

## THE BLENDING OF FACT AND FICTION: HISTORICIZING T.D. RAMAKRISHNAN'S *SUGANDHI ALIAS ANDAL DEVANAYAKI*

*Parvathy Krishna*, Department of English and Languages, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham  
Kochi Campus, India

*Lavanya S.*, Department of English and Languages, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham Kochi  
Campus, India

*Devi K.*, Assistant Professor, Department of English and Languages, Amrita Vishwa  
Vidyapeetham Kochi Campus, India

### **Abstract:**

*Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki (2014) is a postmodern novel written in Malayalam language by T. D. Ramakrishnan set in Sri Lanka. The novel was translated to English by Priya K. Nair in 2018. The novel, inspired by the poem Andal by K. Satchidanandan traces the lives of three women who are crushed by all-encompassing structures of power. The novel perfectly blends historical facts with myths and fiction to produce a meta-narrative which focuses on the lives of three women; Rajini, Sugandhi and Devanayaki. The novel traces the attempts made by Peter Jeevanandam to trace his lover Sugandhi, a jailed LTTE activist. Peter Jeevanandam is a member of a Hollywood production crew who are attempting to make a film on the life of Rajini Thiraganama, a human rights activist shot dead by the LTTE. The novel offers a feminist perspective on the workings of power structures tracing how the power structures at all times have tried to control and subjugate the mind and body of women. Rajini Thiraganama (1954-1989) was a supporter of LTTE who became disillusioned with the ideology of violence perpetuated by LTTE. She was shot dead in the year 1989, allegedly by LTTE for severing her links with the organisation. The novelist compares her fate with that of Devanayaki, a mythological heroine whose freedom was snubbed by the patriarchal forces. The story of Sugandhi is used by the novelist to throw light on the human rights abuses faced by the LTTE activists in the prisons of Sri Lanka. The paper mainly focuses on the objectification in feminist theory.*

**Keywords:** Postmodern novel, power, meta-narrative, instrumentality.

*Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki* is a Malayalam novel written by T. D. Ramakrishnan translated to English by Priya K. Nair. In her translator's note Priya K. Nair says that T.D. Ramakrishnan's novel has a "complex structure that offers plural perspective, multiple modes of narrations and a relentless revision of authorized history. Memories mingle with fable, blurring the boundaries of fact and fiction" (245). In this novel, the novelist blends the recorded history of Eellam movement and the myth of Devanayaki, who audaciously fought against the atrocities of king Mahinad, using her brain as well as her body. The novelist says that in every woman there resides a Devanayaki who rebels against the cruelties of patriarchal power structure, and that Devanayaki reincarnates whenever woman is exploited. The translator also points out an important fact: "Though the novel is about Eellam movement in Sri Lanka, the author understands that the freedom of individuals is a highly contested issue everywhere in the contemporary world" (246.). The novelist reiterates that women and children are most affected during violence and bloodshed. The story of Devanayaki is a powerful myth, the story of a legendary heroine who dares to fight against the exploitation of women. In a conversation with the novelist the translator poses to him a question regarding the factors

which prompted him to set the novel in Sri Lanka. From the reply of the author it can be seen that the author has been a keen observer of the political and social milieu of Sri Lanka.

I was greatly inspired by the freedom movement in Srilanka. I assumed it as a revolutionary movement, much like the movement led by Che Guevara. But after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi; I grew suspicious about the modus operandi of this movement. A true revolutionary wouldn't use suicide bomber. They will not hire killer's. Revolutions aim at removing the class of exploiters, but he cannot condone the murder of innocents. Any revolution need to be democratic, otherwise its disintegration is inevitable etc.... (249.)

The author read Tamil literature, particularly Sri Lankan Tamil literature. He knew that the political scenario in Sri Lanka was quite complex. There was state sponsored violence on one side, and the extremely violent Tamil movement on the other. He thought of finding out whether there was any one who spoke of peace. He came to realize the need for a group of people who spoke against violence of any kind. There were writers, journalists, human right activists and intellectuals in Sri Lanka but unfortunately most of them were silenced. Some of them were deported, others killed. The violent movement preyed upon them. The genocide filled him with angst. Geographically, Sri Lanka is quite close to Kerala. The author was born and brought up at Eyyal in Thrissur. There were many people from Kerala who went to Sri Lanka for work. Though many people from India are connected to Sri Lanka, not much creative writing from India has focussed the island nation. Most of the narratives produced were partisan in nature and much of them focussed primarily on the history of bloodshed and terrorist activities of LTTE. Hence the author wanted to write about the people of the island who spoke for peace. Priya.K. Nair observes that the novel is an appropriate fit in the contemporary times and it produces a powerful statement against the totalitarian power structures and it should be spread to any culture that has experienced the dread of war.

