Capturing Women of War: The Use of Multiple Modes of Self-Expression in Women's Life Narratives in *Herstories*

DDL Willarachchi

Department of Languages

General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

In any conflict situation, women become more vulnerable, and their narratives may get overlooked or glossed over in historical records which tend to give prominence to hero myths or dominant political narratives of the time. In the aftermath of the 30-year civil war in Sri Lanka, the opportunity for women affected by war and violence to voice their stories was minimal. However, to ensure the holistic nature of historical records, archiving such narratives is essential, and having recognized the need, a few attempts were made to archive women's war life narratives, among which the digital archive *Herstories* (2013) by Radhika Hettiarachchi stands out as an impactful archive. In fact, *Herstories* 'bears witness to these lost narratives in order to mitigate the dangers of a single, master narrative in post-war Sri Lanka' (*International Coalition of Sites of Conscience*, n.d.). The present study aims to examine how different modes of expression of self have been used for capturing the self and identity of women survivors of war in Sri Lanka via their life narratives in *Herstories* archive. Since life narratives have the potential to make historical records more inclusive by creating space for alternative narratives, it is of interest to examine how the narratives archived in *Herstories* have enabled women's self-expression and presenting their self and identity. Being a nation that has been long exposed to ethnicity-based conflicts, Sri Lanka recognises the need to be aware of the lived realities of citizens who experienced war and violence. The analysis shows that the narratives in *Herstories* project a balanced depiction of women struggling to recover from the ravages of war as well as women whose spirit remains resilient and hopeful. The study also revealed that most women show multifaceted and multiple selves, assumed by the individual to manage and overcome adversities posed by war.

Keywords: women survivors of war, expressions of self, war life narration, digital archiving

INTRODUCTION

Women are known to play a pivotal role in storytelling and passing on oral histories via narratives (Humez & Crumpacker, 1979), but these narratives are hardly recorded or archived, especially in war and postwar contexts. This phenomenon was observed in postwar Sri Lanka as well, and there is limited opportunity to study important life writing concepts such as self, identity, and mediation in stories by Sri Lankan women who have survived the 30-year war, a significant period in the country's history. The concept and construction of self and identity, however, are central to life narratives (Gusdorf, 1956), especially in war life narratives and digital life narratives, because they become further complex as they are influenced by factors like context, presentation and construction, and mediation. In fact '…technology has profoundly transformed the art of storytelling, revolutionizing how stories are created, shared, and consumed (Bakhtiary & Behzadi, 2023, p. 5). The present study therefore aims to examine how different modes of self-expression have been used for capturing the self and identity of women survivors of war in Sri Lanka via their life narratives in the digital archive *Herstories* (2013) by Radhika Hettiarachchi.

The main objectives of the research are to understand how female narrators' self and identity are constructed via the use of multiple modes of self-expression in women's narratives in the *Herstories* archive; and to examine the role of the curator and mediation in the process of constructing self and identity in the narratives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Human beings use narratives to 'represent and restructure [their] world in [their] daily lives' (Guerrero, 2011, p. 88), and the term life narrative denotes "…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). In fact, people 'tend to construct personal stories and accounts of their lives, in which they position themselves as protagonists' (Gergen & Gergen, 1983 as cited in Guerrero, 2011).

Narratives also provide the audience an understanding of the self and identity of the narrator or protagonist because they can "verbalize and situate experience as text (both locally and globally) and provide […] a resource for the display of self and identity" (Schiffrin, 1996, p. 167). This process makes the act of sharing the story of one's life, i.e., life narration a complicated task, especially when the narrated life stories are related to war, violence, or conflict. This is because the manner in which a narrator positions themselves 'within the social space of interaction [is] a fundamental form of constructing and negotiating identities (Demuth et al., 2007, p. 322)'. However, when producing digital life narratives, this can be influenced by curators or co-creators, which makes examining the concepts of self and identity vis-à-vis modes of self-expression and digital life narratives both interesting and topical. Digital narratives are undoubtedly 'a way of amplifying marginalized voices in the public domain,' (Matthews & Sunderland, 2013) but it is important how the narrated selves and identities are constructed and presented in these narratives because stories in the digital sphere are often co-constructs with a certain amount of mediation. Further, they have significantly changed the way in which people view and interact life stories (Zafar et al., 2024).

