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Women and the Precarity of War: Reading Women Militants and Activists in Sharmila Seyyid's *Ummath*

By Aparna Nandha¹

Abstract

Ummath, written by Sharmila Seyyid, navigates the sensitive topic of the precarious lives of three separate women amid the chaos of war-torn Sri Lanka. The stories of main characters Yoga and Theivanai demonstrate women's challenges in and out of militancy. Their struggles led them to Thawakkul, a Muslim social worker devoted to the cause of rehabilitating disabled and widowed women who once served the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam). *Ummath* provides a powerful social critique of the conditions that aggravated the separatist conflict, the stigmatization of women who become part of the LTTE, the inexorable violence perpetrated by all sides in a chaotic and prolonged internal conflict, and the failure of rehabilitating the militants into the community. The present article investigates the precarity faced by women in the anarchic context of civil violence and internal conflicts. The article discusses the disruption of education, militancy experience, the social stigma of being an ex-militant, and the challenges faced by reformers working to build peace in post-war society. The study employs Judith Butler's theory on precarity to investigate the social life of women militants and activists in the separatist war. Butler's concept of precarity addresses how people's vulnerability is politically induced, and hence different groups of people are exposed in different degrees to violence and death. In Butler's work, she argues that those who are not considered living in the first place, or whose lives are precarious and are not ascribed great value, are not mourned when they pass away. This article analyzes the problems that women militants and social workers face as well as the social ostracization they encounter daily through the focal points of Yoga, Theivanai, and Thawakkul's lives as narrated in *Ummath*. The exploration of the microcosmic experiences of the three women's lives highlights the need to study women's issues in the unstable context of a social uprising and the vulnerabilities they are exposed to in the context of human rights.

Keywords: War, Women militants, Sharmila Sayyed, *Ummath*, Violence, Judith Butler, Precarity

Introduction

The world we live in has seen many political conflicts and wars, and one common factor in the representation of such organized violence is the erasure of women's experiences during these events. The narration and documentation of any conflict, its causes and effects, have often been a subjective account primarily written from the winner's point of view. In many conflicts, the participation of women is unacknowledged, and so are the problems or issues they face in political struggles. War and conflict have been a part of the recent history of Sri Lanka. The origins of this ethno-nationalist separatist conflict have been debated by both Sri Lankan and other critics (Bandarage, 2008; Spencer, 1990). But the war that lasted for around two-and-a-half decades has wreaked havoc on the country economically, politically, and socially. One of the significant groups of the population affected by this prolonged conflict are the women of Sri Lanka. This

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article expounds on Sharmila Sayyed's *Ummath*, which fictionally explicates the precarious lives faced by Tamil women militants and activists who live in the northern part of Sri Lanka, which saw the most violence and conflict during the final days of the war.

Sharmila Seyyid is a Sri Lankan Muslim woman journalist, social worker, and writer. She is from the town of Eravur in the country's Eastern province. She has done extensive social work in the last three years of the ethnic conflict and has even started a community-based organization in her hometown. She has published two poetry collections titled *Siragu Mulaitha Pen* (2012) and *Ovva* (2015) along with two novels, *Ummath* (2014) and *Panikkar Pethi* (2019). Seyyid's work has been the subject of much controversy. Her views on Islam and her comment in support of legalizing sex work (*Exclusive*, n.d.) triggered a reaction from some fundamental Muslims in Sri Lanka. The subsequent threats she received led her to move out of the country. She lived in India while writing *Ummath* and pursuing an education. Tamil Progressive Writers and Artists Association announced *Ummath* as the novel of the year in 2014. Seyyid briefly returned to her home country, but she continued to feel unsafe there and self-exiled after the Easter Sunday bombing in Sri Lanka in 2019. She was then a resident at Art Omi, New York, and continues to live outside her home country while being an avid campaigner for women's rights through her literary works and human rights activism.

