

**PRODUCING AND (RE) PRODUCING? AN ETHNOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE OF
FEMAL PLANTATION AND APPAREL WORKERS OF SRI LANKA**

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Abstract

Producing and (Re) producing? An ethnographic narrative of female plantation and apparel workers of Sri Lanka

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In this journey of ‘storytelling ethnography’ I set out to narrate the stories of ‘tea pluckers’ and ‘sewing girls’, as they struggle to combine their productive and reproductive labour working within the third world/postcolonial context of Sri Lanka. While placing my thesis within a theoretical framework of Marxist and postcolonial feminist thinking, I do not take these theories as given but attempt to explain the extent to which such thinking is reflective of the interactions of women’s productive and reproductive labour as happens within these specific work regimes. Drawing on the belief that ‘knowledge’ of women’s lives should be grounded in and informed by the material politics of everyday life, especially the daily life struggles for survival of women themselves, I employ ethnography from a feminist perspective as the prime methodological approach of this study. Through developing a reflection of my own methodological approach I argue that doctrines of ethnography as a feminist method of research developed by western writers is not fully reflective of the ethical political considerations as applied to third world/postcolonial locations like mine. Exploring and analyzing the daily lives of ‘tea pluckers’ and ‘sewing girls’ through the multiple lenses of class, gender and ethnicity I see these two groups of women, working under two different work regimes, as negotiating the multiple interactions of their productive and reproductive labour in diverse ways; closely interwoven with each other at times and completely separated from each other at others. Finally I see existing feminist thinking, specifically Marxist feminist thinking as not fully reflective of woman’s lives as lived within these settings and argue for a new integrated theoretical framework that see third world women workers as engaged in a continuous struggle against the oppressive structures surrounding their lives.

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Abbreviations

Sri Lanka National Archives, Administrative Reports	–	SLNA/AR
Sri Lanka National Archives, Sessional Papers	–	SLNA/SP
Sri Lanka National Archives, Correspondence	–	SLNA/CO

NB: Names of people and places (ethnographic sites) in this thesis are anonymous.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

A Preamble to the Stories

As I walk with her to the crèche where she will leave her children before starting work, Lakshmini, a young mother who works as a tea plucker in Ceylonita estate, Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka, tells me of her burden of working in the estate and attending to her household tasks. She speaks hesitantly, her low voice carrying the distinct accent of her ethnic identity. It is with a sad smile on her face that she tells me she doesn't have much time to talk with me, because 'she is always working'. Her words resonant in my mind as I watch her struggle through the many roles of mother, housewife and waged worker; walking down to the crèche with her children, working in and around the house, plucking tea leaves in the field - from sun up to sun down. Indeed she seems always to be working. At another day and place, Dishanthi, a young girl who had been working as a sewing machine operator at SriKnit garments, Katunayaka, Sri Lanka for five years, tells me of her plans of leaving work: "...we can't take care of a family while doing this work...the [sewing] machines drain all our energy...they [the factories] are slowly killing us... we have to change this system...". She makes no attempt to hide the anger in her voice, an anger I share with her, as I listen to her in silence. It is this same silence that has surrounded - and still surrounds - the lives of these 'women and girls' as they struggle to make a living as 'tea pluckers and sewing girls' in a far away third world¹ country. It is this silence my study attempts to break, even in a small way by writing the (unwritten) stories of their lives.

¹ Drawing on Mohanty's definition, third world as stated here refers to "colonized, neo colonized or decolonized countries (of Asia, Africa, and Latin America) whose economic and political structures have been deformed within the colonial process, and to black, Asian, Latina, and indigenous peoples in North America, Europe, and Australia" (Mohanty et al, 1991: ix).

1.1. Background of the study

Even though it is only a passing glimpse of their lives, the above narrative gives rise to a multiplicity of questions relating to female estate and apparel workers of Sri Lanka. Why is *Lakshmini*, a woman of Tamil ² ethnicity and Indian ³ origin working in a Sri Lankan tea plantation? Why is she the breadwinner of her family? How does she cope with the multiple tasks of housework, childcare and waged work? Why have global garment factories set up their operations in this third world location? Why does *Dishanthi* work as a sewing machine operator? Why do global factories employ young girls like her in their assembly lines? Why is she leaving her job? What is the work regime she thinks has to be changed? Will she, together with others who share her thinking, succeed in bringing about such change? Indeed, many of these questions have been asked, and to some extent answered, by scholars interested in studying them from the different perspectives of their own disciplinary backgrounds, i.e. history, political economy, gender studies and so on. As such, there already exists a collection of scholarly work on: employment of Indian immigrant labour in colonial tea plantations of ‘Ceylon’⁴ (e.g. Jayawardena, 1971, 2000; De Silva, 1982; Wesumperuma, 1986), gendered aspects of labour within these plantation enclaves (e.g. Kurian, 1985, 2000; Jayaweera, 1991, Wijayatilake, 2001), emergence of global garment factories at third world locations (e.g. Indraratne, 1998; Athukorala and Rajapathirane, 2000; Kelegama, and Epaarachchi, 2002), and employment of young third

² The ethnic composition of Sri Lanka is basically made out of majority Sinhalese, who account for nearly three quarters (74%) of the total population and the minority groups of Tamils and Muslims, who make up 18 % and 7% of the Islands people respectively. The Tamil community is sub divided into two components as the Tamil people of the Northern and Eastern parts of the Island and Tamil people of Indian origin who live in the central hills and work as plantation labourers. (www.statistics.gov.lk/census2001/index.html).

³ Estate workers like *Lakshmini* are of Indian origin and were brought to work in Sri Lankan tea plantations by British colonial rulers.

⁴ Ceylon was the name given to Sri Lanka by its colonial rulers.

world women on global assembly lines (e.g. Jayaweera, 2003; Perera, 2007; Shaw, 2007). These studies, as will be discussed in later chapters of this thesis, have made significant contributions towards producing knowledge on different aspects of plantation estates and apparel factories of Sri Lanka. However, they have also ignored, on a continuous basis, a distinct phenomenon that closely relates to the workers - specifically to the majority female workers - of these work settings. That is, these studies fail to address, other than in a very cursory way, the interaction of women's reproductive and productive labour within these settings. Thus, 'why' and 'how' women workers of these different work sites engage in a multiplicity of labour roles continue to remain outside of the contemporary feminist discourses of women's reproductive and productive labour. Moreover, none of these studies seem to specifically address the issues of what female estate and apparel factory workers themselves think about the work they engage in. Thus, these women workers continue to be silenced, even in the very texts that are written about them. This, then, is the gap my study attempts to bridge, and it aims to do so by exploring the multiple interactions of women's productive and reproductive labour within different work regimes of a third world/postcolonial setting.

In bridging this gap as identified above, this thesis will take a route of 'storytelling', where it will attempt to relate, as closely as possible, 'stories' of women who live and work within these third world contexts. Indeed feminist scholars, specifically postcolonial feminist scholars, have repeatedly pointed out the urgency of writing the 'stories' of 'third world women', raising issues of: are their stories different from women in other parts of the world? Why and how are they different? What are the difficulties of writing their (unwritten) stories? And what is the significance of doing so?

1.2 Significance of the Study

Postcolonial feminist theorists (e.g. Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 2003) argue that western feminist models are inadequate for thinking of research with women in postcolonial sites and raise questions on whether ‘third world women’ or indeed all women could be conceptualized as unified subjectivities easily located in the category of ‘women’ (Minh-ha, 1989; Mohanty, 1991b). Such arguments stem from a legacy where “black, white and other third world women have very different histories with respect to the particular inheritance of post-fifteenth-century Euro American hegemony: the inheritance of slavery, enforced migration, plantation and indentured labour, colonialism, imperial conquest, and genocide” (Mohanty, 1991a:10). Thus, postcolonial feminists argue for “the rewriting of history based on the specific locations and histories of struggle of people of colour and post colonial peoples, and on the day-to-day strategies of survival utilized by such peoples” (Mohanty, 1991a: 10). The urgency of rewriting and rethinking these histories and struggles of third world peoples is reinforced by Sivanandan who accentuates both the significance and the difficulty of rewriting counter hegemonic histories saying “... they must be grounded in and informed by the material politics of everyday life, especially the daily life struggles for survival of poor people - those written out of history” (1990:295).

Contemporary feminist writers speak of issues in globalization such as exploitative working conditions in off shore manufacturing where multinational capital has re-discovered third world women as the cheapest, most docile and most easily manipulative workers (Mies, 1998). Employment of immigrant women from the third world as domestics in the industrialized and oil rich Middle East countries and the massification of the sex industry and sex tourism in the third world which bring back forms of slavery we might have

imagined extinct with the demise of the colonial empires (Federici, 1999) are identified as issues for feminist inquiry. Questions pertaining to the situation of these third world women, who are often the most exploited populations, constitute some of the most urgent theoretical challenges facing the social and political analysis of gender in post industrial contexts (Mohanty, 1991a).

Within this global context, which speaks of differences among ‘third world women’ and women in other parts of the world, and establishes the significance of writing their ‘stories’, this thesis identifies the third world country of Sri Lanka as its local contextual setting. Within this local context, the industrial sectors of tea plantations and apparel factories, representing two historical phases of capitalist accumulation in Sri Lanka (Jayawardena, 2000) and even more significantly representing an overwhelming majority of female labour (Kurian, 2000; Jayaweera, 2003), are singled out as the organizational contexts of the study.

