

Individuality vs Priorities of the Collective: The Gendered Silence of Pathamanathan, a Female Combatant's Poetry

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Poets who write on nationalism, or poets whose work revolve around nationalism, have to negotiate a constant tension that exists between the priorities of the collective and their own individual experiences. When analysing the individual expressions in poetry on nationalism, one of the more prominent areas is the role of the woman, the importance of the woman's voice – or the lack thereof; the woman has often been marginalized despite her being fundamental to the notion of ethnonational identity and culture. Rathika Pathamanathan is a rehabilitated LTTE cadre, who is a representative of women in the battlefield in a liberation movement. Instead of highlighting her individual experiences as a woman, Pathmanathan's work oscillates between her vocalisation of the priorities of the collective and her individual experiences as a schooling child. This paper uses literary analysis to argue that gender is not a discussion she has in any of her poetry. Drawing a comparison between the work of Pathmanathan and the works of other LTTE women cadre, as well as discourse on women's liberation movements around the world, this paper contends that she has desexualized herself, and has created a persona which is more in line with the LTTE's expectations of their combatants: revolutionary. Thus, through selected poems from her collection "There is a Darkness Called Light and I Grope for Myself in the Thick of It" (2016), the essay posits that Pathamanathan does not attempt to fill the gender gap in poetry on nationalism in Sri Lanka, but permeates other strains of individuality, thereby remaining within a patriarchal paradigm, an ideology of the collective, that is difficult to contextualize.

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