



P.O.V.'s "No More Tears Sister"

By Helene Klodawsky

Tuesday, June 27, 2006 at 10 p.m. on PBS (Check local listings)

Filmmaker's Statement

Like many others who have devoted their working lives to documentary filmmaking, my passion stems from a desire to bring the voices of those often relegated to the margins of society to the center. Hence, many of my films over the last 20 years have focused on women and their diverse roles and experiences. I have shown them as mothers, lovers, workers, creators, activists, immigrants, victims and heroines.

Working closely with artists, poor people, and other communities who often see themselves as marginalized, I have tried to reframe "history" from multiple points of view. Whether filming impoverished mothers in the wealthiest countries of the world, gender-bending writers ahead of their time, or young Palestinians and Israelis on the eve of the first *intifada*, I have tried to shed light on corners of experience usually hidden from view. I have been fortunate in finding exceptional characters whose real lives are often more dramatic and revealing than fiction.

When I was first approached by the National Film Board of Canada to create an auteur film about women and war, I considered myself up to the task. Besides making films about other conflict zones, I had a personal connection as well. My mother survived the Lodz Ghetto, Auschwitz and other concentration camps, so I have lived close to the shadows and aftershocks of war all my life. Growing up within a community of refugees and victims of torture, I witnessed both despair and formidable resilience as responses to indelible loss. Questions about war and women's experience in war were part of my daily vocabulary.

I was drawn to the subject of women's experience of war in Sri Lanka—a conflict that scholar Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah has called the "ethnic fratricide" of his country. Raging in various degrees of intensity since 1983, it has been one of the least known but more intractable wars of the postcolonial era. It has caused at least 65,000 deaths, displaced up to one million people, resulted in severe human rights abuses, and compromised Sri Lanka's once promising development. In his book *Reflections on War, The Evil and the End of History*, philosopher-journalist Bernard-Henri Lévy calls the war in Sri Lanka one of the "forgotten wars."

I wanted to understand how ethnic conflict and nationalist struggles impact women—be they victims of war, militant fighters or peace builders. I wondered whether there was a feminist critique of both state and guerrilla violence. It was well known that the Sri Lankan military and the opposition Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were both guilty of torture, illegal detention, disappearances and extrajudicial executions. I wanted to explore whether women were, on one hand, torn between loyalties to their ethnic

community and, on the other hand, the community of women. Did oppressed minority women imagine fighting injustice in different ways than their male counterparts?

The story of Rajani Thiranagama—her courageous life, unique vision and tragic assassination—offered a compelling narrative to pose many of my questions. Rajani's evolution into a spirited champion of the rights of the Tamil people in the '70s and '80s paralleled the escalation of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Moved by her people's complex struggle against ruthless state violence, she believed Tamil militancy was the answer and joined the liberation movement. But when she witnessed the corruption and cruelty within, she felt compelled to document what she saw, and urged her people to resist blind adherence to any leader or movement. Embracing feminism and a belief in human rights, she felt that women in particular were the primary casualties of war. Near the end of her life Rajani wrote, *"Men in battle garb, whether they come with swords or guns, on a horse or in armored cars; the price of conquest seems heightened by the violation of women."* I believed that by following Rajani's life story and the circumstances surrounding her untimely death, several themes could be explored: nationalism vs. anti-nationalism, the lives of women as both participants and innocent victims of war, and the belief in armed struggle vs. a critique of militarism.

Though **No More Tears Sister** is set in Sri Lanka, a similar story might have been explored in Africa, other parts of Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe or Latin America. In the '60s and '70s, Rajani was part of a generation of young political activists in postcolonial societies around the world—activists who dreamed of radically transforming their societies to achieve equality and justice for all. But this idealism continues to be ruthlessly thwarted by narrow nationalist agendas in countless countries.

I knew that creating a portrait of a slain human rights activist would be no easy feat—especially given the fact that there were no surviving archives, few photos and, due to security concerns, no access to filming in Jaffna where Rajani lived and worked. In addition, most of her friends, former students and colleagues were far too fearful to speak about her on camera. Almost everything would have to be constructed, but based on careful research. **No More Tears Sister** is about as far you can get from cinéma vérité. Luckily Rajani's oldest sister and husband—who themselves were leading activists during Sri Lanka's tumultuous years of ethnic strife—were willing to come on board, joined by Rajani's younger sisters, parents, daughters and fellow activists—now living underground.

Cinematically, I wanted **No More Tears Sister** to reflect the passion and beauty of Rajani's ideals. Together with my talented team, including François Dagenais (director of photography), Patricia Tassinari (editor) and Bertrand Chenier (composer), I aimed at making a film that is political, feminist and aesthetic.

- Helene Klodawsky

