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**Narrating Displacement:  
Oral Histories of Sri Lankan Women**

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## **Table of Contents**

<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1.1 BACKGROUND HISTORY: SRI LANKA</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.2 METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>5</b>
1.2.1 FIELD RESEARCH	8
<b>2. RETURN: IN THEORY AND PRACTICE</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.1 THEORETICAL CONTEXT</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1.1 INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS	14
<b>2.2 AGENCY INTERVENTIONS</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>3. NARRATIVES OF RETURN</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>3.1 IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION</b>	<b>20</b>
3.1.1 CASE STUDY: SRI LANKAN TAMIL WAR WIDOWS	21
3.1.2 WIDOWS' NARRATIVES	25
<b>3.2 MEMORY NEGOTIATION</b>	<b>33</b>
3.2.1 CASE STUDY: SRI LANKA – VIOLENCE AND SILENCE	35
3.2.2 WOMEN'S NARRATIVES	37
<b>4. CONCLUSION</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>5. BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>APPENDIX A - IDP RETURNS IN SRI LANKA.</b>	<b>58</b>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is about return migration. It examines how traditional discourses on repatriation and the return home have developed, whether they are accurate or appropriate, and subsequently suggests alternative perspectives on return (Black and Koser 1999). It argues that both scholars of forced migration and the international humanitarian community are working amidst a conceptual framework that has yet to truly comprehend the complexity of experiences involved in return and reintegration. As a result, both discourse and practice dangerously neglect certain crucial needs of return migrants, while simultaneously failing to further our understanding of the harsh realities of social change in the aftermath of war and displacement.

In particular, this paper focuses on the resettlement of internally displaced Sri Lankan women to their native villages, and argues that despite physical return, a “generalized condition of homelessness” (Malkki 1992: 37) persists due to physical, social and political forms of violence which obstruct the ability of many women to return ‘home’. In fact, I contend that for many Sri Lankan women, resettlement has meant merely the return to their geographical place of origin, and no more. What follows after that are deeply complex, individual processes of negotiating past and present forms of violence which violate the precise structures and relationships which constitute ‘home’. As a result, predominant agency approaches to resettlement – focusing almost exclusively on economic reintegration – too often fall short of promoting successful post-conflict reconstruction.

This paper combines a narrative approach with anthropological analysis, acknowledging the increasing need in refugee studies for culturally specific knowledge “informed by the experiences of people themselves... who are involved in the everyday struggles of war and flight” (Schrijvers 1999: 307). It is based upon narrative accounts of Tamil women’s

experiences of resettlement, and emphasizes the social and political forms of violence which have profoundly shaped this return. And yet, the stories that women tell of resettlement are only in part about a political or social experience. They are also personal stories, about “pride, anger, truth and lies, secrets, deception and discovery, crimes, punishment, love and forgiveness, suffering, sin and retribution” (Pohlandt-McCormick 2000: 36), and are thus eloquent testimony to the human nature of both flight and return. These narratives bear testimony to the power of violence to destroy personal identity and private memories, and thus rendering the recreation of ‘home’ a crucial aspect of repair and recovery in the aftermath of war.

### **1.1 Background History: Sri Lanka**

Since the outbreak of war in 1983, Sri Lanka has been the site of one of the world’s longest running civil conflicts, which has wreaked devastation upon the tropical island and its population for almost two centuries. Whether the result of ancient hostilities between Sinhala and Tamil civilizations, or a conflict borne of divisive colonial governance, opposing nationalisms and territorial disputes over ‘homeland’ have led to this ongoing armed conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (Wilson 2000; de Silva 1998; Tambiah 1991; Spenser 1990). In general, the Sri Lankan civil war has been characterized by long-term military engagement, political terrorism, communal violence, large-scale internal displacement, wide-spread physical destruction, declining economic conditions, and extraordinary human loss.

Since 1983, Sri Lanka has witnessed repeated and massive civilian displacements, numbering over one million in total (Norwegian Refugee Council 2002). Roughly 80% of all those displaced are Sri Lankan Tamils (Schrijvers 1999: 309) from the Jaffna Peninsula, the Vanni region and the eastern provinces. While the vast majority of people have been displaced internally, others have fled across the Palk Strait to refugee camps in India, or

have sought asylum within growing Tamil diaspora communities in Western Europe, North America and Australia. In general, vicious cycles of internal displacement have ebbed and flowed according to communal rioting, military offensives, guerrilla attacks and shattered cease-fires. Most internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been displaced multiple times, and for varying lengths of time, fleeing from their homes to temporary welfare centres, to the homes of friends and relatives, or to the jungle.

After ten years of broken ceasefires and abbreviated repatriation schemes, however, February 2002 witnessed the cessation of hostilities between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, and the beginning of peace negotiations brokered by a Norwegian diplomatic initiative. Since then, the Ministry of Rehabilitation, Resettlement and Refugees and the Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have been working to facilitate permanent repatriation of displaced Sri Lankans, both from within the country and from abroad. By the spring of 2002, an estimated 260,000 displaced Sri Lankans had returned to their homes, and rates of return are continuing at a similar pace at present (See Appendix A). With much activity in Sri Lanka on the international level, and a well-established NGO community (Seneviratne and Stavropoulou 1998b: 382), island-wide efforts have begun in order to encourage sustained, longer-term development and rehabilitation projects for returning IDPs (UNHCR 2003: 8).

## **1.2 Methodology**

In the preliminary stages of my research with IDPs in Sri Lanka, I was encouraged by thought that the “present anthropological moment” (Hammond 1999: 232) was ripe for intensive investigation of migration, due to growing recognition “that people are increasingly moving targets... and the shifting of [anthropology’s] lens of enquiry to examine peripheries, boundaries, borderlands, migrants, and the processes of apparent flux and disorder” (Hammond 1999: 233). Such an intellectual climate, I believed, would provide me with a

prime opportunity to reconsider conventional debates on both internal displacement and return migration.

Now, almost a year-and-a-half later, however, as I begin trying to turn my scrawled field notes into a master narrative for academic scrutiny, I am troubled by the disconcerting, slowly-acquired knowledge that while migration may indeed be breaching anthropological consciousness, its' fundamental cause – violence – still remains at the margins of disciplinary imagination. As several anthropologists have suggested, “the practice of sociocultural anthropology... is particularly well suited to understanding the subjective, experiential, meaningful dimension of social conflict” (Green 1994: 228; Sluka 1992: 20). And yet, as Green notes, anthropologists have until recently approached the study of conflict from a distance, examining societal manifestations of violence in often abstract terms, divorced from the harsh historical realities and lived experiences of human beings (1994: 228). Indeed, as Chambers writes, “[I]n the aseptic and sterilized accounts of history, sociology and anthropology, the ‘pain of violence’ is written out of narratives and forgotten” (Chambers 1996: 48). Thus, despite the alarming rise in political repression, state terrorism and internecine warfare in recent decades, such topics have yet to capture “anthropological imagination” (Green 1994: 229).

Recognizing early-on that violence would become the metanarrative of my research with resettled Sri Lankan women, I believe the various methodologies which governed this research were reflective of my own attempt to conduct both politically and socially relevant ethnography. To this end, the time I spent with resettled women provided me with ample opportunity to both document and reflect upon their testimonies of displacement and resettlement, inquiring into the “insidious and pervasive effects and mechanisms” (Green 1994: 229) of physical, social and political violence, and exploring how they functioned simultaneously on the level of lived experience. Through both formal interviews and casual

conversations, women's words took on a wide variety of overlapping narrative genres, and thus I found myself at different times playing the differing roles of ethnographer, oral historian, life historian and witness.

Though historically, the canon has had little room for unwritten oral narratives (Chamberlain and Thompson 1998: 4), recent interest from across the social sciences has emerged as a result of wider social, cultural and political developments since 1945, namely the radical protest and liberation movements in Europe, the USA, the former Soviet Union, Latin America and other former colonies (Rogers et al. 1999). Due to growing interest in radical narrative genres such as *testimonio*, oral narratives have been increasingly recognized as particularly useful in understanding the significance of violence in individual lives, and exploring "both personal trauma as viewed within a social context and society as reflected in an individual's life" (BenEzer 1999: 30). Indeed, throughout the course of my research, I came to realize the power and potential richness of oral sources, not simply to record facts or events, per se, but to provide insight into their subjective, personal meanings instead (Passerini 1983; Portelli 1998; Thomson 1998; Tonkin 1992). I believe oral narratives were a means through which resettled Sri Lankan women alternatively made sense of, interpreted, or commented upon their experiences of violence and displacement, and thus, they provide great insight into the ways in which relationships between public and private, personal and political are continually negotiated (Farah 1997; Rogers et al. 1999) within a turbulent social context.

This paper is about stories and story-telling. Therefore, writing them down, submitting them to academic analysis, "committing them to paper surely violates them in a way that retelling them does not" (Singer 1997: ix). Creating a written narrative from oral sources has thus been a troubling process, for as Singer notes, oral narratives "are intended to be communicated by word of mouth. They are designed to be transient, changing with each retelling. Recording them fixes them in time like a written text" (1997: ix), which they are

not. And yet, spurred on by the stinging commentary of anthropologists such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes, I have come to realize that *not* to do so, constitutes an “act of indifference,” a “hostile act.” For as Scheper-Hughes argues, monographs may become “‘sites of resistance,’ ‘acts of solidarity,’ or a way to ‘write against terror,’ and anthropology itself employed as an agent of social change” (1992: 28 quoted in Green 1994: 230).

### ***1.2.1 Field Research***

This paper draws on oral narratives collected over the course of nine months that I spent doing research with IDPs in the northern provinces of Sri Lanka. While my research was conducted within Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities, the oral narratives which form the basis for this paper come exclusively from Tamil women from Vavuniya and Mannar who were resettled back into their villages after being displaced. Though I spoke with women of all ages, most were younger than forty, and had several children. Indeed, the narratives reproduced here come from a range of individuals with differing backgrounds and histories of displacement, and thus this study is not meant to be a scientific survey based upon a representative sample (Singer 1997: xii), but is one which relies upon the stories of those among whom I lived.