Against such a backdrop, *Herstories* becomes interesting because it is a repository of digitally archived life narratives that are created using different modes of self-expression (Trees of life, timelines, photomontages, and videos). Though the narration is done by the women, there is an element of mediation and co-creation due to the involvement of the curator of the archive. It has been observed that because it is a multidimensional concept, identity is a complex condition that is constantly in a state of becoming and therefore not static (Macedo et al., 2013). So, it is interesting to see how the use of different modes of self-expression help capture the fluid and multifaceted quality of 'self' and identity, particularly vis-à-vis war and violence.

Hence, the present study attempts to contribute to the understandings of the 'self' and identity by examining how different modes of self-expression are used for capturing the 'self' and identity of women survivors of war in Sri Lanka via their life narratives with specific focus on the context of war, digitization, and mediation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research followed a qualitative approach, and accordingly, selected narratives belonging to the five modes of expression (trees of life, timelines, letters, photo essays, and videos) from the digital archive titled *Herstories* (2013) by Radhika Hettiarachchi were subjected to a close reading and textual analysis within a life writing framework using theories related to self and identity, war life narration by women, digital life narration, and mediation.

These primary texts contain Sri Lankan women's personal experiences of war and violence, memories, and their hopes and dreams for the future, which are presented in the *Herstories* archive in the forms of letters, trees of life and timelines, photomontages, and

videos. Though the stories are narrated by the women, these texts have been subjected to considerable mediation by the curator. Hence, these texts have become complex because of the politics of life narration in the digital sphere. Therefore, textual data were further supplemented by insights gained from secondary data such as scholarly articles on life writing, self and identity, mediation, and digital life narration etc.

As mentioned above, narratives in *Herstories* have multiple modes of self-expression, namely, trees of life, timelines, letters, photo essays and videos. Trees of life, timelines and letters contain written narratives, whereas photo essays and videos contain audio-visual narratives. So, it is pertinent to see how self is constructed across such a range of modes by Sri Lankan women survivors of war.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Portrayal of Self in Trees of Life and Timelines

Timelines weave together women's narratives that are simultaneously similar and different from each other. For instance, observe the following extract from the timeline narratives of three women from a Ranaviru village in Kurunegala, Sri Lanka (See Figure 1- a).

a) Timelines   b) Trees of Life

Figure 1: Excerpts from Timeline and Tress of Life Narratives- Kurunegala (*Herstories*, 2013)

In the timeline above, the women talk about living in the village and their most pressing concerns. They share similar concerns in terms of financial difficulties and the need to educate their children well, and satisfaction with the place they live in. In this mode, self-expression is rather limited and factual. However, the audience can easily identify the similarities and differences of women's experiences. In terms of mediation, there is very limited involvement from the curator or editors since the drawings and narratives are done by the women, using their own agency. A striking characteristic of timelines is the limited amount of information shared, and it could be assumed that this mode could have been selected by women who did not prefer sharing detailed life narratives.

Trees of life, on the other hand, enable more detailed expression where the women have written in detail about their lives and experiences (Ex: roots- family and background; ground-land and property; bark- war experiences; fruits- future aspirations) (See Figure 1- b). Trees

of life had been introduced to facilitate these women to share their life narratives and experiences freely and creatively (Radhika Hettiarachchi, personal communication, June 2017).

When examining these narratives, it is evident that they are a blend of diverse emotions including despair, nostalgia, resilience, and hope. However, the style of writing aligns more closely with factual reporting than a personal narrative or a story.

Portrayal of Self in Letters

Letters contain content similar to other four genres, but they inform someone (a friend, family member, project agent etc.) about the traumatic experiences of war, stories of survival and loss, difficulties faced by these women and occasionally, a request for aid. As Radhika Hettiarachchi mentioned, the letter format is also significant as it "gives you an addressable other" (Hettiarachchi, 2017). Unlike in other modes of expression, letters contain hardly any positive take on future except in the letters written by women from Ranaviru villages. Selves that are found here lack confidence, though their survival alone bears witness for their perseverance. The self constructed in letters by women who have had direct experiences of war, more often than not, is overshadowed by exhaustion, trauma and misery.