Needless to say, Seyyid's works articulate the problems faced by women on multiple fronts in the context of a structural collapse of prolonged ethnic hostilities and war. *Ummath* criticizes the ideologies that fuelled the longstanding war between predominant ethnic communities. *Ummath* attempts to demonstrate the gap between lived experiences of war and the ideology it stands for through the experiences of women caught amidst turmoil. Set immediately after the end of war, the novel retrospectively analyzes the ideologies that fuelled an ethno-religious divide in the country. In this story, women characters Yoga, Theivanai and Thawakkul sacrifice their lives for their ideologies. In this fiction, Theivanai joins the state independence movement Tamil Eelam after the Mahiladitheevu massacre. As narrated in *Ummath*, the propaganda attempts to convince the people that a separate nation will solve their current political problems. By this, they view anyone not from their community as enemies from whom the Tamil people are to be saved. These ideas work to inculcate a fear of the lesser known "other" and plant the seeds of separatist nationalist thinking in the masses. Violence is made to look like a reasonable method for securing justice, and the consequences of violence, such as death or injury, are not only justified but instead regarded as a matter of pride.

Caught amidst this political turmoil in this story are three women—Theivanai, Thawakkul and Yoga. They are exposed to different personal and political problems and are vulnerable to the politically induced violence experienced by the country. *Ummath* narrates the social stigmatization that women who participated in the armed conflict are subjected to. In *Imam and the Indian*, author Amitav Ghosh writes, "The truth is that the commonest response to violence is one of repugnance and that a significant number of people everywhere try to oppose it in whatever ways they can" (Ghosh, 2008, p. 60). The act of writing *Ummath* to focus on various aspects of the Sri Lankan ethno-nationalist conflict not only highlights the micro-historical and political realities of the women in the country but also speaks about acts of love, acceptance, and concern as a means of resisting power. Seyyid's novel is a political response and a testimony to the importance of art that engages with history, politics, and women's rights in the face of power. This article engages with the issue of the precarity faced by women actively participating in conflict and the socio-political marginalization experienced by them.

Precarity as Framework

In Judith Butler's seminal article theorizing the concept of precarity, she distinguishes the representation of precarity in fiction from performativity which she had discussed in her previous work. She says, "Performativity was, to be sure, an account of agency, and precarity seems to focus on conditions that threaten life in ways that appear to be outside of one's control" (Butler, 2009, p. i). While she asserts that all life is precarious, Butler distinguishes the precariousness induced by the socio-political conditions that drive certain groups of people to the margins, making them more vulnerable to violence and death. In Butler's own words, precarity "designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler, 2009, p. ii). She argues that the social and political institutions meant to protect people become the structures that marginalize them, thereby exposing them to violence and crime.

After Butler brought forth this theory, many feminist critics have extensively written on the precariousness of women in particular. In an article that critiques the shortage of women philosophers in academia, author Robin Zheng argues that feminist philosophers "have raised awareness of many gender injustices: hostile climate and sexual harassment; stereotyping, bias, and underrepresentation; male-dominated conferences; the androcentric canon, and so on" (Zheng, 2018, p. 235). Hence, it is no surprise that while philosophers face gender discrimination, those working to reform the conditions prevalent at the grassroots level face ostracization and social stigmatization while bringing up structural issues related to the vulnerabilities experienced by marginalized women.

In the context of the prolonged internal conflict in Sri Lanka, women have suffered immense losses and have been exposed to brutal physical and sexual violence. In a study that investigates the perpetration of sexual violence against women in Sri Lanka amidst the war, researchers found evidence that 13% of women have suffered varying degrees of sexual harassment in times of conflict. The study states, "This finding lends empirical support to previous reports on the systematic use of sexual violence by government forces against members of the Tamil community thought to be collaborators of the LTTE rebels" (Traunmüller et al., 2019, p. 4). The study also finds that the most vulnerable group during the Sri Lankan conflict has been the women who have assisted the rebels or participated directly or indirectly in the prolonged conflict.