Gathering and documenting narratives through interviews and conversations was a particularly challenging process given the tumultuous social and political timing of my research, and it clearly had a pronounced effect on both the content and form of many narratives. Despite the declaration of a cease-fire and rumor of peace talks during my fieldwork, many women were cautious and guarded in their verbal communications, and there was therefore much less spontaneous discussion of violence and displacement than I had expected. While many women’s narratives emerged during formal interviews conducted inside their houses, others surfaced during more casual conversations throughout a wider variety of contexts: while fetching water from the well, buying bread from the store, or

preparing lunch in the kitchen. As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, I heard many stories of political violence in particular, only once far removed from public spaces.

There are a number of both methodological and ethical issues which demand attention when conducting this sort of ethnographic fieldwork, though unfortunately, it is not within the scope of this paper to address them all here. With regards to the content of the narratives, I believe they were often influenced by other family members or villagers who were present during the interviews, in front of whom women's narratives were constructed and shaped in certain ways, with certain silences interwoven. Furthermore, it is important to note that a translator was used for many of the interviews, and even where it was possible for me to communicate in Sinhala with some women, for none was it their first language. As is now commonly recognized, oral material can hardly escape being shifted throughout the processes of transcription and translation, and should thus be regarded critically.

Finally, deeply complex issues such as power, authority, agency and authorship have attended this study at every stage of research and writing. In an attempt to locate myself within my own field research and the resulting text, it is important to note that the oral narratives presented here are far from unmediated, and instead reflect interactive, reflexive processes of mutual collaboration and agency through which both researcher and informant co-produce, or create a source and text together, though rarely through an entirely equal relationship. Indeed, while honoring ethical obligations such as acquiring informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, accurately documenting interviews, making interview material accessible, and so forth, my privileged position as a Western researcher ultimately allows me the unmistakable power to interpret women's words, and adopt their insights to support my own. In the end, while consciously striving for 'a shared authority' (Frisch 1990) throughout my research, it has been continually informed by the humbling recognition that I, among others, have yet to create an ideal methodology which negates such inequalities and power

imbalances between researcher and informant, or adequately addresses the “politics of representation” (Sangster 1998: 93).

## **2. RETURN: IN THEORY AND PRACTICE**

### **2.1 Theoretical Context**

Within the fields of both migration and refugee studies, *out* migration has traditionally been of far more interest to scholars and the international community than *return* migration. Such is evident in the way that the fields of migration and refugee studies have been shaped and considered, or perhaps more precisely, in the ways they have *not yet* been considered. In general, immigration and refugee influxes have been widely studied, in part due to the perceived impact of large-scale population movements on the global order. Indeed, as a result of increasing immigration, the birth of the international refugee regime, the UN Refugee Convention and the previously-favored practice of refugee resettlement, scholarly inquiry and international attention have come to rest firmly in *out* migration. To this end, the impact of migrants on their resettlement societies and vice versa, and related processes such as integration, adaptation and acculturation have been central points of inquiry for academics, practitioners and policy makers alike. Such issues have been taken up by numerous scholars from around the world (Berry 1988; Bulcha 1988; Kuhlman 1991; Valtonen 1998), and have inspired both research institutions and social service providers to place significant emphasis on understanding the meaning of out migration at the national, communal and individual levels.

Until recently, however, *return* migration has been relatively neglected by scholars and the international community. As Zetter wrote, “a vacuum in our research becomes apparent... a research void dramatically exposed” (1988: 102-3), when compared with the volumes of research that exist on immigration and refugee resettlement. Until the late 1980s,

when refugee repatriation was considered at international gatherings for the first time since the end of the Second World War<sup>1</sup>, there was an enormous scarcity in both theory and data on return migration (Coles 1985; Crisp 1987; Ferris 1993; Zolberg 1989). Over the past decade, however, return migration has become an increasingly urgent phenomenon, due primarily to the changing nature of conflict and patterns of displacement around the world, and resulting revolutions within the international refugee regime. Indeed, rapidly increasing numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers world-wide, economic recession in the early 1980s, the growing reluctance of states to grant asylum, and profound changes within international politics (namely, the end of the Cold War,) have resulted in a shift in international refugee policy, making voluntary repatriation, rather than resettlement, the preferred ‘durable solution’ to the global refugee crisis, and UNHCR’s organizational goal<sup>2</sup> (Allen and Morsink 1994; Black and Koser 1999; Harrell-Bond 1989; Koser 1993).

Since the San Remo Round Table on Voluntary Repatriation in 1985, voluntary repatriation has been pursued in most refugee situations, and has been the primary response to refugee influxes in recent years. Despite this shift, however, and its weighty implications for international order, refugee repatriation and other forms of return migration have been poorly documented beyond internal agency and government reports, and have been slow to attract international attention. As a result, the myriad of processes and consequences which follow the actual physical return ‘home’ remain cloaked in relative obscurity (Allen and Morsink 1994; Harrell-Bond 1989; Koser 1993, 1997; Sepulveda 1994). Literature on return migration has remained comparatively sparse and limited in scope, determined largely by international political and financial considerations, and restricted in analysis to three main

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<sup>1</sup>In the aftermath of WWII, roughly 6 million refugees were repatriated throughout Europe, though since 1947, voluntary repatriation was replaced by refugee resettlement as the preferred ‘durable solution’, and hardly figured again into international instruments until the 1990s (Feistma 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Since UNHCR declared the 1990s the decade of voluntary repatriation, repatriation has occurred on a much greater scale than in previous decades, with an estimated 12 million refugees returning home (Koser 1993, 1997).

themes: international law, political motivations and practical logistics (Allen and Morsink 1994; Koser 1997). As Sepulveda notes, there is a tendency to perceive return migration as “a unified, monolithic experience in policy, practice and research” (1995: 84), and thus few scholars have explored the experiences of returnees themselves, creating an ever greater research gap around repatriated populations and the processes of reintegration which take place after return (Koser 1997).

One can only muse over the variety of reasons for such neglect – namely, the perceived greater burden of immigration on states and national communities, and perhaps the additional assumption that once migrants have returned home (often to the developing world), they are less relevant to the international global order. As Koser notes of the political construction of the ‘refugee problem’, “return takes people out of the scope of international concern and assistance” (1997: 209). The most common assumption stifling inquiry into return migration, however, and the one I will deal with most explicitly throughout the course of this paper, is the implicit assumption that because return migrants are resettling *back* into their own ‘homes,’ there exist *less* dynamic or extreme processes of adjustment and integration than for refugees or immigrants entering a foreign society. Due to the relative scarcity of research considering the complex relationship between repatriation and reintegration, the assumption persists that the return ‘home,’ involves a transition process much less problematic and multifaceted than that of immigration (Rogge 1994: 15).

The privileged status of refugee repatriation compounded with a conspicuous lack of inquiry into return migration more generally betrays a further set of assumptions often taken for granted within the international community. A whole host of assumptions – about fixed, static, and pre-existing relationships between people and place, and about ‘natural’ processes of returning home – support the image of voluntary repatriation as a positive process and optimal solution, and explain well the general absence of inquiry into return migration in

general. Within the dominant international discourse, the return ‘home’ is conceived of as the reverse of displacement, or ‘refugeeness,’ signaling the end of the migration cycle, and offering the cure to discontinuity and disconnection (Black and Koser 1999; Sepulveda 1994). Underlying this approach are territorialized notions of home which suggest that by returning, migrants go home to the place where they belong, and what necessarily follows are the natural processes of reconnection and reintegration of people to place. Several scholars have recently begun to question such notions of home (Abbas 1994; Appadurai 1991; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Malkki 1992, 1995a), implicitly criticizing the founding assumptions on which both migration theory and international policy are built – that “a singular and immutable bond exists between a people and a particular space”; that there is a mathematical equation or “a one-to-one correspondence” between the two; that people possess “static and sedentary identities”; and, that “flight and exile [imply] a rupture in the symbolic representation of this bond which links people with land, repatriation [being] the sole means through which to heal this severed bond” (Sepulveda 1995: 85).

Indeed, as the language of repatriation suggests – its operational vocabulary riddled with terms such as ‘reintegration’ and ‘rehabilitation’ – scholars and policy-makers alike assume that return ‘home’ reverses the negative experience of displacement, naturally reestablishing roots, repairing lives to their ‘normal,’ pre-displacement status, and offering up a “therapeutic intervention” (Foucault 1979; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Malkki 1992) which terminates displacement and restores people to a familiar environment (Stamou 2000). To this end, displaced people “are seen as the product of crisis; their situation is abnormal; repatriation will resolve the crisis and restore normality” (Ranger 1994: 281). Furthermore, the presumption of familiarity which words such as ‘reintegration’ reflect, betray an obliviousness to time and an institutional neglect of important historical and socio-political processes and changes which are continually taking place in both displaced populations and

their homes. Assumed to be the “end point of a refugee’s trajectory from flight to return” (Farwell 2001: 43), return is thus conceived of throughout international imagination as a timeless process by which people naturally resume their lives, as though returning to a “negative” (Warner 1994: 161) or empty physical space, void of history and socio-political realities. As Warner notes, institutional conceptualization of return “denies the temporal reality of our lives” (1994: 169) and in doing so, fails to attend to the changing personal, historical, social and political contexts through which ‘home’ is continually redefined, particularly upon return.

### **2.1.1 Internally Displaced Persons**

And yet, there remains a further gap in the literature of return migration. In general, migration has been traditionally conceived of within academia and by the international community as primarily an *international* phenomenon. As recent large population movements *within* national borders have demonstrated, however, *internal migration* is an increasingly relevant phenomenon, with Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) constituting the largest numbers of internal migrants. Despite composing the vast majority of the world’s displaced population, IDPs have been relatively ignored throughout migration studies, and by the international community. Though Francis Deng, the Representative of the UN Secretary General on Internally Displaced Persons, has succeeded in bringing the plight of IDPs to international attention in recent years, they remain today a contested people, inspiring debate within the UN and other international organizations over the role of the international community in protecting and assisting IDPs. Contentious issues such as state sovereignty and international responsibility have impeded the development of international support for IDPs, and partially account for the traditional absence of scholarly research and concern. Despite the fact that numbers of IDPs have grown substantially in the past decade, reaching 20 to 25 million displaced due to conflict alone – twice the number of refugees (Vincent and Sorenson

2001: 1) – only two definitive texts have been written on the subject, both by Roberta Cohen and Francis Deng at the Brookings Institution (1998a, 1998b). UNHCR and other international relief organizations have also begun documenting their work with IDPs, though most studies are limited to annual surveys, agency and government reports.

