplified representation of a complex self. The motive of the curator in assigning such tags demonstrates a desire to highlight variety and adds exotic flavour to the archive. Rather than doing justice to the projection of self, this caters to global consumerism that relishes the exotic. Hence, it can be argued that the representations of these women narrators have been affected by the curator's intention of making the digital archive appealing to a global audience. Thus, while there is no harm in presenting the narratives in an interesting manner, from a life writing perspective, this simplification of a complex self in order to present it as a 'unified story and a coherent self' can be questioned.

The portraits in the archive are significant because they make the audience identify the image on screen with the voice in the background. It seems to add more credibility to the narrative by subtly indicating that these are 'real' narratives of 'real' people. The understanding that a portrait represents a flesh and blood individual, and therefore is authentic is behind this assumption. As Roberts (2011) puts it, "the notion that a photographic image provides a straight reflection of the "reality" of people, a scene, a landscape, etc. assumes that by "simply looking", we "know" the image as reality" (p. 13). The audio narration alone could carry a degree of authenticity as it is evidence of a 'real' person speaking, but taken alone, the voice clip creates a sense of anonymity. But the inclusion of a portrait photograph helps to create an identity for viewers' consumption. A narrative coupled with a photograph somehow adds more credibility to the narrative as well as the narrated self; a notion not unfamiliar to the inhabitants of a world where Identity Cards prove one's identity. But this notion can be critiqued as modern editing techniques can alter the images to suit a desired projection. Especially in a curated project like *I Am*, the capturing, selecting and editing of images are done as seen fit by the curator. The self thus assembled and represented online as an individual is a re-representation coloured by the curator's understanding and motives. Therefore, the 'reality' presented in the digital sphere debunks the notion 'a photographic image provides a straight reflection of the "reality" of people' (Roberts, 2011).

As opposed to the portrait photographs, the photo montages add further depth to this discussion as they not only compliment the narrative, but also trigger certain nuances and layers of meaning. This is immensely useful in showing the multifaceted nature of self or its discontents. As discussed in the introduction, self and identity are fragmented, multiple and fluid; characteristics that are reflected by the very form of a photo montage. If one focuses on the sequence of images without focusing on the voice-over, the images themselves build a narrative, albeit incomplete and solely constructed by the curator and interpreted by the audience. It is to this end that Roberts (2011) argues that "A finished photograph is subject, however composed, to interpretation and re-interpretation—and it may well be placed alongside others in a digital slideshow, print book or album, which introduces a particular interpretive positioning (e.g. as part of a chronology or alongside contemporaneous images)" (p. 22). When images appear as primary text, it draws responses and interpretations from the audience. But at the same time, those interpretations and identity of the narrator (as (re)constructed by the audience) are limited by the tag given to the narrator and the images on the screen, which takes us back to the argument on curatorial involvement and platform influence on the construction of the self.

What first strikes as important is the way these montages begin. The first few photographs literally 'place' the narrative and narrator in a particular setting, and this setting reinforces the tag given to each narrator; for instance, *The Bridge Player* (Sarojini Kadirgamar) montage starts off with images of a bridge party— a hand of cards, players, and a domestic serving tea etc., and *The Fisherman's Wife* montage starts with images of the Negombo Fish Market, a statue of a saint, and the national flag captured against a vivid blue sky.

Though the images enable the audience to get a general (and heavily exoticized) idea about the narrated life and self, images alone cannot construct the self or narrative in full. It is said that "…the portrait and the narrative, the picture and words, can be regarded as having a comparable distinctiveness: in the sense that, just as pictures cannot be fully described in words, so words cannot be fully translated into pictures" (Roberts, 2011, p. 19). Hence, the importance of the voice-over which accompanies these images.

