

# In My Mother's House

*Civil War in Sri Lanka*

Sharika Thiranagama

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Civil War in Sri Lanka

Sharika Thiranagama

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*To my grandparents  
Mahilaruppiam and Rajasingam, (Ammam and Appa)  
my parents Rajani and Dayapala Thiranagama, (Daji and Thatha)  
and Kugamoorthy*

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## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

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Rather than use a standard system for transliteration, I have written Tamil words phonetically in English. However, the English usages I follow are those commonly used for those Tamil words (e.g. *ur* the Tamil word for home). In addition, place names and proper nouns are rendered in the text in the form they commonly appear in the Sri Lankan press.

Tamil words are explained in the text as they appear; however, readers will note that kinship terms change slightly between Tamils and Muslims, for example Tamils use *Amma* and *Appa* and Muslims use *Umma* and *Vappa* for mother and father.

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## FOREWORD

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Gananath Obeyesekere

It is a pleasure to write a foreword to this elegantly written, jargon free work on the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. For me *In My Mother's House* is the most significant contribution written to date for understanding that conflict, mostly from the perspective of Tamils and the Muslims of the north, the latter brutally evicted from their homes by the Tamil Tigers (the LTTE). I hope this work will be read not only by Sri Lankans and South Asians but also by those interested in political violence, the disrupted lives that result from it, and the resilience of those living under the shadow of terror and war, so poignantly described by Thiranagama. Thiranagama herself suffered from the war; her mother, a human rights activist and university professor, was killed by the LTTE in its "liberation struggle," which like many other liberation struggles ended up in mass violence and the targeted "rational killing" of those who refused to accept violence as an antidote to the political ills of the nation. At the time of producing her book the war was drawing to a close, but it is hard to believe that such a close will result in a closure of the issues that, from the Tamil perspective, provoked forms of resistance, including violent resistance.

Few outside Sri Lanka know that alongside the ethnic conflict there was another internal conflict in which Sinhala youths took up arms against the government, initially in 1971 and, when this failed, in yet another three-year conflict in the late 1980s. This too was a liberation struggle, and this too led to enormous violence and brutality. The JVP (National Liberation Front) practiced enormous brutalities, and equally brutal was the government reaction when paramilitary groups retaliated with scant regard to the Geneva Convention (that few I am sure had heard of) or any other decent convention. This conflict resulted in the loss of 60,000 lives according to current estimates. Statistics on violence are unreliable, but even if one reduces this figure by

half, the human suffering and loss cannot be estimated through numbers. Unlike the ethnic conflict, virtually nothing of significance has been written on the short span of pain and fear erupting during the JVP youth-based insurrection. Once insurrectional violence has been unleashed, it produces its counterpart in state violence and repression, and a whole nation is thereby caught in a vortex of spiraling violence. And worse: violence can become an addiction for some participants, just like drugs and alcohol, all of which are now endemic in the nation. Liberation movements, unhappily, tend to lose the spirit of whatever idealism sparked the movements' inception. It is easy for a liberation movement to lose its soul. There is no gainsaying the fact that over the last thirty years or so, this beautiful land of ours had become a blood-besotted place. I do not know how a restoration, in the broadest sense of that term, might take place.

Thiranagama's book was completed when the long war was nearing its close and the government forces were closing in on the LTTE, and on 19 May 2009 the war was over. None among those I knew lamented the demise of the LTTE; that included my Tamil friends, although many were concerned, as was the international community, about the fate of Tamil civilians once held as hostages or human shields by the Tamil Tigers. But such concerns were overcome by the sheer relief felt by the overwhelming majority of the people. One can now board a bus without fear of a bomb; one can send children to school without being afraid of erratic suicide bomb attacks. The enshrouding fears that wars produced seem to have been dispelled. It is this sense of relief, especially among the Sinhala majority, that led to the feeling that any attempt to institute an investigation into possible violations of human rights in effect would diminish the sense of having at last overcome the LTTE terror. It is only a very few who feel that the UN has a right and a duty to investigate violation of the rights of prisoners and civilians anywhere, whether in "just wars" or in any kind of war, as stated in the Geneva Convention, assuming of course that such an investigation is by persons of unimpeachable integrity. However, many Sri Lankan intellectuals as well as others living in this region have it seems to me a legitimate concern that is the Geneva convention is not a sacred document but ought to be revised in relation to the times in which we live. At least there should be a similar international instrument that inquires into the violation of human rights in different parts of the world, for example, the tortures and cruel punishments inflicted on women who work as low paid servants, often in effect virtual slaves, in some Middle East nations. These and even some forms of legal punishment such as stoning a person to death

surely must be classified as crimes against humanity, and there should be international organizations and a new set of conventions to inquire into and bring about just retribution and justice. Many would say that U.S. and NATO forces have been accused of causing civilian deaths and bombing civilian villages, but these activities somehow or other manage to elude just inquiry and condemnation.

