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Fecund mullas and goni billas: the gendered nature of anti Muslim rhetoric in post war Sri Lanka

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Issues that are prominent within the anti-Muslim hate discourse that pervaded Sri Lanka in recent years are the speed at which the Muslim community is increasing its numbers—they are said to become a majority in a few decades; as well as Muslim women’s dress- the *hijab nikab* and *abhaya*. Certain Muslim interlocutors’ own responses have included defending the hijab as protecting women from violence, and urging that the state institute measures to increase the Sinhalese population. Ironically the latter was also the position of the Bodu Bala Sena the group propagating anti- Muslim sentiment; and the government responded to the position and institutionalized it by way of a health ministry circular banning NGO programs in reproductive health. I look at the manner in which gender orders became reorganized in the aftermath of the state’s military victory over the rebel group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2009 as a consequence of militarism. This reordering is reflected both in the anti Muslim rhetoric and the rolling back of important women friendly policies in the country. Writing on women’s experiences in Sri Lanka, however look mainly at the experiences of particular ethnic communities at the expense of a collective narrative of exclusion exploitation and misogyny. Exploring these developments this paper will also speculate as to why it is difficult to think outside the ethnic frames to understand the gendered nature of the post war moment.

As has now been well documented, the Bodu Bala Sena, an organization comprising mostly of nationalist monks began a sustained anti minority campaign in post war Sri Lanka, and their minority of choice were the Muslims. In this paper I am going to argue that the BBS attacks against Muslims were a deeply masculinist onslaught that targeted minority Muslims but also had scant regard for women of any ethnicity. I will also argue that the Muslim response was similarly masculinist but drew instead from a set of ideas that resonated with but were different from those of the Sinhala supremacists. This collective of monks, some of whom have been active in nationalistic agitations for years, registered itself as an organization in May 2012.¹ From the time of its registration onwards the group expanded its arena of activities through social media, press conferences, prime time television coverage and by virtue of massive rallies in various parts of the Island. The member monks have also claimed that they have the best network in the country given the many temples all over the island, the number of times the monks engage with the laity, in the temple, at alms-giving of different sorts, Sunday school etc. They in fact threatened at a press conference to mobilize this network to boycott food labelled as *halal* if the labelling process was not done away with by a date that they specified.² The reach of their message and the power of their rhetoric was such that they were successful in getting the halal labeling process suspended from local grocery shelves

¹ It has one public lay member – the secretary.

² BoduBalaSena press conference 19/11/2012(find you tube link reference)

indefinitely. (Haniffa forthcoming) The BBS ideology seemed to find overwhelming endorsement among the Sinhala public.³ The kind of media attention and coverage that it received for a brief period in Early 2013 and the reluctance of mainstream media to carry any voice that was oppositional to the rhetoric, was an indication of how much support the ideology suddenly seemed to have garnered among the Sinhala masses of different classes.

The political context shifted after the Presidential elections of January 2015 and by July 2015 the mood in the country was different; the monks' rhetoric has dissipated somewhat, and while the groups continue to exist and a variety of incidents of harassment get reported, the frenzied snowballing of the sentiment everywhere, the constant threat of violence and the Muslims' sense of distress due to this has abated. The spewing of anti Muslim rhetoric, the sporadic violent events throughout the Sinhala speaking areas of the country, and ultimately the orchestrated anti Muslim violence of June 2014 occurred without substantial comment or criticism on the part of the state, or indeed any institutional measures against the perpetrators.

I have argued elsewhere that the BBS emerged in the wake of the military defeat of the LTTE, and the popular and regime driven endorsement of the ultra-nationalist stance of monk-led nationalist politics in

³ Anti Muslim sentiment has been mobilized periodically in Sri Lanka by various forces. For an examination of one of the first instances of anti-Muslim mobilization in the post-war context see Heslop's exploration of the case of the Dambulla mosque (2014).

the country (Haniffa 2015). The ideology that saw the violent decimation of the Tamil minority representatives to safeguard the unitary nature of the Sri Lankan state also saw the emergence of a frenzied quest for the polities' next enemies. This Sinhala supremacist nationalism took no time to identify the Muslim as the next threat to be addressed.⁴ This paper deals with an element of that nationalism that bares substantial scrutiny: its position on women.

This paper will look specifically at the gendered elements of the hate rhetoric, the gendered nature of the responses that such attention garnered and the kind of feminist concerns that informed the ethico-political questions that emerged for activists responding to the problem. Fecund Mullahs, or sexually predatory and aggressive Muslim males were a main element of the hate rhetoric, as were the *gonibillas*—Muslim women dressed in black hijab and abhaya with their faces covered. The BBS and its allies were extraordinarily preoccupied with what they claimed was the increase in the Muslim population, and the rate at which Muslims were procreating, and the fact that there are Sinhala women marrying Muslim men and converting to Islam. At the same time, they were also extremely concerned with the “Arabized” dress of Muslim women – specifically the women wearing the niqab or face covering that they have often termed “*gonibilla*.” The *Gonibilla* is the “monster” figure of the Sinhala language used to scare children. It is also associated

with the figure of the informant who was responsible for naming terrorists (either of the JVP or the LTTE) during political crises. Men (generally) wearing a gunny sack or a “goni” over their heads with holes to see with, pointed out those who were against the government, or against the rebels as the case may be; those who were thus identified were invariably shot or disappeared.

Together with the intense militarization during and after the conflict in the country, the valourising of a combative masculinity happened in a manner that concomitantly trivialized women and standardized particular ideas regarding women's social roles. Immediate post-war Sri Lanka experienced a significant recalibration of gender orders. As Kodikara documented, the post-war plans for development and progress have been particularly problematic. Institutional reforms, and women centered assistance has been designed in relation to very specific ideas regarding masculinity and femininity. For instance, attributing teenage pregnancies, high school drop out rates and childhood drug use to mothers leaving the country as domestic workers, and the president committing to overturn hard won domestic violence legislation on the basis that it was leading to a higher divorce rate are two examples of such thinking that naturalizes women's care giving roles together with violence within marriages. Controlling women's mobility for work through administrative strictures, beauty culture training for female LTTE cadres, and prohibiting non- state agencies from working on reproductive health issues have been among the institutional consequences of these ideals regarding

⁴ This is not to say that Muslims were only then being discovered as a suitable other. In fact, anthropologists had noted, colonial commentators had claimed that the Muslim was the hated other of the Sinhalese peasant

masculinity and femininity in post war Sri Lanka (Kodikara 2014).

