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The Moral Mother Syndrome

MALATHI DE ALWIS

This paper briefly explores a crucial component of Sinhala nationalism that is articulated through the reiteration of a moral and maternalised historical role model, namely, the legendary queen Vihara Maha Devi, within particular cultural and political spaces in Sri Lanka. Describing this phenomenon as the 'Moral Mother Syndrome', the author extends its original delineation by Micaela di Leonardo—as providing the framework for an ideology that primarily 'speaks for peace'—to one that speaks for peace through a call to violence that is nevertheless formulated as being moral and just due to it being premised upon an argument about the vulnerability and victimisation of the majority community, the Sinhalese.

I was in a trishaw some years ago, trying out my discussion topic of that month—social violence—when the driver suddenly launched into a passionate tirade that the reason for all the violence within our society was that 'our' (Sinhala) women were no longer committed (*kapaweemak athuva*) towards working for the development of our country. Pointing to a Sri Lankan woman holding hands with a white man, he exclaimed: 'Look at that woman, can we even think of comparing her with our great heroines of the past like queen Vihara Maha Devi? If there was even *one* woman today who was like that great queen, we would not be in the sad state we are in today.'

I was rather taken aback because all the other arguments presented to me until then had mainly focused on the parlous state of our political culture—politicians' ignorance of democratic principles, their greed for wealth and power, their increasing dependency on thugs, and so on—which was thus providing a deleterious influence on all other aspects of our society. I was also taken aback because

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I was hearing, after a long time, a very familiar argument. While what presumably triggered the trajectory of this particular argument—the possibility of a mixed marriage—it is in itself a rich topic to pursue (see Jayawardena 1993; Silva 1998), I wish to concentrate here on what I like to call the ‘Moral Mother Syndrome’, the frequent recourse to a moral and maternalised role model from the past. The escalating desire of Sinhala nationalists as well as the Sri Lankan state, particularly since the rise of the Tamil liberation movement in the early 1980s,¹ to encourage the patriotism of Sinhala women has not only extended to the surveillance, disciplining, ridiculing and de-legitimising of those who are perceived to be ‘traitors’, but has also included a concerted effort to promote nationalist female role models as appropriate alternatives. Foremost among such role models is Vihara Maha Devi, described as one of the ‘most outstanding figures of the heroic age of Ceylon’s history ... the perfect daughter, wife and mother. The Mahavamsa’s shining example of womanhood’ (Seneviratne 1969: 20). As a matter of fact, the descriptions of Vihara Maha Devi in this 13th-century Pali text, notes Seneviratne, are markedly different from the chronicler’s ‘mostly taciturn’ references to other queens and consorts. Vihara Maha Devi is described as ‘a woman without blemish’: ‘firm in the faith’, ‘pious and beautiful’, ‘self-controlled’, ‘keen witted’ and ‘virtuous’ (ibid.).

The Pali chronicle that Seneviratne refers to here has been central to the production of knowledge about Vihara Maha Devi as it has been about many other aspects of Sri Lankan history.² The narratives about Vihara Maha Devi that appear here (along with creative and sometimes fanciful extrapolations) have been further disseminated through school textbooks, newspaper articles, poems, dramas, public discourses, etc. According to these narratives, Vihara Maha Devi first exhibits her patriotism and moral strength as a young girl of 12 when she sacrifices herself to an angry sea to appease the wrath of the gods vented on her people due to her father’s rash and sacrilegious act of wrongfully killing a Buddhist monk after becoming enraged at the discovery of his wife’s continued adultery. Vihara Maha Devi is not only an example to her fickle mother and impetuous father, but to the general populace as well. Despite her youth and privileged birth, she is willing to take responsibility for her parent’s actions and to sacrifice her life for the sake of her people.