To further explain the local context within which this study is situated, the capitalist mode of production first made inroads into Sri Lanka in the form of plantation systems (Jayawardena 1971). British Colonial Rulers continued the Dutch Practice of promoting a non-industrial type of capitalism (Jayawardena 2000: 70). In a context where ‘native peasants’ were reluctant to work in the British plantations (Jayawardena 1971; de Silva 1964) landless workers were brought from famine stricken areas of South India to the plantations of Sri Lanka from the 1830s onwards. Thus, the labour force in the plantation industry was primarily: South Indian migrant labour, mainly ‘female labour’.

The adaptation of liberalized economic policies in 1977, argued to be the second phase of primitive accumulation in Sri Lanka in this study, radicalized the socio-organizational life of women rather than that of men (e.g. Abeykoon 2000; Alailima 1998). During this period, the majority of middle income and poor fractions of society were confronting severe shortage of wealth and income. Income disparities widened and poverty increased by creating hardship among the poor (Jayaweera 2002). Women in most traditional middle-income families in urban and suburban areas, and in peasants' families in remote areas were 'pushed' into being waged labourers in newly emerged industries - particularly the garment industry.

These two groups of women workers; of colonial plantation estates and neo-colonial apparel factories who make up the vast majority of the work force in both work settings are the focus of my study. It is their 'stories' that are narrated throughout this ethnographic text. What male workers might have to say are brought to light only in so far as their stories shed light on women's stories. Thus the presence of men, who are a minority work group in the estates and nonexistent among the 'sewing girls' can said to be absent from this study.

Turning to explain the theoretical assumptions on which my study is based; within the specific contexts of tea plantations and apparel factories of Sri Lanka, women's oppression can be traced back to the fundamental questions of the intersections and interactions of class, gender and ethnicity. Firstly, the workforce of these estates and factories consist of proletarian women who make a living by selling their labour to owners of capital; thus their 'class' becomes a major determinant of their oppression. Secondly, they are women; and as

such their 'gender' becomes another determinant of the oppressive conditions under which they live and work. Simply, even within the proletarian body itself, women are subject to a dual exploitation resulting from their gender. Thirdly, this body of proletarian women face the additionally oppressive force of belonging to specific ethnic groups or of living in certain parts of the world, specifically the third world. Accordingly, the estate and factory workers of my study are 'proletarian women of the third world', who are subject to a triple exploitation resulting from their class, gender and ethnicity.

Based on this argument my thesis draws on Marxist feminism as one of its main theoretical foundations. Marxist feminism which integrates gender with the Marxist analytical category of class and thus concerned with women's double oppression resulting from both class and gender is seen as an appropriate theoretical base on which to ground this study. However, rather than taking Marxist feminist categories as given, my thesis attempts to develop a critique of Marxist feminist thinking - specifically its explanation of women's reproductive and productive labour - by drawing on empirical findings from the settings. In doing so it attempts to discover whether Marxist feminist categories by themselves are capable of explaining women's subjugation as happens within these settings, or if there are context specific 'differences' that need to be taken into account. In searching for 'differences' as they apply to 'third world women', the thesis draws on a second theoretical tradition, namely postcolonial feminist thinking which argues for an inclusion of women's specific histories and locations in knowing about their lives (Mohanty et al, 1991). It is argued that, even though these women workers are undoubtedly closely affected by their class and gender, their ethnicity or living within specific historical locations of the third world also affects them in significant ways, which places them in a different situation than

women in other parts of the world. These women live under conditions of triple exploitation. As such, studies with them should draw from Marxist feminist as well as postcolonial feminist thinking. These theoretical notions however, should not be taken as given and adhered to blindly, but critiqued in the light of empirical findings. This then, is precisely what my study attempts to do. It aims to explain the extent to which existing feminist thinking; specifically Marxist and postcolonial feminist thinking, are reflective of the interactions of women's reproductive and productive labour within different work regimes of a third world/postcolonial location, by drawing on empirical findings.

The above aim drives this study towards generating empirical data around women's everyday experiences of oppression within these work settings. The study draws on the belief that 'knowledge' of women's lives should be grounded in and informed by the material politics of everyday life. It also sees such 'knowledge' as 'reflexive, indexical and local: as epistemologically tied to their context of production and ontologically grounded in the interests, experiences and understandings of the knowledge - producers' (Stanley and Wise, 1993:191-92). These underlying assumptions direct the study towards employing ethnography from a feminist perspective as its prime methodological approach.

Fieldwork is carried out within two ethnographic sites i.e. a plantation estate named *Ceylonita*, and an apparel factory called *SriKnit*, of the third world context of Sri Lanka. Within both sites observation of women's daily lives while they engage in waged work in the estate/factory and household work at their homes and lodging places, make up a major part of the fieldwork. Such ethnographic observations coupled with in-depth informal discussions with the women workers and semi and unstructured interviews with other social

actors within the sites give insights into the issues addressed. Photographs taken at the sites, poems and letters written by women and archival records are used to enrich the effort of data generation. Throughout the process of fieldwork emphasis is placed on the fact that ethnography as a feminist research methodology as advocated and/or critiqued by feminist researchers elsewhere in the world may not be fully reflective of the ethical political considerations specific to these third world settings. It is this consideration that results in the development of a critical reflective account of ethnography as a feminist method, as practiced within the specific settings of a third world/postcolonial location.

The analytical approach of my thesis takes on a narrative turn, in that it attempts to weave together elements of data to form coherent wholes or ‘stories’, rather than separate them into constituent parts. As such, it moves away from the popular analytical tradition of ‘separation and fragmentation’ of data towards a method of bringing together and synthesizing data. It is weaving together of different forms of ethnographic data, i.e. field notes, interviews, photographs, personal correspondence, archival data, and integration of my own subjectivities and reflections into the ethnographic text that results in the telling of (untold) stories of women workers of these work sites. Indeed my own subjectivities as a mother, housewife and a feminist writer of a third world/postcolonial location significantly influence what I see, how I see, and what I represent through my writings. In fact it is my own experiences as a woman academic in a third world University struggling to combine the often conflicting roles of waged (productive) labour at work and unpaid (reproductive) labour at home that inspired me to take up this study.

As such, ‘knowing’ about the lives of women estate and factory workers, as attempted through my thesis, takes on a position of ‘embodied subjectivity - knowledge as thoroughly located in our embodied selves, as against objectified disembodiment’(Dale: 2001: 58).

1.3 Objectives of the study

As derived from the above discussion of its background, theoretical framework and methodological approach, my thesis aims:

Firstly, to explore the multiple interactions of women’s reproductive and productive labour within different work regimes of a third world/postcolonial setting.

Secondly, to explain the extent to which existing feminist thinking; specifically Marxist and postcolonial feminist thinking, is reflective of the multiple interactions of women’s reproductive and productive labour within these different work regimes, by drawing on empirical findings.

Thirdly, to examine the extent to which existing principles of ethnography embody the ethical political considerations as applies to third world/postcolonial settings by reflecting upon actual ethnographic experiences gained within such settings.

Fourthly, yet most importantly, to write the (unwritten) stories of women workers as they struggle to balance their reproductive and productive labour roles working within these third world work regimes.

In its journey towards achieving the objectives as stated above, my thesis contributes to knowledge in the following specific ways;

1.4 Contribution of the Study

As reflected in the stories of women estate and apparel workers, my study sees a distinct ‘difference’ in the ways in which their reproductive and productive labour roles interact as they work within the different work regimes of a plantation estate and an apparel factory in Sri Lanka. Revealing this ‘difference’ that has so far remained shadowed, in the light of existing feminist thinking is a main contribution of my work. Moreover, seeing the daily life struggles of these women workers, through the analytical lenses of Marxist and postcolonial feminism as done here, tells us that their lives cannot always be easily placed or explained within existing feminist theoretical frameworks. By revealing the limits of existing feminist thinking for explaining the daily life struggles of third world women and by arguing for newer and broader theoretical insights, fully reflective of their way of life, my study contributes towards the enrichment of feminist theory. Further, by critically reflecting on its methodological approach - ethnography from a feminist perspective - this study reveals that existing doctrines of ethnography as advocated by Western writers does not always reflect the ethical political considerations as applies to third world/postcolonial settings. This reflective account contributes towards the debate on ‘ethnography as a method of feminist research’. The most significant contribution of my study however, is entrenched in writing the (unwritten) ‘stories’ of ‘tea pluckers’ and ‘sewing girls’ as they struggle to combine the multiple roles of mother, housewife and waged worker within these third world/postcolonial settings. In writing their stories my study ‘rewrites what has so far been written out of history’ and places these women workers of the third world at

their rightful place along the contemporary feminist discourses on women's productive and reproductive labour.

1.5 Overview of Chapters

The background, significance, objectives and contribution of the study as discussed in the first chapter gives an introduction to the rest of the thesis. The second chapter, on literature describes the background out of which the research problem of this study is derived. It also engages in a critical review of existing literature with a view to identifying 'gaps' which the study attempts to bridge. Debates surrounding the theoretical constructs of productive and reproductive labour and the significance of gender, class and ethnicity in knowing about women's work and lives, are the main themes around which the theoretical framework is built, and thus makes up the third chapter. The fourth chapter on methodology justifies the use of 'feminist' ethnography as the prime methodological approach of this thesis and describes its ethnographic design in detail. This chapter also contains a critical reflective account of ethnography as a feminist research methodology as practiced within these specific third world/postcolonial settings.