The anxieties spawned by the end of the war were managed and articulated in a variety of ways. There was a widespread referencing of enemies to the Sinhala nation – that Muslims were engaged in a conspiracy to end the majority status of the Sinhalese. The BBS monks stated that if the war had ended ten years later than it did, the end of the war would have been celebrated not by a Sinhala country but by a Muslim one.⁵ They thanked Rajapaksha for ending that war in order that this new enemy –the Muslim--could be identified and dealt with. Sinhalese that did not support the post-war effort to identify this enemy were themselves called “Muslim” with veiled reference to circumcision as emasculation. One element not addressed in Enloe’s schematic but I will show was present in post-war Sri Lanka was also the issue of sexual violence.

The coming together of persistence militarism and particular gender relations in situations of post war transition have had serious consequences for women in the contexts that Enloe references (Enloe 219). In Sri Lanka too, I contend that the emergence of the ideology of the BBS and concomitant Sinhala supremacy indexes the entrenching of a militarist ideology and anxieties about ethnic and gender relations.

In her discussion on feminism after wars, Enloe references the Women’s War Museum in Ho Chi Min city, Vietnam.

⁵ Bodu Bala Sena Kandy meeting. 17th March 2013.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOO69qvJwqU>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inZa_HEbD8Q

The museum is unusual in that it captures the contribution that women made to the glorious victories in wars fought by the Vietnamese forces and glorifies women’s roles as carriers of messages, and food, and also as competent combatants famed for their skills in shooting down American warplanes. However, Enloe also points out one other interesting aspect of the Museum. The statue of the combatant who shoots down planes portrays her as holding her baby while shooting down the plane. The exhibit also includes examples of exquisite needlework produced during the conflict by women in prisons. The museum does not include reference to other roles played by women as nurses or prostitutes or even as people who did not have an informed critical stance towards the war’s politics but carried on everyday life in a time of great difficulty. Enloe calls attention to the fact that these juxtapositions of women’s traditional roles with what is understood as war time state of exception speaks to a larger concern that haunts post war contexts—the restoration of (gender)order in the aftermath of war. As has been extensively documented from the context of both World War II and the Algerian war of liberation for instance, women are expected to resume more traditional gender identities in the post war context and moreover, participate in the post war recovery through providing unnamed but gendered caring and counseling services to returning family members.

This valorizing of maleness in post war Sri Lanka must be understood not just in gendered but also ethnicised terms. Given that the end of the war came about by a military victory for the Sri Lankan army,

which by then was almost completely Sinhalese with some limited numbers of Tamils and Muslims in its ranks, the Sinhala supremacy emerged on the back of a militaristic triumphalism.

The fact that after thirty years of war, Sri Lankan society is heavily militarized is a truism. As many have documented during the 30+ years of conflict the military establishment underwent a substantial transformation as did the ideology of militarism. (Rajasingham-Senenayake (2001), De Mel (2007) In the immediate aftermath of the victory over the LTTE the militarism was pervasive and produced gendered and ethnicized post war anxieties regarding the country's future, in a toxic cocktail of developments among which the emergence of the BBS was only one. In their choice of names the BBS and similar groups – BoduBalaSena or the Army of Buddhist power, RavanaBalakaya- The Ravana Brigade, (they later called themselves Ravana Balaya or the Power of Ravana) are all modelled on an understanding that there continue to be wars to be fought. The BBS in its invocations calls on young Sinhalese to become armies and police forces in order to save their nation from armed Muslim jihadists.

The Minoritization of women

As Enloe points out, post-war decisions made in relation to anxieties about men have profound consequences for women (Enloe 219). The BBS rhetoric on Muslims, as well as the spinoffs on facebook and on different blogs had a particular idea of post – war womanhood. Sinhala women, for instance were understood as being at the vanguard of

safeguarding the nation from becoming minoritized through reproducing the necessary number of Sinhala citizens. Those refusing their function as vessels of procreation, for instance were considered to be traitorous to the nation. The nationalist representation of Sinhala women, where they are considered only in relation to their reproductive function, where they are compelled to reproduce as part of their duty towards the preservation of their nation are tropes that have long been identified and critiqued in feminist literature, in relation to different historical moments in Sri Lanka (De Alwis 1998, De Mel 2002, Maunaguru 1995). However, in this instance the public coming together of misogyny against Sinhala women and the violently sexualized othering of the Muslims --both men and women--is a phenomenon that is peculiar to Sri Lanka's post-war experience, and is fed by gendered post war anxieties.

The following is an excerpt from a monks speech at a mass BBS rally in the early days of the organization when its message seemed to take over the country's imagination and its popularity was ascending. In a mass rally held in the town of Kandy in March 2013, the BBS monk, Ven. Dr. Madegoda Abhayatissa, Senior Lecturer at the University of Sri Jayawardenapura, Viharadhipathi of the Pepiliyana Sunethra Devi Mahapriyena invoked women's dress. He said,

You know, now with regards to their dress, I was telling the reverend Gnanasara that he should not be talking about women's clothing. But then, who knows who is behind that head covering? What kind of criminal might be hiding there? Let's say, I get in to this

garb? Who will know who is inside? Socks on the feet, gloves covering the arms, and they walk everywhere. Is this the Araabi? (Me Araabiyada?) Also how dangerous is this? Even I can go in to a mosque like that, I can even go into the women's prayer room and you know what I can do? I can, I can, (monk grins) I am not going to say it. (Monk sniggers)⁶

The monk in his innuendo is suggesting that if he were to wear Muslim religious dress – the black Abhaya with the niqab--he would be able to enter female spaces and commit sexual violence against Muslim women gathered there. Not only is there a defiling of the sanctity of the prayer room in the monks suggested actions, Muslim women are reduced to objects that can be thus abused presumably without significant consequences.