The voice-overs directly relate to the tag attached to each narrator, and they begin with a narrative which justifies the tag given to them. Sarojini Kadirgamar (*The Bridge Player*) from Colombo, for instance, describes how she got interested in the game and pursued it throughout her life despite changing circumstances. She states that even during the curfew in 1970s she found solace in playing Bridge, but a rupture occurs in her routine parallel to the ruptures in civil society. She claims that in 1983, violence came too close to them (*I Am*, 2012). The communal riots of 1983 thus disrupted her regular life routine; an event signified by the rupture in her life as a Bridge player. Here is another instance of how the exposure to violence affects oneself. The narrator was a possible victim of communal violence at that point because of her ethnic identity, but her resilience is shown by certain decisions she made. For instance, the decision not to desert her home and runaway, and the decision to put up a fight against rioters should they try to harm her family. However, she is not the focal point in this part of the narrative as she is shown in the shadow of her husband. Rather than taking initiative on her own, she plays the role of a supportive wife. Her husband's reply when she asked to be taught how to handle a gun, "No you just hand me the cartridges, otherwise you will end up shooting me", (*I Am*, 2012) reveals gendered power dynamics at work. The resilience developed by her self is largely affected by her husband. Also, compared to the narrative of Mary Joana Vaas, Kadirgamar's self emerges as stronger and less passive in the face of violence. This results from the socio-economic status of the Kadirgamars who represent the upper-class, educated sector. Self here is represented as selves that recourse to fight rather than flight. This shows that the way in which one faces war and violence is also determined by the socio-economic and political status of a subject.

In addition, the platform also facilitates viewers' comments which encourage engagement and dialogue with the lives narrated. However, these are mostly comments on the viewers' perspective of the narrators, relationships with them and occasionally comments on the narrated incidents and contain hardly any fully-fledged discussions. However, when shared on the platform, this information too contributes to the construction of the narrator's self.

The digital platform thus allows multiple parties to be involved in the construction of the narrator's self. One also observes that how a woman narrator's self is affected by war is largely determined by her self formed in the socio-economic, political and cultural context/s prior to war and violence. This provides a partial answer to Arunasalam's (2010) question; "Why did *we* leave, and they stayed?" Everybody seems to have dealt with war and violence within their socio-political and financial limits. Ones who did not exercise their ability to leave, probably had resilience stemming from their socio-cultural and economic roots, while those unable to leave, may have faced limitations in terms of the same conditions.

Narrated Self

Narratives in *I Am* reveal how Sri Lankan women from different communities manoeuvre the construction of their identity and selves within the socio-political and cultural settings they inhabit, and project Sri Lankan women survivors of war and violence as versatile and resilient selves that manage to survive under different and difficult circumstances.

In fact, the narratives analysed here are strongly marked by the narrators' exposure to war and the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Demuth et al. (2007) state that "If both autobiographical memory and self-concept contribute to a culture's continuity and transformation, and if autobiographical memory is fundamentally affected by traumatic events such as war, then we need to consider the impact of such events on the interplay between memory, self and culture" (p. 321). As many narrators state, the exposure to war and conflict has been a turning point in their lives.

These collected narratives that reflect war and post-war contexts project a society largely governed by fear on the one hand, and resilience on the other. The narrative of Jean Arasanayagam (*The Nice Burgher Girl*), a prominent Sri Lankan poet, is a case in point:

> "I didn't think of myself as anything special. I was one with everybody else. But 83[*] was the watershed…For the first time in my life I knew what *fear was*, what alienation was, and what it meant to be considered an outsider. That was the change. That was the shift in my life. It has changed my whole mindset. I was always fearless…but 83 was a *horror*" (Arasanayagam, 2010).

Referring to Pillemer (1998) Demuth et al., (2007) characterise "traumatic events as having a "big bang" quality, in which "[...] the survivor's life is abruptly and violently altered." (p. 321), which is well-expressed in Arasanayagam's narrative.

After describing how they had to face and keep the angry mobs at bay, and their experiences at the refugee camp along with descriptions of protectors who helped them, Arasanayagam asks, "wouldn't you call that a sort of an experience that would change your life forever? It has" (Arasanayagam, 2010). The incident had shown her how your very identity that makes you unique can be the reason for being penalised, and it instantly changed her identity as a Burgher and a teacher to an 'other' and a refugee. Her former self, which she perceived 'fearless', had suffered transition to fear as a result of exposure to violence, and the sense of displacement in her homeland has affected her identity.

She talks of how certain unfair deductions are made, and certain labels are forced upon individuals,

> "My God I remember at the staff meeting when I was lecturing, that was the time when Tamils stripped at Heathrow…and I remember the principal telling me at the staff meeting in front of everybody "and she's one of them". I was branded as a terrorist. I was married to a Tamil, so I was also a Tamil terrorist. So that kind of divisiveness left rather negative feelings within me. Feelings that were inhospitable and unacceptable to me" (Arasanayagam, 2010).