While the global crisis of internal displacement seems slowly to be breaching the consciousness of international, humanitarian and academic communities, however, the vast majority of attention has been focused around issues of state versus international responsibility, institutional mandates, and humanitarian concerns (Vincent and Sorenson 2001: 1). As a result, few efforts have been made to understand how IDPs themselves perceive, experience, and respond to displacement, or subsequently, to the return home. Indeed, if studies of return have been slow to develop with regards to international migration, then scholarly focus upon resettled IDPs has been virtually non-existent. That repatriated IDPs have not only returned ‘home’, but *never even left* their countries of origin seems to serve as legitimate justification for the neglect of such issues by the international community, and thus assumptions about home and return are uncritically accepted to constitute the prevailing framework for research on, and humanitarian assistance for, IDPs as well as refugees. As the Global IDP Project confirms,

[I]nformation on return is little documented... The return of IDPs is given little attention by governments and members of the international community, who do not necessarily give a high priority to care programmes for IDPs in the post-conflict reconstruction and economic development of the country (Norwegian Refugee Council 2002: 9-10).

Once returned, IDPs are often merely subsumed into larger categories of vulnerable, impoverished populations, and are therefore redefined and no longer considered separately, stifling specific attention on returned IDPs as a distinct population (Norwegian Refugee Council 2002). Thus, what little focus there *is* on internal displacement almost completely neglects the issue of resettlement, and the reintegration processes through which returnees

attempt to reestablish themselves economically, politically, socially and emotionally in their homes.

## **2.2 Agency Interventions**

According to UNHCR, the goal of repatriation is reintegration, a concept vaguely defined as “a process which enables formerly displaced people and other members of their community to enjoy a progressively greater degree of physical, social, legal and material security<sup>3</sup>” (UNHCR 1997: 159). Thus, recent debates around return migration consist of attempts to define and measure different aspects of the reintegration process – economic, social, psychological, political, and legal. As growing research on NGO policy reveals, however, most current approaches to reintegration attribute primary, if not absolute importance to economic factors, and assume that economic rehabilitation will necessarily lead to social, psychological and political reintegration. As Rogge notes, “all too often, the fact that there may be problems of social reintegration... may be discounted or even repudiated” (Rogge 1994: 39). In privileging economic determinants, discourse surrounding reintegration assumes that the true challenges facing return migrants are economic ones, and that once these have been met, complete rehabilitation will naturally follow (Frechette 1994).

Though such notions are beginning to be challenged by a handful of scholars who have recently begun to consider more complex realities of reintegration (Harrell-Bond 1989; Ranger 1994; Warner 1994), and by social scientists from diverse disciplines – law (Feitsma 1989; Helton 1991), political science (Stein 1994; Stein and Cuny 1989), anthropology (Allen 1996; Allen and Morsink 1994; Harrell-Bond 1989; Steppuat 1994; Voutira 1991), geography (Black and Koser 1999; Koser 1993, 1997), and psychology (Dona 1993) – an urgent need

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<sup>3</sup> Despite this emphasis, states rarely monitor returnees after their physical repatriation, and thus the lack of investigation into returnees’ experiences further reinforces the predominant discourse which believes repatriation to be the best solution for displaced persons (Black and Koser 1997).

still exists for more sophisticated analyses and holistic understandings of the reintegration process (Frechette 1994; Hvidt 1999; Kimura 1995; Stamou 2000).

Within the context of internal displacement, agency interventions remain largely unconcerned with resettlement and reintegration. Indeed, the only two comprehensive texts assessing agency responses to IDP crises (Cohen and Deng 1998a, 1998b) focus little attention on IDPs after resettlement, concentrating primarily on factors causing internal displacement, national and international responses, human rights and humanitarian concerns. While acknowledging that successful reintegration of IDP populations is crucial to the reconstruction and reconciliation processes of any war-torn society, their almost exclusive focus on economic aspects of reintegration, generally fails to address the pressing social, political and psychological issues which determine resettlement processes. Thus, current approaches to IDP reintegration often repeat the biases found in agency responses to refugee repatriation, and betray devotion to a similar, over-simplified discourse on the meaning of 'home' and return for displaced populations. According to Cohen and Deng, "successful reintegration depends on development aid to increase the absorptive capacity of return areas" (1998a: 166-7). As described, however, this entails improving economic conditions, rebuilding physical infrastructure, providing local opportunities for education, training and income-generating activities, and generally integrating other developments projects into relief programmes (1998b: 302-3). Similarly, the few other authors who assess IDP resettlement (Kabera and Muyanja 1994; Norwegian Refugee Council 2002) also restrict their attentions to the material, structural hardships of return, wholly neglecting consideration of the complex personal, social and political experiences which influence reintegration and rehabilitation processes.

Lamenting the lack of donor and development agencies recognition, will and funding for sustainable implementation of reintegration schemes and post-conflict reconstruction, Cohen

and Deng explain that the main priority of most NGOs working with IDPs is emergency assistance – providing food and health services, water, sanitation and shelter – and that few NGOs persist in the provision of services after IDPs have been resettled (1998a: 192). Even international standards for resettlement as established by the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* are primarily concerned with ensuring voluntary and safe return, and recovery of or compensation for lost property, rather than promoting sustainable reintegration and rehabilitation (UNHCR 1998). Since current NGO debates revolve principally around issues of protection, emergency assistance and institutional mandates, issues of IDP resettlement are largely overlooked during agency interventions, and thus academic disregard of the complexities involved in return migration are largely mirrored by NGO practice.

### **3. NARRATIVES OF RETURN**

Throughout this paper, I will argue that both discourse and practice surrounding return migration reveal a general lack of understanding of the popular experience and processes of resettlement for returnees themselves. Insofar as the varying meanings and experiences of resettlement have been consistently neglected, it is only when one ventures outside traditional migration literature “that one begins to see the enormity of issues involved in exile and return to home” (Warner 1994: 161). Drawing upon my own research with resettled Sri Lankan women, I contend that IDPs’ own experiences and perceptions of resettlement reveal dangerous myths within international conceptualizations of home and return, thus compelling us to question the multitude of assumptions which underlie both institutional treatment of, and agency responses to, return migration.

As I will argue, failure to adequately consider resettlement and reintegration has led to the erroneous conclusion that physical repatriation equals a return home to the familiar, an end to displacement, and the beginning of natural processes of reconnection of people with

place. To the contrary, I suggest that the concept of return involves much more than the simple physical relocation of formerly displaced persons, and that given the tumultuous experiences of violence and displacement, and the dynamic nature of both society and the individual, IDPs return to 'home' may in fact be just as complex an experience as that of refugee resettlement or immigration to a foreign country (Harrell-Bond 1989: 42).

Indeed, research with resettled Sri Lankan women suggests that "the conventional image of displacement, return and resettlement as linear processes, proceeding from loss to recovery and development" (Vincent and Sorenson 2001: 298) is flawed both in its perception of return and reintegration as linear, predictable, natural processes, and in its static, territorialized notions of home. Instead, I will argue that the resettlement process is a dynamic and multi-dimensional one, involving profound economic, social, psychological, cultural, political, legal, personal and communal change which transforms locations of return into sites of struggle and contention. Furthermore, I contend that socio-political factors are of extreme importance in shaping women's resettlement experiences. That is, in addition to material and physical dispossession, there are also profound forms of social and psychological dispossession which continue to have a marginalizing effect even after resettlement and economic rehabilitation (Kimura 1995).

In an attempt to understand the complexities of resettlement, this study asks the following questions: What are key factors influencing the process of resettlement for Sri Lankan women? How does the narrative process reflect their responses to such pressures? Specifically, it explores return through an investigation of two key themes which were central to women's narratives of their resettlement experiences: *identity reconstruction* and *memory negotiation*. While such themes are indeed common throughout literature on immigration and refugee resettlement as well, I suggest that they gain particular importance for those returning to their very *own* 'homes'.

Indeed, a detailed exploration of women's narratives suggests that there are both acute events and prevailing conditions which occur as a direct result of violence and displacement which can render 'home' a strange and unfamiliar place, or which require great struggles of readjustment upon return. As I will argue, both the social construction of identity and the political weight of memory exert powerful influences over the processes of return and reintegration, and make issues of gender and violence, and relations of power, history and memory, key factors in the struggle toward 'home' (Gruber 2000). Certainly, for many resettled Sri Lankan women, return to their villages has meant transforming a series of social, political, historical and psychological spaces into home all over again, and recreating or reinventing both a self and a future through processes in which the locations of return are re-inscribed with meaning as the result of a intricate blend of historical, political, economic, social, psychological experiences.

### **3.1 Identity Reconstruction**

*What is at stake in an ethnic conflict and ethnicide in Sri Lanka is more than the mortality of bodies, more than the destruction of life and the demise of security. Rather, what is at stake, especially for those whose bodies have been spared the destruction of death, is a death of a way of being-in-the-world, the death of that which constitutes their identity, honor, and dignity" (Daniel 1996: 68).*

Over the past thirty years, literature regarding identity politics among resettled refugees and immigrants has grown to abundance. Indeed, as Zetter argues, identity is one of the key points of analysis in refugee life and mechanisms of refugee control (1991). Malkki confirms this, writing, "identity is a highly mouldable, dynamic key-element in the creation of peoples' (self-) images, especially when it comes to refugeeness" (1992: 308). As is well-documented, refugees and immigrants commonly grapple with changing identities in strange, foreign contexts, often in unknown languages, among unknown people, amidst an unknown land. Indeed, their professed alienation and identity confusion is easily understood, given the social and cultural transformations that occur upon entry, and thus, scholars of migration

studies have often investigated international migration with respect to its resulting reconfigurations and ambiguities of personal and social identity.