The fact that the monk can, on the public podium, while speaking to an audience in the several thousands, casually reference sexual violence is an issue worth considering. I also argue that the monk's rhetoric is directed at a male audience who will understand what is being said, suggested or proposed, and additionally, that the listening women, need not and should not be offended by such rhetoric. One reading could be that the reference was to violence against Muslim women, and therefore Sinhala women need not and would not identify with this "other." I contend, however, that it illustrates the absence of any critique of sexual violence within popular Sri Lankan discourses about women during the Rajapaksa years.

⁶ Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inZa_HEbD8Q

Arguably, the militaristic masculinity that was acceptable during that time endorsed such sexual violence, or at least, speech invoking such violence. I contend that the monk's words, addressing men in a context where women are arguably the larger audience erases the presence of Sinhala women. The complete erasure of both minority Muslim men and women and Sinhala Buddhist women in the monk's rhetoric is perhaps the most apt indication of the state of both ethnic and gender relations in Sri Lanka during the immediate post-war era.

Then, the added issue of the rules of *vinaya* or discipline required of a monk becomes a question.⁷ There is another paper to be written regarding the sexualization of monks' rhetoric in relation to "other" women. The manner in which Burmese monk Ashin Wirathu called the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee a "whore" for stating that the proposed "Race protection laws" may violate Human Rights norms constitutes one more example.⁸

Further, the specificity of the critique of the *niqab* in this context is important. The critique of Muslim women's dress here, emerges from a nationalism laced with misogyny and should not be conflated with any critical feminist discourses that also looks at the *niqab* as problematic. For

⁷ This issue has been explored in relation to monks and their political participation. See S. J. Tambiah and H. L. Seneviratne.

⁸ Gianluca Mezzofiore, Myanmar extremist Buddhist monk Wirathu calls UN envoy a whore. International Business times January 19th 2015. <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/myanmar-extremist-buddhist-monk-wirathu-calls-un-envoy-whore-1484104> accessed on 17th July 2015.

the monk what is of importance is that the niqab invokes “Araabiya,” and that it is not local.⁹ The monk’s preoccupation with the dress was purely in keeping with its putative strangeness and “difference” within the Sri Lankan context.

The monk’s rhetoric renders both women and minorities silent and irrelevant other than as subjects of Sinhala masculine address. The Muslims about whom much was being said in the hate rhetoric had no means of intervening and their perspective was absent for all intents and purposes. There were no attempts at consultation, and no participation of Muslims in these public conversations *about* Muslims throughout Sinhala speaking Sri Lanka over a period of two years. While there were a few token TV debates between Sinhala speaking Muslims and BBS monks they were framed in ways that the Muslim perspective was either lost or further marginalized.¹⁰

In the same way the monks speech, and the anti Muslim rhetoric was laced with sexual violence and misogyny irrespective of the fact that women were members of the audience and are known to be greater dayakas of temples. There is no awareness that all women might be disturbed at the suggestion of sexual

violence, or that Sinhala women may feel some solidarity with Muslim women, or that Sinhala women might take exception to the monk virtually normalizing a crime against women. The Ven. Madegoda Abhayatissa’s sniggering reference to sexually abusing Muslim women in prayer rooms assumed an audience of men (who endorse sexual violence) where women though present-- possibly in larger numbers than men-- were irrelevant as interlocutors.

Anxieties regarding the minoritization of the majority

The other related issue around which the conversation regarding Muslims became heated is the issue of population. The preoccupation with numbers has informed much of Sri Lanka’s engagement with democracy. Many have discussed the manner in which the Sinhalese claim to supremacy under modern conditions depends on the fact of number and is based mainly on the Sinhalese “community” called in to being as a majority. The ethical basis for Sinhala nationalist claims against the Tamils for instance, is the claim of number: majority rules (Uyangoda 2001). The Sinhalese Buddhists populace, therefore recognizes the significance of being less than the majority. Therefore, the “rabble rousing” appeal of the idea that the Sinhalese would no longer be a majority is substantial.

Let me describe two posts from the now deactivated Sorry.com Facebook page. The first carries a picture of the aged monk the Ven. Aggamaha Panditha Athipoojya Dawuldena Gnanissara, the head of the Amarapura sect. It also features a hand holding a noose. The text

⁹ Other interlocutors have also made this same critique—for instance, Mrs. Jezima Ismail educationist and activist stalwart of the Muslim community criticizing the hijab during its early introduction, often stated that the practice is middle-eastern and therefore alien to the south Asian context that has had its own modes of covering. See also McGilvray (2008) and Haniffa (2005) on the evolution of the hijab and Muslim women’s dress in Sri Lanka.

¹⁰ There were a few exceptions. Ya TV coverage over TNL station and one conversation with gnanasara on derana are noteworthy

attributed to the Ven. monk reads—during the time of the Portuguese¹¹ the Sinhala Buddhist population of this country was 98%. Today the percentage has dropped to 60% and in 2040 the population will drop to 40%. “A small family is golden they said. The politicians must take responsibility for this.” At the end of the slide it states – “*PunchiPavulaRaththaran, Kaapu Lanuwa Istharam.*” The small family is golden they said—how skillfully were we misled!¹²

The next image states that there are 12,000 Jihadists trained in the East, and that there is a global conspiracy to make Sri Lanka a Muslim land by 2040. The visual carries an image of the national identity card with a niqab clad woman’s face on it. As I have pointed out, elsewhere, there is a clear coordination of information within the various fora where the hate rhetoric appears and naming the year 2040 as the moment of change remains constant (Haniffa 2015).

The two slides bring together two sets of anxieties: the Sinhalese being duped into turning themselves in to a minority, and the Muslims – armed jihadists, waiting to take over through violence if necessary – the majority status in 2040. The face of the niqab clad woman “the *gonibilla*” is important. It is the Muslim woman, but as stated earlier it is also the scary figure of Sinhala children’s stories and the despicable and dangerous figure that points out “traitors” to be killed off during the *Bhishanaya* or the Time of Terror of

1988-89. The rhetorical othering of the Muslims through the *gonibilla* figure is specific to the Sri Lankan context, and is emblematic of the intensity of the Sinhala anxiety caused by this particular brand of otherness. The fact that the Muslims who embrace this practice are not self-conscious about the nature of the self-othering practice that they are participating in, that they are unaware of the manner in which the niqab may resemble the *gonibilla*, and that they have no frame of reference through which to realize its import is telling of the gulf that exists between communities.