The novel gives an accurate account about the history of violence in Sri Lanka. The author has dedicated this novel to Dr.Rajini Thirangama, an activist who dared to speak out against both Sinhala chauvinism and LTTE'S narrow nationalism. For T. D. Ramakrishnan she is a "crusader for justice." In the words of T.D. Ramakrishnan, it was Rajani's assassination in the year 1989 that inspired him to write the novel.

"It was Rajani's assassination that forced me to look into the complexities of the ethnic divide in Sri Lanka. Inspired by her elder sister Nirmala, an LTTE member, Rajani also got involved with the ultra nationalist group mainly by administering the care to those wounded in action. In 1983, Rajani travelled to England under commonwealth scholarship for post graduate studies in anatomy at Liverpool Medical School. Even that shifting from the troubled nation to a far better living atmosphere had not deterred her from raising her voice against injustice".

Even though she was a supporter to the LTTE during the initial stage, soon she realised the pointlessness of armed struggle and eventually turned to an expositor of LTTE's barbarity.

What really moved me was her return to war torn Jaffna to rebuild the university and work there for her own people. I am not sure that the LTTE who killed her. But it was her sincerity to the cause and boldness to say the truth that resulted in her murder and that had inspired my novel," says Mr.Ramakrishnan.

Well, he didn't fail to bring out the accuracy of real historical details that is the history of violence that Srilanka has passed through in his novel *Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki*. "Rajani Thirangama, Thambimuthu, *Sugandhi Alias Devanayaki*. The initial days of love, karthika flowers, betrayal, trial-exodus. Jesus! What an event filled eight months."(54.)

The novel begins at 'Divine Pearl' or DP, a secret military camp which is ninety-five kilometres away from Colombo. The most dangerous of the Tamil Tigers are housed in the camp. They are terrorists who pose a

threat to the society, persons who are immune to all sorts of temptations, personal desires and longings for personal freedom and liberty. They are hardened criminals immune to the feelings of pleasures and pain, trained to withstand the gravest forms of torture. DP was a prison built by British colonisers to house hardened criminals. When the novel begins, a crew of a movie production unit visits the 'Divine Pearl'. The crew comprises the narrator Peter Jeevanandam, the scriptwriter; Christie Alberto the director; Christie's girl friend and cinematographer Mary Ann and Tony Bernard, one of the producers. The crew is attempting to make a movie on the death of Dr. Rajini Thirangama, an activist allegedly shot dead by the LTTE in 1989. Rajini Thirangama (1954-1989) was a supporter of LTTE who became disillusioned with the ideology of violence perpetuated by LTTE. She was shot dead in the year 1989, allegedly by LTTE for severing her links with the organisation. The crew are at DP on a pre-production schedule. The movie's title is 'Women Behind the Fall of Tigers' and is produced with the help of the Sri Lankan Government. In the first chapter Colonel D'Silva, the camp-in-charge explains the procedure of 'torture' followed in the camp. He explains that in DP, torture is practised without using weapons and inflicting wounds. The camp-in-charge explains to the crew the physical and mental tortures that are inflicted on the prisoners.

Prisoners are made to lie naked in a big steel box resembling a coffin. Then spiders are let loose in to it. When the spiders crawl on their naked bodies, prisoners writhe in pain. In another box, there are millipedes. There are also box filled with ants, scorpion, crab, and snake... the prisoners have to lie in one of these boxes while they are interrogated... And all these happen in the prayer rooms upstairs. After the physical torture is over, we start torturing them mentally. We use prayer hall in the first floor for this. It is a mini theatre that shows the movie clips of Sri Lankan army defeating the tigers in battle and the victory celebration that followed. They also show the Tamils suffering under the Tigers. These clips are played in the hope that they will make the prisoners feel guilty. (3)

The army also endeavours to display the footage of the prisoners' relatives cursing the tigers, revelations of the people like Daya master who yielded, and the advice of people like karuna who shifted loyalties.

The prayer room on ground floor is a modern torture chamber. It houses torture machines of international standards. There are machines to pull out nails and crush bones, cots that administer electric shocks, machines that stimulate drowning, electric sticks that can be used to penetrate anuses and vaginas, gas chambers that can make you laugh or cry continually and weaken your body, whips studded with nails, chair of thorns, and microscopic instruments used to administer shock to private parts. These machines are not used in ordinary circumstances. (3)

As the novel progresses, the depiction of violence becomes much more graphic than the aforesaid description. The crew later meets Thambimuthu, a man affiliated to LTTE and the narrator and his friends are misled by him in many ways. The crew has no political motivation in making a movie on the death of Dr. Rajini Thirangama. For them the movie is just an effort to find out whether LTTE has any involvement in the death of Rajani. Later the narrator and his friends conduct a meeting to discuss the life of Dr. Rajini Thirangama. However, they fail to gather any information on the perpetrators of the crime. Every one appeared afraid to speak on the death of Rajani. "The audience too were victims of fear. This is today's Sri Lanka. Clouds of fear surround us. Nothing is democratic. Everyone is under surveillance"(64), and it was said that Rajani herself was sure about her end "one day, a gun will silence me and it will not be held by an outsider, but by a son born in the womb of this very society, from a woman with whom I share a history". (73)