In contrast, there is a dearth of literature regarding identity in the context of return migration. As noted previously, prevailing assumptions maintain that returnees return home to the familiar, thus commencing natural processes of reconnection in which displacement is terminated, and lives are repaired to their pre-displacement status. Such a discourse is founded upon what Malkki describes as sedentarist beliefs about the inseparability of identity from place (Malkki 1992, 1995a, 1995b), and implicitly suggests that when natural ties to land are severed, so too are individual identities, and thus repatriation is a process of reestablishing these ties, and the association between identity and a familiar land (Hammond 1999: 229). To this end, identity is assumed to be solved when located back into place (Warner 1994: 168).

As I contend, however, as war-torn societies shift themselves into place in the aftermath, new lines are drawn and differentiations made as a direct result of violence which often necessitate IDPs' identity reconstruction *despite* returning home to the very people and places from which they came. In such cases, the condition of displacement may persist, disallowing the resolution of identity and prohibiting reintegration *despite* the return home. Furthermore, processes of identity alteration may even render 'home' a bewildering, unfriendly, and unfamiliar place, thus challenging the assumption that individual identity and notions of home depend solely on a territorial connection with place, instead suggesting that they rely heavily on the relationship with community.

### ***3.1.1 Case Study: Sri Lankan Tamil War Widows***

Such is the case for many Sri Lankan Tamil war widows. Since the outbreak of war in 1983, the population of Tamil widows has risen dramatically due to repeated massacres of entire male populations of Tamil villages, and particularized killings. As a result, thousands

of Tamil women have been left displaced and widowed. Crucial to any discussion of Tamil war widows, of course, is a brief consideration of gender. As Schrijvers notes, gender is fundamental to the process of identity construction, especially in situations of conflict, war and displacement (1999: 308). While in ‘normal’ circumstances, gender heavily influences people’s lives, in war-time it is “renegotiated afresh, gaining new weight, meaning and expression” (Schrijvers 1999: 308). Located at the very heart of human identity and dignity, gender “has far-ranging consequences for the overall positioning of women... and it determines to a great extent the way in which people experience their lives” (Schrijvers 1999: 308). Insofar as it refers to “relations of power, privilege and prestige,” (Schrijvers 1999: 308) gender constitutes a key force in Tamil widows’ lives.

While Tamil war widows face a multitude of difficulties upon resettlement to their homes, the vast majority of humanitarian assistance focuses on their economic vulnerability. In many families, the husband was the sole breadwinner, and thus widows are suddenly responsible both for providing for the family’s daily needs and running the household. Many women have had no previous experience with income-generating activities and thus experience great difficulty finding employment, earning a suitable income, and raising children alone. Additionally, many widows’ rights to their husbands’ land and property are often violated by the husband’s family or even their own sons (Shanmugam 1999).

In an atmosphere of hostilities, security is another very real concern for many widows. Without husbands for physical protection, many are vulnerable to rape or sexual abuse from the surrounding armed forces, men in the community, or even male kin. Furthermore, many widows are extremely emotionally vulnerable due to sadness and grief at the loss of their husbands, worry for the future, and memories of violence and displacement. Often, they had no time to mourn their husbands’ deaths in the chaos of displacement, but had to immediately begin providing for their families, despite heavy emotional stress.

Upon resettlement, many women simultaneously face extreme social discrimination as a result of their new identity and social position as widows. As their stories revealed, the personal loss of identity as a result of violence is an already traumatic experience then further exacerbated by reduced social status within their native villages. Throughout Sri Lanka, Tamil war widows commonly remain at the mercy of religio-cultural traditions which yield power over their personal identities and material lives due to conservative discourses on gender. According to still powerful images of Tamil womanhood, women are conceptualized through their relations with men, and are thus recognized as wives, mothers, and daughters, but rarely persons in their own right. Being a wife is therefore a position of both power and powerlessness, as it represents the core of womanhood and lends women their dignity, respect, social status and identity, and yet is contingent upon the living presence of the husband (Jagadeesan 1992).

According to ancient Hindu proscription, once widowed, women are robbed of their ordained functions as wives, and thus the root of their identity is stripped from them, as is their source of respect and authority within the community. As Chakravarti explains, widowhood constitutes state of social death, as they effectively depart from social life (1998). Widowhood often connotes the exclusion of women from the functioning social unit of the family and community, as the woman ceases to be both wife and person, and has neither social nor religious existence outside of her husband (Chakravarti 1998). Institutionalizing widows' marginality, Brahmanical patriarchy reduces widows to "a liminal state between being physically alive and socially dead... [The widow has] ceased to belong and [has] been expelled from normal participation within the community... She is the object of divine and social disfavour" (Chakravarti 1998: 64-5). Brahmanical ideology, as expressed in the Hindu *Dharma*, deprives widows of personhood, sexuality and social status, imposing upon them a code of renunciation and demanding a celibate, pious and ascetic lifestyle (Patil 2000).

Cessation of the widow as a social entity and rejection of her personhood are often symbolically expressed through ritualized patterns during funeral procedures which enact the disfigurement of the widow: the removal of the *pottu* (a sacred mark on the forehead, symbolic of auspiciousness and good fortune), the *tali* (wedding necklace), cosmetics, jewels and ornaments, adornment in plain, white clothes, and often, shaving of the head (Somasundaram 2000). Such rituals and symbols used to mark or define widowhood constitute important instruments of the community's power over a widow, and mark her transition from the central place in the family and community to its margins (Chakravarti 1998).

Necessarily implying self-negation and patriarchal subordination, widows are seen as the opposite of *sumangali* (auspicious woman), since good fortune and prosperity are virtues bestowed upon women through marriage (Patil 2000). As stated in an ancient Brahmanical text,

Just as the body, bereft of life, in that moment, becomes impure, so the woman bereft of her husband, is always impure... Of all inauspicious things, the widow is the most inauspicious. There can never be any success after seeing a widow. The wise man should even avoid her blessing... for it is devoid of auspiciousness, like the poison of a snake." (66) *Stridharma Paddhati* 47(2) r.1-4, Vyasa quoted, Skanda Purana , III.2.7.49-51

While conservative Hindu ideologies have never played as dominant a role in Sri Lankan Tamil society as in India, widows are indeed regarded as bad omens, and are said to bring misfortune. As a result, they are relegated even further into the domestic domain, are unwelcome in public, and are the site of much social stigmatization and humiliation. While in discourse and in practice, ideologies regarding gender relations have loosened in recent years, violence and displacement have also "fed a strikingly conservative discourse... The new conservatism is a reaction to real changes, brought about by war" (Schrijvers 1999: 312-7), such as thousands living in refugee camps and thousands more fleeing to the West. Indeed, displacement has created a very real fear about the complete collapse of family

values among IDPs and the Tamil diaspora. As Schrijvers notes, images of the liberated woman, intensified by real social transformations in the context of civil war have created wide-spread fear regarding perceived chaos in gender relations due to increased movement and collapse of traditional gender hierarchies, thus allowing the reemergence of patriarchal, Brahmanic discourses on Tamil womanhood (1999: 328). To this end, attempts to deal with extreme loss, sorrow and fear by clinging to familiar cultural patterns have increased restrictions on widows in recent years.

### ***3.1.2 Widows' Narratives***

Indeed, social violence and discrimination emerged as the foremost concern of most widows I spoke with, and appeared to most profoundly affect their self-perception, relationships to 'home', and resettlement experiences. As their narratives revealed, even a once familiar home may be made strange by violent ruptures to personal identity and social life, leaving the individual a stranger in her own society, continuing displacement, and inhibiting the anticipated 'homecoming'. Throughout my research, countless stories indicated that for many widows, their husbands' deaths were conceptualized not only as a crisis of individual identity, but also of social meaning. Themes of social death and estrangement, the severing of social bonds, of being forgotten and rejected were common among widows' stories. Neglected and ostracized by the community, excluded from social life, and subject to strict dress and behavior codes, many widows were forced to renegotiate their identities and relationships to 'home' anew. To this end, even return "involved multiple losses" (Buijs 1994: 2), and thus many narratives revealed the ongoing struggle to recover continuity and control within the social space of return.

As Gardner suggests, "[N]arratives prove powerful tools in indicating the diverse elements which constitute identity, and the ways in which identities shift and are contested within the same individual" (2000: 29). In addition to revealing the challenging process of

identity reconstruction, the reformulation of meaning and the “reconstitution of self-hood” (Gardner 2000: 30), however, widow’s narratives also took on an activist role “that... not only report[ed] on, but actively participate[d] in the process of identity construction” (Benmayor and Skotnes 1994: 15). Primarily involved in processes of self-recognition and preservation within a place of extreme disruption and loss (Zur 1999: 55), many widows’ narratives reflect an effort to come to terms with the changed social space of ‘home’, accept their new identity within it, and make “highly ambivalent experiences and emotions whole or complete” (Gardner 2000: 32).

As Knudsen notes, “[T]o secure a positive feeling of self (who I am) through identity management, the individual often tries to negotiate on the basis of past, now lost, positions (who I was) rather than present conditions (who I have become). Central to these processes of negotiation... is the strategic presentation of life histories...” (1995: 25). Indeed, for widows, “who I have become” presents a great threat to the concept of self. As I will suggest, however, widows negotiate the past in order to *explain* present conditions (who I have become), and present life histories in order to both chronicle this painful transformation and chart their futures.

### ***Social Displacement***

Commonly, widows’ narratives began by describing the painful reality of their continuing displacement, despite return to their native villages. To this end, many narratives were constructed to establish the vast discrepancies between social life before and after widowhood, thus continually turned around their husbands’ deaths as the fundamental point of departure from past into present. Many widows’ sought to establish a secure and reliable past through detailed descriptions of life before displacement and widowhood, representing

economic prosperity, individual happiness and prominent social status – all things denied them in the present. As Bhavani<sup>4</sup> said,

Before my husband died, we had a nice life... this was a good home, and we were a good family then. I was a fine wife, and we had a good place within the community – we helped to develop this village! My husband earned well – we weren't very rich, of course, but we could provide for our children. They were happy, they ate well, and my son got good marks in school.