Certain narratives have stressed the fact that it is as a reward for such exemplary behaviour that the gods decided to spare her life

and safely guided her vessel to the kingdom of her future husband. This fortuitous reprieve of course enables her to give birth and to nurture the saviour of the Sinhala race and the Buddhist religion, the first unifier of the entire country—Duttugemunu. Due to the pacifism of her husband, who is more interested in building irrigation tanks than waging war against the Tamils (who are occupying the northern and north-central regions of the island), it is Vihara Maha Devi who takes it upon herself to supervise the military education of her son. When her husband dies, she installs Duttugemunu as king, accompanies him in his battle against the Tamils and proves to be his shrewdest military adviser. After their historic victory against the Tamils, all references to Vihara Maha Devi in the *Mahavamsa* come to an abrupt halt and the chronicler shifts his focus to the heroic accomplishments of her son.³

Not surprisingly, a woman of this calibre is a rare find and the name of Vihara Maha Devi has been publicly invoked by many at various historical moments. In the 1930s Sinhala readers were frequently reminded of this 'supreme heroine from the glorious past of the Sinhalese'. As one article proclaimed, all honour and respect should be accorded to Vihara Maha Devi, rather than King Kavan-tissa, for nurturing such a valiant hero such as 'our Gemunu': 'For it was she who embedded [*nidan kale*] lofty ideas [*udara adahas*] in her son when nursing him at her breast [*akayehi kiri ura bona kalhi*]' (*Sithumina*, 25 January 1936). This was enough proof, the article continued, that in a 'contest to produce heroes and heroines whose sole purpose in life is to develop the country, race, and religion, the woman always beats out the man [*sic*]'. In conclusion, the article appealed to 'educated Sinhala women' to inaugurate a campaign to educate Sinhala women on how best to honour their husbands (*swami bhaktiya*) and to practise the fine art of home management (*griha sangvidanaya*), since our 'contemporary sisters' have 'kicked aside our age-old traditions' in their haste to embrace a Western civilisation (*ibid.*).

This intricate link between morality and maternity was further emphasised during this period by the common perception that the majority of Sinhala womanhood was too immoral to nurture the 'future citizens' of Lanka, the 'children of the soil' (editorial, *Nation*, 5 March 1915). Or, as another editorial noted, they were 'utterly unfit and unsuited to rock the cradle' and had become 'a serious menace to the national life of the country' (*Young Lanka*, 14 January

1923). The term 'immorality' was employed in a very broad sense in these contexts, not only to suggest unchaste and 'un-respectable' behaviour, but also to encompass Sinhala women's lack of national sentiment, religious piety and domestic competency. As the *Young Lanka* editorial pointed out, the bourgeois Sinhala women of Lanka—described as 'wine-sipping butterflies with their ostrich-feathered hats'—and the 'modern educated girl'—defined as a 'bundle of polished vulgarity' only concerned with passing exams, going to parties, painting, dancing, and playing tennis and the piano—must be made to realise that their 'true mission in life' must consist of 'service and sacrifice' rather than entering 'the portals of a divorce court' (ibid.). In the 1950s, too, when the most famous park in the capital city of Colombo, named after Queen Victoria, was rededicated to Vihara Maha Devi, Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike used that occasion to berate the women of Sri Lanka for not taking sufficient interest in the affairs of the country unlike their counterparts in India. He reminded them of Vihara Maha Devi's supreme sacrifice in her youth and hoped that the statue of the queen that was installed in the park 'would be an inspiration to the younger generation' (*Times of Ceylon*, 19 July 1958).

Vihara Maha Devi became a particularly potent symbol during the 1960s when Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the world's first woman prime minister, was leader of the country. Bandaranaike's supporters frequently compared her to Vihara Maha Devi, with T.B. Illangaratne and R.G. Senanayake referring to her as a 'modern version of Vihara Maha Devi' (quoted in *Ceylon Daily News*, 8 March 1960), and Vimala Illangakoon describing her as a 're-incarnation of Vihara Maha Devi' (quoted in *Ceylon Daily News*, 16 March 1960). When allegations were made that Bandaranaike was being unduly influenced by some of her cabinet ministers during her second term, P.R. Ratnayake, Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), MP for Mawanella, noted that she was not one who could be easily misled, she had a 'great will' like Vihara Maha Devi (quoted in *Ceylon Daily News*, 16 May 1964).

Such a comparison was shrewdly exploited by Bandaranaike and her party, the SLFP, when they sought to oppose the granting of linguistic and administrative concessions to Tamils by the United National Party (UNP) government in power in 1965–66. On 8 January 1966 the SLFP organised a massive demonstration at the Vihara Maha Devi Park, with the protest campaign being officially inaugurated

by Bandaranaike garlanding the statue of Vihara Maha Devi. The protestors then took an oath pledging to dedicate themselves to 'defend and protect our beloved motherland, the Sinhala language, and culture, in the same manner that the heroic Sinhala masses in the past had pledged before Queen Vihara Maha Devi to protect the Sinhala race and religion' (quoted in *Janadina*, 9 January 1966).