Even when women are not exposed to sexual violence, they are prone to other modes of violence and injury. While the temporary dismantling of the gender status quo prompted by the longstanding internal conflict has affected the gender roles and performance within the social fabric of the country, the other prevalent discourses, such as religion and caste, became markers of reiterating the traditional gender norms with the official end of war in 2009. An article on women's agency pre- and post-war interestingly argues that "Violent deaths and armed conflict open up ambiguous spaces of agency and empowerment for women within their families and communities who have not been directly engaged in violence" (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2016, p. 164). While access to public spaces and new roles may be read as empowerment, it is also important to note that women in such contexts are forced into new roles and are often deprived of their right to choose their trajectory of growth and development. Concurrent with this thought, an article that investigates the correlation of gender identities with national identity claims that "While war may generate openings for women and men to renegotiate their work, mobility, and relation to one another, it also heightens uncertainty and insecurity for those displaced by the war" (Hyndman & De Alwis, 2007, p. 553). Adding to this discourse on insecurity, Casas-Cortés argues, "the politicization of insecurity has become a source for reconfiguring individual and collective

identities, leading to a fluid space of political creation made out of unexpected alliances” (2021, p. 511). Thus, even in conditions that favor women in the context of war, the politically created precarity incited by displacement, along with vulnerability to crime and violence, pose a threat to women. This article explores the range of structurally induced precarity by probing into the conditions that prompted women to participate in armed rebellion as well as the precarity and social stigma that characterized their lives thereafter.

Educational Precarity and the Context of War in *Ummath*

Ummath tells the story of three different women belonging to various socio-economic backgrounds. Among the three women, two are ex-cadres of LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam). The story begins after the war ends and is narrated retrospectively; Yogalakshmi, who is referred to as “Yoga” through most of the novel, has lost one of her legs in the war and returns crippled after spending time in an ex-LTTE soldiers’ rehabilitation camp. The narrator describes Yoga: “She went to school barefooted, in a dirty uniform with her tangled hair left uncombed and unbraided” (Seyyid, 2018, p. 11). The picture is that of a disabled girl uncared for and hence her position of vulnerability is established. Yoga originates from Mavadivembu, a village in the Mattakalappu district characterized by fertile lands, agricultural people, and dense trees. The romantic description of this place is juxtaposed with the picture of Sri Lanka violently afflicted by the separatist struggle. Yogalakshmi, who is born into this village, is given this name because of the local popular belief that the third child being a girl would be the harbinger of prosperity to the family. But this belief proves false for Yoga’s family.

The work discusses the lack of access to educational opportunities amid the raging conflict in the country. No one in Yoga’s family is educated, nor do they perceive education as a significant mode of progress. Yoga’s parents work in the fields from dawn and return only at night while her elder sister Vathsala cooks the only meal they would eat for their entire family. Yoga’s desire to learn inspires her to go to school and she does so out of her own will. Every time she faints in school due to starvation, her mother comes to bring her home and scolds her for going to school. However, her father’s support encourages her to continue her educational pursuits. Due to his support, Yoga grows fond of her father and perceives him as a progressive and open-minded man. Her father buys her a twenty-page notebook and a pencil after the incident with her mother. She continues to study without much support till the seventh standard. But because of the civil unrest, their family is displaced, and Yoga is forced to discontinue school. This affects her mentally and, as a result, Yoga becomes depressed. The narrator writes, “For Yoga, displacement meant not just moving from one place to another but dismemberment of every limb of the family tree, a negation of trust and belief that throws one into the dark abyss of loneliness” (Seyyid, 2018, p. 16). Yoga’s precarity is increased by her displacement, thereby further marginalizing her. Yoga’s failure to complete her secondary education is a result of her social conditions which mirrors the real-life lack of investment in education attributed to the prolonged Sri Lankan conflict (Ganegodage & Rambaldi, 2011).

Yoga’s relocation to her aunt’s house, with her sister Vathsala, in Mattakalappu and her change in status from being a student to being a domestic helper significantly affects her mental well-being. Pathma, Yoga’s mother, feels insecure about the girls’ safety and sends them away from home despite their reluctance to leave the house. A strong sense of injustice and rage possesses Yoga; she is haunted by thoughts of injustice perpetrated on her by society, and a deep sense of indignation governs her. Yoga maintains the home of a family with two girls who are slightly older than her and study at Cecilia Convent School which leads Yoga to grieve about the

termination of her own education. In the meantime, the “war was spreading like wildfire” (Seyyid, 2018, p. 28), and the village of Mattakkalappu comes under the control of the Tamil Tigers. The narrator writes, “The struggle for power turned into war and damaged not only lives and property, it also depleted the nation’s ethical and cultural values” (Seyyid, 2018, p. 28).