The monks had an elaborately worked out logic through which they represented the manner in which this minoritizing of Buddhists will take place.¹³ The monk stated that, of the Sinhala Buddhist population, a majority is over the age of 40 and no longer able to bear children. Of the remainder, another half is men. Of the group of women of childbearing age, a significant percentage has been persuaded by NGOs to engage in permanent birth control and therefore cannot have any more children. Therefore according to their calculation, the remainder constitutes just one million Sinhala Buddhist women who are capable of having children. At the present rate of population increase, if they even have three children each (which most will not) it will not be possible to replace the aging population. Therefore, a large section of the current Sinhala Buddhist population will be dead by 2040 and will not be replaced and thereby, the Sinhala

¹¹ The Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka in 1505 and stayed until they were ousted by the Dutch some 150 years later.

¹² The PunchiPavulaRaththaran campaign was a population control initiative from the 1960s.

¹³ The following is drawn mainly from the presentation made by Ven. Madegoda Abhayatissa Thero at the BBS Kandy meeting on 17th March 2013.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inZa_HEbD8Q

Buddhists will lose their majority status in the country. The monk emphasized the need for young people to save Sinhaleanness through having children.

The Muslims, according to the Ven. Madegoda Abhayatissa Thero, have many more than three children. In Muslim households, the grandmother, the granddaughter and the mother, the monk states, are all pregnant at the same time. He stated further “If you see a Muslim woman she will have one child in the hand one in the stomach and a whole line of them following her.”¹⁴ This fecundity of the Muslim family is referred to in derogatory terms by Buddhist monks on a regular basis.¹⁵

¹⁴ This rhetoric of the fecund Muslim males and the constantly pregnant female appears again and again in various fora. Professor Nur Yalman was in Sri Lanka in Mid February 2013. He gave an interesting talk about his time in Sri Lanka in the 1960s when he wrote the book *Under the Bo Tree* and the changes that have come about. He made some veiled allusions to the anti minority sentiment rampant in the country and commented that it was a good opportunity for Sri Lanka, at the end of the war to draw from the values of true Buddhism. He also stated that he found the Sinhalese to be a gentle people and that their sensibility was ideally suited to a multi-ethnic polity. A member of the learned audience asked a question of the professor and the question was this: “As a Buddhist, Buddhism teaches me to respect others. However, this is a small country and it can only support a limited population. But one community, claiming that it is their religious belief, are refusing to practice birth control and are engaged in increasing the population. What can we as Buddhists do about this?” I read this comment as a reference to Muslims and their supposed non-practicing of birth control. (notes from Nur Yalman talk)

¹⁵ See for instance the manner in which the Ven. Gnanasara listing Muslims’ abilities at an interview on the TV channel Youn Asia Television available at <http://modernvdo.com/UVJiTHNEemZ4bHMz>. He states that Muslims ability in trade and in “making children” (*Muslimayadaruwohadannadakshay*) should be valorized as an asset to the country. Also see the

Within this discourse, large and visible Muslim groups are seen as over sized “nuclear families” whose numbers will contribute towards them taking over from the Sinhalese as the majority. Muslim othering also involves the overt sexualization of the predatory Muslim male. References to the sexuality and fecundity of Muslim women --that they are constantly pregnant, that age is no barrier to Muslim women’s pregnancy-- is also a reference to the rampant sexuality, of Muslim males. The monk’s claim about mothers, grandmothers and daughters all being pregnant at the same time, is a claim that Muslim men of whatever age are sexually potent and Muslim women of all ages are sexually active and engaged in the process of reproduction. The Facebook pages and monk’s rhetoric against No Limit and later Fashion Bug were also couched in sexualized terms. For instance, one Facebook post, calling for Sinhalese to not patronize Muslim owned clothing stores, referred to Muslim men fixing cameras in women’s changing rooms. The post said “dear women, please be careful.” (*kantavanipraveshamvanna*) the next line read “share for the sake of your mother, sister, female friend, or girl friend.” The post is addressed to men to look after their women. In the BBS Kandy meeting of March 2012, the Rev. Gnanasara read out names of Sinhala women who had worked at the Muslim owned clothing stores, converted to Islam and in certain instances, married Muslim men. The Ven. Gnanasara shouted with reference to the clothing chains “can we let them create

comment on Muslim fecundity by the chief monk of the Deegavapi temple quoted in Emmanuel. (2015)

harems like this?” And concluded by saying “hereafter we will not send our daughters to work there. We will only send our sons!” Here the venerable Gnanasara is making claims not just about the overt sexuality of Muslim men but that Sinhala women cannot make choices about sexual partners outside of the Sinhala Buddhist community. And further, by asserting that it is Muslim men that are creating the harems, he is also saying that Sinhala women are the victims of the predatory sexuality of Muslim men and have no agency of their own. Another comment worth making is that there is no rejection of the Muslims’ place in the economy. Sinhalese will work with them but only *male* Sinhalese.¹⁶

¹⁶ In the case of Hindutva in India too the sexualization of the Muslim other is a trope that has received much comment. In this case too there is a fear of Muslim sexuality and fecundity articulated as that of a minority overtaking the majority. (Menon 2005, Sarkar, 2002). Sarkar writing in the aftermath of the anti Muslim violence in Gujarat which led to the brutal and targeted rape and killing of Muslim women and children describes the possible mentality behind the frenzy of violence as something that had been cultivated by active ideology and politics. There is a revenge narrative for past wrongs – Muslim abductions of Hindu women-- that were resuscitated by alleged contemporary wrongs, the rape and cutting off of the breasts of Hindu women in the train in Godhra --that led to the frenzy of violence, Sarkar suggests. She also suggests that there is a prevailing sexual obsession about allegedly ultra virile Muslim male bodies and over fertile Muslim female ones that inspire and sustain the figures of paranoia and revenge (Sarkar 2002. p2874). It must be acknowledged that the violence against Muslims in Sri Lanka is in no way comparable to occurrences in India. But given the history of sexual violence against Tamil women during and after the conflict, and the BBS’s call for allegiance with the BJP such violence continues to be within the realm of the possible in Sri Lanka as well.

The Muslim Response: Responses from male Muslims constituted a gendered discourse similar to that of the Buddhist monks.