As Peteet notes of such reminiscences, “[N]arratives of the past evoke a nostalgic longing for something irretrievable and confirm a contemporary reality that is painful and alienating” (1995: 180). That widows may have essentialized the past using a ‘selectively reconstituted memory,’ however, highlights further the intensity of their dismay at conditions after resettlement.

After securing a picture of the past in which their personal identities as wives were central to social well-being, many widows’ narratives then explained the sudden alteration of this identity – from wife to widow – as the source of their present state of social displacement. Their stories of flight and return were repeatedly punctuated by mention of their husbands’ deaths, and many referred to events in time not by date, but as “before my husband died,” or “after my husband died.” In this way, their stories turned around the husband’s death as a rupture point in life, identity and in the narration of life, first interrupting life and identity in reality, and then serving as a ‘temporal marker’ in narrative, signifying the loss of status and protection in economic, social and personal terms (Peteet 1995). That widows’ life stories so often hinged on the death of their husbands suggests that this trauma was not an isolated event in life, but a continuous injury which “played a decisive role in their perceptions of life afterwards, and in their interpretations of subsequent events” (Rogers et al. 1999: 15) Explaining the condition of widowhood, Suriya said,

Everything changed after my husband died. There are so many difficulties for us now... it is hard to tell them all. We have so little income, it is difficult to

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<sup>4</sup> All names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

educate our children. We need assistance, but we're reluctant to take loans, because if we can't pay them back, we'll be branded as defaulters and get a bad name. These days, I make Rs. 50 each day doing fishing labor – how can I raise my family on this? Now all our lives are restricted because our husbands were killed. Young widows who go out and talk to men in the town, they develop bad talk around them – there is suspicion and they are shunned. A few women are supportive and kind to the widows, but generally, we are not recognized. We aren't allowed to go to village functions because people think we're bad omens. They have reservations to talk to us. Now we cannot move freely in public, and we can't mix at village celebrations because of this state we're in! We're asked to leave funerals and weddings, or to come late, when everyone else has gone. Most widows are still very young, but people think we're inauspicious, bad luck. The villagers discriminate against fatherless children and look down on them! Since my husband has died, my life is lonely, I am only in this house. And of course, I cannot remarry. Who would marry a widow? Women here won't dare try to marry again, then they will have *no* respect. We know the attitudes of the villagers, they all think in this way. It is our society.

Often, the contemporary reality of widowhood was framed in terms of a past that had come to an abrupt and violent end, leaving only an uncertain future (Petee 1995). For many widows, all their fears and apprehensions regarding the future were constructed as a result of their changed social identities, and poverty, alienation and insecurity were explained as an effect not only of a physical reality (the death of the husband), but also as a combined result of the induced social condition (widowhood), making survival in the village suddenly very tenuous (Petee 1995).

For many widows, the return home brought merely an end to physical displacement, while enacting new forms of social displacement, and continued disconnection and discontinuity from their past lives. Indeed, for a Tamil widow, whose husband lent her a “way of being-in-the-world,” his death signified the burial of her own “identity, honor and dignity” (Daniel 1996: 68). Thus, despite efforts to cope with traumatic experiences upon return, resettlement constituted a painful return to a world of distorted connections and disassociations (Rogers et al. 1999: 15). Many widows struggled to come to terms with the knowledge that it was their own community which stifled attempts to recover social position

and self-esteem, instead forcing the adoption of a brand new identity, with neither honor nor dignity. Indeed, as Karthi said,

Even my neighbors who knew me as a young girl, even they are shy to speak with me now! To, them, I am only a widow these days. They think I am bad luck. Even my own sisters, my own family is different now... Now I am just the widow, Karthi. So this will be a lonely life for me.

Clearly, fellow community members often prove most effective in undermining self-identity and making one's past irrelevant (Daniel and Knudsen 1995). As Knudsen notes, "When an individual is no longer able to gain the necessary support from close relatives and friends, and when even the family has proved incapable of living up to its expected therapeutic potential... the individual is alone in a new and heightened sense" (1995: 27). Certainly, for many widows, the quest for familiar structures fails when they are no longer respected as wives or even mothers, and with their ultimate role and function in life gone, they must occupy a new social space within Tamil culture, and spend their lives defined by an absence. Once revered within Hinduism and the Tamil community, it is these very same structures which then relegate them in widowhood to the social, economic, and legal margins, provoking bitter disappointment upon resettlement, and prohibiting social reintegration.

Insofar as discrimination and ostracization also had a profound impact widows' personal sense of themselves, their narratives simultaneously attempted to negotiate widowhood's implications for their own personhood. For many widows, the death of their husbands immediately signified not only the violent smashing of a familiar social structure, but the shattering of family life and the fracturing of personal identity. A "disconcerting sensation of disjuncture" (Zur 1999: 53) was evident in many widows' narrations, reflective of a pervasive sense of loss and the abrupt alteration of selfhood. Indeed, many narratives reflected widows' personal sense of themselves was now as "someone else," or "someone other" than who they once were (Zur 1999: 54). As Padmini recalled,

When they told me he was killed, I got a great shock. From that day, I knew nothing would be the same for me and my children. I thought my life was over. I felt like I died too. My whole life was gone, and now I had to start all over again... Now, without my husband, I feel like a different person. See, I have grown very thin – I am not the young girl I once was. Now I'm old after just a few years...

As Kotre reminds us, autobiographical memory often divides life into two categories, separated by “[p]ersonal landmarks that come to the forefront of remembrance [marking] occasions in which we stepped into a new role and became a new person... As a new self emerge[s], the old one recede[s] into the past” (1995: 109). Clearly, widowhood was one such landmark, significantly impacting self-perception, inducing feelings of “‘broken’ or ‘splintered’ personhood” (Zur 1999: 54), and confirming the power of both physical and social violence to dismantle identity, “hindering attempts to integrate the ‘self’ of the past with the ‘self’ of the present” (Zur 1999: 57).

### ***In Search of ‘Home’: Re-imagining History, Society and the Self***

In many cases, widowhood and its resulting social marginalization interfered with women’s efforts to both recognize and reintegrate into their villages, thus making resettlement an often profoundly painful process. Amidst narrations of return, many widows described their difficulty coping with the hostile, alien atmosphere they found awaiting them in their villages, citing widowhood as that which had rendered their villages strange or unfamiliar. As Suriya said,

Without my husband, I don’t feel at home here. This is not the same place I left, it feels like a different village. Everything has changed now after he died, and it is not like it used to be when he was alive. Of course, this is our house, but I cannot kiss the ground and say I have come home.

Clearly, for many widows, homelessness is not exclusively a physical condition (Warner 1994), and thus return does not necessarily indicate ‘homecoming.’ To the contrary, widows’ narratives were testimony to the potential of violence to dramatically alter personal identity, creating new social outcasts, and rendering ‘home’ an unfamiliar, unwelcoming location of

return. Estranged from the community and forced to abandon the old kinship structures and social networks which once constituted ‘home,’ resettlement merely represented return to a physical location for many Tamil widows, as many were still far from ‘home’.

Faced with the impossibility of *reintegration*, or return to life as they had once known it, many widows’ narratives reflected creative processes of innovation and imagination through which they negotiated a new place for themselves within history, and formed new relationships to society and the self. Through such reinterpretations, many widows’ narratives attempted to forge an integrated version of ‘home,’ while simultaneously rectifying personal disunity by establishing continuity from past to present, and confirming a coherent identity through which to renegotiate a vision of the future.

Widows’ narratives reflected patterns of innovation which sought to establish continuity on multiple levels – through historical tradition, society, and self-perception. For example, many widows turned to religio-cultural traditions in order to explain their social demise and re-imagine their place in history. Indeed, establishing a historical tradition to legitimize their suffering and placing their individual experiences within a larger historical context appeared to help assuage feelings of isolation and alienation, and made possible an understanding of their new relationships with society. As Sangeetha explained,

My mother and grandmother were also made widows at a very young age. It is the same for all of us. This is what was meant for the women in my family – actually, this is how it’s always been. It has always happened to widows, even long ago – it is our *karma*. At least we do not suffer like Sita<sup>5</sup>.

Similarly, many widows’ narratives aimed to establish societal continuity through repeated discussions of the common suffering of Tamil widows throughout Sri Lanka as a result of civil war. As Padmini said, “[W]e are a great tragedy of this war – there are so many women left alone after their husbands were killed. All the widows in the country are suffering.”

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<sup>5</sup> Sangeetha’s reference to Sita refers to the heroine of the Hindu epic, *The Ramayana*, who is immolated on her husband’s funeral pyre after his death. This practice, called *sati*, was historically prevalent throughout India, and still occurs on occasion today, though it was formally outlawed by the British in 1829.

Drawing strength from historical and communal continuity, many widows clearly relied on this sense of shared identity to give meaning to the hardships they faced upon the return to home.

Maintaining continuity in one's personal identity was also central to widows' resettlement struggles. As Daniel and Knudsen argue, since self-identity is anchored firmly the past, it is thus "the foundation upon which a meaningful world may be rebuilt" (1995: 5). Indeed, many widows' stories strove to maintain meaning in their own personhood and womanhood through connecting both past and present. As Bhavani said,

I was a good wife to him, and I will still care for my children well. I was a good wife, and I will be a good widow. I know how people will talk if I meet men in the streets... I do not want to get a bad name – I am still a good woman. I won't ever remarry, of course. It would look bad to the villagers, and I am still my husband's wife. There are his children to raise, so I must make a good home for them again.

Clearly, locating personal identity within newly invented perceptions of history, society and the self helped many widows find continuity and order amidst violent, profound social transformation. Furthermore, many women suggested that their affiliations with other widows offered them much needed companionship, and that integration within the work force allowed them to participate in a new, meaningful sphere of society. Thus, through creative processes of remembering the past and imagining the future, many widows redefined their identities, social affiliations, and economic participation as part of the process of returning 'home'.