The precarity that Yoga experiences is contextualized by narration of the then ongoing social events that led to an aggravation of conflict. Yoga watches the news and comes to know that Muslims of northern Sri Lanka were forcefully displaced by the Tamil’s nationalist Eelam Movement despite living in harmony for many years in the regions of Mannar and Musali. The turning of hundreds of Muslims who lived in Northern Sri Lanka into refugees is a significant event in the history of civil war in the country. Haniffa argues that Muslims in Sri Lanka constitute 40% of the population affected in the conflict zone. He also discusses the “bipolar understanding” (Haniffa, 2007, p. 52) of war which focuses only on the Tamil and Sinhalese ethnic groups as being contenders for the land. Circling back to the novel, the narrator says that this event demonstrates the power the Movement wields in the region. Yoga is disturbed by these stories. She blames the war for her plight and for all the injustices done to innocent civilians. As a passive witness to the conflict that deprived her of agency, Yoga is instilled with a deep sense of structurally and politically induced precarity.

Women and the Condition of War

Ummath provides the context in which young people like Yoga join the Eelam Movement. Yoga’s militancy does not begin with an urge to revolutionize the world she lives in; instead, the prospect of instant death in armed conflict lures her into the Movement. Yoga abhors her status as an exploited domestic helper even as others around her try to encourage her to view the position as a means of safety from the political unrest. Then, she meets Shenbakam, her close friend, in the temple. Shenbakam informs her that the Movement is forcefully recruiting children of their age. The kids say that if recruited, they would die in the first battle itself. The idea of death lures Yoga since life has become unbearable for her. Later, when she returns home, Yoga is accused by her mistress of stealing a gold earring and is punished by branding with a hot knife. That day, Yoga decides not to tolerate the abuse any longer and escapes from that house. According to Yoga, “death in battle would be inevitable and [would] solve all her problems” (Seyyid, 2018, p. 36). Hence, her deplorable life prompts her to join the Tamil Tigers. After she joins the Eelam Movement, her desire to die metamorphoses into a desire to “fight and die on the battlefield” (Seyyid, 2018, p. 60). She proves her mettle in a battle and receives appreciation for her performance. Her physically weak father, who passes away shortly after, comes to visit Yoga at the camp. The narrator says, “As it was a place that belonged to the rebel movement, he was unable to give full vent to his feelings; he sobbed quietly as if his hardened heart was about to burst with its suppressed feelings” (Seyyid, 2018, p. 6). Much to her family’s disapproval, Yoga unapologetically and ardently pursues her work in the Movement. Ironically, for Yoga the civilian life was more precarious than her militant life. She even finds satisfaction while working for the Movement. To her, the Movement ironically becomes a safe space where she feels appreciated and valued within an egalitarian framework which she could not find in society.

Reflecting intelligently on the Movement’s ideology and trajectory happens much later for Yoga, which suggests that militants like her are not educated to think about their actions. While Yoga worked, the narrator states that the Movement’s growth was admirable. The narrator describes, “In the meanwhile, the Eelam Movement had gone from strength to strength in terms of warfare and posed a real threat to the government and the international community. Monetary aid

poured in from many parts of the world wherever there were Tamil-speaking people” (Seyyid, 2018, p. 61). In 1999, Yoga becomes the head of a small troop. The Sri Lankan army attacks them leading Yoga to be wounded by gunshot. Yoga later wakes up in a hospital and finds that she has lost a leg in the war. After this event, she is sent to the movement’s rehabilitation center and taught to make a livelihood by repairing electronic items. On the day she is supposed to open an electronic items repair shop, the fourth phase of the Eelam war begins. Without a permanent residence, Yoga is forced to constantly be on the move and vulnerable to the incessant bombing and cruelties of war. She thinks the Tigers and the government are indifferent to the innocent people caught between the warring factions. When the war is over, the survivors caught up on the battlefield are asked to walk into the Sinhalese army-controlled area. Once they enter the armed territory, they are cared for by soldiers. Yoga wonders if these same soldiers were killing people until some time ago. Yoga is sent to an ex-soldiers’ rehabilitation camp responsible for preparing and integrating combatants into society. Her time in the Movement and the myriad experiences taught her that political precariousness results from constructed identities. The soldiers who perpetrated unspeakable terror in the regions of war acted as guardians and caretakers once the rescued citizens crossed onto the government-protected zone.