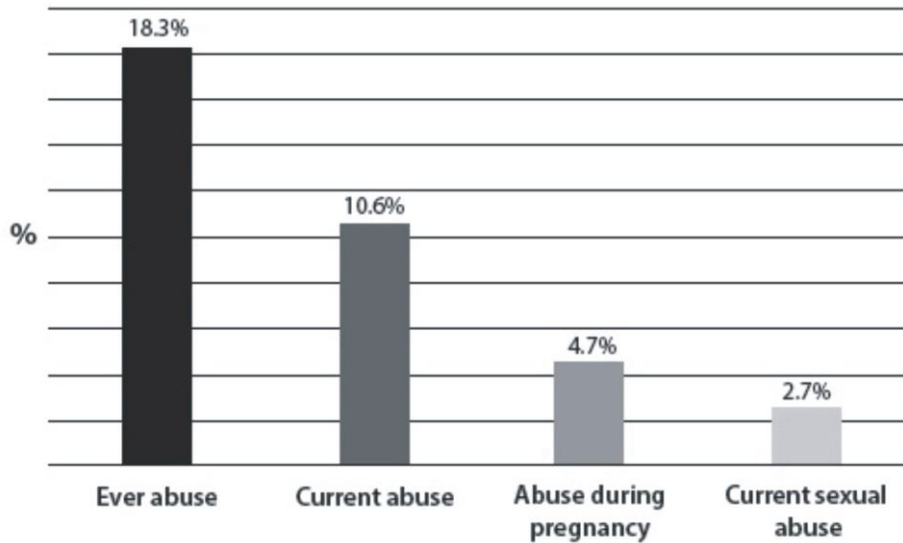
Since the first meeting fails to produce any result, the narrator arranges another meeting to know more about Rajani. At that meeting a man named Anbu Chezhiyan starts to reveal truths about the death of

Rajani. However, before he can complete, he is shot dead by a stranger. This incident prompts the narrator to think about the professional assassins of Iyakkam and he mentions the name Sivarasan, the master brain behind the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi.

The history of Sri Lanka is a history of civil war which lasted for twenty five years. In 1983 first Eellam civil war took place, Second Eellam war happened in 1990 and Third Eellam war occurred in 1995. Along with political assassinations and terrorist attacks there were sexual violences against women too. And here the feminist perspectives of *Objectification* prick up ears. In accordance to feminist theory, *objectification* can be considered as the fundamental concept, where women are usually treated as object that is, objectification occurring in sexual realm. Another term that can use by this theory is *Instrumentality*. Poomani Selvanayagam's abduction in the novel is an instance to validate this. There is a code of conduct for the women there. She should wear either a light green or yellow saree below the navel with yellow flowers tied around her waist. She is neither permitted to use perfume nor any sort of cream, and for him sweat was the best perfume that aroused him. Pregnancy is the initial course of punishment for women who are afflicted with ailments like human rights or feminism as the army believe that the worst punishment for women is to be robed for their chastity. An archaeologist is another victim of sexual violence. In her email to the narrator she points out that she also is a victim like Poomani and other women. In the same mail she refers to a student leader who was killed by the Lion. After getting to know about the stories of these women Christie says that the mythical character Devanayaki in this novel rather shows aliveness of each woman fighter in Iyakkam thus disclosing the compound situation of female empowerment and also the misogynistic stances existing simultaneously. The heroine of the novel is a victim of this violence. When she appears for the second time in the novel, she reveals the atrocities she passed through. Sugandhi is reintroduced in the novel through a video conference arranged at Gayathri Perera's house who was a member of SSF movement. Sugandhi is first introduced as Meenakshi Rajarathinam, who is the founder of SSF movement. Meenakshi Rajarathinam's first post appeared on facebook after freedom struggle ended in August 2009. It was titled 'black widow', and it was a cartoon which depicted a cruelly raped, half-naked woman called Sri Lanka and a victorious president in military uniform who stood with one leg on her chest. And she captioned it as 'don't you feel ashamed?'(201) and this went viral. When the situation went unfavourable Sugandhi posted a video recording revealing her true identity and admits her authorship of everything written in the name of Meenakshi Rajarathinam. She reveals that all her writings were typed by two girls named Arulmozhi Nangai and Yamuna Sridhar. She reveals that her arms have been amputated. The girls helped her to type her stories as they were desirous of preserving them. Her face was disfigured by acids and her arms hands end her elbows. She was captured along with Isai Priya by Sri Lankan military after the last battle. As she was beautiful they wanted to present her to VIPS. She was repeatedly raped for three days in a secret room near temple room and it was on her body that the aristocrats in the government celebrated their victory over freedom fighters. Later she was shifted to Divine Pearl. As she was fairer than other Tamil women fighters, the military leaders had more hunger for her body. She was inhumanly tortured for trying to escape from the high security area. As a part of trial they decided to burn her face with acids and cut both of her hands. They placed before her an offer in order to spare her. She would be set free if she was ready to speak to the media in support of government humanitarian operation; she must speak against Velupillai Prabhakaran and Iyakkam. She must praise the President in detail, and comment positively on his administrative skills. She should say that Mahinda's ideas are the only way for Srilanka's prosperity. But she was reluctant to say it and her face was burned with acid. But in the second chance she acted wisely. She agreed that she will say whatever they wanted her to say. They presented her to the media as a girl who was rescued from tigers. However she broke her promise and answered the questions the way she wanted to. Using this opportunity a foreign journalist along with HOPE, a human rights organisation, rescued and moved her to Canada. But nothing