Letter 54 from Mullaitivu, for instance, begins as follows:

"I write this letter to inform you about our plight I have undergone. My husband died in Maththalan on account of a shell attack. This happened when we were going to Maththalan from Puthukudiyiruppu as we couldn't stay there due to shell attacks and aerial bomb attacks. My two sons were grievously hurt and they cannot walk properly…" and ends with "If we are resettled then that is enough for us. Thieves also harass us. As I am a widow and we have no employment we have to face many challenges. I wrote this letter to inform you the situation we are facing" (*Herstories*, 2013).

What is seen is an outpouring of the suffering and hardships which could be the result of having an opportunity to unburden herself. As mentioned earlier, letters give the narrators someone to whom they can address and unburden themselves. Simultaneously, letters provide an insight into the impact of war on selves, which has resulted in making the narrator rather despondent. Especially, recurring themes of loss, suffering, injury, poverty etc. often narrated in tones of despair reveal how war has affected self-confidence and esteem in these women. Moreover, some letters end with an apology. Letter 223 concludes with the following apologetic request to forget what was narrated,

"Ok my dear friend, I told you of all our sad experiences. If I made you cry, please forgive me and forget it. I am awaiting your reply", and letter 222 ends with "So far, I have told you about the hardships that we are faced with and please excuse me if I have made you angry or sad" (*Herstories*, 2013).

This apologetic self indicates a certain amount of guilt in having narrated the events.

Further, requesting the addressee to forget what was narrated can be juxtaposed with the quintessence of archiving. Why narrate and archive if it is meant to be forgotten? The self here seems to be torn between two needs; the need to recall and share, and the need to forget. Expressions of this nature show the audience the complications of expressing traumatic experiences and consequently, how the narrator's self has become further complex as a consequence of being exposed to war and violence.

Portrayal of Self in Videos

Commenting on how stories integrate lives, Dan McAdams (2008) states that "Stories often bring together disparate ideas, characters, happenings and other elements of life that were previously set apart" (p. 244), and the nature of video recording further facilitates this. When narrating, the women weave together separate incidents, characters, emotions etc. into a single

(yet multifaceted) entity. In commenting on the four themes provided, their narratives meander into details, and link, for instance, the decision to marry a soldier to experiencing personal tragedies of war and the present struggle for survival.

In most of the narratives in *Herstories* an evolution of the self is visible. This results in a single self playing multiple identities as demanded by the changing circumstances due to war. The narrator of the video from Vavuniya, for instance, shows how her role has changed from a dependent in the care of her parents, into someone who has to be a strength to her mother who is 'mentally weak' (*Herstories*, 2013). She links her future hope of providing a better education for her children and seeing her children live as equals in society to the bitter experiences of war which has brutally disrupted many lives. It is argued that,

> "...life strivings and ongoing projects influence how personal narratives about the past are organized in the first place, and goals for the future generate retrieval models to guide the search for memories later on. Life stories therefore, are always about both the reconstructed past and the imagined future" (McAdams, 2008, p. 244).

This phenomenon is clearly visible in the narrative. The narrator constructs her vision of future while reconstructing the past. Simultaneously the construction of the past and present selves of the narrator brings the evolution of the self to viewers' notice. War is thus seen as an external force that has a direct influence in bringing about internal changes in the narrators' self.

Portrayal of Self in Photo-essays

On *Herstories* web page photo-essays are described as follows; "Photo-journals and objects of memory: Based on some of the letters and conversations had in groups, a smaller number of women were selected based on their willingness to be photographed. These showcase people, places and objects of memory as they share their stories in their own homes" (*Herstories*, 2013). It thus attempts to construct an autotopographic life narrative.

According to Smith and Watson (2001) autotopography shows how a person's integral objects become, over time, so imprinted with the "psychic body" that they serve as autobiographical objects. The personal objects may be serviceable, such as clothing or furniture; but they may also be physical extensions of the mind—photographs, heirlooms, souvenirs, icons, and so forth: "These personal objects can be seen to form a syntagmatic array of physical signs in a spatial representation of identity" (p. 133). Organized into collections, such material memory landscapes might be as elaborate as a home altar or as informal as a display of memorabilia. Autotopographies are invested with multiple and shifting associative meanings; they are idiosyncratic and flexible, although their materiality prevents free-floating signification (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 189).