### ***Discourse and Policy Implications***

Refugee status is considered the "perilous territory of not belonging" (Petee 1995: 170), with the refugee "hover[ing] at the edges of her adopted society, an alien body" (Menon 1999: 163). As the case of Tamil war widows indicates, however, such is also the plight of many return migrants, for whom violence has transformed 'home' into an unfamiliar site of continuing disconnection and displacement. For as widows' narratives suggest, the return

'home' is largely the return to a community, and thus, insofar as widows' new identities enforce their social estrangement, home – as a place of belonging and affinity – is no more. Far from reestablishing lives to their pre-displacement status, or initiating the natural reconnection between people and place, resettlement for many widows meant the return to a whole new world of challenges and struggles, profound transformations conditioned by the social realities of violence and gender, and a new relationship to the social space of home.

Clearly, widows' testimonies have grave implications for contemporary rehabilitation assistance schemes, most of which focus largely on returnees' economic reintegration. Indeed, the harsh social realities of widows' lives complicate this approach, presenting yet another formidable challenge upon resettlement. As we have seen, economic and social factors are in constant and dynamic interaction, since while many widows are excluded from economic opportunity due to their social status, others are aided in their social lives when allowed to participate in the economic sphere. Instead of existing in isolation from one another, economic and social realms constitute a reflexive relationship within the widow's life, and should thus be treated in collusion with one another. Dynamically influencing each another, economic and social aspects of return must be approached through holistic strategies which integrate the two so as to deny neither the social constraints upon economic rehabilitation nor the economic implications of social status.

### **3.2 Memory Negotiation**

*“The political value of what is forgotten reminds us of the deep connection between memory and freedom.”<sup>6</sup>*

*“Man's struggle against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Passerini 1983: 196.

<sup>7</sup> Kundera 1994.

As a result of increased multidisciplinary inquiry into refugee resettlement, refugees' psychological adaptation has recently come to the fore in both academic literature and organizational agendas. Indeed, it is now generally understood that refugees who have lived through violent experiences such as war or torture may suffer profound psychological distress during resettlement, given that traumatic events are rarely isolated incidents, but rather violent processes which persist in destroying the psyche long after their actual occurrence, even when far distant from danger (Manz 1995: 161). Permanent resettlement and its founding principle of *non-refoulement*, however, may afford refugees some degree of psychological assurance by implying that they should never again have to face their perpetrators or the scene of violence, and thus they may cope with their memories and experiences of violence in a setting vastly removed from that in which the trauma occurred.

On the other hand, the myriad of psychosocial issues that accompany returned migration have rarely been addressed by researchers or the NGO community. As Farwell notes, “[R]epatriation programmes typically emphasize infrastructural assistance and material aid rather than psychosocial support during reintegration” (2001: 44). As mentioned previously, predominant approaches to repatriation stifle sophisticated investigation into psychological dimensions of return given that psychological rehabilitation is generally assumed to follow naturally after successful economic reintegration. Thus denying the historical, political and psychological contexts in which ‘home’ is continually situated, conventional wisdom regarding repatriation implicitly suggests that return involves a natural process of reconnection between people and place, and posits a fixed, static, relationship between the two which excludes troubling historical and socio-political realities so often embodied in a physical place.

As I will argue, many returnees are also involved in similar processes of psychological adjustment, though they must negotiate traumatic memories and experiences of violence

amidst the very physical, historical and political contexts which produced them. It is this very return – to the physical site of violence, the political site of repression, and the emotional site of memory – which creates great challenges for many resettled IDPs, and renders the process of psychological adaptation a formidable one in its own right, not necessarily following the physical return ‘home’. As research among resettled Sri Lankan women revealed, unresolved memories of violence can render resettlement a highly troublesome process, particularly when ‘home’ is a place replete with traumatic historical events, continued political repression and forbidden memories. Far from natural processes of reintegration, returnees must often negotiate anew the meaning and place of their memories within the physical, historical and political spaces of home, and are thus engaged in continuous struggles to reconcile their haunted reflections of the past with visions for a future, despite the violence and silence still alive within their villages.

### ***3.2.1 Case Study: Sri Lanka – Violence and Silence***

Such is the case for thousands of resettled Sri Lankan IDPs. Since the outbreak of war in 1983, violence has become endemic within Sri Lankan society in general, and has largely shaped collective memory within the Tamil community in particular. Throughout the north and east, repeated attacks on Tamil civilians and repressive state military control have produced a ‘culture of terror’ in which fear is omnipresent and the pervasive threat of violence has become a reality of life for all. Rather than an acute reaction, fear is a chronic condition (Green 1994) instilled throughout the Tamil population as a result of decades of direct military attacks, civilian massacres, murders, torture, disappearances, systematic harassment, round-ups, detention, imprisonment, interrogation, searches, threats, ubiquitous military presence and surveillance, checkpoints, garrisons, patrols, and various other forms of state violence and repression. Violence has been the “motor of oppression” (Green 1994: 236) used by the Sri Lankan state against its Tamil citizenry, and combined with internecine

warfare, was so central to the lived experiences of IDPs, that its memory formed the core of my interviews with most resettled women.

As Pohlandt-McCormick argues, however, beyond the experience of actual physical violence lies an insidious form of discursive, rhetorical violence, and thus, if the first casualties of physical violence are human lives, “then the first casualties of the discursive violence that follow[s] are the stories of what [people] had experienced and seen” (2000: 27). As with many repressive governments, violence manifested itself in Sri Lanka in the way evidence was destroyed, concealed, or manipulated in order to deliberately distort the historical record and change what is known, written, and remembered about the past. As Pohlandt-McCormick notes, though the state cannot change what has happened, it may compound the physical violence done by violent attempts to hide the evidence thereof, thereby changing the official meaning of events, and altering the process of historical memory (2000: 29). Similarly, Manz argues that the primary objective of a government involved in terror is to create an official version of the facts – an official story or memory – which “ignores crucial aspects of reality, distorts others, and even falsifies or invents still others” (1995: 158). As many women I spoke with testified, beyond the physical violence which they had experienced or witnessed, was a silence enforced through fear and official practices of deceit and disguise which were, in themselves, violent attacks on the dignity of victims, survivors and witnesses.

According to Zur, official denial of violent events constitutes a ‘historical amnesia’ which acts as a means of social and ideological control through its power to “obliterate, silence and negate” (1999: 49) the lived realities of a people. As Gittins reminds us, “silence has long shadowed violence” (1998: 61), and is woven into the very fabric of historical evidence, texts and memory, making history a potentially destructive force due to its capacity to distort the truth and invent mythical pasts (1998: 61). While this is not the place for a full discussion of

power and the production of history, I believe that an exploration of the relationship between violence, memory and silence is crucial for an understanding of the complex psychological dimensions of IDP resettlement processes. For within the Sri Lankan context, violence and silence have acted in collusion with one another, “and can be read as a war against memory, a... falsification of memory and negation of reality [and an]... attempt to deny people access to the truth” (Zur 1999: 48), thus rendering ‘home’ the site of much historical and emotional contention.

### ***3.2.2 Women’s Narratives***

Despite the pronounced cessation of warfare during my fieldwork, only a fragile, “eerie calm” reigned throughout the north and east, and a fearful uneasiness lay just below the surface of daily life, permeating and tearing at the social fabric through a “low-intensity panic [that] remain[ed] in the shadow of waking consciousness” (Green 1994: 231). Indeed, violence experienced at the hands of the state remained a central element of both individual and collective memory, and rather than fading amidst a climate of political reconciliation, continued to violate everyday life, disrupting peoples’ ability to find continuity and meaning upon the return ‘home’. Far from erasing memories of violence, the silences enforced upon victims and survivors alike have created individual memories that remain “torn with pain, anger, distrust and unanswered questions” (Pohlant-McCormick 2000: 24), thus making many IDPs’ return ‘home’ an often volatile journey.

In spite of continued peace talks and resettlement back to their villages, violence was still an intimate, integral part of everyday life, and fear and suspicion still penetrated the social memory of many communities, increasing the hesitancy with which I proceeded in my research, and governing the time, place, and overall nature of my interviews. Indeed, the sites for discussing memories of violence were carefully restricted, and women were constantly guarded and alert for informers. Due to the continued military presence in many

Tamil villages, most conversations took place in whispers, and were punctuated by instructions to turn off my tape recorder, or move out into the fields.

Despite some initial reluctance, most women gradually warmed to my presence in their villages, and subsequently allowed their narratives to emerge. The nature of their recollections varied greatly: while some women spoke for the first time about their experiences, others unleashed a flow of seasoned, often-told stories. Through close examination of one woman's narrative, I will explore memories of violence in an attempt to capture a sense of the challenges that permeate Tamil women's lives upon return to a 'home' engulfed in hideous memories, ongoing militarization, and chronic fear.

Due to growing literature on trauma, memory and narrative, it is currently understood that traumatic memories often constitute the core of life stories narrated by those who have survived (Caruth 1995, 1996; Rogers et al. 1999). That such stories are often told and retold reveals the "central importance of narration to remembering and recovery" (Zur 1999: 22) and the individual's purpose to bestow past experience with meaning: "a meaning which will contribute to the meaning of the present" (Rogers et al. 1999: 72). Additionally, however, I will argue that uncovering and narrating memories is vital not only for integrating violence into one's own personal life, but for understanding its significance within the larger historical and political contexts, thus reaffirming hidden memories within the location of return, despite continued violence, silence and fear.