The fourth and the fifth chapters belong to *Lakshmini*, *Madumani*, *Rajeswari*, *Mary*, *Dishanthi*, *Sakunthala*, *Dilrukshi* and others, for here they tell us 'stories' of how they live and work within the different work settings of a plantation estate and an apparel factory in a world/postcolonial country. These chapters take us from the cold and misty mountain ranges to the noisy and crowded shop floors telling us how these 'women and girls' of the 'third world' struggle with their multiple roles - as mothers, sisters and housewives at times and as waged field and factory workers at others. The stories as told by women workers of

this study are then brought together and revisited in the light of its stated objectives and selected theoretical framework. It is this synthesizing of findings of the two ethnographic sites that make up the sixth and the final chapter of the thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Women, Colonies and Capital

This chapter begins by describing the context out of which the research problem of this study is derived. This description of its background then leads onto a critical review, with a view to discovering areas of existing literature that remain under researched and therefore unclear. Accordingly the chapter begins with an explanation of the origin of plantation labour in Sri Lanka, drawing special attention to the reasons for employing ‘women’ as its main source of labour. From its origin, the pattern of evolution of female estate labour is traced down to its present context. In this part the chapter looks at: why immigrant labour was employed in colonial plantations; why women became the main source of labour in the estates; what were the conditions of work and life in the estates during the colonial era and if and how these conditions have changed over time. From here the chapter moves on to describe the situation of women under structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), in post independent Sri Lanka. It addresses the issue of why it is ‘young third world women’ who make up the majority work force in ‘world market factories’ specifically garment factories. The working and living conditions of female workers of local garment factories are also described drawing on existing literature. This discussion on context then leads on to a review of ‘gendered aspects of work’ within plantations and apparel factories. Through this review the chapter draws out a unique phenomenon related to women’s reproductive and productive labour as happens within plantation estates and apparel factories in Sri Lanka, as the main research problem of this study.

Having thus situated the research problem within its context the chapter next engages in a critical review of existing literature. Here it attempts to identify what has already been said about the research issue as well as to ascertain what remains ‘unsaid’ or under researched. Mystification of women’s reproductive labour, silencing ‘class’ and ‘ethnicity’ in writings about ‘third world’ women, portraying women workers of the third world as ‘passive and silent’ and objectification of female workers by writing of them only as numbers are identified as problematic areas in existing literature through this review. As such they are drawn out as the main themes around which the study crafts its analytical framework.

2.1 Ceylonese Tea and Indian Labour

During the early 19th century, while British colonial rule was taking root in ‘Ceylon’, industrial capitalism was spreading its wings across the countries of Western Europe, creating a demand for primary and cheap consumption products - primary goods serving as inputs for the growing industries and the consumption goods meeting the demands of the growing middle classes - in these countries. Colonies were seen as a cheap source of supply (of these goods) and colonial policy actively promoted enterprises engaged in their production (de Silva, 1982; Perera, 1998; Kurian, 2000). Plantation production, which from the 1830s onwards dominated the sphere of economic activity of ‘Ceylon’, was introduced in line with these policies of colonial governance. As Jayawardena (2000: 68 -70) argues, “The early 1830s is an important turning point in Sri Lankan economic and political history. ...with the viability of a plantation economy gaining importance it was imperative to replace outmoded mercantilist policies”. During this period economic expansion called for major reforms in the administration, political institutions and the

judiciary of the country. In 1829, a commission of inquiry headed by W. M. G. Colebrooke and C.H. Cameron was appointed to look into all aspects of colonial rule in Sri Lanka. Recommendations made by Cameron and Colebrooke were innovative and controversial in nature and included the closure of many feudal and mercantilist institutions, abolition of *rajakariya* (compulsory labour), the cinnamon monopoly and so on (Wesumperuma, 1986; Perera, 1998; Jayawardena, 2000). Jayawardena explains the growth of the plantation economy in Sri Lanka as “in the 1830s, the British continued the Dutch practice of promoting a non-industrial type of capitalism in the form of the plantation system. As in many colonial territories, merchant capital found this particular form of economic and social organization the most suitable for exploiting the country’s resources and maximizing profits” (2000:72). Such colonial economic arrangements moved primary production - agriculture and extraction of raw materials - to cheaper (colonial) locations, allowing more lucrative secondary (industrial) production to be undertaken within the colonial power itself. Later on, in the ‘new international division of labour’ industrial production as well was moved to the (post) colonies retaining the highest returning tertiary sector ‘in-house’.

Returning to the emergence of colonial tea plantations in Ceylon, one of the major concerns of British planters was non availability of a steady supply of labour to service the plantation economy. During the early years of the 1830s the Sinhalese Kandyan⁵ peasants did not respond to the demand for regular work on estates (Wesumperuma, 1986) as they were involved with their own cultivation practices and piece work in the fields (Kurian, 2000; Perera, 1998:). According to de Silva “...the Sinhalese villager was not

⁵ People living in the upcountry area are known as Kandyans.

willing to work as a hired labourer...Despite the dispossession of a large extent of the lands enjoyed by him the Sinhalese villager was a small peasant proprietor and, therefore, he was somewhat independent minded (1964:16). Wesumperuma (1986: 8) further explains this situation as “Indigenous people did not come forward to work on plantations... they had no need to labour for a wage, as they lived within virtually self sufficient, traditional economic frameworks”.

This situation resulted in an acute shortage of plantation labour which compelled British planters to look for alternative sources. The overpopulated regions of the Madras Presidency, South India where landlessness was wide spread and famine occurred frequently (Wenzlhuemer, 2005) offered an ideal solution. The ever increasing landlessness of the Tamil districts of the Madras Presidency (particularly Tanjavur) is attributed to the “disintegration of the Indian village handicraft industries consequent to the flooding of the Indian market with cheap British manufactured articles” (Wesumparuma, 1986:16). Village artisans could not compete with the British producers and this resulted in a state of “chronic indebtedness of all ordinary villagers to the land magnates to the city usurers” (Kurian, 2000:3). These regions also suffered from famine during the period which most affected the lowest castes and classes.

The ever increasing economic peril and distress contributed to the creation of a pool of extremely destitute persons who were forced to look elsewhere for a living. The British planters seized this opportunity, and *kangany*⁶ were assigned with the task of recruiting estate labourers from among this group of destitute women and men. They were given

⁶ *Kangani* is the name given to (male) workers who supervise labourers in the estates.

advances of money (known as *pensa kassi* or payment in pence) to be paid to the workers and sent to these regions. Recruitment was done within villages and among kin groups, and the majority of workers were from the lower caste peasants (Wesumperuma, 1986). Once enlisted the workers had to cross the Indian ocean and journey a long way inland to reach the Kandyan highlands of 'Ceylon' where local forestlands were being cleared away to make room for the emerging plantations.

Jayawardena describes the perils the immigrants had to face during their long journey as "... the immigrants had to walk long distances to the Indian coast and about 150 miles from Ceylon ports to the hill country. In the malaria - ridden areas, the sick were left to die on the roadside and many of the survivors who reached the hill country succumbed to the unaccustomed cool weather" (1972: 17). Even on the estates, the neglect of sick workers became a public scandal, and reference was made to the 'roads choked up with the sick, the dying and the dead' (de Silva, 1965: 240). In 1869, W.C. Twynam, then Government Agent of *Jaffna*⁷, describing the plight of 'coolies'⁸ during the early stages of resettlement says:

Miserable gangs of coolies of 1843 and 1845, with one or two women to 50 or 100 men, strangers in a strange land, ill-fed, ill-clothed, eating any garbage they come across (more however from necessity than choice), traveling over jungle paths, sometimes with scarcely a drop of water to be found anywhere near them for miles, and others knee deep the greater part of the way in water, with the country all around a swamp; working on estates just reclaimed from jungles, or on jungles about to be converted into estates (SLNA/CO, 1869:16).

⁷ Jaffna is the main city in the Northern Peninsula of Sri Lanka.

⁸ 'Cooly' is the term used to identify immigrant workers of Indian origin in colonial documentations.

2.1.1 The Early Years: Life under 'colonial masters'

As mentioned previously *kanganys* were instrumental in bringing down workers from south India to the plantations in Ceylon. However, the 'role' of the *kangany* in the working of the plantation system, especially during the very early years, did not end here - he was assigned the "powerful position as intermediary between the plantation management and the workers" (Jayawardena, 1972:17). During this time the duties of a *kangany*, in addition to recruiting workers included ensuring the workers turned up to work in the field, supervision of workers in the field, settling of disputes both within and outside the field, issuing of rice and running a shop in the estate premises (Jayawardena, 1972; de Silva, 1982; Kurian, 1985, 2000). While the need for recruitment disappeared over the years with the Indian workers becoming resident labour "the patriarchal role of the *kangany* and his position as money lender and shop keeper continued" (Jayawardena, 1972:17). The powerful and often dubious role of *kanganys* within this enclave plantation system brought about many undesirable affects to the lives of plantation workers. Firstly, they were perpetually in debt to the *kangany* who as the sole money lender gave credit to workers at unreasonably high rates of interest. The debts were set off against the workers' monthly wages resulting in a never ending vicious cycle of 'worker indebtedness' which caused R. Reid, a former Controller of Labour in Ceylon to remark that Indian workers in Ceylon were " born in debt, lived in debt and died in debt" (SLNA/AR, 1932: 18). *Kanganys* used fraudulent methods to swindle money from the illiterate workers, who were often kept in the dark as to the actual amounts owed by them. The '*tundu*' system which enabled the *kangany* to transfer the worker from one estate to another and set off the amounts owed by him against the wages received from the new employer was another feature which kept the workers bonded to and unable to escape from the grips of the

kangany. Even though legislative action was taken to overcome the worst effects of worker indebtedness and the ‘*tundu*’ system was abolished, the *kanganys* through various extra-legal methods continued to take advantage of the pauperized workers and enrich themselves in the process (Jayawardena, 1972; de Silva, 1982). Another objectionable feature of this system was the issue of wages where “planters in the 19th century sometimes failed to pay wages regularly, handed the workers wage to the *kangany* or made deductions from the wages” (Jayawardena, 1972:18). As described by P.D Millie, himself a planter, if the coolies did not do what was considered as a fair amount of work, they were either put absent, or half day in the check roll, or kept at the working place but not at work till it was dark (Millie, 1878). The wages paid to the immigrant work force, through these apparently unjust methods, were lower than those paid to the lowest paid unskilled urban workers (Jayaweera, 1991), keeping estate wages down - 33 cents daily for men and 25 cents daily for women - being a determined policy of the planters (Jayawardena, 1972). Even during periods of acute labour shortages “the lack of bargaining power of the workers, their political isolation from the rest of the community, and the tight discipline....” (Jayawardena, 1972:18-19) enabled planters to keep estate wages at a constant low level during these early years.