More immediate for those of us living in Sri Lanka, whether intellectuals or ordinary folk or those in the international community, it is the specter of majoritarianism in a government that rules with an overwhelming parliamentary majority. This means among other things a fear of enveloping authoritarianism, erosion of civil rights within the nation, and impunity with which critics of the government can be muzzled. Journalists have been especially vulnerable and have been attacked or gone missing, and in one instance a TV station has been vandalized. Unlike in Thailand, here in Sri Lanka critics and intellectuals have in general been cowed into silence. Unfortunately, the criticism of the Euro-American community on these and similar issues have only resulted in an unbelievable jingoism among the majority community, the belief that the nation can go on its own, with help perhaps from India or more especially China, forgetting that altruism is hardly the motive behind international aid. No Island, unfortunately, is an island unto itself, and each is a piece of a global continent and a part of the main. One can only hope that the “we can go it alone” kind of rhetoric will give way to the reality principle of living in a globalized and interdependent world.

It seems that after the hurly-burly was over, the battle was won and then, sadly, lost. The European international community, as well as the UN, has been concerned about the delay in resettling Tamil refugees and the increasing government control of NGOs who are trying to help with that process. I personally believe that the government will attempt to resolve these contentious issues in time, and I can sympathize with any government in similar circumstances unable to stick to a hard and fast deadline. For me the more disturbing trend is the possibility of the north being recolonized, not only for Sinhala settlers but also culturally. There are currently an overwhelming Sinhala-speaking majority and a clear Sinhala-Buddhist majority in the Island, and with the latter I fear there is a conscious formulation of the idea of a Sinhala-Buddhist nation, a concept that many imagine existed in the past of Sri Lanka. It is true that many Buddhist kings of the past believed the ideal ruler was one who governed the whole island under a single umbrella. But none of our past kings could possibly have conceived of modern nationalism

that consists of some form of central government control, state monopoly of resources, a sense of political and cultural unity brought mainly about by print capitalism, and in many instances a single dominant language. Thus Eugen Weber in an early study tells us that French nationalism resulted in the elimination of local languages and cultures and local forms of governance in a gradual but inevitable and brutal process of internal colonization whose end product was the creation of the modern French nation. So with Britain after the unification of England, Scotland, and Wales in 1707 that led to “forging the nation,” the title of Linda Colley’s book, which demonstrated the domination of Protestantism as the state religion, persecution of local Catholics, and demonization of the neighboring Catholic nation, France.<sup>1</sup>

But the trouble with today’s world is that we are no longer living in the eighteenth or nineteenth century and there is no way that a nation-state can ride roughshod over minority religions, languages, and cultures. The attempt by the Indian BJP to create a Hindu nation based on an invented and modernized Hinduism has resulted in tragic conditions of ethnic warfare and anti-Muslim and anti-Hindu riots. I am afraid that similar attempts at imposing the dominant culture on minority religions and language groups are being currently felt here in Sri Lanka. You can squash dissent, but it is much more difficult to squash the spirit that fosters legitimate dissent. “Forging the nation” in Colley’s felicitous phrase entails two things as I see it: it hammers a new sense of nationhood as in a forge; and it forges or fabricates new values, often reified as old values, that can then be imposed on the nation as a whole. A recent newspaper account (*Daily Mirror*, 6 August 2010) mentions a Buddhist monk engaged in a death fast unless, says he, the government “reconstruct Buddhist temples that were destroyed during the war in the north and resettle the Sinhalese people who were displaced during the terrorist domination of the area.” I don’t know the outcome of this fast but it forebodes a possible indication of “internal colonization” of the north and, worse, ignores the plight of the 80,000 Muslims ordered to leave their homes by the LTTE, and whose terrible situation in temporary homes has been described by Thiraganama. It is doubtful that the few displaced Sinhalese will go back north, but there will be many new migrants who might be waiting to recolonize that region. I can only hope that the government will listen to the voices of the minority communities and squash such attempts at internal colonization.