Photo-essays are a combination of portrait photographs of the narrators and people, places and objects of memory that are significant for them (see Figure 2.4). Objects of memory include photographs, homes, religious objects such as Buddha statues, statues of Gods, offerings, garlands etc., and objects of livelihood such as sewing machines and trishaws, household items and so on. At times the images shared correspond with the text.
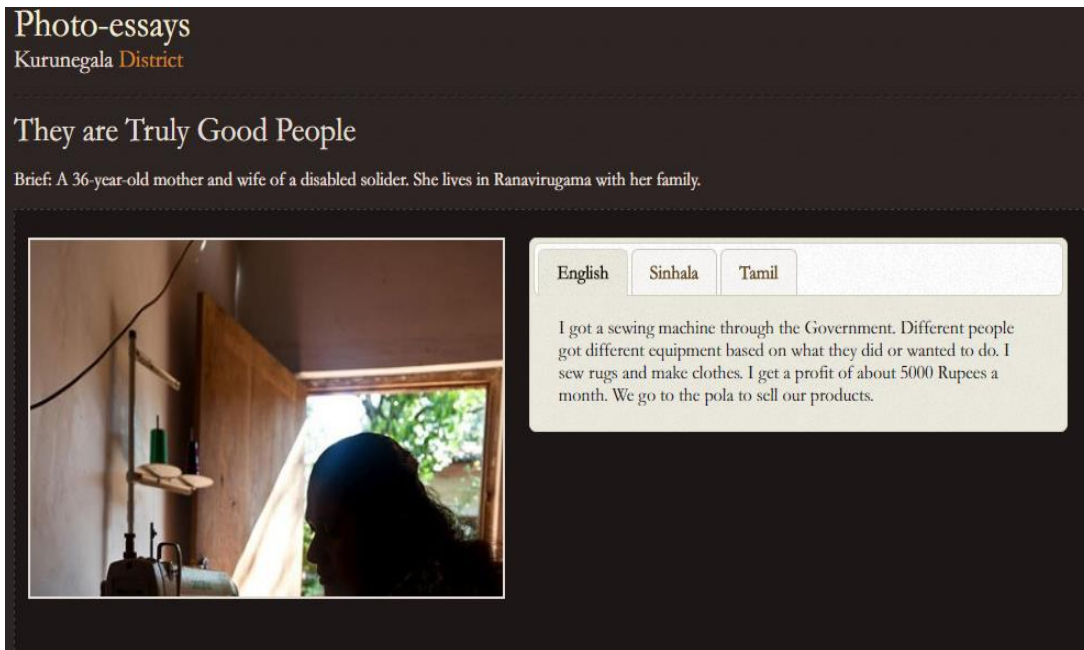
Figure 2: Photo-essay Kurunegala (*Herstories*, 2013)