Social Ostracization and Precarity of Ex-militants

The marginal social status of the Movement’s ex-militants and the ostracization they experience in society is narrated in the attitude of Yoga’s family towards her. After she loses her leg in the fighting, she decides to stay permanently in the rehabilitation center and attempts to contact her family with many unanswered letters. However, a letter was finally answered by her sister, who states that the family was under the misconception that she had died in the war. Yet upon receiving her letter, the family realizes that she is alive and asks her when she will be relieved. Her sister informs her that her mother will come to take her home. Yoga is reassured by this letter. On the said date, her mother comes to take her home as promised. She expects that her mother will show some sign of affection towards her. Nevertheless, her mother’s face reveals no emotion. The narrator says that Pathma’s actions suggested that she had come there to sign the relieving order out of some compulsion. Yoga realizes that her mother has changed a lot in the eighteen years she was away fighting for the Eelam Movement. Pathma has become thin and dark, and her face now suggests a sternness. When they travel from Vavuniya to Mattakalappu where their home is located, the mother and daughter do not speak to each other. She feels that her mother coming to receive her is a charitable act.

When she returns home, Yoga reflects on the financial instability and poverty experienced by her family as principal reasons for her plight. At home, she is welcomed warmly by her younger sister, Kala, who then goes off to inform her friend, Shenbakam, of Yoga’s return. Yoga then thinks back on the conditions under which she joined the Eelam Movement. The narrator says, “She could neither accept or deny the fact that she had returned to her birthplace. Having imagined so many different outcomes and traveled through so many different places, she had arrived at the very spot that she had started from” (Seyyid, 2018, p. 5). She thinks back on the poverty that prompted her to make decisions she would not have made otherwise. In the years when she was not home, much had changed. The passing of her father, for instance, leads Yoga to recollect him breaking down at the sight of her in the militant uniform with cropped hair. He cried, “What have you done, child? It was for your protection that your mother left you in the house in town. How could you disappoint us all like this?” (Seyyid, 2018, p. 6). In the verbal exchange that ensued, Yoga blames her mother for her circumstances. Her father then regrets his decision to send her

away from home and says that he had not imagined the consequences of sending Yoga away to a safer place amidst war.

The conditions for integrating ex-militants into an unprepared and resenting society become a challenge at this point. At home, Yoga is ostracized by her family and society. Her elder sister, Vathsala regards her as unlucky and accuses her of inciting the accident Vathsala's husband suffered. Her mother is helpless and does not support Yoga in any manner. Shenbakam, her only friend, is also prevented from meeting Yoga by her husband because of her involvement in the Movement. Yoga's plight at home worsens when Kala urges her to attend Thawakkul's rehabilitation and support group for those affected by the war. When Kala proposes the idea to their mother, Pathma, she scolds her. Kala is angry at her mother's reaction and reasons with her saying that all are responsible for Yoga's plight. Meanwhile, there are rumors of the government spying on ex-militants, which further disrupts their integration into society. The narrator writes, "Even the Tigers who had been freed from service were still being considered combatants" (Seyyid, 2018, p. 159). It is in this context that Thawakkul comes to meet Yoga in person. By then, Yoga has given up the hope of a better life. Thawakkul's visit and her promise to help Yoga find a suitable job reignites Yoga's will to live. The experience of an unsuccessful integration into civilian life is a story closer to the reality of many women who served in the Movement. In her work on ex-LTTE women, Friedman narrates Sivakami's experiences thus, "She would like to marry and have a family, but her past makes it difficult to find a partner. Like many former cadres, she continues to experience frequent military surveillance visits, which further stigmatizes her in the community. Sivakami feels that only those closest to her—those who know her story—are able to fully accept her" (Friedman, 2018, p. 632). *Ummath*, in many ways, represents ex-militants' challenges in postwar society.

