

# STAGING PAIN: REPRESENTATION, THE DISABLED SOLDIER AND THE BUTTERFLIES THEATRE OF SRI LANKA<sup>1</sup>

## *The Pain of the Battlefield*

Walking on crutches  
I got on the bus.  
But no room for me there.  
Beautiful young men and women  
Sit, holding hands,  
No one looks at me.  
I clutched my crutches  
I saw white flags along the road  
To honour the soldiers who sacrificed their lives  
For the motherland.  
Gamunu, Vijayaba, Vikum, Parakum.  
As if to say they are the brave sons of the Sinhala.

'You are the soul of the nation'  
Are the songs you sing.  
How true, these lines,  
The ear hears  
How the crutches cry in pain.

Private 452258, Corporal K.A.D.R.S.P. Indra Kumara  
(4<sup>th</sup> Gemunu Watch)<sup>2</sup>

## 1. The Body in Pain

Elaine Scarry, in her book *The Body in Pain*,<sup>3</sup> discusses the function of injury in war. She notes that 'The main purpose and outcome of war is injuring.'<sup>4</sup> Yet, an extraordinary silence and instability surrounds the role of injury in war. This deliberate maiming of the body is never called what it is – for that would be drawing

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<sup>2</sup> K.A.D.R.S.P. Indra Kumara, *Ranaviru Miniketa* 3 no. 12, Ragama: Ranaviru Sevana, October 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.63.

attention to the body in pain. Rather, it is named a 'by-product' of the war; collateral damage, 'shock and awe'.<sup>5</sup> Military language withholds the meaning of injury and pain in war to acknowledge its presence only within a larger military 'strategy', 'camouflage,' 'sweep' or 'code.'<sup>6</sup> In integrating several bodies into one homogenized collective corps, the military assists, Scarry notes, in 'the disappearance of the human body from accounts of the very event that is the most radically embodying event in which human beings ever collectively participate.'<sup>7</sup> This event - which is the act of killing in war - is thus renamed as the 'disarming of a unit', 'prevention of enemy advance,' or 'taking out a division.'

Injury as a marker of loss in war is another reason for its suppression. The numbers of dead and wounded in battle is a site of contention with each side accusing the other of inflation or erasure of the 'actual' numbers of dead and injured. The appropriation of civilian injury for claims of human rights abuses also serves to displace the focus away from the body and pain, for this is a terrain on which a strategic contest for propaganda and counter-propaganda between opponents is fought. The wounded *subject*, whether soldier or civilian, is, therefore, externalized in the structures and discourse of war, eclipsed and disowned so that the attributes of injury are transferred elsewhere, onto the terrain of ideology and away from the human body.<sup>8</sup> Ideology is both real and imagined: real because it mediates the reality of the relationship between people and the social conditions that govern their existence; and imagined because it 'discourages a full understanding of these conditions of existence and the way (we are) constituted within them.'<sup>9</sup> It thus follows that ideology is often masked, deferred, camouflaged. The body in pain of the wounded soldier or civilian, the dead and maimed in war, get read within ideology, then, as sacrifice, duty, heroism.

A rich genealogy of critical thought on the body in pain and its relationship to language has come down to us through Nietzsche and Wittgenstein to Durkheim, Elaine Scarry, Veena Das, Aishwarya Lakshmi and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. Scarry's discussion of the body in pain, although published in 1985, is still useful. It has also been influential. Her attempt to create 'out of pain the very condition of the human subject'<sup>10</sup> has been used by scholars such as Jeanie Forte analyzing theatre

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<sup>5</sup>'Shock and Awe' was the slogan of the U.S led coalition forces' attack on Iraq in March-April 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Scarry., p.133.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p.71.

<sup>8</sup>Scarry., p.64.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, London & New York. Routledge, 2003, p.53.

<sup>10</sup>Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: gender, culture and postcolonialism*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993, p.20.

performance that dramatizes the experience of the female body and its pain within specific cultural contexts of women in medical institutions being treated for 'hysteria', anorexia, child birth; or women undergoing foot binding or genital mutilation.<sup>11</sup> Both Aishwarya Lakshmi and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan have turned to Scarry's discussion in their explorations of what constitutes sati in India. Claiming that 'the condition of pain can serve adequately to define the human subject in certain contexts' Sunder Rajan nevertheless offers several qualifications to Scarry's theoretical propositions on the body in pain. While Scarry relies on the universality of pain as shared knowledge which unites the torturer, soldier and perpetrator of violence with their victims in the understanding perpetrators have of the pain their victims will suffer, Sunder Rajan draws attention to sati as a site in which people regard the pain of sufferers as ontologically different from their own.<sup>12</sup> The defenders of sati attribute heroic significance to the woman committing sati by assuring the public that she does not experience pain as normal people and if she does, transcends or endures her pain with courage and honour. A dichotomy and separation between body and spirit is central in this discourse, and, Aishwarya Lakshmi observes, once pain is objectified in this way, its very 'entrance into language makes invisible the actualities of its own state.'<sup>13</sup> For Elaine Scarry, the difficulty in *representing* pain has roots in its very unsharability. It is localized and embodied in an individual experience. It is often disbelieved. It resists language and semeiosis.<sup>14</sup> Pain is often brought into language therefore by someone speaking on *behalf* of those who are in pain<sup>15</sup> in a move which defers and de-centres the body in pain. Elizabeth Jelin echoes this. She writes 'One of the characteristics of traumatic events is the massive character of their impact, creating a gap in the capacity "to be spoken" or told about. This provokes a hole in the ability to represent symbolically the event. There are no words, and therefore there cannot be memories. Memory remains disarticulated, and only painful traces, pathologies and silences come to the surface.'<sup>16</sup> For Valentine Daniel, on the other hand, pain can be represented. He

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<sup>11</sup>Jeanie Forte, 'Focus on the Body: Pain, Praxis, and Pleasure in Feminist Performance,' in Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (eds.) *Critical Theory and Performance*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992, pp. 248-262.