In the above figure the photo of the sewing machine and its significance on the narrator's life are clearly depicted. The narrative captures how she can earn a living through sewing, and also the fact that many people in the Ranaviru Village got similar opportunities of starting a small-scale business. However, there are instances where the given image does not necessarily tally with the text (see Figure 3).
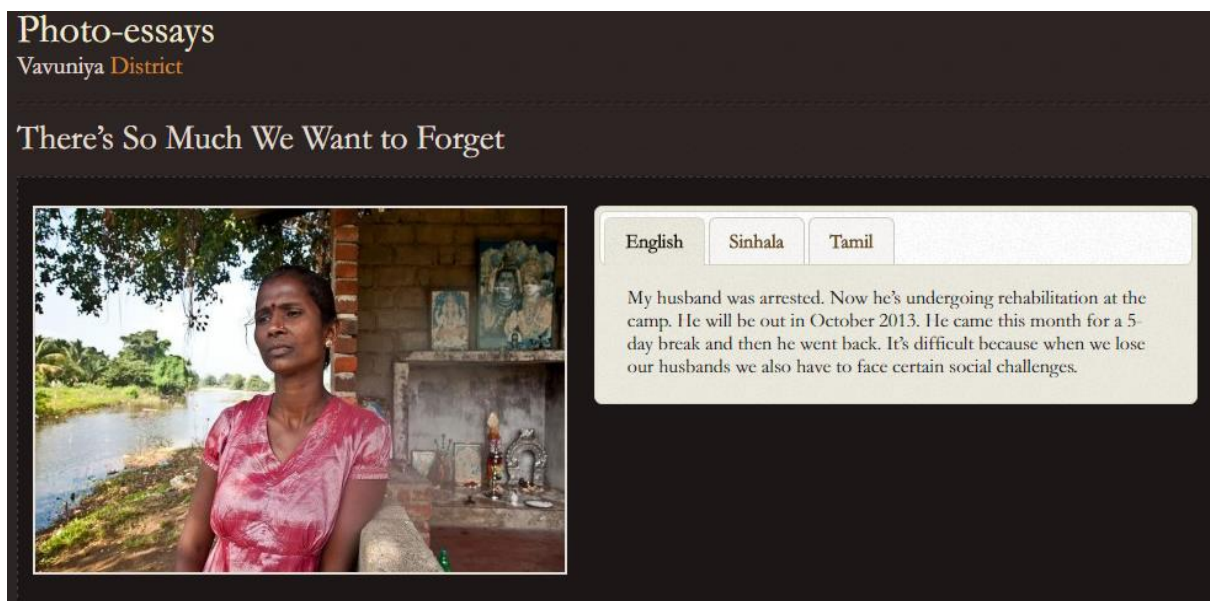
Figure 3: Photo-essay Vavuniya (*Herstories*, 2013)

The above image shows the narrator beside a shrine, but the narrative is about her husband and the challenges she faces in society. In such instances the narrative deviates from the autotopographical, and it becomes simply a pictorial narrative with content similar to what is found in trees of life or timelines, but with rather exotic pictures.

Thus, it can be argued that though photo-essays contain photographs and other objects of memory, they are not strictly autotopographical narratives.

With regard to the relationship between images and text it is believed that,

"...both the text or image can "describe" or "illustrate" the other, or the text can be part of an image—intentionally included or added later within the image, or as title or caption. Images can be placed within, before or after bodies of text …Finally, more "abstractly", photographic portraits may be taken as both "material" and "artistic or representational" objects, both "showing" and also seeming to "stand in" for the individual portrayed" (West, as cited in Roberts, 2011, p. 8).

As explained before, there are instances where images and texts illustrate each other, and where there is less direct relationship between the image and text in photo-essays. Where the image does not compliment the text, the image still serves a representational purpose, i.e. it represents the narrator or the setting where she lives which adds to the truth effect, authenticity and getting a 'feel' of the narrated life.

As pointed out by Roberts (2011) the "process of "looking", therefore, includes an interpretation of the seen elements of the photograph but also engages the other senses (touch, sounds, etc.) as it engenders memories of the scene portrayed. The influences of contemporary personal experience—the immediate context, our broader personal circumstance and outlook—feed into this process of "looking"; and even the "feel" of the photograph, its frame or folder, and the effect of reading any written caption or dedication, can affect our response to the image" (Roberts, 2011, p. 18).

This stresses another characteristic of the digital sphere. The photo-essays allow an immersive experience for the viewers by providing glimpses into the 'real life' contexts in which the narratives are produced, i.e. the viewers are transported to the narrative location. The power of image in its appeal to the viewers is manipulated here. Not only is there a narrative, but also there are photographs that bear witness to what is being narrated, and the fact that these photo essays are done in their personal space seems to add more credibility to the lives narrated. This notion of credibility veils the *constructedness* of the digital narrative.

The photo-essays effectively capture different aspects of the self that is narrated, and therefore the self is presented as multi-faceted. After viewing each frame, however, the viewers are able to access a coherent life narrative. It is observed that,

"as individuals, we are a "fragmented" collection of experiences and emotions, etc., but, "autobiographical narrative" seems to aim towards producing a "unified self". [and that] …although a written autobiography is "constrained" by what the authors select about their life to relate, "a work of art" is even more curtailed by "technical limitations" since (unlike video, etc.) it can merely give "a series of frozen moments" (West quoted in Roberts, 2011, p.19).