Precarity and the Harbingers of Reforms

Ummath not only discusses the precarious conditions of ex-militants but also all those who support rehabilitation. The second equally important character described in the story is Thawakkul, a Sri Lankan Muslim woman social worker. The narrator introduces her thus, "Thawakkul was a young woman who had the motivation and courage to seek to identify the problems and do what she could to help her war-ravaged country" (Seyyid, 2018, p. 17). Thawakkul is introduced as a social worker who helps widows, displaced people, physically challenged children, and women. She is involved in discussions with women affected by war in the district of Mattakalappu, located in East Sri Lanka. Each woman she meets tells her unbelievable tales of misery, cruelty, poverty, and hardships, all of which contribute to their wish to have died in the war rather than survive it. Thawakkul believes that people have the power to create their own history. An ardent supporter of women's leadership, she has faith in the head of the province, who is also a woman. While Thawakkul meets with women affected by war, she receives a letter from a young woman names Theivanai who, like Yoga, lost her leg in the war. She claims that she works for a children's home and asks if Thawakkul can come and meet her.

Thawakkul's devotion to her social work makes her accept the letter earnestly because it is reformers like her that can bring sustainable peace in a war-torn country. She goes to meet Theivanai. Theivanai is surprised and concedes to her that she did not believe that Thawakkul would come and meet her. Like many ex-militants, she tells her that she cannot find work because she is an ex-militant. She expresses her wish to learn bookbinding as a profession which leads Thawakkul to promise to help her acquire the necessary training. Thawakkul goes home and narrates her day to her father Habeeb who tells her, "If this Movement had not started, the Tamils

would have won Sri Lanka just by their superior literacy level” (Seyyid, 2018, p. 24). Thawakkul agrees with her father’s views and says that the stories she hears and the people she meets are testimonies of the hardships created by war: “Three generations, three decades, they wagered the dreams of an entire society” (Seyyid, 2018, p. 25). The author is thus critical of the organized violence perpetrated by the Eelam Movement, but it does not stop her from being compassionate towards those who once served the Movement.

Thawakkul firmly believes in education as a means to uplift society. Her work within the textual space is to provide opportunities for ex-militants to constructively contribute to the post-war society. Thawakkul helps Theivanai to become an apprentice at a bookbinding press. The press owner whom Thawakkul speaks to expresses his reluctance to admit Theivanai because of her past militancy. The man also tells Thawakkul of the atrocities perpetrated by the Movement on the Muslim population. He recounts the violent acts thus, “Ripped open helpless women by inserting bayonets into their vaginas. Slashed the abdomens of pregnant women committing foetal homicide, laughing insanely all the while” (Seyyid, 2018, p. 37). The earlier-mentioned forced displacement of the Muslims in the North by the Tamil Tigers caused an enmity between the two groups. However, Thawakkul reasons with him that although what he says is right and just because the people of the Movement wronged the Muslims of the region, it is unfair to categorize the Tamil people as their enemy. She argues, “If one community starts hating the other because of such wrongful actions and seeks to avenge themselves, it will destroy the very foundations of society’s quest for progress” (Seyyid, 2018, p. 39). At last, the man succumbs to Thawakkul’s prompts and agrees to take Theivanai as his apprentice.

Like many reformers of the real world, Thawakkul assumes the role of the educator campaigning against divisive communal hatred in post-war Sri Lanka. Theivanai, who now works as an apprentice in a Muslim man’s binding shop, changes her attitude toward Muslims. The narrator writes, “News of the Tamil Liberation Movement’s attacks aimed at killing civilians caused her a lot of mental disquiet. She could not accept the bomb attacks in buses, trains, public places and the many suicide bombings that happened” (Seyyid, 2018, p. 71). She feels guilty for her participation in the war. Theivanai was inspired while she was in the eleventh grade to join the Eelam Movement after she experienced two violent attacks (at the Mudalaikuda prawn farm and at Mahiladitheevu) by the Sri Lankan military. The atrocities committed by the Sri Lankan army made it easier for the Movement to canvass families for one individual who would serve as a soldier. Theivanai also believed that fighting against those who kill people is not wrong. She joined the Movement and was so indoctrinated over time that she started hating even the statue of the Buddha. Theivanai participated in the third phase of the Eelam war and lost a leg in fighting. She was then given a position at a library where she gained access to news and official reports on the war. Having a larger picture of the war, she reflects on the strategies of the revolutionary movement and slowly becomes disillusioned with the ideology that once blinded her.