I have argued in my work that the movement of Sinhala Buddhist cultural colonization had its origins in the early twentieth century. In 1970 I wrote a paper entitled “Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon,” a piece

of ethnographic prophecy based on my witnessing a monument in the city of Colombo, erected I thought after Prime Minister Bandaranaike's triumph in 1956.<sup>2</sup> That regime, an early herald of Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism, introduced a few years later "the Sinhala only act," one of the catalysts that led to fears of Sinhala domination of the North and the East and precipitated the Tamil resistance. During that period I saw a huge concrete map of Sri Lanka erected at a major intersection in Colombo. On the four sides of the map were written in English script the four great Buddhist virtues: *mettā* (lovingkindness), *karuṇā* (kindness, compassion), *upekkhā* (equanimity), and *muditā* (tenderness). In the middle of the map was a representation of the Sinhala flag, the lion holding a sword. To me, being a Buddhist of sorts, the symbolism was somewhat disconcerting, the lofty sentiments of doctrinal Buddhism being contradicted by the image of violence in the middle. But soon the obvious struck me, namely that what was being expressed here was the idea of the Sinhala-Buddhist nation, albeit in early form. That map was soon removed, but I noted that Buddha statues were being erected at similar road junctions and outside a few public buildings. Formerly in Sri Lanka Buddha statues were found in temples, and these temples were recessed from the normal village setting, somewhat cut off from the hub of communal living, expressing in symbolic terms the soteriological distance of the monk from the village and the lay folk that inhabit it. I went on to say that it seemed to me that the Buddha was being brought out of its seclusion right into the market place, a sign of things to come.

By the 1980s the Buddha in the marketplace had become an ubiquitous presence: he is found everywhere, outside public buildings, at every major road junction, at the entrance to towns, in almost every school, at the entrance to university campuses, at hospitals, and, disconcerting to me at least, even in parts of the tea country where the population is almost exclusively Tamil and Hindu. Catholics have always erected statues of Christ, the Virgin, and the saints in the Catholic areas of the west coast. The Buddhists have imitated the Catholic example in their expressions of projected nationhood, but in recent times they have even invaded the Catholic marketplace with Buddha statuary. The aesthetic ugliness of these statues, in contrast to the traditional, signifies it seems to me, the uglification of the Buddha's spiritual message and the inner uglification of the Buddhist conscience. Buddha statues have also been planted on mountain tops for all to see, some of them erected by modern private corporations, often competing with the tall and ugly telephone towers, erected by competing mobile phone companies, covering the once green and



pleasant hills that range all over our land. Nowadays Buddha statues can be erected without recourse to permission; only Buddhist business-monks can build temples wherever they want, even encroaching on prime government-owned property.

Additionally there is the omnipresent Buddhist flag, invented in the late nineteenth century by Colombo businessmen inspired by the Theosophist Colonel Olcott, but, fortunately, not ugly. For Olcott the flag represented the ecumenical reach of the universal Buddhist dispensation or *sāsana*. Nowadays, the flag alongside other Buddhist symbols has become in Sri Lanka an entirely particularistic representation of the Buddhist nation. Flags and Buddha images adorn private buses and trishaws: in front for all to see are slogans such as the following: “this is the country of the Buddha.” To sum up the situation in metaphorical terms: the Buddha has now become the flag of the nation. But when you put the Buddha in the market place, you are in effect transforming him from a *lokottara* or transcendental symbol into that of a *laukika* or worldly one. The latter has not supplanted the older image but it exists anomalously with the newly invented other.

Thus symbolic representations of the Buddhist-ness of the nation were happening before we won the war, but, alas, it would seem to lose the peace, when in the aftermath, Buddha images have begun to sprout in Muslim areas such as Beruvala in the Western Province and in areas in the Eastern Province where the dominant population is Muslim or Hindu. As the north has begun to open up, Buddhist temples and statuary have begun to be erected in the heartland of the Tamil country. A cultural invasion has begun, symbolically expressing the triumphalism and the possible emergent cultural conquest of the Tamil and Muslim periphery and the beginnings of the creation of a Buddhist nation. But now my prophetic sense fails me: I do not know how and when these processes will end. But as someone given to aphorisms I can say this with regard to both liberation movements and attempts to forge nations in our own troubled times: it is easy to create a monster but it is hard to kill it.