Mansur Dahlan a community spokesperson, a member of the advisory board of the All Ceylon Jamiathul Ulema (ACJU), was a rare breed, a Muslim elder who actually could hold his own in a debate in the Sinhala language. In a TV interview with the local YA TV, Dahlan also invoked the same *Punchi Pawula Raththaran* government initiative when discussing the issue of population.¹⁷ He stated to the interviewer, “the falling Sinhala population is not the problem of the Muslims. Look at the number of abortion clinics that are opening up,” he said. “Muslim women don’t patronize those. They are mainly used by Sinhala women. If an incentive was offered to the Sinhala women to have more children rather than offer an incentive for birth control, then this problem can be solved.” It is here that he mentions the family planning/population control drive that provided incentives for women to have less children. Even to-date doctors routinely provide family planning advice and the choice of permanent contraceptives to women after their third pregnancy. Dahlan too then echoes the monks and reproduces the prevailing stereotypes regarding Muslim fecundity. Muslim women perform their reproductive role satisfactorily, according to Dahlan. The solution to the monks’ perceived

¹⁷ *Muslimhalalanyagamikayantaharamda?*
<https://vimeo.com/59737224>. Featured on TNL TV channel on 21.02.2013

problem lies in getting Sinhala women to reproduce as efficiently.¹⁸

During this time an email was circulated in the form of two graphics ostensibly from a Muslims perspective.¹⁹ One was entitled *Why is my niqab your problem?* Done with a combination of Sinhala and English text, the graphic featured visuals of a niqab clad Muslim woman with a speech bubble indicating that what was represented in the graphic

¹⁸ Dahlan was claiming to speak for two million Muslims. And a gynecologist writing to the *Ravaya* newspaper in fact claimed that Muslim choices of reproductive technologies often were similar to those of others of their class background.

¹⁹ This email was forwarded to me by a female feminist mentor, and a Muslim friend and colleague with whom I had done much work on the anti Muslim sentiment. I have since then found it featured on the following website <http://jaffnamuslim.siteblogs.net/2014/12/06/why-my-niqab-is-your-problem/>. (Only the first poster, the second that invokes sexual violence is not shown.) I am not aware of the reach of the email or the extent of its circulation. I use it because it reflects sentiment I often heard repeated by Muslim males. Muslim male positions on the hijab are rarely informed by a feminist understanding of the issue. See for instance veteran Muslim journalist Latheef Farook's article "Does Hijab prevent social development" available at <http://www.dailynews.lk/?q=features/does-hijab-prevent-social-development>. In this article Farook claims that those who are "impressed with modern civilization" claim that "Hijab is an obstacle that prevents women from progressing in the spheres of personal and social development." Questioning the sentiments of such persons Farook states further that such people "wish that women became an item to be traded in the market of immorality. They want to rid women of their chastity and bashfulness, and wish that their thinking and objectives becomes Westernised. Their desire is that women become experts in singing, dancing and acting. In short, they want the Muslim woman to be devoid of faith, belief, purity, morals and chastity." It is unlikely that many women who wear the hijab will identify with the writer's invocation of "chastity and bashfulness." Such a reductive understanding of women's lives and roles informs male interventions into discourses on women in Sri Lanka.

was her perspective. The graphic, done in the form of a poster has a line of text at the top stating that many religions prescribed a form of modest dress for women. A visual below that depicted a group of smiling women with different sorts of head coverings categorized as Christian-catholic, Orthodox Jewish, Muslim, and Sabran.²⁰ The visual was followed by text stating that both Buddhism and ancient Sinhala texts urge women to be modest. This text is followed by a quotation from an unnamed Sinhala literary source about how a woman should cover her body, not smile too broadly, and not leave the house without permission from her mate. The niqab clad woman's speech bubble states: "why then is my dress that is so modest considered to be alien to our culture? Is it not the types of dress below that are unsuitable for our culture? The next illustration contains a line of women in tight pants, short skirts, midriff baring outfits and low cut tops. Then why is my niqab a problem for you?"

The second poster/leaflet referred explicitly to sexual violence. Invoking the high incidences of sexual violence in the country—with a citation from a women's group's March 8th message—it stated, for sure the blame for these incidents should be placed entirely at the hands of the perpetrator. However, women who incited these men by walking around half-naked should also bare some amount of responsibility. In the same way as we lock our windows and bolt our doors against thieves and criminals

²⁰ It is not clear what the term Sabran featured in the graphic refers to. It is a town in France and the reference could be to medieval European women's dress.

in the night, in the same way that drivers wear helmets and put on seat belts, women too when they wear modest clothing receive a measure of protection. That is why every religion calls upon women to wear modest (*sheelachara*) dress.

Next to the text there is a visual entitled “a simple theory” – there are two photographs – one of a lollipop with a wrapper on and one with the wrapper off. In the first there is a fly moving away from the sweet. In the second the lollipop is covered with flies!

The next illustration further endorses the idea of the lecherous male. There is a woman in a bikini and sunglasses walking; she is being followed by a man with his pants down revealing his buttocks. There is a woman who is walking in the opposite direction dressed in the niqab to whom the man pays no attention. The speech bubble over the woman in the bikini says “I am minding my own business, why is he following me?” The niqab clad woman looks on as she walks away and states – “thank goodness I was saved by my clothing!”²¹The Hijabi’s speech bubble at the bottom of the page states in Sinhala-

We are not casting aspersions on anyone’s choice of dress. Every woman has the right to dress the way she wants. In the same way,

²¹ This particular graphic is culled from one that was in circulation internationally on facebook and a variety of other websites. The original features only the two women --one clad in *niqab* and the other in a bikini and sunglasses. In the original the bikini clad woman’s speech bubble states – “only the eyes are shown, everything else is covered -how oppressed!” And the *niqab* clad woman states – “only the eyes are covered, everything else is shown, how oppressed!”

<http://www.democraticunderground.com/10026022609>

don’t we too have the right to dress in our religious dress in order to ensure our security? Why is my niqab your problem?