The implicit patriarchal hierarchy of society and the check imposed on women is shown in the novel when Sufiyan’s family expects Thawakkul to renounce her work after marriage. After she refuses, Thawakkul’s marriage with Sufiyan is called off by the families and she begins receiving threatening emails from anonymous parties. She receives an anonymous letter threatening to stop her social work, cautions her against leaving her house, and defames her as a prostitute. She faces strong resistance both from the Islamic religious sect and the society at large for her work. Thawakkul feels that society is more disturbed by the fact that a woman is going out of the place demarcated for her than they are concerned about her work. She thinks, “In such a society, it is men who define women’s freedom and a woman is always on the backfoot. Their

basic argument is that a woman's beauty, that is her 'zeenat', exists purely for the enjoyment and satisfaction of men" (Seyyid, 2018, p. 147). In the face of such resistance, Thawakkul's family also starts pressuring her to discontinue her work, but Thawakkul firmly refuses as she asserts that gossip and blind threats do not deserve attention.

A woman's non-normative behavior in her society earns backlash at work and home. At home, Gulfer, Thawakkul's sister, receives a marriage proposal, making matters worse on her home front. Thawakkul's parents are pained that she does not receive any proposal of marriage while her younger sisters can find eligible suitors. Thawakkul goes to attend a conference in Anuradhapura. Her presentation there is well received by Ruwan Alagama, the president of the conference. Some of the male participants are enraged and jealous of her presentation's impact on the President and make demeaning comments about her. Ranuka and Powsan are two characters who work on projects to empower women in the country post-war. The male participants further ridicule Thawakkul by associating her with Ruwan. Thawakkul, disturbed by this encounter, feels unsafe and seeks refuge in Anoma's room for the night. Anoma is enraged at hearing Thawakkul's account of what happened and immediately calls up Ruwan to inform him of the participants' misconduct. Ruwan is angry that such demeaning comments have been made about a woman at a conference focusing on women's empowerment. Ranuka and Powsan are asked to leave the conference and are terminated from their jobs for their conduct.

The conference also initiates the discourse on building an inclusive and accommodating society. After the conference, the participants are taken to a home for disabled women. Thawakkul is impressed by the way the home is constructed. The architecture of the home is such that the physically challenged people will need no assistance in doing their daily chores. Thawakkul talks about accommodating Yoga in this home to Ruwan. Ruwan, who is first optimistic about helping Yoga, expresses doubt when he finds out she is an ex-LTTE cadre. Thawakkul tries to convince Ruwan but says he will have to talk to the board members before accommodating her. Thawakkul leaves the conference satisfied. She leaves behind her bitter experiences at Anuradhapura and is filled with hope.

However, the characters are reverted to their precarious lives as the story shifts back to Yoga. The approaching day of Kala's wedding leads Pathma to have Vathsala postpone her move into a new house and instead help her convince Yoga to stay at their Uncle's house until the wedding is over. Yoga accepts staying at her Uncle's house; however, Kala is upset by her sister's absence from the wedding. Meanwhile, four men come to Thawakkul's house and threaten to harm her. Nissa, the only one at home, is shaken by this incident. Thawakkul comes home with Yoga, and this further worsens the ambiance at home. Thawakkul's parents' request her to quit her social work due to concerns for her safety. Thawakkul is disturbed by her parents' outlook, but she realizes how one person's actions can affect an entire family's safety and happiness. After contemplating the persistent social resistance and communal ostracization that her parents face on account of her work, Thawakkul agrees to give up her job. She assures her father that Yoga will be the last person she will help as a social worker. Yoga finally gets her artificial leg fixed and earns an accommodation in the Anuradhapura home for the disabled. While everything seems to fall in place, the story takes a sharp and tragic turn. Yoga goes off to stay at Chittandi uncle's house to apply for identity proof. When everyone in the family goes to Kala's wedding, the uncle stays back and rapes Yoga. Yoga resists, but her disability makes it impossible to run and escape. She loses her desire to live and sets fire to herself. Thawakkul's father is murdered by thugs who come to attack her and the story ends with Thawakkul being seen off at the airport by her mother and sisters.