The living conditions of the plantation workers during this period are reflected in the high death and infant mortality rates. Non availability of adequate hospital and medical facilities, debility caused by malnutrition (Jones, 2002), harsh working and living conditions and neglect of the sick by the planters (Jayawardena, 1972) are identified as factors causing the higher than average mortality rates among the estate populations. The workers had no other property and were dependent on selling their labour for daily

survival, and the usual practice in the plantations was “no work - no pay” (Jayawardena, 1972:19) which put pressure on the labourers to work even when sick. The death rates were so startling that a Mortality Commission was appointed by the government in 1893, to look into the causes of ‘cooly mortality’. Although the Commission recommendations resulted in setting up of plantation dispensaries (Laing and Perera, 1986), even during the early twentieth century estates figured a higher mortality rate than the rest of the country.

Illiteracy was wide spread among plantation workers which together with their degraded social status kept them docile and subservient (Wesumperuma 1986) to the *kanganys* and planters. While education made rapid advances in the rest of Ceylon, literacy levels in the plantations remained lower than the national average (Jayaweera, 1991). The plantation system during these years was infected with a high rate of exploitation and other grievances. Moreover, it contained features of a semi feudal system of economic relationships - “the worker was not a free agent in the capitalist sense, whereby he could sell his labour on a competitive labour market” (Jayawardena, 1972: 21). Rather the whole system was one of bondage, and plantation workers had many of the characteristics of serfs, including part payment of wages in kind, housing tied to the place of work, ties of indebtedness, legal compulsion to remain on the estate, and physical violence to enforce discipline (Jayawardena, 1972; 2000). It is this very nature of estate life that makes plantations different from other work regimes and gives rise to work relations unique to these specific settings. Thus, the similarities between the lives of estate workers and ‘serfs’ as identified by Jayawardena (1972) offer important insights in exploring the complexities surrounding estate woman’s’ multiple labour roles as attempted through this study.

The above discussion on why immigrant workers of Indian origin were brought to Ceylon to work in British plantations and their way of life in the estates during the early stages of the plantation economy, reveals a story of poverty, starvation, neglect, exploitation, disease and death among a group of women and men which happened one and a half centuries ago. These workers even to this day, sell their labour to the same capitalist estate set-up to which their lives seem to be tied down by an undying bondage. Thus, it is to examine how much the present conditions of plantation life have changed or remained the same, when compared to its historical context that this chapter now turns.

2.1.2 The Present Context: of poverty, profits and politics

In 2007, the World Bank published results of a ‘household survey’ of the estates sector undertaken with the stated objective of ‘explaining the nature and determinants of the persistence of poverty in the estates’ (World Bank, 2007: 82). Even though the ‘objectives’ as well as findings of this survey should be viewed in the context of a World Bank sponsored agenda of privatization of state enterprises in third world countries, it presents a graphic picture of the state of continuous and acute poverty among estate workers in Sri Lanka. Also it provides the most recent published data on conditions of life in the estates.

As this report identifies, contrary to the trend in the country as a whole, poverty in the estates was higher in 2002 than in 1990-91. By 2002, estates were the poorest sectors of the economy with a poverty rate 7 percent higher than the national average (World Bank, 2007: 82). The report goes on to say that ‘the story in the estates seems to be one of little movement over time and low variance across the sector. A majority of the estate

population consumes just enough to approach the poverty line and a slight worsening of the situation has affected the entire population over time ...’ (Ibid: 83). The report sees poverty in the estates as endemic, linked to factors that affect the sector as a whole and to factors that have changed little over time. Further, the report identifies education and health in the estates to be lagging behind the rest of the country. As illustrated thereon, in 2003-4 male and female literacy rates were 6 and 16 percent lower than the national average respectively. High costs of education, low quality of schools in the estates including a shortage of teachers are cited as reasons for this trend. 30 percent of estate children are categorized as low weight babies. Also 37 and 46 percent of estate children are stunted and underweight. Potential reasons for the relatively high levels of malnutrition in estates include inadequate access to food and poor nutritional and dietary practices. Food shortages are directly related to lack of income rather than to non availability of food (Ibid: 84). The report asserts that ‘availability of a doctor, nurse and midwife varied across different types of estates and utilization of maternal and child care services were lower than in the rest of the country’ (Ibid: 84). This is substantiated by other research that states ‘most estates had a maternity ward with limited bed capacity and deliveries handled by a midwife...’ (Puvanarajan, 2002). Housing in the estates consist of single houses, attached houses, line rooms, row houses and shanties, with the proportion of line rooms being higher than other types (World Bank, 2007:84). Condition of housing in the estates are further illustrated as, “the estate population were housed under the most uncongenial living conditions. The housing type provided being ‘ line rooms’, a long row of dwellings subdivided into smaller units of living space of around 3 by 3.75 meters, ill-ventilated, cramped and skirted by drains often containing stagnating water” (Puvanarajan, 2002: 28).

The remoteness of estates causes their populations to be isolated from markets and employment opportunities. This is identified as another reason for estate poverty. 'Lack of competence in production and lack of care in human resource management' of estate managers is seen as a major downward drive. The self serving nature of union leaders and lack of representation of workers are also identified as negative factors (World Bank: 2007: 86). The remedy for this multiplicity of problems, as seen by the World Bank is one of restructuring the sector by increasing the share of small holdings in total production; or simply privatization. A change in capital ownership is recommended as a way of increasing labour productivity thereby making the estates more profitable and economically viable in the long run. However, the issue of how such a privatization of estates, if implemented, would affect the lives of its persistently poverty stricken workforce of women and men, is left unexplained in the report.

Studies of 'estate workers' discussed above, often embedded with elements of history and political economy (e.g. SLNA/AR, 1932; de Silva, 1982; Perera, 1998) and sometimes reflecting agendas of international agencies (e.g. World Bank, 2007), while being significant in many ways seems to ignore or perhaps take as 'natural' the fact that the vast majority of these workers who crossed the Indian Ocean in search of work and who laboured (and still labour) as estate hands under extremely hazardous conditions were/are 'women'. More often than not these writings do not differentiate between male and female workers. Rather they are seen as one group and referred to collectively as estate workers. Writing of estate workers as a whole rather than looking for gender related differences seems to be a common thread running through most of this literature. Such limitations, while not undervaluing the contributions of these writings, however, seems to necessitate

further studies aimed at understanding how women's work roles differ from those of men within estates. As such, even in the midst of extensive literature written around various aspects of plantation life, there seems to be vacuums or 'empty places' waiting to be filled by women estate workers telling 'their stories' of how they live and work in the estates. Listening to and writing their stories then become one of the aims of my study.

Though limited in number, a few writers with feminist orientations (e.g. Jayaweera, 1991; Kurian, 2000; Wijayatilake, 2001) have paid special attention to 'gendered aspects of work' within plantations. Such writings discuss whether work and life conditions in the estates affects the lives of women the same way they do men, or if there are significant differences in the manner in which women's lives are affected. Presented below is a review of this literature on 'women in plantations'.

2.2. A Gendered View: lives of female tea pluckers

During the early years of migration the majority of workers recruited were male with a small number of unattached women also migrating with the male gangs (Twynam, 1869). However, during later years planters as well as colonial officers made an attempt to recruit as many women as possible to work as estate labourers (Kurian, 1985). "The mortality rate among the workers was very high (about one in every four migrants) due to the harsh conditions on the journey and the problems of acclimatization as well as the work regime" (Kurain, 2000:6). Thus, planters were keen to retain the workers who survived the initial period and figured out if more women were made to migrate, the workers would stay for longer periods and the estates would have a more settled population (SLNA/CO, 1859). Another important reason for recruiting women was that female labour was cheaper than

male labour, as women were paid less than men even for equal tasks (Jayaweera, 1991). Also as Kurain identifies ... “women from these low castes and classes occupied the lowest position in the Indian hierarchical order and this has forced them into accepting hard and menial tasks” (2000:7). Thus women were seen as ‘more steady and regular labourers’, more adaptable to the hard life on the estates. These attitudes resulted in colonial officers issuing instructions to agents in India to look for more women to recruit as labourers. Thus, more and more women began to migrate with men, causing a shift in the sex composition of the estate workforce (Kurian, 2000), and by the early 20th century the number of women workers were almost equal to that of men. “In 1932 of the Indian estate population of 650 576, 209 788 were men, 200 518 were women and 240 270 were children, indicating that family life was almost universal among adult Indian estate labours in Ceylon” (SLNA/AR, 1932: 122). A situation emerged where household units were maintained in the estates with women working both in the field and at home. This was an arrangement quite lucrative for the planters as they benefited both from women’s productive work in the field and unpaid reproductive work in the households. In the field, women were primarily employed for the labour intensive, repetitive, time consuming task of plucking tea leaves; the rationale for this being ‘women had nimble fingers’. In the households women were primarily responsible for caring for the needs of the children since they were more ‘patient’. Thus, with the increase in the number of women workers, a clear sexual division of labour, based on so called ‘natural principles’ was also established in the estates (Kurian, 2000).