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## In My Mother's House

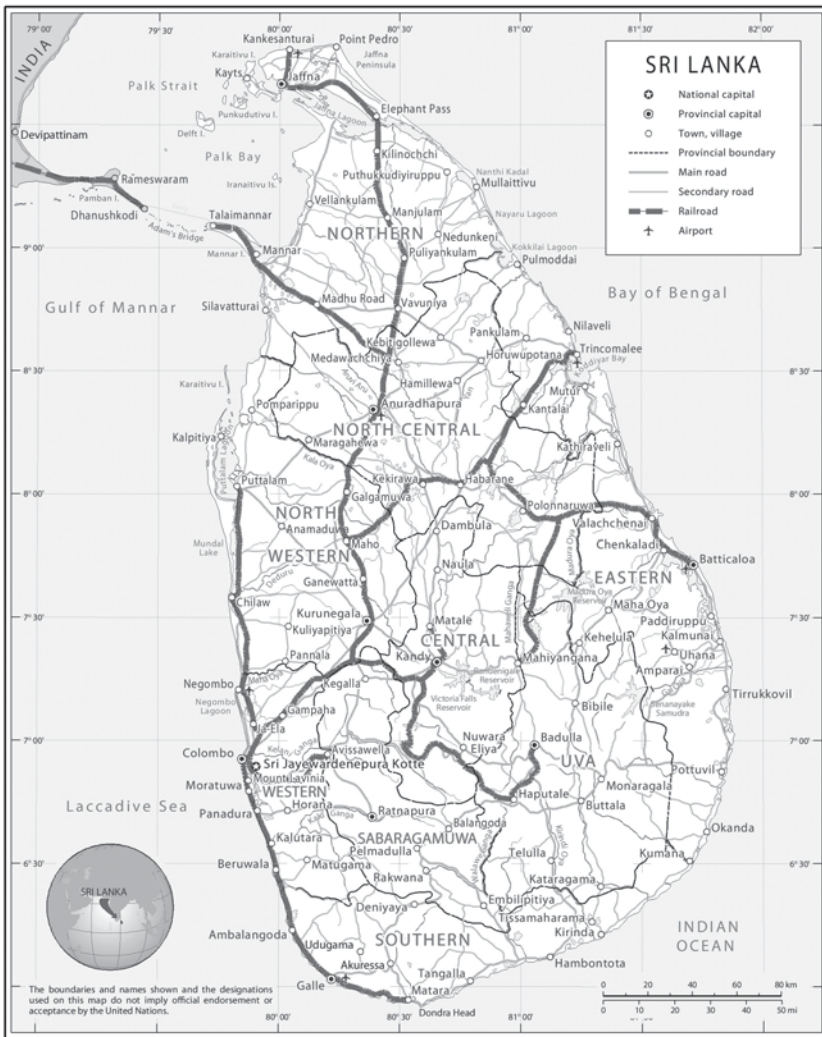


Figure 1. Map of Sri Lanka.

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## Introduction: In My Mother's House

On 21 September 1989, my sister and I waited for our mother to come home from work to the temporary house we were renting at the time. We were living in the northern Jaffna peninsula, by then, already a war zone. We were half minority Tamil (my mother), half majority Sinhalese (my father), but brought up speaking Tamil. The years when our Sinhalese father lived in Jaffna with us, as opposed to our once or twice yearly trip to Colombo to see him, or when my Sinhalese grandmother and uncles would travel up to Jaffna to visit or to go on pilgrimage were becoming dim memories in our almost exclusively Tamil and Muslim world. For us, our world was Tamil-speaking Jaffna.

Without being quite conscious of it, we were becoming witness to immense changes. We had already become accustomed to running into bunkers when the Sri Lankan army bombed us in 1986, were used to the idea that there were places and people we should be careful of, were cognizant that there was one really big militant group called the "Tigers," and had some dim idea of other militant groups. We had seen the Indian army arrive, heard rumors of the rapes that accompanied their arrival, seen the disordering of our world as the Indians and the Tigers fought it out. I recall in art class at school, being asked to draw pictures of beaches with coconut trees, and farmers tending their fields with cows, images that no longer described our world. At home, I drew instead pictures of being in bunkers surrounded by my family with speech bubbles of the funny things that people said while helicopters hovered. My mother mounted that picture in her office at the university. I recall having an intensely happy childhood in the midst of this war.