<sup>12</sup>Sunder Rajan, op.cit., p.20.

<sup>13</sup>Aishwarya Lakshmi, 'the liminal body: the language of pain and symbolism around sati,' in Helen Crowley, Lyn Thomas, Vicki Bertram (eds.) *Fiction and Theory: Crossing Boundaries*, (Feminist Review 74), Palgrave, Macmillan, 2003. p. 89.

<sup>14</sup>Scarry, op.cit p.4.

<sup>15</sup>Scarry, p.6.

<sup>16</sup>Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 23.

states 'There are myriad of ways in which memory can be suppressed or repressed. It can also be rendered into narrative, and thereby, made available for consensus and for the realisation by the community.' But he echoes Scarry in the notion that this representation is second best, inauthentic for falling short of the real thing. 'What is said by the subject trying to express his or her *Memorium Doloro*, however, can never satisfy the subject' states Daniel. 'The subject bearing the *memorium doloro* will invariably find it far too sublime to be sublimated into mere narrative. The urgency and magnitude of the telling will be deflated by the told.'<sup>17</sup> For Sunder Rajan, the insistence on the resistance of pain to language and representation is reductive for this is to fix pain as 'ontologically autonomous', to totalize it in 'conceptualizing pain as essentially unrepresentable'.<sup>18</sup> 'To attribute pain's resistance to re-presentation to the essential nature of pain itself' states Sunder Rajan, 'is to ignore the cultural, historical, gender-specific and generic variations in the representation of pain.' The defenders of sati who re-present pain according to their own religious and patriarchal categories is one such representation. The dramatization of women's bodies and pain in female/feminist theatre performance is another. However, representing the body in pain and mapping subjectivity onto its contours is to inhabit a complicated terrain. When the language of pain is appropriated or represented by someone else, it is to speak, as Scarry noted, on *behalf* of someone else, on behalf of the body in pain.<sup>19</sup> This is an articulation beset with danger. It denies a voice to the wounded subject and encourages a reading of him/her as passive victim. Where the pain of the sati was appropriated by Christian missionaries and British colonial officers in their interventions to stop its practice, the denunciation had a purchase in a cultural relativism which called the Hindu barbaric. It encourages a conceptual separation of the body from consciousness and enables the wounded subject to be seen as static, rather than in transit, albeit unevenly, from a state of pain to coping with pain. Cautioning against fetishizing the body in pain as stasis, Sunder Rajan notes, 'While the affect produced by a body in pain – pity, anger, sympathy, identification – is an important consideration in formulating a politics of intervention, it is important also to recognize that an inherent resistance to pain is what impels the individual or collective suffering subject towards freedom. It is therefore as one who acts/reacts, rather than as one who invites assistance, that one must regard the subject in pain.'<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Valentine Daniel, 'Whose face is that I see? Remembering the Unfallen,' (Fourth Neelan Tiruchelvam memorial lecture, Colombo, 29/7/2003), Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2003, p.6.

<sup>18</sup>Sunder Rajan, p.22.

<sup>19</sup>Scarry, p.7.

<sup>20</sup>Sunder Rajan, p.22.

The subjectivity of the disabled soldier can be constructively placed at the point of convergence of all these premises. To do so is an intervention that acknowledges and records the disabled soldiers' pain(s) as a condition of existence; and foregrounds the ideology of militarism as deliberately endorsing and designing that pain. Unlike the woman who does accomplish sati, the disabled soldier lives beyond the moment of injury and its pain. He suffers both somatic reactions and psychological 'trauma' caused by his injury. The disabled soldier also inhabits a doubleness that goes beyond the usual body in pain, or the sati in pain. For how do we view the disabled soldier who is *both* sufferer of pain and, as combatant, perpetrator of it on others? How does the disabled soldier deal with this duality? How can this be represented in a manner which, while centering the pain of the disabled soldier, also lays bare the work of militarization as a process which legitimizes the ideology of militarism and procures sanction for militaristic solutions to conflict? <sup>21</sup> If willful maiming and injury are central in war, yet are clothed in silence, what does this inaudibility mean for our own subjectivity as citizens within a militarized society? And if we should look at the body in pain as a dynamic entity, as one 'who acts/reacts' and resists pain in a bid towards freedom from suffering, rather than a passive entity inviting our assistance, where do we locate the agentive moments of the disabled soldier in this trajectory?