Still, it can be argued that even a series of 'frozen moments' have the capacity to construct a self and its life narrative. Although a life narrative usually attempts at creating a unified self, the multiplicity and fluidity of self makes that a near impossible task. And forms like photo-essays further facilitate the projection of self as multiple and fragmented, which is why the same narrative may project a woman in multiple roles and capacities.

When examining the way in which self is positioned within the narrative, it becomes clear that similar to *I Am*, narratives in *Herstories* too generally tend to encompass characteristics of both autonomous and relational constructions of self, and hence employ both independent and interdependent modes. Demuth et al., (2007) have singled out positioning of the self as a crucial aspect of the self-concept in life narratives,

"The way the narrator positions him- or herself within the social space of interaction has been described in the literature as a fundamental form of constructing and negotiating identities. Positioning within a social interaction may comprise personal, role or moral attributes of a narrator (Langenhove & Harré, 1999). It is our understanding that a positioning of the self, e.g. in terms of personal attributes or motives, prototypically

accounts for an independent self-concept, whereas the positioning of the other prototypically accounts for an interdependent self-concept. A missing positioning, i.e. the narrator him- or herself does not appear in the remembered account at all, may be linked to the emotional distance the narrator holds to the memory due to the traumatic nature of the experience" (p. 322).

Analysis of the narratives revealed that selves tend to be positioned in terms of 'personal attributes or motives' when talking about overcoming challenges and future aspirations, whereas 'positioning of the other' within the narratives generally occurred when describing traumatic experiences, suffering, early memories, family etc.

The following excerpt from the tree of life- Kilinochchi exemplifies the positioning of the other,

"On the 20th of August 2010 my daughter and I returned to Kilinochchi. UNHCR provided relief items. We got mats for sleeping, lanterns and some money. Our land looked like a jungle. We paid money and cleared our land. Later our wells were cleaned by an organization. We made temporary sheds out of tarpaulin and lived there. They gave relief food items. We got help for my daughter's education.

Prior to our displacement, NEAP provided financial assistance for a house under its scheme…The war began in Kilinochchi during the month of September in 2008. Artillery shelling continued and Kfir aerial attacks were made close to the welfare camps. We were safeguarding ourselves in bunkers. By the end of the month we loaded our household things in a hired vehicle and went to Vattakkachchi. From there, with the help of our relatives my child and I went to Udaiyarkattu. There we lost all our belongings and struggled for food. Shelling and aerial bombing continued and we were in the bunkers.

Inside the bunker we'd make rice and dhal to eat. While we were eating shells would land nearby. We could not go to the toilets. We boil dhal in water and eat. Onions, garlic, tamarind, salt will not be available. We would vomit" (*Herstories*, 2013).

The narrator has positioned her 'self' along with many others ranging from family to welfare organizations, and their presence is significant to the events that take place in her life. The self constructed here is interdependent; both sharing hardships and efforts for the betterment of her life are linked to others, and these people and organizations play a key role in her narrative. In the same narrative, however, are instances where independent self comes to the fore; "When my husband died, I learned many lessons. I learned to stand on my own two feet. Because I didn't have employment, I suffered. But I am grateful that my friend taught me a trade" (*Herstories*, 2013). Here the self is positioned in terms of personal attributes and self-growth in the face of challenges. The narrator has had to 'learn many lessons' following the demise of her spouse due to war and was compelled to become independent, and to learn a trade in order to become self-sufficient. The first part of the excerpt shows the emergence of an independent self that is responsible for her own well-being, while the second part ('…my friend taught me a trade.'), shows how even self-growth and self- sufficiency may be linked to others. As a result of war, she had to re-imagine and re-conceptualize her self to suit the context. The narrative thus reveals how changing circumstances during the war demanded women to be increasingly adaptive.

Some other narratives, for instance, the following excerpt from the tree of life-Kurunegala, show a keener sense of agency and independence,

"I run a small grocery. I started this business, after taking a bank loan… I appreciate my own courage. So, I am strength to myself. I am not scared of anybody. I have courage. I will not give up. If somebody hits me, I hit back. We have a loan to settle. But I am not worried. I live like a man" (*Herstories*, 2013).