While invocations of Vihara Maha Devi's patriotism, particularly during her adulthood, had always connoted anti-Tamil-ness (her patriotism was premised on her desire to rid the island of Tamil invaders),⁴ it had never been articulated in such a blatant fashion as was done during the SLFP protest campaign of 1965–66. With the rise of the Tamil militant movement, however, it was this aspect of Vihara Maha Devi's patriotism that was brought to the fore once again. For example, the virulent racist and Sinhala nationalist, Cyril Mathew, who was minister of science and industry in the 1983 UNP government, garlanded a statue of Vihara Maha Devi located at the Ruwanweliseya Stupa (believed to have been constructed by Duttugemunu) in Anuradhapura, and proclaimed that if Vihara Maha Devi had not birthed a heroic son from her womb, 'it is quite possible that there would not exist today, a Sinhala race or Buddhist religion, upon this island' (quoted in *Island*, 10 October 1983). 'It was thus a woman,' he further trumpeted, 'who came forward to save our country, race and religion in its hour of greatest need' (*ibid.*).

Cyril Mathew's reduction of Vihara Maha Devi to the role of reproducer not only illuminates a particularly patriarchal appropriation of this legendary figure,⁵ but also conveniently dovetails into a timely equation that links the motherland, Vihara Maha Devi, and contemporary Sinhala women; their vulnerable femininity needing to be compensated by the production of heroic sons/citizens who will protect them and perform valorous deeds that will make them proud. As Cynthia Enloe (1989: 197) has remarked, it is in periods of national crisis that idealisations of feminised sacrifice and masculinised valour become particularly exaggerated. In a previous article (de Alwis 1998), I tried to question the very engendering of such a binary that I formulated as one of 'Moral Mothers' and 'Stalwart Sons'. I argued that the myth of Vihara Maha Devi and Duttugemunu was central to the formation of a particular ideological field that enabled the production, dissemination and apprehension of such a binary. My suggestion that Vihara Maha Devi

had been produced as the 'Moral Mother' of the Sinhala nation was based on an extension of Micaela di Leonardo's (1985) discussion of a primarily American phenomenon. Di Leonardo, who borrows this phrase from Ruth Bloch (1978),⁶ describes the 'Moral Mother'—in the context of an increasingly militarised society—as someone who primarily speaks for peace, who is 'nurturant, compassionate ... the sovereign, instinctive spokeswoman for all that is living and vulnerable' (di Leonardo 1985: 602).⁷ However, di Leonardo is also quick to point out that the ideology of the 'Moral Mother' can be used for *both* anti-militarist and militarist ends (ibid.: 605, 611) though the materials she discusses in her review essay do not address the latter.

Premised on my analysis of the representation of Vihara Maha Devi in school textbooks, I argued that though Vihara Maha Devi embodied all the characteristics of the 'Moral Mother' delineated by Bloch and di Leonardo, her relationship to the concepts of 'life', 'vulnerability' and 'peace' had to be formulated differently. She speaks for peace and for life through a call for violence, which is nevertheless framed as being 'moral' and 'right'. Unlike in the American examples that di Leonardo cites (the American 'Moral Mother's' critique is addressed to a superpower that is both militarily and economically dominant), the construction of Vihara Maha Devi as 'Moral Mother' is enabled by the positioning of the Sinhala race, the Buddhist religion and the motherland (that is, the land of the Sinhalese) as being victimised and vulnerable (see SLFP pledge in 1966 and Cyril Mathew's statement in 1993 discussed earlier). Her call to arms is thus primarily framed in terms of patriotism, justice and peace. This doubled identity of moral woman and patriot is also what enables Vihara Maha Devi's espousal of violence without reducing her femininity and vulnerability. The reason she endures the hardships of travel and military encampments when accompanying her son in battle, and is even willing to see her son die,⁸ is because of her commitment to a greater good—the defeat of the Tamils, and, concomitantly, the unification of the country and the protection of her race and religion.