### *Geetha's Tale*

I knew Geetha for a long time before finally learning the troubling circumstances of her husband's death, and the violent events which had preceded her flight from home. Though she spoke of her husband often, and continually alluded to his death, it was months before an appropriate moment came for me to ask her how he had died. When Geetha began the vivid tale of her husband's death, her initial words betrayed the difficulties of finding a language to

recover a memory hidden in fear, or to articulate a pain and suffering which have been denied and covered up. Her uncertainty about how to tell me of an event whose reality was dangerous and painful reflected the difficulties of “fixing fear and terror in words” (Green 1994: 230), and she was immediately aware of her own limitations and those imposed upon her by language:

How did my husband die? You want to hear this story? I do not even know how to tell this story... I don't know where to start. That time was a very bad time for me, and I cannot speak of his death. I do not know what are the right words for this story – that time was all sadness for me. How can I explain this sadness? It is always with me, and this fright. I have not spoken of it for so long...

Despite the halting, haunted beginning of her narrative, her insecurities about whether she was telling her story “right,” and her self-professed difficulties in finding the correct words, often causing her to back up and begin again, Geetha’s narrative quickly became dynamic and charismatic, replete with detailed descriptions, spirited recollections and forceful movement. Reconstructing for me in compelling whispers the scene which she had watched unfold before her own eyes – how her husband had been coming home from work during an army attack on the village, how an army truck had brutally run him down on a road nearby their house, as she stood watching from the cross-roads – Geetha’s words were evoked in a torrent of speech. She described the ensuing army attack, and those that followed throughout the week, during which time the villagers fled their homes into the jungle. In the shelling and bombardment that accompanied their flight, Geetha’s twelve year-old son was also killed, shot as they were climbing a wall to escape. Once safe, Geetha then lived with her youngest son in a welfare center for three years before returning to her village in 2000.

Like Geetha, many women I spoke with had been victims of, or witnesses to, hideous violence at the hands of the Sri Lankan Army. In addition to bearing witness to the physical violence which had unfolded in their villages, however, many narratives also provided

eloquent testimony to the silences which had long enshrouded these memories. As Geetha explained,

I cannot speak of this to anyone. I cannot say, “this is how my husband died.” I am too afraid, for myself and for my son. Everyone knows, of course, but it is dangerous to speak of it... even now, I do not know who may be listening. People here are always willing to talk for money. It is not wise to trust these people – that is why we must speak out here [in the garden], like animals. **[Who are you afraid of?]** Everyone – the government, the LTTE. But they [the Army] know I saw, so they are also afraid... They say they took him to the hospital, but I don’t know where they took him, I don’t know if he ever went there... They took his body, and they wouldn’t release it to me. For a long time, they wouldn’t give me his body – they said if I wanted it, I must sign some papers saying that the accident was done by the LTTE, that the LTTE ran him over. **[Why?]** They didn’t want to get into trouble – they found out my husband wasn’t in the LTTE, and they were afraid of getting trouble. At first, I didn’t sign the papers, but they wouldn’t give me his body for burial, so what could I do? I had no choice unless I signed their papers... I don’t know what I signed, but it said the accident to my husband was done by the LTTE... I just said, I’ll sign anything, and they gave me the body. I couldn’t go against the Army, and they said they would know if I told people it was the Army... The army can say what they want, that is the way. I cannot even speak of this to my son, you see. He’s in the LTTE, and he would discover my tale. If the LTTE would know I signed those papers, there will be much trouble for both of us. I know it was a bad thing, but what could I do? My own son does not know how his father died... But at least I have my husband’s body – so many just disappeared...

Through her account of the Army’s deceit and the lies it forced *her* to tell and retell, Geetha’s narrative reflects the damage done to individuals when those who have committed physical violence erase the history of their victims, and deny their own culpability (Pohlandt-McCormick 2000). Such silencing constitutes a “violence within” (Warren 1993: 37), woven as it is throughout the texture of everyday life, on individual, family, communal, and national levels.

Many women I spoke with admitted that though they had longed to return home while living in the welfare centers, the actual resettlement process had been an excruciatingly painful one due to their sudden confrontation with, and habitation in, various sites of violence and horrific memories. Indeed, upon her return home after three years, Geetha’s efforts to come to terms with the violent legacy which haunted her village were persistently frustrated

by the lies surrounding her memories, and the powers which tried to nullify and distort them. Geetha's words reflect the realization that not only had violence shattered her personal dignity and family life, but that the denial of violence had destroyed her home, severing the affective affiliations and feelings of security which she once knew there. As she reflected,

This village has become a very sad place for me, since we went away. When we were in the camps, I wanted to come home – I thought it would be better here. But everything has changed here – this village has only bad things for me, so many places are sad to remember. It is not a good place to live now, our own homes are filled with so much blood... The Army is still here, so people are afraid, and still, I cannot speak freely in my own house!

Clearly, for Geetha and others like her, resettlement meant the return home not to an empty, or 'negative' space, but to a land pregnant with unresolved memories, silences and traumatic historical and political events which have yet to be accounted for, and laid to rest. Indeed, 'home' for Geetha was a place which harbored secret, raw wounds, scraped open afresh by their daily public negation.

### ***Memory, History and Home***

Far from describing natural processes of reintegration, Geetha's narrative reflected her struggle to both resurrect memory from its silent grave, and negotiate its place within the historical space of her home. As I will argue, where silence and speechlessness have clearly been the insidious, pervasive results of violence, private memory such as Geetha's provides a way to excavate these silences, and testify to past injustices which are otherwise impossible to articulate. Indeed, the rapid excitement with which Geetha recounted the events of her husband's death both vigorously enacted the retrieval of suppressed memories, and betrayed a desperate attempt to make a lost moment of history real through its retelling. As Geetha told me,

I *watched* him die, you know. They say it was an accident, and I signed to say it was the LTTE, but we all know. I saw the Army kill him, so did the other women. We all ran into the street when we heard them coming, and there was shouting, and we all ran, *ran* into the street, but then we got afraid, so we hid behind the stalls. So I was *watching* from behind, we were all just watching

people running and there was so much noise... I *saw* when they crashed down on him and I was screaming... That truck had very big wheels, and they never slowed down, that Army truck. Their papers say it was the LTTE, so it was, but it *wasn't!*

Rogers et al. claim that “[W]here there is silence, where there are no witnesses, it may seem as if an event has not occurred” (1999: 11). And yet, as Geetha’s narrative repeatedly implores, “I *saw*.” This struggle to bear witness, to resurrect a hidden truth, to reassert the veracity or reality of an officially denied event is clear through Geetha’s insistence that while on one level (that of official documents and history) “it *was*” the LTTE who killed her husband, on another level (that of individual memory and personal truth) “it *wasn't!*” In her persistence to speak, to struggle with memory, to get the story “right,” Geetha was consciously combating “the inauthenticating effect of living behind a lie (the official truth)” (Zur 1999: 54) establishing the truth as she knew it, and creating an engagement between narrative and history. Thus through her political act of remembering, by joining memory to language, Geetha became the “testimonial bridge which, mediating between narrative and history, guarantees their correspondence and adherence to each other,” (Felman 1992: 101) and establishes memory as a means through which to resist both violence and silence. For as Geetha recalled, “I know what I saw... Yes, I signed those papers, but I still know what happened.”

Clearly, a crucial aspect of Geetha’s struggle to cope with her memories amidst a context of fear included contesting official versions of the violent events she had witnessed, thus actively locating herself within the historical space of home. While silent due to fear, Geetha’s insistence upon the truth within her own memories, and her refusal to forget, or accept the official version of her husband’s death, immediately confronted the military agenda, turning private thoughts into political ones, “reinterpret[ing] the political domain and challeng[ing] the ‘natural order of things’” (Zur 1999: 49), as put forth by those in power. In this way, witnessing and remembering were not passive functions (Felman 1992), but acts of

personal resistance in which the individual, lone act of memory, however small, indicated an active engagement with officially sanctioned versions of history, “acting into these spaces and contesting their hold” (Pohlandt-McCormick 2000: 25). Thus, by maintaining these secret, unofficial memories, Geetha and other women like her sought to establish authority over the historical spaces of their homes, lending them personal meaning and historical significance despite the unforgiving silence.

### *Memory in Space, Time and National Politics*

Furthermore, Geetha’s narrative denied the existence of a fixed, static relationship between people and place, instead reflecting a continuing struggle to re-cultivate an affiliation with home by carving out a place for memory within the physical space, time, and politics of her village. For Geetha, resettlement demanded not only return to the site of memory, but to that memory denied, thus inspiring in her a concerted effort to make sense of her memories amidst a context which had both produced and obliterated them. One day, weeks after she had told me the story of her husband’s death, Geetha asked me to accompany her to the town center. Choosing a different route than we had walked before, she stopped alongside a dirt road just west of her house. Pointing, she said,

Even now I do not like to return to this place. These days, when I go to the store, I take the long way through that woman’s garden so that I do not pass by. Look at the road – it looks as though nothing has happened here... It has not even left marks on this road. Earlier, there must have been marks – they must have cleared them away. But I know this is the place. See over there? I know it’s here because of that jack tree.

Combined with the detailed physical and geographical descriptions that emerged throughout her narrative, Geetha’s desire to show me the site of her husband’s death suggests “[T]he need to penetrate... silences, to know where somebody was killed, what exactly happened... [and] reflects a need to locate a person or an event in history, to find a place or a site in which memory can orient itself, create boundaries and spatial dimensions...” (Pohlandt-McCormick 2000: 44). By revisiting the site of her husband’s death, I believe Geetha was reclaiming a

memory obscured by the lies of the state (and those she herself had committed,) transforming it into one with tangible, physical characteristics through which she could locate and affirm a site of personal mourning and loss. Wresting power from the Army, Geetha sought to re-inscribe physical space with meaning, truth and personal memory, thereby recreating a relationship with physical land in the aftermath of violence.

Similarly, Geetha's stories continually reconnected the memory of her husband's death to other temporal markers, 'real' and publicly known events whose reality could not be negotiated or denied, such as her son's birthday, and the day the villagers had fled. Thereby affixing the violence she had witnessed to a dependable time, Geetha was able to locate her memories within the chronology of her own life and that of the village. As she recalled,

Since we returned, it seems to be a different place, different from the home we left. How can it ever be like our old home? This used to be a beautiful village – there was plenty of fruit on the trees, though now it is dry and we cannot grow well... When I was a young girl, this was a prosperous village. I was very happy and we earned well. There was food to eat, and I studied well in school. Now that all this has happened, our lives will never be the same here...