As discussed above, the issues of why women are employed as tea pluckers in estates and the conditions under which they work, had already been addressed by researchers to some

extent. However, there are other aspects of women's work in estates that, apart from being briefly addressed by a few scholars over the recent past (e.g. Wijayatilake, 2001), remain mainly hidden. One such issue relates to the nature of estate life that requires these workers to live and work at places located in close proximity to each other. Wijayatilake (2001) explaining this situation says, the working and living environments of these women workers is such that they find it difficult to have clear boundaries of 'work' and 'home'. Their work environment is not limited to the field or the factory. As Wijayatilake (2001) further explains, the entire estate, "including their dwelling places, foot paths to the crèches and estate hospital, the paths they tread upon for plucking/tapping and the distance to the weighting shed and factory comprise their working locale" (2001: 122). This workplace - homestead interface is a reflection of the multiple roles, the estate women are burdened with; which often impinge upon one another. Their household work is invariably combined with their work in the field or factory. Thus, the reproductive role of female plantation workers appears to revolve and impinge upon their productive roles, unsettling the workplace - homestead interface. 'Women often found it difficult to de-link one role from the other; and thought that taking the children to the crèche and going to muster⁹ were all part of their work' (Wijayatilake, 2001: 122).

Wijayatilake's argument gives valuable insights into the nature of estate life and explains, to some extent, the unusual manner in which 'estate women' perceive their work roles. However, her work also gives rise to certain questions that neither she nor any other scholar writing after her seems to have addressed. For instance if, as Wijayatilake argues, estate women find it difficult to separate their waged productive work from non paid

⁹ The term used in the estate to denote commencement of work.

reproductive work, is this difficulty (mystification) reinforced by managerial practices distinct to plantation estates such as providing women with free crèche facilities situated in close proximity to their work places ? Does such close intermingling of work roles make it difficult for women to think of their dual, sometimes even multiple work roles as exploitative of their labour? Such questions, undoubtedly influencing the ways in which these women workers live and work, however, have not being directly addressed by existing studies.

Explaining further, even though feminist writers (e.g. Kurain, 2000; Wijayatilake, 2001) have made some reference to multiple roles and the dual burden of estate women, they fail to engage in a theoretically informed discussion of the capitalist logic and the exploitative nature surrounding this unique happening, as experienced by women in estates. As such a further exploration of the multiple interactions of women's reproductive productive labour as happens within this estate setting becomes a primary aim of this study. It attempts to do so by looking at this phenomenon through the critical analytical lenses of Marxist feminism and post-colonial feminism, bringing the categories of gender, class, and ethnicity into its analytical framework. The scope of this study however, extends beyond the plantation estates in that it attempts to explore the multiple labour roles of women estate workers by comparing and contrasting them with women's work as happens under a different work regime: namely of global garment factories. Accordingly, the emergence of global garment factories in post independent Sri Lanka and the working and living conditions of garment factory workers - majority of whom are 'young girls' - will be discussed in detail in the following section of this chapter on girls, garments and global capital.

2.3 ‘Girls’, Garments and Global Capital

Sri Lanka was one of the British colonies that gained independence¹⁰ during the mid twentieth century. For nearly three decades since regaining independence in 1948 the country’s economy remained largely unchanged. From 1956 to the 1970s the local economy was characterized by state accumulation through nationalization and regulated private enterprise alongside import substitution (Lynch, 2002; Jayaweera, 2003). By the late 1970s the economy was in a crisis state with wide spread shortage of consumer goods including food and clothing - blamed on inward looking economic policies of import substitution, protectionism and welfare. The year 1977 was a watershed in the economic history of Sri Lanka, with a radical shift towards market liberalization and an ‘open economy’. These changes were accompanied by the adaptation of a structural adjustment programme, promoted by the IMF and the World Bank (Indraratne, 1998). One of the significant policies of such ‘structural adjustment’ was export promotion; accordingly economic reforms that followed placed greater emphasis on export-driven industries (Athukorala and Rajapathirane, 2000). The government extended numerous measures of support to the export sector, in the form of “subsidies and duty rebate schemes, duty-free imports of machinery and raw materials and lower corporate taxes, including tax holidays” (Kelagama and Epaarachchi, 2002:198). The second phase of the structural adjustment programmes extended these policies and the Board of Investment (BOI) was established as a ‘one stop investment promotion centre’ (Jayaweera, 2003). Given the fact that Sri Lanka is a labour surplus economy these measures attracted a significant inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI) to the country - particularly into labour intensive industries such as the

¹⁰ In 1815, Sri Lanka - or Ceylon as it was then called - went under British rule when the last *Sinhala* King signed the *Udarata Givisuma* (Kandian Treaty) with the British Monarchy. After a period of non violent struggles led by anti colonial nationalist forces the country regained independence in the year 1948.

garments industry (Athukorala and Rajapathirane, 2000). Thus global capital found its way into the Export Processing Zones (EPZs) of Sri Lanka specifically set up for the purpose of attracting foreign investments.

As Perera (2007:11) notes, 'Sri Lanka's first free trade zone region was created in 1978 under the auspices of the World Bank and the (IMF) as one of the condition for global aid. These plans were implemented by the right wing United National Party (UNP) government, whose national economic policies charted a shift from welfarism to development. Dismantling the infrastructure of labour laws put into place as the hard - won gains of 1930s anti colonial working-class movement¹¹, this new free trade regime promised investment protection, tax holidays, and most importantly the availability of cheap labour to foreign capital'. Such 'adjustments' and the setting up of export-driven industries in the newly emergent free trade zones brought about radical changes in the socio-economic fabric of the country.

Assessments of structural adjustment programmes at the global level have shown that they have failed to achieve sustained economic development while having adverse socio-economic consequences for the poor (Jayaweera, 2003). Localized country specific studies (e.g. Lakshman, 2000; Indraratne, 1998) reiterate these findings, pointing to the increasing income disparities and the exclusion of the poor from the benefits of economic development. As Jayaweera (2003:197) affirms, 'the quality of employment available to women has deteriorated as a consequence of these reforms and women in low income

¹¹ The anti colonial working class moment that led the struggle for independence also fought for and established rights of the working class, some of which were later eroded by right wing political parties/governments such as the United National Party (UNP).

families have borne a disproportionate share of the burden of adjustment'. The social cost of this sharp shift in policies, such as escalation in the cost of living and consequent decline in real income, increase in income disparities and poverty, created additional burdens for women in low income families (ibid: 199).

During the period following structural adjustment programmes, the majority of the middle income and the poor factions of the society were confronting severe contractions in their wealth and income. Income disparities widened and poverty increased by creating hardship among the poor. Earnings of the head of the household in the traditional monogamous family were not adequate even to fulfil the basic needs of the family members. In this context, women in most traditional middle-income families in urban and suburban areas, and in peasants' families in remote areas were compelled to seek employment to supplement the dwindling real incomes of their families (Jayaweera, 2002: 111). However, in a weak labour market, where unemployment and marginal, intermittent informal sector jobs were the norm for unskilled workers (Shaw, 2007) free trade zones (FTZs) were virtually the only source of regular, secure work available to these women. In a context where socially esteemed jobs in the public and white - collar sectors has contracted (Lakshman, 2002), women whose families were able to support them preferred to remain unemployed at home. It was only the poorest who were compelled to seek employment in the zones. Thus, 'rather than being 'pulled' to the zones by the prospect of regular work, women of poor rural families were 'pushed' by poverty and a lack of choice into jobs they would not otherwise take' (Shaw, 2007: 43).

In this way, liberal economic policies and its accompanying structural adjustment programmes, succeeded in creating a ‘pool’ of economically deprived men and mostly women, who were compelled to seek employment in FTZ factories, specifically garment factories. These women workers who today make-up the vast majority of the garment industry workforce in Sri Lanka becomes another group of workers, alongside the women estate workers, that this study focus on. However, unlike the estate workers whose history can easily be traced back to the early 19th century, the entry of ‘young girls’ into the global factories is fairly recent - spanning just over 30 years or so. It is to a discussion of the conditions under which these female factory workers have worked (and still work), that this discussion now turns.