My mother never came back home that 21 September; her journey was ended by LTTE assassins in front of the house. Her body returned like us to "our home," my *ur*, my grandparents' house and village where she and we had been born and had lived for most of our lives. This house is still standing in

2011, though scarred like all of us by war. My childhood ended. My sister and I left Sri Lanka for London with our father who came to get us, flying on 25 December 1989. On 26 December our new lives as refugees in London began.

This is how my journey back to Sri Lanka to conduct my research began, but it did not end there. This book is not about myself and my personal journey, but instead the stories of others, and the society to which I returned a stranger over a decade later. A society which presented in its strangeness to me, new questions about what had happened and was happening. I experienced the very real sensation that I, like many others abroad, lived in memories inadequate to the task of comprehending what had happened in Sri Lanka in the 1990s. The title of this book is of course a reference to Kwame Anthony Appiah's (1992) essay "In My Father's House," which recounts his return to Ghana for his father's funeral and the fraught family and community disputes that unfolded around the requests of the dead man. Lurking behind is the Bible, which he and I too were brought up with, and one of its most quoted statements: "in my father's house there are many rooms." This book is about returning to my mother's house, but through a glass darkly, for I have put away childish things indeed. The book, while about Sri Lanka's civil war, is more largely about war itself as "a social condition" (Lubkemann 2008).

The decades long Sri Lankan civil war was waged between the Sri Lankan state and most latterly the Tamil guerrilla group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, also called the "Tamil Tigers"), who emerged supreme through the elimination of all other Tamil militant groups. While there has been punctuated ethnic conflict since Independence in 1948, most would agree that large-scale violence between "armies" in the northern and eastern minority areas became a more everyday reality in the mid-1980s. It is a war that has involved the destruction of physical and human infrastructures, the permanent displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, the pitting of majority against minority ethnic groups, and the rise of insurrectionary groups who have turned from "heroes" to oppressors.

In 2009, in the midst of writing, others and I put our lives—in my case this book—on hold. In May 2009, the Sri Lankan government announced that the civil war, which had spanned almost 30 years, had ended with the final defeat of the LTTE, arguably one of the most successful, multifaceted, and wealthy guerrilla organizations in the world. The end of the war was not a quiet one. From January to May 2009, in an ever-shrinking coastal strip in the northern Vanni region the Sri Lankan government bombarded the LTTE

and more than 330,000 civilians with heavy weaponry, while denying their use. The LTTE in its turn, as the Sri Lankan army advanced through the north central areas under LTTE control, took civilians with them, leading them to their death by using them as human shields. Sri Lankan Tamils ran from the advancing army, which has never offered them an alternative to the LTTE. Moving from place to place, bunker to bunker, 280,000 to 330,000 of them ended up trapped with the LTTE. The LTTE stepped up its forced recruitment of civilians, and those who escaped tell of hiding in their bunkers, trying to protect their children from roaming LTTE cadres picking up new recruits (UTHR 2009a,b). When surrounded by the Sri Lankan army, the LTTE hid and fired among civilians, refusing to let them leave.

The Sri Lankan state continued its relentless shelling of areas it had declared safe zones for civilians as well as hospitals in the war zone.<sup>1</sup> Escapees told the human rights group University Teachers for Human Rights-Jaffna (UTHRJ) and news agencies such as Al Jazeera and the BBC in Tamil about the heavy shelling by the state, their desperate attempts to protect themselves in the face of constant bombardment and lack of food, water, and medicine, and their disgust with their so-called protectors, the LTTE, who were willing to sacrifice them (UTHR 2009b).<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan government banned journalists and independent observers from these areas. Diasporic Tamils in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom mounted campaigns calling for the end of bombing by the Sri Lankan government. Increasingly, the LTTE abroad took over the management of those campaigns, and turned them into massed displays of LTTE flags and demands for the LTTE to be recognized and rescued by foreign governments. The gulf between internally displaced Sri Lankan Tamils in Sri Lanka and those in the diaspora who rallied around the LTTE was all too apparent to those of us who had done fieldwork in Sri Lanka. The support of expatriate Tamils for an increasingly delegitimized and violent LTTE meant that the protests became ineffective and the international community did not hold the Sri Lankan state to account and make it halt its use of heavy weaponry.