The two graphics subscribe to an understanding of women’s roles and social worth that is similar to the monk’s discourse, but also reflects a widely held justification among Muslims in the south Asian region and elsewhere for Muslim women’s veiling practices. The first graphic extolling the virtues of Muslim women’s dress, reworks the age old trope of asking women to practice modest dress or be subjected to a predatory male gaze and the inevitability of sexual violence. The second graphic is explicit in making a connection between sexual violence and dress. It is also produced from an imagination that cannot comprehend solidarity among women. The possibility that the Muslim woman might be incensed enough by the prospect of sexual violence against a fellow human being to intervene to stop such violence is not permitted by the visual.

While the poster depicts women’s bodies only as objects of male desire, the graphic also depicts men as flies – unclean and polluting, and unable to control themselves in the presence of a woman’s body if not for the concealing and obstructing barriers of clothing. The normalization of sexual violence through the depiction of males as predatory and out of control and similar to vermin (flies) goes to further regularize violent and criminal male sexual behavior as an everyday occurrence. On the one hand women are called upon to take measures to protect themselves from such male predators. On the other hand, according to

this logic such a dangerous state of affairs can only be avoided through a combative and protective “good” masculinity, dovetailing well with the combative masculinity of militarism that sees women as needing protection from predatory ‘other’ men.²² While Muslim interlocutors may not have intended the connection with a “saviour” masculinity attributing safety exclusively to the hijab and *niqab*, I argue however that the graphic participated and drew upon elements of the same militaristic discourse that saw women only as objects and thereby victims of male sexual violence and in need of protection.

These two graphics were on email during the height of the circulation of anti Muslim sentiment among the Colombo circles that I frequent and the extent to which it received wide coverage is not clear. It most probably had a life on social media as well. I have also more recently come across social media photographs of the lollipop with and without the wrapper appearing in Billboards in the middle-east. These are generally advertisements favouring veiling practices for women. I use it here since it referenced a perspective that I periodically encountered among groups of Muslim men who were responding to the crisis.²³ And that these

²² Such protection from “good” men is also of course reserved for “good” women as many feminists have pointed out.

²³ Another such instance was the anti BBS monk – Watarakke Vijitha thero extolling the virtues of Islamic clothing for women as the most modest and most civilized dress for women—(*vinitha, sanwara*) since it covers a woman completely. He made this statement addressing the Upcountry Muslim Council meeting. The statement is available on a YouTube video made by an organization called Knowledge Box and uploaded on 24th August 2013.

graphics in particular had little to do with womens’ experiences was born out almost immediately afterwards. At a women’s meeting that was organized by the Secretariat for Muslims in August 2013 we discussed these graphics. And the immediate response of the participating women—many of whom wore the hijab and some who wore the niqab --was that they wear the hijab, niqab or any form of Muslim dress not to protect themselves from predatory males, but because they believe it to be a direct request of Allah that appears in the Quran.²⁴

I received this email from a male colleague who was very involved with the activism against the BBS. He forwarded it

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbV3QUaWILQ>

²⁴ During field-work that I conducted a decade ago women were less shy about stating that they covered in order to ensure that men were not tempted by women’s beauty. (Haniffa 2005a) With regards to the Quran’s statements regarding modesty Leila Ahmad claims that there is no direct injunction in the Quran regarding veiling. The practice was prevalent during the time of the prophet Muhammad in many parts of the world including Arabia and was probably an elite practice. Within the young Muslim community veiling and seclusion became a norm only for the prophet’s wives. In the Hadith or the practices of the prophet, the use of the phrase “she took to the veil” to indicate that “she became the wife of the prophet” suggests that even after Muhammad’s death the practice was not common amongst Muslims. The Quran (Yusuf Ali translation) states: “Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: and God is well acquainted with all that they do.” 24:31 And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their sons, their husbands sons, their brothers or their brothers sons

to me as an example of a good response that we could use in our anti BBS work. He could not quite understand my opposition to the images and rhetoric. He thought it was a well-formulated response to the BBS. Positing that most men see women only as sex objects, that women should constantly be vigilant against sexual assault, that women are responsible for their protection from sexual assault, that sexual assault occurs because of women's dress, that women are only objects of male pleasure (like a lollipop) that men are vermin (flies) that are attracted to any and every female were all ideas propagated by the set of graphics. They did not seem to be thought of as problematic by this friend or many others among whom the graphics were shared. I am arguing here that misogynist ideas that were prevalent within the Sri Lankan public sphere and given public expression under the Rajapaksa regime were part of a fairly widespread male cultural ethos in Sri Lanka that crossed ethno religious allegiances. Therefore the prevalence of predatory male sexuality, and a culture of male sexual violence against which women needed to protect themselves were truisms about Sri Lankan society even for my Muslim activist male friend. Therefore, the graphic depicting women as lollies and men as flies reflected a social reality, and arguing that hijab provided protection for women from predatory male sexuality was an ideal even progressive defense of the hijab!

I have argued elsewhere that gender relations within the Muslim community were inevitably inflected by Muslims' minority consciousness. I argued that the performance of segregated male and

female spaces and the hierarchization of male female relations among Muslims were important and were impacted by the non-endorsement, dismissal and demonization of Muslim masculinity in a multi religious and plural Sri Lankan public sphere. Maintaining strict gender hierarchies in the homes of middle class Muslims that I worked with, then, was important. Individual Muslims perform hierarchized gender relations in Muslim identified settings far more intensely, and with greater commitment than they do in more multi religious settings. While for some this performance was meaningful in one set of social interactions with little relevance in many others, for many it was performative in that it spawned greater restrictions for women regarding dress choice, freedom of movement, access to education, and strictures to practice their religion in particular ways. (Butler 1990) It is often this internalization of gender hierarchies that renders such discourses about dress, safety, and also ideas of predatory males meaningful.

The Rajapaksa years saw a coming together of gender relations inflected by post-war militarism as well as those formed by a generation of minority consciousness exacerbated by the strained ethnic relations of the conflict years. However, the response by activists in Sri Lanka to the assertion of these very gendered positions was also somewhat hesitant and muted.

Let me end this section with one other example of the gendered and sexualized nature of this discourse about hijab. I was forwarded an email by a male friend which many told me later was circulated widely via many of Colombo's old boys networks

that share images that might be termed soft porn. The photos were paparazzi shots of a voluptuous young woman – obviously wealthy and well dressed in revealing and flattering clothing. She was shown entering and leaving various venues and in one shot waving to a photographer. She was uniformly attired in low cut or strappy short dresses and high heels. After a series of images of this young woman the final slide states.