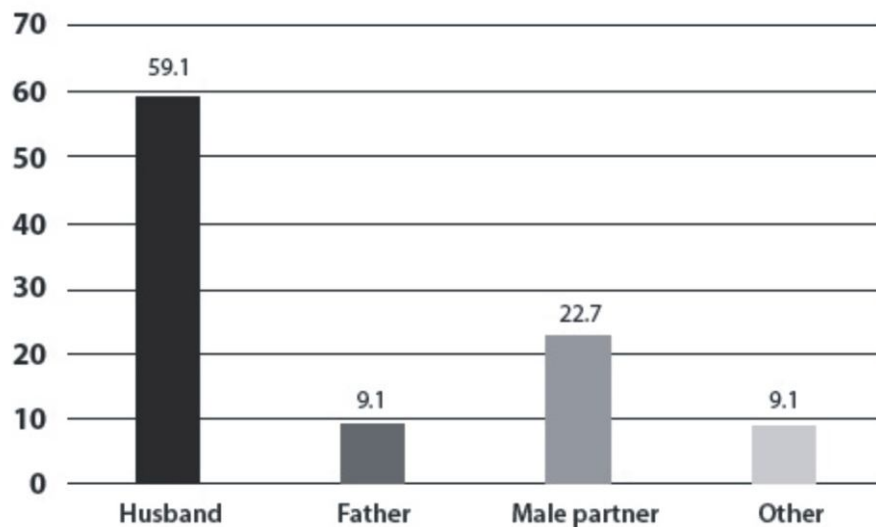
was over for Sugandhi. Three months after reaching Canada she was attacked. A guy who was six foot tall and well-built chopped her hands off one by one at the exact same spot marked out in divine pearl. He took the detached limbs in a bag so that no hospital could re-join her limbs. The violence in the book doesn't end with Sugandhi. At the end of the novel Arul and Yamuna are arrested and are taken to DP for interrogation, they were tortured at DP. The chief Wickrama Ranatunga orders: "first rape, then question". (238.) The sexual violence in the novel thus presents a true picture of the civil war torn Sri Lanka.

**Figure 1: Prevalence (%) of physical and sexual abuse.**



Source: Clinic- based on GBV among pregnant women [33].

**Figure 3: Prevalence (%) of current sexual abuse by type of perpetrator.**



Source: Clinical-based study on GBV among pregnant women.

**Works Cited**

1. Bardhan, A.B. "Caste-Class Situation in India." *Caste and Class in India*. Ed. K.L. Sharma. Jaipur: Rawat, 1998. 405-18. Print.
2. Kumar, Krishna and Joachim Oesterheld. Introduction. *Education and Social Change in South Asia*. Ed. Krishna Kumar and Joachim Oesterheld. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007. 1-23. Print.
3. Kunhambu, Potheri. *Saraswativijayam*. Trans. Dilip Menon. New Delhi: The Book Review Literary Trust, 2002. Print.
4. "Novel on Rajani Thiranagama gets ready for English readers". Web. July 4, 2018. <https://www.thehindu.com/books/novel-on-rajani-thiranagama-gets-ready-for-english-readers/article24332479.ece>
5. Oommen, George. "Education, Self-Perception, and Identity: The Experience of the Pulaya Christians of Kerala." *Education and Social Change in South Asia*. Ed. Krishna Kumar and Joachim Oesterheld. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007. 101-26. Print.
6. Ramakrishnan, T.D. *Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki*. Translated by Priya .K.Nair.
7. Wankhede, C.G. *Social Mobility and Scheduled Castes*. Jaipur: Rawat, 1999. Print.