Because of her marriage to a Tamil, she was deduced to be a Tamil sympathiser and therefore 'one of them', i.e. a terrorist. This kind of story reveals a culture where everyone who was a Tamil or related to Tamils was considered a terrorist. Her inability to take sides because she had taught many of the 'Ilamists and Subversives' did not matter for many people. Her personal opinion did not count in that context, and even her writing, she claims, was seen as Tamil sympathising works, while her works on other issues were overlooked. A society where every non-Sinhalese was seen as an enemy was the result of certain political agendas and that agenda's power of wiping out all other identities harboured by these individuals is a key concern raised here. It does not take only one person to make a refugee camp, and inhabitants of 'the burning townhood of Kandy' (Arasanayagam, 2010) probably have had similar, or worse, experiences as Arasanayagam.

[*] The 1983 ethnic riots in Sri Lanka, commonly known as the Black July, where the Tamil minority was attacked by Sinhalese mobs. Jean Arasanayagam was a Burgher, but she and her family were attacked during the riots because she was married to a Tamil.

Her self was forced to become an 'other' against her will. Though the experience left its mark on her, her present self is depicted as strong, and she takes pride in being Sri Lankan. Once again, this could be a result of her social and educational status. Having expressed herself via literature, her present self seems to have come to terms with the horrors of 1983.

Hence it can be argued that the interplay between experiencing war and violence, self and culture is highly dynamic and intense. War and violence have had an impact on the women's 'self', that enabled the self to be aware of and changed by the prevailing socio-political culture, and memory being the link between pre and post conflict selves, the self thus affected bears witness to the horrors and challenges of that context. Since these experiences of war have an impact on the individual self, and that affects the culture at large, it can be concluded that what is potent to the individual self is also significant for the cultural context.

The narrative of Sr. Pushpam Gnanapragasam (*The Nun*), is based on the concept 'our'. She explains how her community views itself as a unified group. In other words, a community consisting of individuals with a strong sense of belonging; "Jaffna people always say… our people. You don't mean to say, you don't mean to distinguish, but you say our people. Invariably you say our nuns, our priests, our people…*our*. I don't know why. It's just built in" (2012). She further adds that this sense of community and belonging predates ethnic discrimination, conflicts and war in Sri Lanka.

It is noteworthy that she glosses over the class and caste issues that continue to have a strong hold over the Jaffna community, indicating that though it was prevalent in the past, now it is not as strong as before. But Dominic Jeeva's (2012) narrative in *I Am* establishes the fact that class and caste-based discrimination still prevails within the Jaffna community, which contradicts her narrative. This shows how narratives are subjective, and that narrators' perspectives rather align with how they perceive themselves. Jeeva, who comes from a low caste family and projects himself as a fighter for equality, sees caste divisions as prominent, while Sr. Gnanapragasm, a member of the clergy, focuses more on unity than divisions. Because of her religious role and duties, she considers herself more as part of a mass of people than an individual,

> "Our people are simple. Our hospitality, our people are open and ready to share…They are religious people also, either Christian or Hindus…I won't generalise and say that we are perfect, there is a lot of violence here too…there is a lot of jealousy and competition amongst our people too…But deep down we feel that we are brothers and sisters" with the sense of belonging to Jaffna acting as a bonding factor (Gnanapragasam, 2012).

Her narrative is marked by 'we/ us/ our', and very few 'I/me/my' are found in her discourse. She sees herself as part of a larger community, which is known as the 'we-referral' (Demuth et al., 2007, p. 324). Her work is communal work, and her 'self' is influenced and shaped by the socio-cultural and religious context in which she lives. This could possibly be because she is a nun, and it is her "duty" at a political level to execute rhetoric in a manner that promotes harmony. So, we hardly learn anything about the narrator's self, other than the fact that it has been heavily conditioned by her religious role in society.

Moreover, she weaves other people's narratives into her story as re-representations, ex: reading a letter by a French Nun, and describing war experiences of others,

> "We were at the receiving end recently when people came back without anything… What I am going to say is not my personal experience but what the sisters have gone through. They have been in 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, they have been there in the Wanni area… We had seven or eight convents that side in the Wanni. They themselves had to evacuate from one place to the other because there was constant shelling. Even

> they had to undo buildings, beams and doors and things and transport them to another place, and then settle down there. To see that in a month's time they had to shift again…finally they had to leave everything and come with their little bags or basic things…Sisters say that they had walked over dead bodies…" (Gnanapragasam, 2012).