2.3.1 Politics of ‘Productivity’ in the garment industry

In 2002, a study sponsored by the International Labour Organization (ILO) sets out to examine the garment industries of five South Asian countries, one of which is Sri Lanka. The report on Sri Lanka identifies low ‘productivity’ leading to decreased competitiveness in the international market as a major concern for the garment industry. Accordingly, the report attempts to identify reasons for low productivity and to recommend strategies to overcome them. The outcome of this vigorous industry wide study is a rich economic analysis of considerable managerial value. However, written beneath the lines of its ‘managerial economic’ analysis - most probably not intended by its authors, but present nevertheless - is another analysis. A reading of this concealed analysis tells us about the ‘conditions of life’ in the zones; the conditions under which women who come to the ‘zones’ in search of work are compelled to work and live. It is for the purpose of explicating these conditions that the ILO paper is used here, for in explaining reasons for

low industry productivity it portrays a detailed picture of the lives of female garment workers of Sri Lanka. The paper begins by presenting the gender composition of the industry labour force by occupational categories. As stated thereon, by 1998, 87 percent of the industry work force was female. This percentage was even higher for operative grades (i.e. machine operators, helpers, checkers and ironers) with a value of 90% or above. Interestingly enough, 84 % of the senior management positions were held by males, with pattern making, merchandising and designing jobs being shared equally between women and men (Kelegama and Epaarachchi, 2002: 201). Furthermore, the paper specifically identifies 'poor working conditions' as the first factor contributing to low productivity. As it states, 'hazardous factory layout with cramped workspaces for the workers are not conducive to improving output' (ibid: 210). Garment factories are said to be lacking in basic facilities such as canteens and toilets with workers not been given regular breaks to use even the limited facilities. Harassment, in particular sexual harassment of workers, is seen as another problem. Pressure to achieve production targets which requires machine operators to work longer than the normal hours, sometimes even without additional payment is identified as another detrimental factor. 'Sometimes they are required to work on continuous shifts, even night shifts; and female workers on unsafe, inadequately lit roads at night are subject to harassment and violence' (ibid: 210).

As they come from rural areas garment workers have to find lodging places in the vicinity of the factories. Most available places, due to increasing congestion in the urban areas, are of extremely poor quality. This situation compels workers to reside in small, ill ventilated rooms with inadequate sanitation, the rent for which often constitutes a significant proportion of their salaries. Poor working and living conditions is seen as a major cause of

low productivity while ‘poor interpersonal relations at work, autocratic management style, lack of variety in work, low use of skills, poor pay’ are also identified as contributory factors. (ibid: 211). Low social image or stigma attached to working in garment factories, especially in relation to female workers is seen as another negative factor.

Lack of professionalism in the industry resulting in strained worker - manager relations is identified as another cause of low productivity. This situation is reflected in, ‘setting of unrealistic targets and pressuring workers to perform beyond their capacity’ (ibid: 215). Employers tend to believe that creating employment absolves them from any obligations towards workers, an attitude which makes them evade laws ensuring statutory right of workers at significant scales. For instance, only 35 percent of the employers comply with the provisions of the Employment Provident Fund (EPF) Act (ibid: 215). Trade union formation is discouraged as managers see them as a barrier to increasing ‘productivity’. Biyanwila, (2006: 73) further explains that FTZs are firmly based on an anti-union strategy that redraws new boundaries to regulate labour. With unions essentially made illegal, the state promotes the interests of capital to maintain a strike - free zone with compliant ‘productive’ workers.

High levels of turnover and absenteeism among its work force is noted as another major challenge facing the industry. ‘The garment sector has recorded average labour turnover rates of around 55 percent, with its monthly absenteeism rates showing a value of 7.4 %’ (Kelegama and Epaarachchi, 2002: 212). The ILO sponsored study, which attempts to identify reasons for low productivity in the garment industry, sees this as a major contributory factor and suggests remedial actions for reducing absenteeism and turnover

among garment workers with a view to increasing industry productivity and competitiveness.

The findings of this study are useful in visualizing the adverse conditions under which garment workers are compelled to live and work. However, looking at these issues only from a market managerial perspective and offering a solution for improving productivity, as so obviously done through this study, is seen here ‘not as a solution but as part of the problem itself’. World Bank sponsored market managerial view points such as above, while seeing some aspects of these work regimes (i.e. high turnover) as problematic, refrain from connecting these to gender. Perhaps their agenda of seeing (and using) ‘third world women’ as a cheap and docile supply of labour prevents them from making these connections. As far as this study is concerned however, industry wide problems such as unusually high worker turnover are seen as related to the issue of majority of garment factory workers being women, specifically young girls.

Many authors (e.g. Jayaweera, 2002; Attanapola, 2005; Biyanwila, 2006; Lynch, 2007), including the writers of the above report have repeatedly pointed out the unusually high turnover rates of female garment factory workers as a major concern facing the industry. This situation of high labour turnover - or the tendency to leave waged employment after a short period of time - viewed in conjunction with related research findings (e.g. Jayaweera, 2002:122) which state that “the garment industry has been feminised with 90 percent of its employees being young women workers. Among them 70 percent are in the age group of 15 to 25 years, 91 percent never married....” points towards a unique trend or pattern of employment among garment workers in Sri Lanka. As data reveals, the local garment

industry had continuously exhibited figures of high labour turnover, while being characterized by an over-whelming representation of young female workers. Given this context, why it is that only young women work in garment factories? Why is labour turnover in the garment industry exceptionally high? And even more importantly, is there an interrelationship between these two phenomena? Become issues to be addressed. However as in the case of women estate workers whose multiple labour roles continue to remain vague and mystified, here again the issue of why young women leave their paid work in the factories after a short span of time is attributed to ‘natural’ causes. It seems that such issues are rarely considered as a problem calling for further study, but brushed aside as ‘how things are or should be’ in the industry. It is within this context that this study seeks to explore relations between reproductive and productive labour of female garment factory workers comparing and contrasting them with similar circumstances as faced by female plantation workers.

In so far as the above discussion, primarily woven around Sri Lankan apparel and estate workers is concerned, there seems to be a tendency of mystifying/naturalizing women’s reproductive labour. In its next section this chapter examines whether this ‘mystification of reproductive labour’ is a common phenomenon to women working globally by looking at women’s work on assembly lines and or plantation estates elsewhere in the world.

2.4 Mystification of Women's Reproductive Labour?

As the 1970s saw the end of the post Second World War boom period, the need to change the system of the world economy to ensure continuous growth of capitalist economies became of paramount importance. The resultant *new* international division of labour (IDL) meant that 'labour intensive production processors should be exported to the colonies, now called the 'developing countries' or the 'third world', that whole industrial plants should be shifted to these countries and that third world workers, because of their low wage levels, should now produce the machine made goods for the masses in the Western countries' (Frobel et al, 1980). Under the new IDL large multinational corporations of the USA, Germany and Japan began relocating their factories in the Free Trade Zones (FTZs) of Philippines, Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore, Mexico, Sri Lanka and Thailand. These were particularly in the textile and garment industries, the electronics industry and the toy industry (Lim, 1983; Mies, 1998; Elias, 2004). In the Free Trade Zones (FTZs) of South-East Asia, Africa and Latin America, more than 70 percent of the labour force is female; the majority of these women are young - between the ages of 14 and 24 - and work in the actual production processes on the assembly line, mostly under male supervisors (Frobel et al, 1980; Lim, 1983; Phizacklea, 1990; Rosa, 1994; Hurley and Miller, 2005). The massive incorporation and proletarianization of third world women in global factories is explained by Mohanty (1991a :28) as "world market factories relocate in search of cheap labour, and find a home in countries with unstable (or dependent) political regimes, low levels of unionization, and high unemployment. What is significant about this situation is that it is young third world women who overwhelmingly constitute the labour force of these world market factories". Global capital has once again discovered - they had already once been discovered during colonization - *women* - specifically poor third world women.

2.4.1 Why women, Why 'Young Third World Women'?

Feminist scholars (Elson and Pearson, 1986; Mies 1998) while pointing out that it is young third world women who overwhelmingly constitute the labour force of 'world market factories' and that third world women seem to be more attractive as workers to global capital than men, also raise queries about this situation. It is based on such thinking that they ask; is this situation really a change of heart in the centres of capitalist patriarchy as promoted by the official slogans of 'integrating women into development'? (Mies, 1998) Or do we indeed need to problematize the relations through which women are 'integrated into development', as part of the problem itself rather than as part of the solution? (Elson and Pearson, 1986) Agreeing with the latter point of view, prompts us to look for other reasons for the attention given to women in the colonies today. As Mies (1889:114) argues, for the strategy of new IDL - that is to produce at the lowest possible cost-to work, relocated industries have to look for the 'cheapest, most docile and most manipulable workers' in the underdeveloped countries. Women are seen as possessing 'naturally different innate capacities and personality traits than men' (Elson and Pearson, 1986:72) which makes them more attractive to global capital. As the Malaysian government in an investment brochure designed to attract foreign capital says:

...the manual dexterity of the oriental female is famous the world over. Her hands are small and she works fast with extreme care. Who, therefore, could be better qualified by nature and inheritance to contribute to the efficiency of a bench-assembly production line than the oriental girl? (Grossman, 1979 cited in Mies, 1998:117).

As Perera (2007) asserts, the occluded agent of production in this post-industrial age is the super exploited (female) worker in 'postcolonial' developing countries. In business brochures, she is sold as 'cheap', 'docile' and 'famous for her manual dexterity'.

Furthermore, third world government advertisements offering their young women to foreign capital make no attempt to disguise their sexist undertones. For instance “the third world investment bureau of Haiti, trying to attract German investors, published an advertisement showing a beautiful Haitian women and the text: Now you can get more labour for your DM. For only 1 US Dollar, she works happily for eight hours for you, many hundreds of her friends will do so, too” (Frobel et al, cited in Mies, 1998:117).