## 2. Narrating Pain

The Sri Lankan based Sunera Foundation's Butterflies Theatre productions intervene in this silence. Its four major productions to date – *Butterflies Will Always Fly* (1998), *Flowers Will Always Bloom* (2000/2001) and *Swinging Times* (2001 & 2003) and *Turtles Will Never Fly* (2004) is a theatre which integrates disabled and abled, and includes actors with Downs Syndrome, speech and hearing impairments, soldier and refugee, Sinhala and Tamil. It adopts a workshop style in which the abled and disabled present their own narratives through a performative language of dance, mime and puppetry that is not heavily reliant on the verbal sign. This style has the potential to shift 'the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality to matters of practices/doings/actions' which, according to Karan Barad, foreground 'important questions of ontology, materiality, and agency'<sup>22</sup> It is a performativity which brings into visibility the materiality of the disabled body in pain in a manner that is interventionist and agentive as much as it is

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<sup>21</sup>Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers*, p.3

<sup>22</sup>Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,' *Signs* 28, no.3, 2003, p.802.

cathartic: a performativity that resists the notion that the subject in pain is trapped in an eternal dissatisfaction with the representation of his/her pain.

The Butterflies Theatre offers a richly textured site of representation in portraying the subjectivity of the disabled soldier within the ambit of the Sri Lanka armed conflict and disability in general. In all militaries, the youthful, athletic, 'masculine' body is a basic requirement for entry into the fighting corps. That such a body is deliberately put at risk as a target for injury is one of the complexities of war. Eight disabled soldiers have taken part in the Butterflies Theatre. They are young men of Sinhala ethnicity (reflecting the ethnicized recruitment policy of the Sri Lanka army) and come from various parts of the south of the country. They have all been together at the Rana Viru Sevana (RVS), Ragama, which is the rehabilitation centre for disabled military personnel run by the Sri Lanka army, and from which they were chosen to take part in the Butterflies Theatre. We spoke to them directly about their motivations in joining the Sri Lanka army, their military career, the circumstances of their injury, how their disabilities have affected their lives, their thoughts on the war and the peace process. We also spoke to them about the roles they played in the Butterfly Theatre productions and its workshops, the impact of this theatre on their lives and social attitudes to the disabled in general.<sup>23</sup>

Several common strands emerge from their narratives. The date and place of injury are indelibly etched in the memory, as are the details of the wounding. The soldiers mark a long period of unconsciousness soon after the injury. This hiatus maybe due to heavy sedation, but it is noteworthy that, because of this period of coma, inbetween (un)consciousness, the experience of pain itself is not part of their conversational narrative. This void seems to endorse Elaine Scarry's observation that pain is difficult to represent because it is localized, embodied in an individual experience, its intensity even disbelieved. But the human defence mechanism also blocks out the memory of intense pain so that its absence is not because it resists language but because it is a memory *mediated* through time and coma. The consequence of the injury - the everyday pain of their wounded joints and muscles and the psychological pain - linger, however, in the lives of the disabled soldiers, constituting a very real lived reality. This is a condition they *can* narrate. On wheelchairs, wearing prostheses or reliant on crutches, paralyzed, visually impaired or incontinent, these soldiers who were once able bodied youthful men voice their depression, sense of isolation and loss at their disability. Pvt. Ajith Rohana Kulatunga who, in 1996, lost his leg to a landmine blast while serving in Batticoloa remarked 'I thought I had to be away from my colleagues...Like earlier I cannot do bunker duties...I was also very sad to go to my parents like this.' He articulates a

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<sup>23</sup>The interviews were conducted by me and my research assistant Samira Wijesiri in Kurunegala, Kuruvita, Horana, Colombo and Ragama.

sense of shame, of lost hopes, of uselessness to friends and society. Lance Corporal Wijebandara who was injured to a pressure mine in Pullimudday in 1995 and lost his right leg, refused the grand wedding that had been planned for him before his injury. Both soldiers signify a state of depression and sense of loss: of prestige, of masculinity.

The sense of shame, stigma and depression experienced by the disabled soldiers supports Sunder Rajan's argument that bodies are central in the consciousness of subjectivity and that it is necessary 'to prevent (a) conceptual split between body and consciousness in arguing that pain constitutes subjectivity.'<sup>24</sup> In certain circumstances this pain is socially and ideologically sanctioned. The corporeal and psychological pain of the disabled soldier, deeply embedded and implicated on the one hand in ideas about disability in general and the cult of the military abled body on the other, is such a case.

Society's view of disability is directed from the standpoint that, just like military bodies, the 'able body is crucial to the smooth operation of traditional theories of democracy, citizenship, subjectivity, beauty, and capital.'<sup>25</sup> The disabled body, aligned with the grotesque, freakish, and deviancy from this norm, has historically endured socially sanctioned 'cultural "solutions" as institutionalization, isolation, genocide, cure, concealment, segregation, exile, quarantine, and prosthetic masking.'<sup>26</sup> For the most part, in myths and legends, the disabled have sided with evil<sup>27</sup> and disabled rulers such as Tamerlaine and Richard 111 have been portrayed as ruthless and vindictive. Portrayals of the disabled as freakish figures who are either 'redeemed' by a beautiful abled bodied person falling in love with them, or who take revenge on the abled bodied are motifs common in Hollywood cinema. Any critique of abled bodied hegemony in this cinema is superceded by the melodramatic 'image of freaks as being sub-human after all.'<sup>28</sup> The sign of disability thus carries an ideologically loaded discourse. It is further complicated for encompassing multiple conditions including invisible disability which has its own set of challenges and paradigms.<sup>29</sup> Both Pvt. Kulatunga who wears a prosthetic leg

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<sup>24</sup>Sunder Rajan, p.23.