Halal certified.

Who is she?

Princess Reem Al Waleed bin Talal of Saudi Arabia.

No Burqa for her!!

... If she was in a Burqa, you would not have received this ... Be thankful for small mercies!

The middle class men consuming images of this young woman's body via social media were calling attention to Muslim hypocrisy by presenting the Saudi princess' non- hijab clad body as an "uncovered" Muslim female body. They were also asserting their own right to look at women's bodies for pleasure and celebrate the media's circulation of images of scantily clad and sexualized women thinly disguised as icons of female wealth and success. I draw attention to this set of images to illustrate once again the prevailing sexist and sexualized mainstream middle class culture in Sri Lanka which also drew from and participated in the anti Muslim sentiment in circulation at that time.

So what?

I have argued so far, that the Militarism that pervaded Sri Lanka's social and political worlds in the aftermath of May 2009 (when the war against the Liberation

Tigers of Tamil Eelam officially ended) influenced post-war nationalism and brought about a recalibration of gender orders within the country. I am arguing further that the Sinhala supremacist nationalist hate rhetoric against Muslims drew from and was formed by this discourse of militarism and for the purposes of this paper I have illustrated the gendered nature of the thus influenced rhetoric. I have also demonstrated the striking similarity between the BBS assertions and the Muslim response – both representing communal sensibilities that saw women as owned by the collective and defined by their sexuality and reproductive capacity.

I want to end with some speculation regarding what this means for women's solidarity and women organizing. As I have indicated in the analyses of both the Buddhist and Muslim rhetoric in relation to anti Muslim sentiment, both have little space for entertaining ideas of women's solidarity. The dated stereotypes that were mobilized by the Minister of women's affairs of the Rajapaksha regime for instance indicated that women were incapable of such solidarity. The Honorable minister, Tissa Karaliyadda, once stated:

Even though we have paid special attention to the protection of women's rights, when a woman is given authority in a department or a ministry they tend to suppress other women (who) are under their administration out of jealousy. This situation will lead to inefficiency in that particular organization. Hence always the main chair should be given to a male and the assistant

should be a female' the Minister said.²⁵

The stereotypes regarding women that are mobilized by both Muslim and Buddhist sets of representations and by representatives of the state are curious in their celebration of archaic, obsolete and outmoded ideals about women and speak to the structural maintenance of gender hierarchies in what many Sri Lankans self identify as the south Asian country with the greatest freedom for women. The stereotypes seem to persist in an economy liberalized since the 1970s where many women are integrated in to the labour force, and are also compelled to participate economically in the informal sector. As others have pointed out women in the garment sector, the plantations and those who work as migrant labour form the base of the Sri Lankan economy. Women also have leadership positions in many professions and professional bodies, and the country's (male) diplomats often boast of having the worlds first ever woman prime minister and later, a woman president. Women constitute a majority of university educated youth.²⁶ Every

²⁵ <http://www.mirror.lk/news/5843-a-male-should-always-be-the-chairperson>. Of course there was serious opposition to this from women activists and a statement was issued. But to no avail. The Minister of Child Development and Women's Affairs, Mr. Tissa Karaliyadda was recently quoted as saying that the concept of Gender Equality was meaningless, and that women activists who were advocating such ideas were a small minority who had rejected the values of pathivatha (fidelity to husbands). The interview was aired on the Sirasa TV channel on 15th November 2013.

²⁶ In the 2012=2013 academic year alone out of total of 24198 admitted to the universities 14853 were women. From Sri Lanka University Statistics available at http://www.ugc.ac.lk/downloads/statistics/stat_2013/chapter2.pdf

professional category in the country includes women and Sri Lanka boasts of the second highest ranking for the region in the Global Gender Gap index (at 79 out of 142, ten rankings behind Bangladesh who are ranked at 68).²⁷

Several years in to the emergence and spread of organized anti Muslim sentiment in the country, there has been no substantive coming together of a strong women's voice in either the critique of the Bodu Bala Sena rhetoric or to question the very reductive response from Muslim interlocutors. Those who have looked at the issue with even a partially gendered lens have done so in ethnically specific terms. Chulani Kodikara's excellent piece calls attention to the BBS making statements about Sinhala women's fertility, and Qadri Ismail has pointed out the many problems that arise in instances where Muslim men police the actions of Muslim women.²⁸ Neither calls attention to the fact that the BBS and the Muslim male discourse reflects derogatory ideas regarding women in general and are not

²⁷ As many have pointed out, however, the political participation of women remains abysmal at less than 5% in parliament and even lower in local government. This brings down Sri Lanka's ranking in these indexes. The story about how women's lack of representation in parliament leads to but also stems from the prevalence of such gender stereotypes, and the manner in which it indexes a structural problem in the Sri Lankan society remains to be written.

²⁸ Ismail's intervention is problematic in that he attributes women's dress only to male policing and renders any choice that women may exercise in practicing Islamic dress absent in his discussion. His analysis does not reference the immense literature on women's dress transformation either in Sri Lanka or elsewhere and speaks to a very problematic and reductive putatively ethical position on gender relations in Muslim communities embraced by many academics in Sri Lanka.

specific to Sinhala or Muslim women alone.

Another issue that haunts the lack of feminist organizing around the BBS despite its very clearly gendered rhetoric is most active Sri Lankan feminists' mistrust of the *hijab*. Since the 1980s Muslim women's practice of the hijab has become institutionalized in the country. Hijabs are distributed by the state as part of the Muslim government school uniform. However, many women's activists, from the Muslim community and from other communities, are not convinced as to the nature of the "choice" that informs Muslim women's adoption of the dress and the difference from other women that Muslim women are thereby asserting (Haniffa 2005, Mahmood 2006, Haniffa 2008). While the hijab and niqab have both been practices that became common in the 1980s the niqab is arguably more prevalent today with many niqab clad women pursuing university education and public roles while maintaining their face cover. The piety movement led transformation experienced by Sri Lankan Muslims during the conflict years has not been effectively communicated to ethnic and religious others and many stereotypes abound. One of my feminist friends once told me that "the BBS are ok with the traditional Muslims. They are only against the fundamentalists." This feminist activist's remark invoking both problematic terms "traditional Muslim" and "fundamentalist" are part of a larger vocabulary shared by local civil society that includes the uncritical use of the term "radicalization." Such terms underscore the manner in which local discourses "know" the reality of Muslims in Sri

Lanka—nearly two million strong-- many of whom have committed to the self-transformation promised by the Islamic piety movement. The hijab-clad woman personifies this transformed Muslim community known through the above terms – radicalized, fundamentalist and so on. The failure of Sri Lanka's "progressive" community including feminists, has been their inability to perceive these Muslim women's concerns and address them collectively.²⁹

What is crucial about the post war moment in the country is the manner in which the latent racism and misogyny within Sri Lankan society found public endorsement by Sinhala society's icons of authority—the sangha and the political leadership. This leadership claimed to speak about both women and minorities without letting representatives of either group on the podium. The minority Muslim response has been to seek common cause with the monk's rhetoric through endorsing the monks' positions on women. The result is a complete erasure of women's perspectives.