What the other sisters have undergone thus becomes part of her war experience, and life narrative because she is made witness to their experiences by the act of listening to others' experiences. In a way, she makes the audience bear witness to her narrative of what she has witnessed in someone else's narrative. These horrors of war are juxtaposed with a harmonious past and a society with a strong sense of brotherhood.

Life narratives of this kind complicate the construction of self as well as the construction of the narrative, as the audience questions whether this life narrative is a holistic account of a woman's life affected by war, or is it a construct which aims to juxtapose a rose-tinted past with the horrors of war, in order to reinforce the curator's aim of promoting reconciliation? Being made a third-party witness to these situations, are the viewers gently nudged into believing in a division-free utopian society? Is harmonious existence possible if the existing divisions are glossed over?

Addressing another aspect of self construction, next we would like to differentiate between two processes of self construction within the relational life narrative. According to Roberts (2011) "Life connections, or how we associate one memory (of a person, event, feeling, piece of music, conversation, place, etc.) with another, are intricate and varied, and are used to "compose" our "life" and sense of self" (p. 18). In other words, it is through linking our memories together that a sense of self is made. One can string together personal memories and create a self, which we would call *intra-relational*. Since we have many shared memories, the process could also become *inter-relational* as well. *Inter-relational*, as we would like to define, is the process in which self is constructed by relating our memories and experiences to other peoples' memories and experiences.

Relational narratives present narratives within narratives, and even selves within one self. This reveals that it is near impossible to extricate a single self (or even a single narrative) woven into a rich mass of selves and narratives. Sr. Gnanapragasam's process of self construction is both *intra-relational* and *inter-relational.* Through her narrative we not only see her 'self' and identity, but also the selves and resilient spirit of others who are part of her life narrative. Thus, a largely interdependent self would be a rich composite of selves, experiences and narratives brought together via *intra-relational* or *inter-relational* means.

However, the critique also takes into consideration the fact that her narrative is subjective and political. As discussed above, her narrative has absences in terms of ruptures like insurgencies in Sri Lanka before the war and she glosses over prevalent caste issues. Her narrative coaxes the audience to envision a society of ethnic and racial harmony. It can be argued that it is war that has defined her present self, especially in terms of the political role she is expected to play as a religious figure.

The story of Subramaniyan (*The Independent*), on the other hand, rather aligns with the model of independence. She decidedly places herself at the centre of all action, and her actions, reactions, achievements and opinions etc. are strongly voiced; "I was selected as the House Captain. I had to handle my House/ Daily I'm busy… I'm looked upon to look after everything (at *Uthayan* where she works)" (*I Am,* 2012).

Her self is positioned at the centre of her narrative, while other parties are placed in the periphery which shows that she perceives herself as the nucleus. In turn, the audience too views her as the central figure in her life narrative. In contrast to the traditional, albeit much critiqued, view that women take a secondary position in the Sri Lankan culture (Jayawardena, 2016), narratives in *I Am* depict women who play key roles and wield agency in the face of war and violence as well as daily life. This aligns with the envisioning of the project as an

optimistic endeavour by the curator and imparts a sense of strength and hope to the viewers as well. The sense of autonomy, however, predates war time (resulting from socio-economic and educational status) but has become stronger with the confidence and resilience she has gained by surviving during the thirty-year war.

However, one absence that is noted in project *I Am* is the absence of any narrative voice of despair or pessimism. This striking absence limits the realistic depiction of a cross-section of women's war experiences and construction of selves, for it is impossible that *all* those victimised by war are devoid of feelings of despair and confusion, a clear indication of censorship. Hence our argument that the re-presented sense of hope and strength in the project is carefully engineered by the curator to match his aims.

In another clip Subramaniyan (*The Independent*) talks of her decision to remain in Sri Lanka despite invitations by her sisters and adopted daughter to migrate and live with them. She stresses on simplicity, the 'most unique personal attribute' (Wang, 2011, p. 3) she upholds.