<sup>25</sup>Carol A. Breckenridge and Candace Vogler, 'The Critical Limits of Embodiment: Disability's Criticism,' *Public Culture* 13 (3), Fall 2001, p. 350.

<sup>26</sup>Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell, 'Re-engaging the Body: Disability Studies and the Resistance to Embodiment,' *Public Culture*, op.cit., p.368.

<sup>27</sup>Meenu Bhambani, 'Societal Responses to Women with Disabilities in India,' in Asha Hans and Annie Petri (eds.) *Women, Disability and Identity*, New Delhi: Sage, 2003, p.78.

<sup>28</sup>Madeleine A. Cahill and Martin F. Norden, 'Hollywood's Portrayals of Disabled Women,' in *Women, Disability and Identity*, p. 63.

<sup>29</sup>See W.J.T.Mitchell, 'Seeing Disability,' *Public Culture* 13 (3), Fall 2001, pp.391-397.

covered by clothing, and SPR Rajapakse whose visual impairment is invisible to others spoke of the difficulties they have travelling in the bus. Their disability unrecognized, they are disbelieved by an abled bodied public who refuse to give them seats. This makes the soldiers hide their disability in a masking that nevertheless carries anger and hurt. The bitterness is not only at an unequal citizenship but also the loss of public respect and honour they feel entitled to as soldiers who have sacrificed much for the country.

The disabled body, whether male or female, is thus positioned in relation to the agile, youthful, abled body, the cult of which is central in the ideology of militarism. Whether in Rupert Brooke's war sonnets or Leni Riefenstahl's films, the abled body was celebrated as good, patriotic citizenship in times of war. Masculinity is an important aspect of this. As George Mosse notes, 'War is an invitation to manliness'<sup>30</sup> and figurative literary and cinematic texts play their part in assiduously reinforcing the cult of the military body in the form of what Steve Neale's calls 'masculine romance(s)'.<sup>31</sup> For women combatants too (within the LTTE for instance), the goal has been to train just as rigorously as the men. Adele Ann, writing on the LTTE women combatants, states that these women are chosen for missions entirely on merit and that their 'deployment and allocation of military work is gender neutral.'<sup>32</sup> Noteworthy is that the sub-heading under which Adele Ann writes this is called 'True Grit' and that in fact, no gender neutrality operates here because the standards by which the women are judged have already been set by the masculine ideal within militaries.

The figurative site, however, also encompasses, as Allen Feldman notes, an 'aesthetics of *counter-memory* contingent on re-historicizing the practices and effects of violence'<sup>33</sup> – violence that is de-historicized in the first place through 'cultural anesthesia, the repression or inadmissibility of multiform, painful sensory experience.' Feldman draws attention to the DaDa and Surrealist movements that responded to the experiences of the World War I battlefields with its 'unprecedented mechanized assault on the human body' and the 'accelerated commodification and technological refunctioning of culture, of which war

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<sup>30</sup>George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p.114.

<sup>31</sup> Steve Neale quoted in Robert Eberwein, 'as a mother cuddles a child: sexuality and masculinity in world war II combat films,' in Peter Lehman (ed.) *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture*, New York & London: Routledge, 2001, p.163.

<sup>32</sup>Adele Ann, *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers*, Jaffna, LTTE, 1993, p.100.

<sup>33</sup>Allen Feldman, 'Violence and Vision: The Prosthetics and Aesthetics of Terror,' in Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, et al, *Violence and Subjectivity*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp.71-2. My emphasis.



technology was a part.' World War 1 created eleven million disabled veterans. In the work of artists like Salvador Dali, bodies patched up with artificial limbs and prosthetics enabled statements about the 'alterations to human proportions (as) corresponding mutations in human identity and its perceptual coordinates.'<sup>34</sup> Surrealism, in its aesthetics of anti-realism 'transmogrified the everyday into a sensory war zone' and its legacy provides, according to Feldman, not only a critique of the fetishized integration of realist aesthetics into warfare and the structure of everyday life, but also the possibility of rehabilitating other antirealist perceptual postures within the sensorium of war.<sup>35</sup>

One of these postures is to re-align and re-visualize the disabled soldier to embody war as willful injury. Sri Lankan artist Chandragupta Thenuwera accomplishes this in his work on the Sri Lankan war. Approximately 21,000 members of the Sri Lankan army, air force, navy and police have died in the war<sup>36</sup> and 11, 922 permanently maimed. Thenuwera, best known for his signature oeuvre known as 'Barrelism', painted a series on the disabled soldier of which one, entitled 'Victor?' was painted in 1998 following a major military defeat for the Sri Lanka army at its base in Mankulam in the Vavuniya District. The very title of this painting and its question mark are calculated to mark the irony attenuating a morality which calls the maimed body a war hero (Rana Viru). For Thenuwera the disabled body of the soldier is a prime signifier of the residue of war. In the painting, this body, foregrounded against a background of harsh orange-crimson, is portrayed as faceless, with only a helmet for his head, a hole for his heart, a limp penis, and a firearm that grows out of his arm-stump. It is a figure which provokes thought on the post-war society that remains, in Thenuwera's words, once the soldier has 'sacrificed' his life, once the terrorist has been 'killed' and once the civilian has 'died'.<sup>37</sup>

For the disabled soldiers, the pain of the battlefield folds into a psychological pain that encompasses sexual anxiety. Society conflates serious physical 'imperfection'/disability with asexuality and impotence. These are stigmatized images that contribute to a sense of inadequacy and anxiety amongst the disabled, leading to problems of personal maladjustment that becomes the actual handicap.<sup>38</sup> The limp penis of Thenuwera's 'Victor' folds into this dominant

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p.70.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p.71.