Women's speech in the public sphere—where women articulate political

²⁹ There have been local non-Muslim activists who have engaged with Muslim communities and participated in programs seeking to address Muslim concerns during the years when the BBS was at its most active. However, they have been in the minority and much of the work of documentation, engagement with the state and human rights activism has been carried out by Muslim activists. The issue of Muslim women has come up rarely other than in the ways outlined in this paper. When the BBS popularity was at its height, many Muslim women dressed in black were fearful of venturing out in public. At this point the Muslim Council distributed pastel colored hijabs in exchange for the black. One Muslim feminist was not happy with this effort as it further institutionalized the hijab.

moral or ethical positions common to all—remains absented by this discourse. The complete dominance of nationalist public discourse by men with the assumption that they speak for all has silenced women institutionally and politically. The women that attempt to speak—either in support of or against this discourse—face enormous obstacles not only to speak but to be heard. As Kodikara has argued, the nationalist preoccupations of the Rajapaksa regime resulted in a roll back of progressive legislation favouring women. (Kodikara 2014)

The presidential elections of 2015 where Maithripala Sirisena defeated the incumbent were a resounding rejection of the Rajapaksa regime. The critique mounted against the regime, however, was against the rampant corruption and nepotism of the Rajapaksa family and not primarily of the ethnicised and gendered nature of its politics. However anti-Rajapaksa rhetoric during both the presidential and general election campaigns included references to the fact that many in his camp were rapists or had a record of sexual violence, or of verbally insulting women. It was also claimed that it is the bankruptcy of Rajapaksa's political project that required him to continue to incite ethnic hatred.³⁰ While

³⁰ An advertisement for the Sirisena Campaign included one where Hirunika Premachandra criticizes the manner in which Rajapaksa loyalist S.B.Dissanayake called for the parading of an unclothed former president Chandrika Kumaratunge as an insult to all Sri Lankan women. Further JVP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake roundly critiqued the Rajapaksa regime's inability to see the war as a devastating period in the country's history that the entire country needed to recover from and not as a victory to be celebrated endlessly at the expense of reconciliation and positive changes to people's everyday lives.

the fact that such ideas are circulating in the public realm is promising the positive articulation of this critique—where minorities are and should be placed within the Sri Lankan polity, and what the state's position should be on women has not yet been made clear. In this context the news that the cabinet has approved the changing of legislation to ensure 25% compulsory nominations of women for local government elections is welcome.³¹

The minoritization of women and the feminization of minorities that began following the military victory over the LTTE caused distress to minorities—the Tamils in the north and Muslims in the south.³² Additionally the discourse—as represented by those proposing and opposing it—reduced women to their sexual and reproductive roles alone. While elements of the previous regime that embraced such rhetoric continue to hold office there is a clear and public articulation of opposition to it. However, regardless of this welcome shift, overturning the structural features that makes such ideas regarding both women and minorities commonsensical in popular consciousness is going to take time.

Women's incursion into the public sphere is being modulated and masculine

³¹ See Lanka Business Online. 30th September 2015. *Sri Lanka to include 25% women in local government elections*. Available at <http://www.lankabusinessonline.com/sri-lanka-to-include-25-pct-women-in-local-government-elections/>

³² I am referring here to the rhetorical othering of northern Tamils through the virtual occupation of the north by the military and the BBS running loose in the south. I do not propose thereby to suggest that the Muslims and Tamils are localized to the north and the south or that there are no Tamils in the south or Muslims in the north.

hegemony of sorts is maintained through utilizing a constant, repeated and frenzied rhetoric of women's sexualized and domestic place in the world (Chatterjee). And this is true not just of the anxious assertion of post-war Sinhala nationalism but of the equally anxious defensive response from Muslim representatives. Due to the prevalence of such ideas Muslim women find it difficult to break into the annals of community decision-making either through politics or through leadership positions among the ulema. While there are hundreds of Muslim women lawyers, at least one prominent magistrate and a very powerful assistant attorney general who is a Muslim woman, the All Ceylon Jamiathul Ulema (ACJU) as gatekeepers of change in community religious practice has consistently blocked the introduction of women quazis.³³ And women's participation in politics in Sri Lanka remains the lowest in the South Asian region.

The BBS articulations and the responses to them emerge from a particular Sri Lankan brand of gender relations. Different community experiences with regards to gender relations must be understood, and are in fact necessary for successful political interventions. The distinctions of caste, class religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation and regional location that impact Sri Lankan women's lives in particular ways need to be understood as having nuances that may not immediately make sense within prevailing frameworks. The point of taking account of difference is to then understand the manner in which structural

features that cut across ethnic particularities may impact such communities differently. It is not to lose sight of the possibility of collective action to address such differently troubling experiences.

Unfortunately, given the polarizing and ghettoizing impact of the conflict, much of the analysis about the status of women in Sri Lanka has been ethnic specific (Haniffa 2005, De Alwis 1998, Maunaguru 1995). And further, the conflict influenced our categories of critical analysis. Social science investigations about Muslims, for instance, were eclipsed by the urgency to understand Sinhala and Tamil nationalism and the mechanics of the conflict. In post war, post Rajapaksa Sri Lanka, then, we are compelled to ask new questions and find new arenas of inquiry to inform both our scholarship and our politics. 🙏

³³ Those who adjudicate on matters of Muslim personal law.

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