And so it went on. Every day in May brought more Tamil escapees from the LTTE areas carrying their elderly and children and wading through the lagoon to government-controlled territory. The events of the last days of battle and final defeat of the LTTE, especially the killing of its leader Prabhakaran, remain vague. It is unclear how the last leaders and their families died in the final days. It is rumored that they and their families were all executed

by the state despite their surrender (see UTHR 2009a). The UN estimated that around 7,000 civilians may have died in these months, but this figure is in all probability conservative. After the end of the LTTE, the agony for those who survived did not end. The Sri Lankan government incarcerated 285,000 in sorely under-resourced and squalid mass camps for security clearance, not allowing them even to leave to meet family until December 2009, just before presidential elections. By mid-2010 around half had been released, but thousands still remain in camps. What happened to those taken out of camps for further questioning under suspicion of being LTTE remains a mystery. Areas where civilians once lived are now mined and scorched earth as the two armies advanced, retreated, and destroyed in their wake. The battle for hearts and minds of Tamil civilians was lost by the LTTE, and, sadly, remains the only battle the current Sri Lankan state is reluctant to initiate.

There is more to be said about these months, but I cannot say it in this book. I have no way of understanding fully what those thousands in the last war zone went through; I neither anticipated nor have privileged knowledge of the end. A book that began in the heart of the civil war somehow now tells its story from the other side of that protracted war. I have had to make the book again around a world made strange, with a new set of questions that now need to be asked.

The military war may have ended, but not the political one: the place of minorities in Sri Lanka still remains unsure. But the end of that war provides the fragile hope of new possibilities and parameters. It brings the possibility to reflect concretely on the specific social, cultural, and economic forms created in the decades of war. The accounts that will surely not survive the end of the war are those that, unlike this book, equated LTTE interests with those of the people it governed, and envisioned minority life through the pronouncements of the LTTE. The lives of Tamils and Muslims, and the complex ways people sought to live under and through the LTTE that I document here, may indeed point to why, despite many academic and Tamil nationalist claims to the contrary, when the LTTE collapsed militarily and its leader was killed it collapsed as a popular force in Sri Lanka.

### War, Generation, and Home in Sri Lanka

This book is about war and the transformed physical, emotional, and social landscapes of civilians attempting to live through it. I focus on the war as

mundane existence, and on the life cycles of individuals, families, and communities that are generated by and generate the social life of protracted war.

This introduction frames this enterprise through three overarching approaches. First, the book weaves together accounts of dramatic events of the war with those of life's ordinary projects. I do not focus on violence as the only primary feature of life in a war zone. Instead, following others such as Lubkemann (2008), I examine the myriad mundane (and perhaps more severe for being mundane) experiences of life in protracted wars. Second, this wartime life has been characterized by massive displacement of Tamils and Muslims. Displacement here is analyzed not in terms of facts and figures of migration flows, but as a ground of sociality, a new way of inhabiting the world. Third, I examine what kinds of new selves, generations, biographies, and ambivalences war produces—an inquiry into forms of subjectivity and individualization.

The individual narratives of war I write about in this book are self-conscious stories. People decide and select stories to tell, structured by particular political and social perspectives. I treat these narrations as commentaries, which both provide a way of understanding this war and are structured by the transformations of war to produce particular biographies. Thus the book is centrally concerned with individuals and the relationship they perceive between the self and the collective, in short, the production of selves and spaces within times of political terror.

These three larger grounding assumptions are worked through three ethnographic “how do” questions focusing on ideas of home, family, and political life. The first set of ethnographic questions tackle mass displacement through focusing on the transformations of notions of home for people who are chronically displaced in a war for homeland. I take this from the perspective of both Tamils and Muslims, the former at the heart of the struggle for homeland, the latter expelled to the margins. I explore how the loss of homes comes to endow new forms of historicity to individual and collective biographies. These concerns are braided into a second set of questions dealing with the generational divergences produced by the rapidity of transformation in the civil war, as well as the longer-term changes in familial and political ideologies. The book explores the fraught tensions between historically sedimented familial ideologies and structures and transformations in familial and generational experiences. The final ethnographic inquiries center on the effect of political terror on sociality and transforming political ideologies of militancy. I take militancy from the perspective of those who have left



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