The narrator takes complete responsibility for making financial decisions and running a business. Her attitude at times may seem somewhat aggressive, but the challenging experience of living in 'an artificially created village' (Ranaviru village) where drunken riots, using influence to cause trouble for others and spreading of rumours have become everyday occurrences has toughened her self. She says that though her husband is very supportive and understanding, he is usually away from home because of work. She has to manage everything on her own and play a dual role; hence the comment 'I live like a man'. This can be interpreted either as a dual role or the need to circumscribe to the heteronormative ideals and assume another persona for the purpose of survival within this patriarchal context. One could argue that her self has become androgynous, as her narrative reflects a self that is confident in fulfilling the duties traditionally expected from both men and women. Yet her narrative is not solely independent as it is war and other related circumstances that have influenced the moulding of her self in this particular manner, including an assumption of dual identities by being a woman who works like a man.

She is assisted by social and financial support systems; her family and the bank, for instance. Similar to the narrative of Subramaniyan, though the rest of her narrative positions her family members, neighbours and the Government, when talking about life in general, her 'self' is presented as highly independent when talking about overcoming challenges and future plans.

Narratives from all five districts display this characteristic to differing degrees, i.e. the self constructed in the narratives is a combination of independent and interdependent models. Most of the narrated selves display independence in the personal sphere where they talk about overcoming challenges and personal aspirations, but significantly, there are also selves that assume responsibility and agency on behalf of the community. The second and fourth narrators in timeline- Vavuniya are examples of this; the second narrator talks of the need for her village to be independent,

> "Our village Puthukkudiyiruppu was known popularly as a prosperous village. But now it looks like a cremation grounds. Our village should regain its prosperity and stand on its own without anyone's help" (*Herstories*, 2013),

and the fourth narrator talks of becoming an agentive self that would shoulder the responsibility of bringing about development for her community,

> "I would try to get the necessary assistance for the people through relevant authority for them to live healthily… I swear that I would make use of the educated people to assess the needs and try to improve the living conditions of all the people" (*Herstories*, 2013).

While being part of the community, the self is capable of accepting responsibilities for communal benefit. War has made the narrators suffer losses and left lasting scars in their life, but their selves offer a contrast to others in extending plans for recovery from the ravages of war to an entire community.

The second narrator's story, for example, shows that she had been the "pet child" (*Herstories*, 2013) of the family, and had had a sheltered and relatively carefree life at the beginning. But during the war she had been exposed to violence, loss, and poverty. The transition of her self from a "pet child" into a resilient self, willing to speak up for the whole community can be traced in her narrative. In this instance, war experiences have influenced her to re-construct her self as a resilient representative of her community.

The fourth narrator, however, claims to have been an independent individual since childhood; "When I was 12 years old, I left my parents and was living separately" (*Herstories*, 2013). But the sections that deal with her war experiences show how her self-confidence was affected. She claims to have been "forced into poverty" following the killing of her husband by an armed group, and states "I am a widow, and I am helpless. I fully depend on the mercy of God" (ibid). The same person, however, plans the re-building the community via mutual

help; "I will help the children for their education, organize tuition classes and educate them and make them scholars in the future. These scholars in turn would improve the village" (ibid).

Her narrative contains such contrasting aspects of self due to the exposure to war, and what is witnessed here is a tension between a strong, independent self and effects of war. The narrative thus brings forth an interesting dimension where diverse facets of self are in conflict with war, and in the post-war context the narrator seems to be reverting to her former self.

CONCLUSION

Herstories contain stories that reflect diverse selves of Sri Lankan women survivors of war, and the above analysis shows that no matter whether war has affected these women in similar or different ways, the ways in which their selves have been affected are different. Some women record a sense of defeat and hopelessness, and some show resilience, strength and hope for better personal lives in the selves that emerged after the war, while others extend their aspirations for the future to the communal level. It can also be concluded that the fluidity in the selves of these women allows them to change and play multiple roles and assume different identities depending on the changing circumstances. This, in turn, projects some women survivors of war in Sri Lanka as resilient individuals capable of adaptation in order to survive adversities brought on by war and violence. However, it does not gloss over those women who are rather despondent and broken-spirited, which indicates a balanced presentation in the *Herstories* archive. Consequently, the viewers can gain a realistic picture of the impact of war on Sri Lankan women.

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