“The concept of ‘nimble figures’ is often accompanied by two other important assumptions: that compared to men, women are more patient (and thus can tolerate monotonous jobs) and more obedient (and thus easier to manage and control)” (Lynch, 2007: 26). Capital prefers women as workers not only because they are seen as easily trainable, disciplined and disposable but also because of their ‘docile disposition’ (Biyawila, 2006). Third world women enter global factories with a ‘natural’ exit (tendency to leave their jobs after a short span of time) out of the factory. At the same time they show a very high degree of productivity of work (Kelegama and Epaarachchi, 2002). Why global capital prefers young third world women to work in world market factories is illustrated by Elson and Pearson as:

Women are considered not only to have naturally nimble figures, but also to be naturally more docile and willing to accept tough work discipline..., and to be naturally more suited to tedious, repetitions, monotonous work (1986:73-74).

Elson and Pearson (1986) take their analysis further by pointing out that, why only young women work in world market factories is also rationalized as an effect of their capacity to bear children. This means they will be either unwilling or unable to continue in employment beyond their early twenties. The phenomenon of ‘women leaving employment in the factory when they get married or pregnant is known as natural wastage’ (Elson and Pearson, 1986: 74) and is highly advantageous to firms which prefer to have an unstable,

irregular, casual labour force. Mies confirms this view by drawing attention to the *maquiladoras* or free trade zones in Mexico where ‘80-90 percent of the workforce is young unmarried women who work under almost forced- labour conditions. These workers are usually fired when they get pregnant because their employers do not want to pay any maternity benefits’ (1998: x). Setting up of free trade zones in the third world, therefore, is driven by the availability of a work force that is ‘assumed to view work as a temporary interlude between childhood on the one hand and marriage and motherhood on the other’ (Mitter, 1986:49).

The phenomenon of women leaving employment in the factories to get married and bear children, considered as ‘natural’ by their employers, but problematized not as ‘natural’ but as exploitative of female labour and advantageous to capital by feminist scholars becomes an intriguing issue, a further study of which could yield important insights into women’s work in world market factories. Even though feminist scholars (e.g. Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Lim, 1983; Nash, 1983; Elson and Pearson, 1986; Mitter, 1986; Mies, 1998; Salzinger, 2003), have already questioned many aspects of women’s work in world market factories under ‘new’ international division of labour, the specific issue of how these work regimes affect the relations between women’s reproductive and productive labour seems to remain under researched. Furthermore, when it comes to the specific locations where these factories are in operation and where the women actually live and work - the third world - the lack of theoretically informed studies about ‘how factory work affect woman’s lives’ is even more prominent than elsewhere.

Further elaborating this point, at the global level, Elson and Pearson (1986) among others have already linked this happening with ‘young women’s ability to bear children’. A situation largely ignored or ‘naturalized’ by capitalist industrialists, but problematized by feminist scholars as not being natural but exploitative of female labour. Within the Sri Lankan context, many scholars (e.g. Kelegama and Epaarachchi, 2002; Attanapola, 2005) identify high turnover figures of female garment workers as a problem. None of them however, perhaps with the exception of Jayaweera (2002), seem to view the over-whelming representation of young female workers in the industry as a problem, which therefore remains silenced and unproblematized. However, as far as this study is concerned, these happenings are not seen as natural, and unrelated to each other, but problematized as interlinked and also intertwined with women’s reproductive labour. It is situated within these global and Sri Lankan contexts that this study seeks to further explore these phenomenon and it attempts to do so by comparing and contrasting them with similar (dissimilar?) circumstances as faced by female plantation workers.

As derived through the above discussion mystification of women’s reproductive labour, becomes a major theme around which the study will craft its analytical framework. However, in doing so it will bring into focus categories of analysis that have more or less being ignored or ‘silenced’ in recent literature written around various aspects of women’s work. Simply, it can be argued that existing studies on women assembly line and plantation workers highlight some aspects of women’s work i.e. their gender, at the expense of some others i.e. their class and ethnicity. However, these other/ hidden aspects can be argued to be of equal or even greater importance in determining the conditions under which these workers live and work. Not only do these studies effectively silence the ‘class’ and

‘ethnicity’ of women workers, but the women themselves are often featured as silent and passive; unable to speak for themselves, and reduced to the backgrounds/ margins of the very literature that claim to speak of them. Furthermore, these women, majority of whom are from the third world, are often objectified, classified and turned into numbers in order to be made visible. Such characteristics of existing literature, seen as problematic as far as this study is concerned, are further illustrated below.

2.5 Silencing ‘Class’ and ‘Ethnicity’?

Reviewing recent literature on women in the third world, specifically women working in global garment factories, in the light of the above discussion, there is a popular trend of studying the ‘identity formation’ of these female workers. As such these studies address issues such as: whether global capital moves into the third world in search of docile workers or whether the ‘docile worker’ identity itself is constructed on the global assembly line (Salzinger, 2003), how female factory workers struggle to construct a ‘good girl’ identity for themselves as against the ‘bad girl’ identity imposed on them by the society (Lynch, 2007) and how they attempt to subvert the ‘respectable culture’ into which they are not accepted by performing a ‘disrespectable culture’(Hewamanne, 2003). Undoubtedly each of these studies makes significant contributions to knowledge on global garment workers in their own way. However, in silencing class and ethnic differences which are very much a part of the socio-political and historical conditions under which ‘girls and women’ work in global factories these studies also silence issues such as: concentration of global garment factories in the third world, employment of ‘poor third world women’ on the global assembly lines, ‘young female workers’ making up the overwhelming majority

of these workers, the exploitative conditions under which they work and appropriation of their productive and reproductive labour by global capital. It is argued that in silencing such issues these research shifts attention away from the fundamental issue of exploitation of women's reproductive and productive labour, thus serving the needs of capital, more than the needs of (women's) labour.

Elaborating this argument further, in a paper entitled *Performing Dis- respectability*, Hewamanne claims that 'FTZ workers' insistence on unique tastes and their play with established categories of style, language, and demeanour subverted middle- class values and tastes, on the one hand, and enabled them to register distinctive identities as migrant working women on the other'(2003: 72). In the next paragraph of the paper which describes the methods used in the study she mentions '...in several journal entries they critiqued my tastes in fashions, clothing, music, and movies and termed my preferences middle class (hi-fi or western)' (Hewamanne, 2003:72). She goes on to state that 'as a group FTZ workers celebrated their stigmatized identity by unhesitatingly claiming stigmatized tastesthese new tastes and cultural practices contained many elements of what the middle - class people consider disrespectful' (Hewamanne, 2003:73). At another point, just after elaborately describing the FTZ workers' tastes in movies she mentions 'growing up in a Sri Lankan middle- class family I was never taken or allowed to see such movies' (Hewamanne, 2003: 83). It seems that the author is keen to tell us she is of a 'different' class than the factory 'girls' she is writing about. Also she does not seem to want to talk about the vicious circle of poverty surrounding these 'girls', which compels them to consume supposedly 'third class' commodities. If, indeed these workers glorify their 'stigmatized identity' as claimed by Hewamanne (2003) or if they are compelled to live in

a way that is significantly different from the 'respectable' middle class way of life, with which the author is always careful to associate herself, remains open to argument. Hewamanne's (2003) study, however, overcomes the problem of 'silencing' women in that she allows them to speak about their likes and dislikes, tastes and preference with regards to clothes, music, cinema, books and the like. But she takes care to interpret their ideas in such a way, that the 'girls' are ultimately identified not as 'working class women', but as members of a newly emerged 'disrespectful' culture. It can be argued that this 'new identity', which the author insists on forming and forcing on 'garment girls' causes them to be de-associated or separated from the working class and lessens their chances of organized resistance.

In a recent study of female plantation workers in Sri Lanka, Amali Phillip's (2005) focuses on the 'role of kinship, marriage, and gender ideologies and practices in reproducing gender inequalities within plantation production and household reproduction' (137). At the end of her extensive study conducted among female plantation workers of Sri Lanka, Phillips concludes that 'the gender constructions underlying kinship, marriage and labour place women at a considerable greater disadvantage in the family, the household and the workplace' (2005:137). Even though it does add to knowledge on 'kinship and gender' as claimed by the author, this study also silences other structural inequalities - elements of imperialism, capitalism and even racism - that are very much part of estate women's lives. It seems as if in focusing on gender alone, such work either consciously or unconsciously undermine the impact of other dominative structures surrounding women's lives in these third world /postcolonial settings. Furthermore, it is the author's voice that remains dominant and authoritative throughout the text. The women workers are not allowed to

speak, and thus have no opportunity of telling the reader what ‘they’ think about the relations of gender, kinship and marriage as experienced by them.

Indeed Phillips work along with studies by Kurian (1985, 2000); Jayaweera (1991); Wijayatilake (2001) and Puvanaranjan (2002), carries the value of discussing gendered aspects of plantation life. However, many of these studies - perhaps with the exception of Jayaweera (1991) and Kurian (1985, 2000) where some reference is made to ‘resistance of women workers’ - tend to attribute characteristics such as ‘submissiveness, passivity, weakness, obedience, subordination, ignorance, dependency, backwardness, docility and emotionality’ (Wijayatilake, 2002: 128) to describe these workers; either explicitly or otherwise. If, indeed these women workers are as passive and ignorant as these studies seem to want to portray, or if this is yet another manifestation of the marginalization of immigrant workers of Indian origin, specifically female workers among them, remains yet to be known. This then becomes an issue to be further explored through this ethnographic study.