<sup>36</sup>Narme Wickremesinghe, 'Honouring those who thirst for peace,' *Daily News* 7/6/2003, p.11.

<sup>37</sup>Chandragupta Thenuwera, Interview with Neloufer de Mel, Colombo, 18/2/2003.

<sup>38</sup>Sandhya Limaye, 'Sexuality and Women with Sensory Disabilities,' in Asha Hans and Annie Petri (eds.) *Women, Disability and Identity*, p.94.

ascription of sexual impotence for the disabled, even as it draws ironic attention to the cult of masculinity within militarization. Popular entertainment is replete with disabled figures shown as 'not fully human, particularly with regard to sex and romance.'<sup>39</sup> Not surprisingly, an undercurrent of anxiety runs through the manner in which the disabled soldiers of the Butterflies Theatre speak of their present and future partners. S.P.R. Rajapakse told us that he longs to be married and have a home of his own but that his visual impairment is a serious handicap in finding a suitable marriage partner. Privates Jayatissa and Jayasinghe were abandoned by their fiancés when they became disabled. Pvt. Jayasinghe talked of the wives of disabled soldiers who take on the multiple burdens of the household. Their primary role as care giver continues the gendered roles of women within domesticity. But these wives are, in effect, also heads of their households even though they may not earn an income. They run house and in negotiating with the State and the public in the absence of their housebound husbands, inhabit 'male spaces'. Amongst the reasons Lance Corporal Tillekeratne gave for refusing membership in an army housing scheme was the foreboding that his wife would be vulnerable to the sexual advances of other men within the housing complex.

### 3. The War, Memory, and the Labours of Pain

While the peace talks<sup>40</sup> were welcomed by all the disabled soldiers, four of them said that the LTTE should not be trusted and that what has been gained so far, through the sacrifice of soldiers such as themselves, should not be jeopardized. Pvt. Jayasinghe, interviewed one year into the MoU, went furthest in stating that the sacrifices made by soldiers like him had already been betrayed. Lance Corporal Wijebandara, despite his retirement from the army, spoke in the present tense when, and only when, asked about the peace process: 'because I am in the services I know the LTTE is not committed to peace. If it is going to be war again it will be totally different and disastrous and the Sri Lankan government will lose whatever it has gained so far. In four, five days the LTTE will be able to pulverize the Sinhala people.' The LTTE is acknowledged as a formidable if not invincible force here, and an uncaring, if not demonic one, illustrated in Pvt. Samantilleke's comment 'I don't think they keep their injured and try and rehabilitate them as we do. Well, I haven't come across such people so far. I don't think they have a need like that.'<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup>Cahill and Nordon, p.66.

<sup>40</sup>A Memorandum of Understanding, brokered by the Norwegian government, was signed between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2002.

<sup>41</sup>The LTTE have rehabilitation centres for its disabled cadre in Kilinochi and in the Vanni. The current policy of the LTTE is to look after its disabled veterans at these centres rather than integrating them into their home communities.

The question that nagged me was, how and why, did the Butterflies Theatre which does not flinch from dramatizing the destruction and pain caused by the war, or thematize the dark side of its political economy, have an uneven and unstable impact on its cast of disabled soldiers as a pedagogy of peace and de-militarization? Only two disabled soldiers condemned the war outright. The others were ambivalent. Several reasons mediate these responses.

The first lies in the performative modes of the Butterflies Theatre itself, a discussion I will return to. The second is located in the positionality of these soldiers who, except for the retired Wijebandara, are still in service. Apart from Pvt. Jayasinghe who reports to work everyday the others are at home on long term medical leave, but continue to draw a regular salary from the army, often visiting their camps on pay day. They live in army housing schemes. All of this provides a sense of continuity, duty and *belonging* to the military. Third is their remarkable denial of the ferocity of war at the point of recruitment and their *deferment* of the possibility of injury. When asked whether they did not anticipate injury in war, both Lance Corporals Wijebandara and Tillekeratne affirmed that they 'did not think of the eventuality.' Wijebandara added that, at the time he joined the army (in 1987), there weren't as many soldiers getting injured in war. Pvt. Jayasinghe echoed this, stating that when he joined the volunteer force in 1991 the war 'was not that serious'. This may point to a defence mechanism that defers the possibility of injury in the face of desperation for a job. But it also marks how the brutal realities of war were downplayed in the media. For the disabled soldiers this meant a war that 'was not that serious' until they themselves confronted its harsh reality on the ground.

Even when reported, as Elaine Scarry noted, the discourse of war renames injury and destruction on the battlefield as something else.<sup>42</sup> War reporting is censored with a silence on the real number of the injured, and it is appropriated for ideology when those wounded on the battlefield are called national *Rana Viru* or war heroes. This is the fourth reason as to why, however badly maimed they may be, however cathartic the Butterflies Theatre experiences have been, most of these disabled soldiers stop short of condemning the war outright. Valentine Daniel notes 'Of all the forces of language that do banish memory into nostalgia, tradition or oblivion, the cliché is the most powerful one.'<sup>43</sup> The cliché/slogan of the War Hero confers immense value on dead and injured soldiers, enabling military men and their families to ease their suffering through pride in themselves. This has a purchase in the non condemnation of war. The social honour accrued by the disabled soldiers when in active service is of such value that at times, there is a nostalgia for the war. One soldier of the Butterflies Theatre whose daughter was not accepted to a school

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<sup>42</sup>Scarry, p.68.