Thus, in her attempts to understand the effects of violence on the life of her village, and come to terms with the violent legacy of her home, Geetha's words both sought to imbue time with personal truth, and establish a relationship to her village that *encompassed* personal memory, despite its official non-existence.

Finally, in her efforts to imagine a future in which her violent memories of the past could be reconciled, Geetha's words reflected sophisticated recognition of the political changes taking place around her, suspicion of their authenticity, and an attempt to lend political significance to her memories, fitting them into a larger political context in the hopes of reconciliation. As she mused,

Now there is talk that the war has ended, that the Army will leave here and there will be peace talks. But how can there be peace when such things have happened to so many of us? I wonder about this peace... if I will ever be able to tell about my husband's death. How can there be peace when I cannot even do this? I want to tell my son how his father died. Now, I am still very afraid,

but if there are these peace talks, maybe the Army will leave and I can tell my son. When I see the Army, I want to shout at them to give me back those papers... If my son knew the truth, things would be better for us here.

Longing for the end of violent conflict to bring redemption to memory, Geetha's hopes indicate a yearning for political reconciliation with her home and its history, and a recognition that *not* to account for violence serves as "a perpetration of its tyranny" (Laub 1995: 64). To this end, her words betray the still "foaming, eddying presence of the past" (Daniel 1996: 127), and that the death of her husband is an event which is *not yet* over. By imagining the future of national politics as an opportunity to reformulate an attachment to home and restore a semblance of dignity, Geetha's words reflect a multi-faceted struggle to resolve the painful process of 'homecoming'.

### ***Discourse and Policy Implications***

Turner contends that if a refugee has faced intense traumas in his home, this compounds the experience of alienation and may inhibit successful integration into the asylum country (Turner 1995: 63). As Geetha's narrative demonstrates, however, the *return back* to one's very own home may constitute a similarly challenging process of *reintegration* for the precise reason that the return home is a return to the site of this trauma. Thus, home is not a 'negative' or empty space into which people naturally reintegrate, but a physical, historical and political place in which people must struggle to carve out a place for their memories of the past and visions of the future while subjected to violent historical legacies and ongoing political repression. To the extent that such forces have the potential to alienate people from their native lands, the attachment of people to place is not a natural given (Stepputat 1994), but an affiliation that must be cultivated and re-cultivated through complex psychological and political processes.

Furthermore, insofar as the resettlement process is one of coming to terms with violence, silence and the painful memories embodied in home, I believe that psychological adaptation

is unlikely to be a natural corollary of economic reintegration. To this end, rehabilitation assistance must approach the processes of psychological adaptation as real and vital ones in their own right, and while they must not be pursued in isolation, psychological well-being must be conceived of as an end in itself, and not merely a benefit of economic reintegration. If the psychological needs of returnees go unattended, deep, pervading wounds to the psyche may persist in damaging the entire individual, thus undermining even the goals of economic rehabilitation. Indeed, the processes of reestablishing trust and affective ties to a land haunted by warfare depend on much more than simply improvement of living conditions.

Unfortunately, despite recent political developments towards peace in Sri Lanka, a “veil of official secrecy” (Dawson 1999: 199) continues to shroud the past in ambiguity, impeding a necessary reassessment of the state’s role in violence against the Tamil population. Recently, we have begun to hear calls from Sri Lanka to ‘overcome’ a violent legacy and ‘move on’ toward a peaceful future. While national reconciliation is an admirable goal, it is also a fragile, potentially dangerous process in that it “risks abandoning those individuals and communities who have suffered trauma, with no public recognition of, or accounting for, the causes and impacts of their loss” (Dawson 1999: 23). As Dawson notes,

Where the language of reconciliation speaks of forgetting the past... this amounts to a denial of the psychic and political realities of those communities. In such a situation – where violent conflict has only recently ended, it remains fresh in living memory, and is liable to break out again... The psychic and political legacies of history are not overcome quite so readily: they remain a source of profound tension within and between the warring communities. That which the language of reconciliation would smooth over and erase, the language of trauma insists upon: it names the realities... as traumatic, and points to the necessity of remembering in order to go forward to any viable alternative future” (1999: 184).

Indeed, I believe that remembering – forcing individual memories of pain and suffering into the public domain where they may be heard, and their burden shared – is a prerequisite for genuine reconciliation. Without such acts of public witnessing, the buried past may remain a raw and open wound, slow to heal and continually re-emergent, exerting “a malign influence

in a range of morbid symptoms, silences and emotional reactions” (Dawson 1999: 186). Therefore, it is essential to create both social and political spaces in which death, destruction and personal losses can be recognized, and their traumatic effects acknowledged.

Clearly, public and official acknowledgement about the truth of atrocities committed is central to the distribution of responsibility, and is needed for both “social reparation” (Green 1994: 241), and for “repairing the damage wreaked within the inner world of the psyche” (Dawson 1999: 195). Such acknowledgement is one way of recognizing the dignity and worth of both victims and their survivors, and thus beginning the process of both individual and collective healing and recovery. As Jelin notes,

Truth telling is said to address the social need for knowledge to become acknowledgement. It is said to bring victims back into the fold of society, by recognizing their suffering, providing a form of distributive or social justice, and giving out non-conventional resources such as social awareness, collective memory, solidarity... Truth has also been seen as a form of ‘justice as recognition,’ acknowledgement or admission. It can further be seen as a form of compensatory justice, in that it restores a sense of justice that had been broken down” (1994: 25).

To this end, pursuing accountability and combating “social amnesia” or denial supports social rehabilitation, “allow[ing] individuals to acknowledge and reconcile the past openly, to acknowledge at last the culpability for the death of their loved ones and to lay them to rest” (Green 1994: 241).

For as we have seen in the case of Sri Lanka, painful aspects of the past live on “whether as private nightmares or public conflicts” (Dawson 1999: 23), and thus remain to pollute the present. Thus, in an effort to counter the vast silence and isolation of victims and survivors, societies must attempt to “heal the great divide between the personal and the political” (Manz 1995: 163). And yet, while memory is vital to such a process, as Manz notes, “personal liberation cannot be fully realized while the social conditions remain in a state of oppression and distress. Real liberation and trust cannot be cultivated and sustained separate from the society that binds individuals” (1995: 157).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Clearly, for many returnees, the concepts of both home and return often mean something vastly different than the meanings attributed by academic literature and international policy. While the predominant discourse on repatriation uncritically accepts and continually reaffirms territorialized notions of home, resettled Sri Lankan women's narratives repeatedly imply that the concept of home suggests something much more than merely a territorial space or their physical, geographical place of origin. To the contrary, home for many women was made up of a series of interconnected social, political, historical and psychological spaces, the return to which involves processes of struggle and contention.

Similarly, many narratives consistently portrayed return not as a natural process of reconnection and reintegration between people and place, but as a challenging process of transforming these various spaces into home all over again, through dynamic, contested, and often painful processes of power and inequality (Ranger 1994: 291). For many women, their struggles during return hinged on the fact of violence, the physical, social and political forms of which governed their everyday lives, constituting an integral, intimate part of their memories and identities, and obstructing their efforts to return '*home*'. To this end, while resettlement to their native villages may have signified an end to physical displacement, the return to violence simultaneously enacted the beginning of other forms of social, political and psychological disarticulation, ensuring the profound impossibility of *return* at all, and instead requiring creative processes of reconstruction, reinvention and re-imagination. Indeed, women's narratives suggested a far more creative concept of home, one which acquires meaning through complex processes of remembering and narrating the past, and imagining a future in the location of return.

In fact, women's narratives imply that the existence of, or connection to, home cannot be taken for granted, but is rather something worthy of explanation. As Warner argues, disciplinary assumptions about return and home "assume a world of order and symmetry" which over-simplifies the relationship between individual, society, state and territory (1994: 160). As Warner notes of refugees,

The situation of the refugee is the physical incarnation of the rift in being; it is the physical incarnation of the denial of symmetries, alignments and equations... It is in this sense that the refugee shows us the rifts in ourselves that we wish to deny. The refugee's return to home, and our desire to prioritize that return, are all our desires to return to a world of alignments and symmetries. Refugees and non-refugees wish to be in a world of equations and alignments, a world that... never was (1994: 168)

Sri Lankan women's words deny the existence of such equations and symmetries, bearing witness to the divergence between both discourse and policy on repatriation, and the actual, lived experiences of returnees themselves, and effectively highlighting a dangerous gap between official images of home and return for policy-makers, and the harsh realities of post-conflict resettlement. Such images are the result of a theoretical framework that has yet to truly comprehend the complexity of experiences involved in return and reintegration, and therefore dangerously neglects certain crucial needs of return migrants, while simultaneously failing to recognize the harsh realities of social change in the aftermath of war and displacement (Hammond 1999).

To this end, oral narratives must not be seen merely as research methodologies, but as a means through which to reevaluate the humanitarian community's impact on returnees. Clearly, reintegration programmes must strive for a more holistic approach to development for assistance to be at all relevant, successful and sustainable on an individual level. Insofar as women's narratives encourage a more complex understanding of personal, social and political life after resettlement, they challenge organizations to develop multi-faceted

approaches to rehabilitation which will effectively address the profound effects of violence and loss on the return home.

We are in dire need of both a new theoretical discourse and practical strategy which incorporate returnees' own meanings, perceptions and experiences of home and return into their fold, thereby altering the ways in which we conceive of return migration. Such an institutional shift must acknowledge the ways in which personal, social, historical, psychological and political experiences influence notions of home and identity in the location of return. Furthermore, insofar as repatriation presents returnees with new challenges and opportunities upon return, their responses point us toward a new course for both policy makers and academics, translating the vocabulary of return – reintegration, reconstruction, and rehabilitation – into one of “construction, creativity, innovation and improvisation” (Black and Koser 1999: 11; Hammond 1999: 243).

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A - IDP Returns in Sri Lanka.

# Rapid village assessment



## Total number of Returnees per District (30 May 2002)