The appropriation of Vihara Maha Devi by Sinhala nationalists has thus enabled the production of a particular kind of Sinhala motherhood that is always already imbricated in Sinhala 'history', 'culture' and 'tradition'. Here was a figure that encapsulated the vulnerability of the Sinhala nation and its peoples' determination to

retain what was perceived to be rightly theirs (a unified country dominated by the Sinhalese); here was a figure who was an exemplary daughter, wife and mother, who placed the needs of her country above her own; here was a woman who knew her rightful place, who was content to take pride in her son's achievements and was duly 'greatly revered' (Geiger 1950 [1912]: 168) by him. The reiteration of Vihara Maha Devi as a relevant role model for Sinhala women, even at the beginning of the 21st century, must surely make us wonder. Why are we still fixated on the 'Moral Mother' when Sri Lankan women have produced so many other enabling role models during the span of the past century?

Notes

1. Founded in 1976, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is a powerful group that began its armed conflict with the Sri Lankan government in 1983. The LTTE has its own intelligence service, naval element and women's political and military wings. The Tigers control most of the northern and eastern coastal areas of Sri Lanka, but have conducted operations throughout the island. They are currently engaged in peace talks with the Sri Lankan government.
2. The crucial role played by the Pali chronicles—the *Mahavamsa* and *Culavamsa*—in the Sinhala nationalist project has been addressed by many scholars and has engendered heated, and often acrimonious, debates over the years (the two key figures in this debate have been Dharmadasa [1992] and Gunawardana [1984]. Scott's (1995) brilliant intervention in this debate is particularly significant for its proposal to shift the very problematiqués of history and historiography). For an excellent historical location and provocative deconstruction of the Chronicles, see Walters (2000), and for a nuanced discussion of how a key archaeological and national site was produced through the transformation of the *Mahavamsa* into an authoritative historical text in the 19th century, see Jeganathan (1995).
3. Nevertheless, writers such as Seneviratne have produced their own conclusions:

Tradition has it that she lived to witness and share in his crowning achievement and celebrate the unique event. *Hers was a place of pride and honour beside her beloved son*, and she remained his trusted confidante and wise counsellor in the quiet years of peace that followed, as she had been in times of war and stress. (1969: 36, emphasis added)
4. However, this anti-Tamil policy was often glossed over with specific references being made only to her bravery and patriotism when a child.
5. Similarly, President Premadasa, in a speech made on International Women's Day in 1990, noted that the reason that King Duttugemunu was able to perform such great deeds in such a short lifespan (according to Premadasa, he only lived to be 44) was because Vihara Maha Devi had brought him up to be 'healthy and strong' and supported him with her 'wisdom and cleverness'

- (quoted in *Island*, 12 March 1990). Even Premadasa, who frequently sought to equate herself with Vihara Maha Devi, and went about constructing statues of the queen in different parts of the south, continued to reiterate the familial roles of Vihara Maha Devi. When garlanding a statue of the queen that she had gifted to the Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihare (located in the region where Vihara Maha Devi was supposedly sacrificed to the sea), Hema Premadasa reminded those present of the fact that Vihara Maha Devi, 'in all her roles as daughter, wife and mother had been noble and exemplary' and that her life 'was a great source of inspiration to the women of today' (quoted in *Ceylon Daily News*, 19 March 1990).
6. Bloch (1978) argues that the rise of the 'moral mother' is a specifically 19th-century phenomenon that is connected with the rise of Protestant evangelism that sought to redefine women's maternal role by stressing their religiosity and domesticity.
 7. I am also fully in agreement with di Leonardo's (1985: 613) critique that the ideology of Moral Mother 'glorifies the heterosexual, reproductive woman and implicitly depreciates the lives of childless women and lesbians'.
 8. In one of the dramas included in a Sinhala reader (that students are encouraged to perform in class) the *Kumarodaya*, Vihara Maha Devi's husband asks her whether she does not fear her son dying in battle (when he realises that she has been promoting her son's military zeal). Her reply is a telling indictment on her pacifist husband as well: '[Whether] one goes to war or not, one has to die some day. If my son who is the heir to the throne cannot sacrifice his life for his country, he is not fit to be king' (*Kumarodaya* 1965[1952]: 47).

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