<sup>43</sup>Valentine Daniel, fourth Neelan Tiruchelvam memorial lecture, op.cit., p.6.

loans for disabled soldiers as well as army and police personnel.<sup>44</sup> The erasures in particular, are read by the disabled soldiers and their service providers as ingratitude for the sacrifices made throughout the war by the armed forces. A nostalgia for the respect and attention received during the war years returns.

How does this nostalgia differ from an act of (counter)memory with the potential for a radical critique of war, or an understanding of the structures of militarization? If militarization is a process through which the ideology of militarism nourishes itself, what these disabled soldiers know well is how they have been incorporated into that ideological apparatus of the war effort. When does this understanding occur? Through the RVSA, monumentalizing the *Rana Viru* became part of the official record. Through mnemonics such as war monuments, War Heroes Day and memorial parks, the State constructed a hegemonic cultural memory of the war in which its soldiers were revered. It is the *relegation* from this dominant record of official history that is resisted by the disabled soldiers and their service providers. This is when an articulation of the instrumentality with which they have been appropriated for ideology becomes audible. Asoka Dayaratne, President of ADEP, stated in an interview that he launched the organization in 1994 to remedy the neglect by successive governments of these soldiers and their families. Dayaratne stated 'Parents send their children to the army with high hopes. They want a proper income for their family and some kind of protection. But when some disaster takes place, every government has neglected the duty of looking after these people.'<sup>45</sup>

Resisting this 'active forgetting' is however, a complex process. As Christine Bold et al note:

Active forgetting functions most effectively as repression rather than forgetting – repression through shifting out of conscious memory to the level of naturalized behaviour that is learned, embodied, and internalized through ritual practices and habitual action (Connerton 1989) and made available through societally "prescribed" narratives and performances (Sturken 1999).<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>'Interest-free loans to war heroes and their families,' *The Island*, 21/7/2004, p.5. Under the scheme a loan of Rs. 150,000 to 250,000 would be available, payable in monthly installments for ten years from the date of release. The capital is released from the National Defence Fund.

<sup>45</sup>H.K.Asoka Dayaratna, Interview with Neloufer de Mel, Colombo, 11/6/2003.

<sup>46</sup>Christine Bold, Ric Knowles, Belinda Leach, 'Feminist Memorailizing and Cultural Counteremory: The Cast of Marianne's Park, *Signs* 28, no. 1, 2002.

The active forgetting in the context of gendered violence that Bold et al write of, re-visiting the murder of 14 women engineering students at l'Ecole polytechnique in Montreal in 1989, is about erasing the tragedy off the public record in a way which makes women accept that such violence is what they must naturally experience as their everyday reality as women. For the disabled soldiers, the active forgetting encourages an internalization of the sense of emasculation and uselessness as citizens, as soldiers, as men, within a subordinate citizenship that should not demand too much of the State. This is a position marked by a relationality to the dominant position these disabled soldiers once occupied as military men, a dominance that is not usually available to women. But the naturalization of helplessness on the part of subordinate men or women need not terminate in a totalizing abject position. The very anger that emerges from their sense of repression and neglect indicates the labours of counter memory which encourage a refusal to comply with the narrative of uselessness. For the disabled soldiers, this moment of anger is also one of recognition of the instrumentality in war, of the appropriation of the *Rana Viru* for ideological and political ends.

#### 4. Staging Pain: The Butterflies Theatre

If mainstream theatre's 'mimetic "action" is narrativised rather than perceived as physicalised', the latter being what we have in a theatre that foregrounds circus, dancing and miming bodies, the result is that 'spectators often find it more difficult to interpret physical theatre bodies in action for complex or unpredictable meanings than they might find it to absorb (read) words in a (spoken) text or even (repeatable) images.'<sup>47</sup> However, the non-verbal theatre has radical potential precisely because of this. It is a theatre which allows for conceptualizations and commentaries from the *viewing* positions of the audience rather than received commentaries from the stage. Of course dance and mime are forms that are not neutral or value free, and the dancer or miming human body is already inscribed with signs of gender, race, age, sexuality etc.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the absence of verbal ascription in the best of this theatre is enabling. The audience is challenged to re-imagine the visualized body in ways that 'expand cultural ideas' of how they are usually received.<sup>49</sup> Thus the disabled body and the body affected by Downs

<sup>47</sup>Peta Tait, 'Fleshed, Muscular Phenomenologies: Across Sexed and Queer Circus Bodies,' in Peta Tait (ed.), *Body Show/s: Australian Viewings of Live Performance*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000, p.62.

<sup>48</sup>Janet Wolff, 'Dance Criticism: Feminism, Theory and Choreography,' in Lizbeth Goodman with Jane de Gay (eds.), *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, London & New York: Routledge, 1998, p.245.

<sup>49</sup>Peta Tait, p.63.

Syndrome, usually associated with evil eye, stigma, shame, deviancy and revulsion in Sri Lankan culture is presented in the Butterflies Theatre as bodies with talent, self-confidence and grace: as differently abled rather than disabled. It is a project which (re)de-signs disability itself.