Discussion

In this entire novel, precarity induced by the social structure is put at the forefront of the discussion on war. In the case of Yoga, her precariousness is first induced by poverty and then exacerbated by the violent political conflict. In an article that explores violence and women's agency in war, the author observes, "The female militants are also desensitized to violence and the fear of death, not necessarily as a means of self-empowerment, but as means to an end as stipulated by the revered leader" (Meegaswatta, 2019, p. 38). The function of indoctrination and the collapse of education systems during the war could be instrumental in perpetuating the violence and brutality of war. Moreover, those who become victims are doubly marginalized. In the examples of Yoga and Theivanai, they do not have a happy and economically secure standing in the society they were part of. Furthermore, after they participate in the Eelam Movement, they are branded as rebels and socially ostracized. Thus, their existence in society is acknowledged only when they become rebels.

The war also created extensive psychological trauma in the country—particularly in conflict zones. One specific study that investigates the collective trauma of the Sri Lankan war gives the following concluding thought:

The effects of disasters, particularly massive, chronic traumas go beyond the individual to the family, community and wider society. Social processes, dynamics and functioning can be changed fundamentally by disasters. In the aftermath of war some of the community level changes included mistrust, suspicion, silence, brutalization, deterioration in morals and values, poor leadership, dependency, passiveness and despair." (Somasundaram, 2007, p. 5)

This is echoed in *Ummath* when Thawakkul talks about the long-standing effects of war. Social change for the worse and cultural deterioration affects the most vulnerable groups of society first, particularly women. Yoga's suicide at the end of the novel is a result of the harassment she has suffered throughout the war. Her precarious position as a socio-economically marginalized and physically challenged woman subjects her to becoming the victim of sexual abuse. She is traumatized by the attack and her suicide can be read as an act of helplessness conditioned by her precarious position.

While there is a lot of discussion on the precarity caused by the collapse of social structures in the event of a crisis like war or political conflict, there is little discussion on the gendered precariousness in the context of social relationships amidst conflict. The hegemonic patriarchal discourses functioning through coercion and consent play a massive role in relegating women to the background of a conflict. In the novel, Thawakkul's agency is under threat and her work in redeeming and rehabilitating the women militants of war is looked down upon. Sufiyan and his family's perception of Thawakkul's work is a reminder of society's perceptions of women and their supposed roles in contributing to the community. Additionally, when Thawakkul leaves the confines of the domestic space and enters the predominantly male-dominated social space, she is threatened. Her precariousness becomes a byproduct of the socio-political and cultural context in which she finds her work. The novel voices the need for social education and campaigns for education as a sustainable means of ensuring social change.

Conclusion

Hence, in analyzing the novel, it is crucial to investigate the micro-historical context in which Yoga, Theivanai, and Thawakkul are positioned. Their problems and social ostracization are a result of their precarious positioning in the overall socio-political framework that dictates norms for women. This paper delineates the different stages of precarity experienced by characters victimized by political turbulence. The context of violence and cruelty they experienced is anchored in the disruption of education in the country. By abruptly hindering education's function in society, the war puts several young adults' lives and futures in jeopardy. Secondly, this paper addresses the role played by women in the Eelam Movement. Women's active participation in the conflict took them out of designated domestic spaces and made them relevant political agents simultaneously making their social position even more precarious. Thirdly, the faulty reintegration of ex-militants in society is discussed. By narrating the struggle of each of the women characters represented in the novel, the paper brings to light the unsuccessful reintegration of ex-militants in post-war Sri Lanka. Through all these discussions, the framework of power and the value associated with the lives of those marginalized are dealt with. Finally, this paper talks about the precarious position of social reformers who go out of their way to make sustainable changes in post-war Sri Lanka.

A consistent theme of Butler's work is her attempts to understand coexistence among people identifying with politically incongruent ideologies. Hence Butler's work on gender performance and precarity becomes the basis on which understanding of ethics, humanitarianism, and critical theory are envisioned. Consistently through this piece of fiction, the author positions her characters in situations where the norms of gender performance are relaxed, and precarity is accentuated. This article reads women militants and follows their transition into civilians in postwar Sri Lanka. The vulnerabilities they are exposed to and the marginalization they undergo reaffirms Butler's notion that precarity is politically constructed and that rehabilitation and peace only come through a humanitarian approach to reconciling political differences as well as through robust and holistic education.

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