> 'Their pattern of life is different from mine. I always believed in simplicity…I never wanted to be stylish or uppish or anything…If I go there (London), for two days they will say OK we'll allow you to be simple…but [on the] third day they will say 'No, you must also fall in line with us.' Then what will happen to *me*? Where do *I* stand? [my emphasis]... On the 31st day after my husband's death I removed all the ornaments other than these ear studs. So they were harassing me, saying that people will say that I am not wearing anything, and that's a bad reflection on them... then I told them 'you tell all those people that I'm not your sister. If you say that then things are OK for you no?' (Subramaniyan, 2012).

What is projected here is a self with a strong sense of independence, and awareness. She distinctly sees herself as an individual 'I/me' as opposed to 'they/them'. She states that there is no fear in being cut off from her relatives because she wants to be *herself*. Yet she is not completely isolated as she keeps in touch with her relatives via calls. She still is part of the network but manages to be an individual within that.

However, though this narrative rather fits the model of independence, there is a degree of interdependence as well. When talking of her school days, though she highlights her achievements and popularity, she is projected in relation to others such as her teachers, friends and family; "…my father fell sick and he was boarded in Colombo hospital for two months. So I had to go with my mother and stay. So that came to be the end of my studies" (Subramaniyan, 2012). Here we see her "a fluidly defined individual as interrelated with others (co-agent), accepting norms and hierarchies, contributing to the harmonic functioning of the social unit, in particular the family" (Demuth et al., 2007, p. 1), i.e. an interdependent self. She does not exist solely for the smooth operation of the social unit and therefore, is an independent, individual self. But when the situation demands it, the fluidity of self enables her to integrate herself to the larger structure and play the expected role. The construction of her self through the narrative is rather positive, highlighting character traits such as independence, resilience and intelligence. Such positive articulations of self, I would argue, are included to create a specific, desired type of Sri Lankan women in the curator's proclaimed mission of promoting reconciliation. The most prominent common characteristic of all five women narrators (as established earlier), i.e. resilient, strong and hopeful selves devoid of crippling despair resulting from war, promotes a particular *brand* of Sri Lankan women in the post-war reconciliation agenda. Thus it is evident that the selves are re-moulded and projected to fit a political requirement, and hence not a holistic representation of the women narrators.

However, the elimination of selves yet to recover from damages of war marks exclusion and marginalisation. If a platform that claims to record the diverse histories of the

common people of Sri Lanka is selectively censoring the seamier aspects and lasting, devastating marks of ravages left by the war on women, how effective can the project's contribution to the process of reconciliation be? Reconciliation should not mean glossing over the lasting negative impacts of war on selves. If the women narrators are to exercise the full potential of leaving their mark on the historical fabric of the nation, diverse selves and narratives need to be accommodated.

Hence, one striking limitation is that the project's attempt at highlighting diversity borders on exoticism, while diversity in terms of how war has affected selves is censored to create the above discussed *brand* of Sri Lankan women in the post-war reconciliation context.

CONCLUSION

War has been a decisive factor in determining the selves of these women. It has demanded the narrators' selves to become versatile and assume multiple identities and these are reflected in the narratives shared by the narrators as discussed above. In becoming versatile, these women's selves have become resilient. The narratives provide glimpses of the women's former selves, how war affected them, and what their present selves are like. Tracing the process of transition and *becoming* has revealed that war is the catalyst that resulted in changes of selves and identities.

The analysis also explored the women's selves projected in the archive, and concluded that in *I Am*, a particular image of women, i.e. strong and hopeful women without a trace of defeat or embitterment, is projected as the Sri Lankan women in the post-war and reconciliation context. These are identified as re-representations of selves which are made to align with the curator's aims and perceptions, probably influenced by the particular brand of women desired in postwar Sri Lanka. Thus it is evident that the selves are re-moulded and projected to fit a political requirement, and hence not a holistic representation of women survivors of war. Moreover, the depicted selves in the project bear traces of exoticism (especially in photomontages and videos) which contribute to a picturesque representation that appeals to global consumerism.

Despite these features, the act of archiving these narratives is powerful, and by preserving women's life narratives which would go unnoticed otherwise, space has been created for their stories to be accessible for scholars, policymakers, and postwar reconciliation projects. At a theoretical level, the selves projected in these narratives facilitate the understanding of a particular generation of elderly females from Sri Lanka whose identities are heavily influenced by war and conflict situations. It promotes the understanding of the impact of war on ordinary citizens, and hopefully, enables dialogues among future generations on the adverse impacts of war and significance of sustaining peace.

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