This project draws attention, then, to re-presenting this body as a contested political and cultural terrain, shifting the public gaze away from its locus to the institutions (medical, education, legal, military) and the cultural paradigms that impose restrictions and oppressions on it. Yet, if we are to take Gayatri Spivak's argument of the necessity of a *strategic* essentialism which requires a 'deliberate foregrounding of particular markers of "pure" difference as part of a "scrupulously visible political interest"',<sup>50</sup> then, the disabled body has to be visualized in a double discourse which calls attention to itself *as disability*, even as it challenges the audience to re-shape its perspectives on 'deviant' embodiment(s). The position of the disabled soldier within this compass of disability, as someone who has been disabled *on purpose*, whose injury has been deliberately *designed*, and whose disability has been both individually accepted at the moment of joining the military, and socially and politically sanctioned in the justifications to war, raises yet another set of issues in this field of (re)visualizing the disabled body.

The Butterflies Theatre plays, developing out of a workshop process and shaped by directors Rohana Deva Perera and Wolfgang Stange,<sup>51</sup> reflect many of the real, lived experiences of their cast and characters. The love affair between the disabled soldier and abled woman in *Butterflies will always Fly* (1998/9)—a relationship frowned upon by both his and her sides, developed, according to Pvt. Jayasinghe, at a working group of disabled soldiers who drew from their experience of rejection by their girlfriends following their injuries. That in the play, the lovers transcend social and cultural barriers was for Jayasinghe an affirmation that 'love can go beyond these problems and that there can be marriage.' Dramatizing this episode was both painful and cathartic. The war, however, was peripheral to the love story, its pain conquered and sublimated for a benign closure of love between abled woman and disabled man. The play was received by the audience not so much as an interrogation of the armed conflict, but for its remarkable work as integrated theatre

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<sup>50</sup>Helen Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p.328.

<sup>51</sup>Rohana Deva Perera is a renowned Sinhala dramatist and theatre practitioner. Wolfgang Stange trained at Hilde Holger's school of Central European Expressionist Dance and the School of Contemporary Dance, London.

which brought disabled and abled together. This was the pitch in all of the pre-publicity of the play and the reviews of the production kept to this line.<sup>52</sup>

This is not to say that this theatre's emphasis on re-aligning society's attitudes to the disabled was irrelevant, or to insist on a single-minded focus on the armed conflict. The play chose to represent ideas of disability through the theme of armed conflict. But in its representation, the war was peripheral to the love story, its pain conquered and sublimated to a benign closure of love between an abled woman and disabled soldier. This is a closure reminiscent of Hollywood endings which integrate the disabled into mainstream society through the affirmation of an abled-bodied lover who confers value on the disabled.<sup>53</sup> However, that the plot and closure of *BF* were conceived and determined by the disabled soldiers themselves - as subjects in pain - marks a substantial difference. These narratives call attention to pain and mark it as a *stage* towards an identity shorn of stigma and marginality. This is where the Butterflies Theatre as an integrated, workshop theatre has its richest and most useful promise: in enabling the disabled to represent themselves rather than being signified upon, and in facilitating a representation of the disabled that encompass moments of agency which challenges the gaze upon them as permanent victims to be pitied.

With the next two productions, *Flowers will always Bloom (FB)* (1999/2000) and *Swinging Times (ST)* (2001/2003) the Butterflies Theatre unmistakably stepped into the subject of the Sri Lankan war. These performances engaged war as 'everybody's citizenship' dramatizing it as corruption, cynicism, destruction and willful injury. The image of a maimed soldier who uses his crutches as a firearm wove in multiple layers of interconnectedness. If, as Elaine Scarry noted, 'The image of the weapon only enables us to see the attributes of pain if it is clear that the attributes we are seeing are the attributes of pain',<sup>54</sup> the corporeal staging of the disabled body engaged in war, signifying both victimizer (weapon) and victim (pain and limbless), disavowed any separation of the weapon from the body, or sublimation/displacement of injury in war onto the discursive terrain of ideology. (This connection between weapon and pain is what is avoided in the high tech 'smart' wars fought by the U.S. and NATO forces which rely on precision missiles so that ground combat is minimalized.) In the Butterflies Theatre, the body of the soldier is not simply acted upon but one that inhabits a complicated, interactive subjectivity vis-à-vis war, its very presence as victim-victimizer

<sup>52</sup> Kumudini Hettiarachchi, 'Having Fun as One,' *The Sunday Times* (Features) 6/12/1998, p.3; Carl Muller, 'The human spirit soared high as these butterflies took flight,' *The Sunday Times* 18/7/1999.

<sup>53</sup> Cahill and Norden, op.cit.

<sup>54</sup> Scarry, op.cit., p.17.

enunciating doubleness as a complex condition of war and a discursive paradigm within militarism. The reviews of the plays caught these intentions.<sup>55</sup>

But did the soldiers themselves apprehend their duality? Kumudini Hettiarachchi interviewed Privates Kulatunga and Wijebandara at Meepe while they were rehearsing *Swinging Times* which portrayed the nexus between war and arms dealers. She quotes Kulatunga as saying 'We want to show the world how innocent people are the victims of such weapon sales and deals' and Wijebandara as stating 'We are trying to make the normal people aware of the crimes committed by arms dealers who also pretend to be great philanthropists. How they earn their money and continue to lead a high life, while people of all races suffer.'<sup>56</sup> What is significant here is that these soldiers locate themselves completely as victims. Their own collusion in war remains unaccounted. What enables this masking? *Swinging Times* was a biting satire about the elite. The world of arms commissions, its cocktail parties, weddings and savvy businessmen, both local and foreign, depicted an upper class the soldiers were alienated from and did not identify with. Pvt. Wijebandara, during the course of our interview with him, drew a clear distinction between themselves as soldiers and the elites in Colombo, and of how the war impacted on metropolitan Colombo differently than on the 'poor' elsewhere. The perpetrator, in this instance, was clearly someone else. They were the victims: their *doubleness* deferred.

The Butterflies Theatre did have a significant impact, however, on the way its cast reviewed the condition of disability. Pvt. Jayasinghe's comment that taking part in *Butterflies will always fly* made him realize that the disabled should have equal status, should not be marginalized and 'treated like patients and kept aside', and that through the play he acquired self-confidence amply illustrates that the performative *process* of the Butterflies Theatre had an enormously beneficial impact on its cast. Through its productions this theatre also strove to redirect audience attention away from the 'freakish' disabled body to the institutions of society, politics and culture that marginalize, if not conceal, the disabled. This is a lesson the disabled soldiers themselves learnt on confronting the other actors with varied disabilities. For some there was disavowal at first. Pvt. Kulatunge stated that when taken to Meepe for the first theatre workshop, and on seeing disabled children there, he thought they had come for something else. 'Am I going to work with them?' was the question that had entered his mind. But the cast of the Butterflies Theatre, whether disabled by birth, accident or design, soon became a community/family

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<sup>55</sup>Jonathan Steele, 'Dancing with the Enemy,' *The Guardian* 3/5/2001, p.13; Sonali Samarasinghe, 'The Earth Laughs in Flowers,' *The Sunday Leader*, 12/12/1999, p.30; Wathsala Mendis, 'Blooming for a better tomorrow,' *The Sunday Times*, 28/11/1999, p.3.

<sup>56</sup> Scarry, p.17.



through this theatre. Each one of the disabled soldiers lavished generous praise on the children and youth in the cast who had other disabilities and with whom they learnt to share, journey abroad,<sup>57</sup> protect and understand.

It was only Lance Corporal Tillekeratne who, while endorsing the general sentiment expressed by the other soldiers towards their friends in the cast, felt, nevertheless, that disabled soldiers were entitled to special treatment because of their sacrifices in war. Despite this insistence on a privileged status for the disabled soldier being within the ideology of militarism, Tillekeratne's point is important for drawing attention to the fact that *disability resists a singular condition of existence*. This is where the Butterflies Theatre lost an opportunity for a radical politics of peace, contributing ultimately to an unstable discourse around the Sri Lankan armed conflict. By amalgamating disability whether by birth as congenital defect, through disease such as polio, or through road or work related accident, the Butterflies Theatre permitted its cast, audience and reviewers to slide away from confronting the fact that the maiming of soldiers occurs by *design*, socially and politically sanctioned as a deliberate goal in war. The double play of maimed soldier as victim and perpetrator, as both weapon and body in pain, lingered in the visual memory, but soon got encompassed in the *larger* project of this theatre which Chris Tribble summed up, reviewing *ST*: 'Difference in ability is dissolved by the power of the masks the characters put on and the whole company emerges as consummate actors. Dramatic skill, engagement in the play and commitment to the ensemble become the criteria against which we judge their performances and what we have called "disability" becomes a meaningless distinction. This is one of the great achievements of this production.'<sup>58</sup>

On similar lines, Arun Dias Bandaranaike noted: 'The enormity of revulsion we feel at the wanton destruction of life and limb that a generation of Sri Lankans has had to face is salient. However, one must, move beyond even such a conclusion, and rationalize the importance of 'performing arts' being equally accessible to those with alternate abilities where once they were neglected to the realm of Barnum and Bailey and their roomful of Curiosities.'<sup>59</sup> It is in this 'moving beyond' that the sign of the disabled soldier as injured by design gets deferred. This body in pain is only momentarily centre-stage, but once again sutured into something else. The Butterflies Theatre as integrated theatre calls for a timely realignment of the dominant perspectives on disability. It brings together people from different sides of

<sup>57</sup> The Butterflies Theatre troupe have traveled to Sydney, London and New Delhi with their performances.

<sup>58</sup> Chris Tribble, 'Fresh Triumph for Butterflies,' *The Sunday Times Plus* 20/1/2002, p.6.

<sup>59</sup> Arun Dias Bandaranaike, 'Flowers: We are Waiting for More,' *The Sunday Times Plus*, 26/12/1999, p.2.

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the divide, be it soldiers and refugees, Sinhala and Tamil, abled and disabled. It dramatizes complex pluralities and highlights the insidiousness of militarization. Yet, in its interchangeability of signs, in its homogenizing of the disabled which masks disability's varied conditions, in its fluidity of visual metaphor which makes for exciting theatrical illusion, the Butterflies Theatre productions leave the subject of the maimed soldier as a profoundly unstable and deferred category. Within these conditions of visibility, the effect it produced on the disabled soldiers themselves and the audience was irresolute and shifting, permitting both a denunciation of war and a nostalgic recuperation of it; both an admission of collusion in the war as a part of everyone's citizenship and a distance from it as some one else's tragic mistake.

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