In contrast to those studies discussed above, Maria Mies’s *Lace Makers of Nasapur* (1982) is one study where the interaction between women’s productive and reproductive labour is analyzed without treating ‘third world woman’ as objects or seeing them as victims. In her study of Indian women lace makers of *Nasapur*, Andhra Pradesh, Mies analyses a substantive household industry in which housewives produce lace dollies for the world market. Through an analysis of the structure of the lace industry, production and reproduction relations and the sexual division of labour, Mies uncovers the level of exploitation in the industry and its impact on the living and work conditions of the women

lace makers (1982: 4-5). As Mies illustrates, *Nasapur* women are engaged in lace making as much as six to eight hours a day, in addition to their household chores. Many of the women are actually the breadwinners of their families. Yet, by defining them as ‘housewives’ and their work as ‘leisure time activity’ the women are placed into a highly exploitative production system, where they work making lace dollies for extremely low wages while engaging with their household chores. Mies’ analysis shows the effects of historically and culturally specific patriarchal relations on lace makers lives. This work does not contain easy generalizations about ‘third world women’. Neither does it reduce the exploitation of lace makers to ‘passivity and obedience’ that might characterize these women and their situation. *Nasapur* women are not mere victims of a production process, because they resist and challenge and subvert the process at various junctures (Mies, 1982). Mies’ study goes a long way toward explaining the contradictions inherent in women’s specific historical locations within different structures of domination. It does so by looking beyond gender - at class, ethnicity and caste relations which are very much a part of the lace makers’ world. Mies’ study, conducted among women of similar cultural and social backgrounds offers valuable insights for the present study.

Notwithstanding the atypical studies such as *Lace Makers of Nasapur* (1982) the trend of ‘objectifying’ ‘third world women’ had persisted over time. Many Sri Lankan scholars (e.g. Samarasighe, et al. 1990; Samarasighe, 1999; Puvanaranjan, 2002; Kelegama and Epaarachchi, 2002) among others, writing about women estate and factory workers continue to see them as objects waiting to be turned into numbers/ percentages and be classified and categorized to serve the purposes of their respective studies. Puvanaranjan’s (2002) study of *Estate Women’s Fertility in Sri Lanka* carried out with the main objective of ‘examining the

changing scenario in fertility trends among the estate women in Sri Lanka' is a classic example of such a study. The study centres on bringing to light the determinants which contributed to the anomalies that prevailed over time in their fertility behavioural patterns and establishing the causal links' (2). Indeed fertility, as in the case of this study, is one of the most commonly studied topics in relation to women in the third world, life expectancy, nutrition, education, income generation ability being a few others. In each case the outcome is a descriptive report where the women under study are objectified, classified and turned into numbers and percentages.

While acknowledging that such descriptive reports of third world women may be useful and sometimes even necessary, this study does not view such objective writing as adequately reflective of the 'fluid, fundamentally historical and dynamic nature of the lives of third world women' (Mohanty, 1991: 6). Rather, it argues for seeing these women workers in all their diversity - of class, gender and ethnicity - ; as subjective beings who lead fluid and dynamic lives within estates and factories, and who have a critical perspective of their life struggles. It is these daily struggles for survival of women plantation and garment factory workers as they strive to balance the often conflicting demands on their productive and reproductive labour, that this study seeks to understand.

Accordingly, studies by feminist writers who have looked into complexities surrounding women's waged and family work, taking into consideration relations of gender, class and ethnicity (i.e Mies, 1982; Pollert, 1983; Westwood, 1984) are seen as offering important insights and for the present study. It is for the purpose of revealing such insights that the chapter engages in a review of two such writings, namely Pollerts (1983) study on women

tobacco factory workers and Westwood's (1984) research with women knitting workers. Westwood's as well as Pollert's work as reviewed below are workplaces studies, and both claim to be guided by studies of a similar nature conducted earlier (i.e. Nichols and Armstrong, 1976). However, these early workplace studies are predominantly concerned with class issues and lives of male workers. Pollert's study of women tobacco factory workers, while drawing inspiration from these early studies offers a major corrective to their concentration on men by focusing on how gender and class implicate women's waged labour. As such her work makes a significant contribution to feminist literature by explaining relations between gender, class and women's waged work from a socialist feminist perspective. The significance of Westwood's work lies in the fact that it provides further insights into the analysis of women's waged and family work by bringing in considerations of 'race' in addition to gender and class relations.

2.6 Gender, Class and Women's Waged Work

Laying the groundwork for her study with women tobacco factory workers Pollart (1983) revisits Engels' (1972) analysis of the connection between the rise of private property, privatized reproduction, monogamy and subjugation of women. She interprets Engels' analysis to read as, capitalism was progressive for women in that it threw them into waged labour, but progressive in a contradictory way since it intensified their oppression by creating the double burden of economic exploitation and domestic labour. A key to understanding this dialectical process, according to Pollert (1983), is to look closely at the interaction of ideological and material processes involved in the sexual division of labour both inside and outside the family (98). Thus, Pollert identifies this as the aim of her study of women tobacco factory workers in Bristol, U.K. in the early 1970s. In a study focused on the relationship

between gender and waged labour, Pollert explores the issues of 'immediate experiences of the job and approaches to work, experiences of and attitudes to marriage, the family and life outside the work place, shop floor life, experiences of trade unionism, and broad political conceptions and social values' (1983:97) of women tobacco factory workers.

Pollert's work becomes a point of departure from Marxist feminist analysis of women's oppression under capitalism in that it accounts for women's consciousness. As Pollert herself points out this is something that has been ignored by Marxist feminists 'locked into a materialist mould' (1983:98). In Pollert's view women's oppression should not be explained as resulting only from material structures, neither should it be explained entirely through women's consciousness. Rather such analysis should attempt to see the role of consciousness in material structures and processes and vice versa (1983: 98). Based on this point of view Pollert attempts to 'draw out a picture of how women's experience of gender, as constructed by their role within the family, presents itself in work settings' (1983:98). By doing so, she argues that 'a vicious circle between gender oppression and working - class exploitation is set up which both perpetuates women's relegation into the domestic sphere and intensifies their exploitation as workers' (Pollert, 1983:98). Pollert sees this vicious circle as both material and ideological and argues that such a dialectical approach is vital to the analysis of women's continued oppression under capitalism. Pollert's study of women tobacco workers also seeks to explain the progression out of this situation into emancipation. Drawing on Engel's analysis of how waged labour can bring women into the arena of class struggle, Pollert shows how these women workers organize against capital. The importance of her work lies in that she brings out how 'women's experiences of gender in wage labour' initiates such struggles (1983: 99) as happened during a strike at the factory.

In summary then, Pollert's study is of special significance in that it takes on a dialectical approach to explaining women's oppression under capitalism. In attempting to see the role of women's consciousness in material structures and processes and vice versa it makes a rupture in Marxist feminist writings breaking away from a more restrictive materialist mould. This rupture is precisely what makes Pollert's work significant to the present study of women estate and factory workers. For while taking into account the structural inequalities surrounding the lives of these women, this study does not treat the women workers as passive victims of these structures. Rather it sets out to explore the ways in which these women either collude with or resist these structures in their role as working-class women. This study seeks to understand woman's waged and family work in a context far removed from both Engel's and Pollert's, but draws inspiration from Pollert's view of a dialectical approach to explaining woman's oppression. As Pollert herself mentions 'the ways in which women's experience of gender affect their work varies historically. Black women workers in Britain, migrant women workers in Europe, South Asian women workers on the global assembly lines - all have distinctive situations of gender oppression (along with other forms of oppression) that need to be analyzed' (1983: 99). This then is what the present study sets out to do, thus it also seeks to bring in implications of 'ethnicity' into its analysis.

2.6.1 Gender, Class and Ethnicity

In her book, *All Day Every Day* (1984), Westwood explains the role of factory and the family in the making of women's daily lives. Located within a British company where women engage in various tasks related to mechanized knitting, Westwood's study seeks to understand the inherent contradictions of women's factory and family lives under

conditions set by patriarchal capitalism (1984:1). Westwood claims that her study attempts to contribute to feminist theory by drawing attention to the complexities of women's subordination in a way that is rooted in the women's daily life experiences. In Westwood's view, women workers who enter the capitalist production system are subject to exploitation in the workplace. Also women work at home where they are exploited as unpaid labour. Both these systems are oppressive, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to divide patriarchy and capitalism between the home and the workplace. Rather, Westwood argues that sex-gender system and the class structure are two interlocking systems (1984:3). It is drawing on this understanding that Westwood seeks to 'bring together the worlds of production and reproduction in a feminist account of women's oppression (1984: 4). It is this endeavour as undertaken by Westwood which makes her work important for the present study.

A significant feature in *All Day Every Day* is that it relates to the post-colonial setting within which patriarchy and capitalism interacts in so far as this particular company is concerned. In Westwood's words 'while this book gives a central role to patriarchal relations in defining the lives of both black and white women acknowledging that they share a class position within capitalism, it recognizes that black women share a triple not just a double burden of oppression through class, gender and race' (1984: 10). The recognition that 'women of colour', while sharing with their 'white sisters' the double burden of class and gender relations, carry an additional or triple burden resulting from their 'ethnicity' makes Westwood's work especially significant for the purpose of the present study.

Throughout her book, Westwood shows the ‘interaction of patriarchy and capitalism in the factory and home, and the response women make to this by generating and sustaining a shop floor culture which structures the way that becoming a worker, through a women’s role in production, and becoming a woman, through her role in reproduction, are brought together and reinforced’ (1984: 230). She concludes by saying ‘there are no prescriptions for action here and no single clear cut route through the complexities. Instead, there are cross-cutting layers, sometimes in coalescences and sometimes in contradiction with one another, shifting and forming in struggle, not unlike patterns in a kaleidoscope’ (1984: 230). Through her concluding remarks Westwood reminds us that there are no clear cut, easy answers to the complexities surrounding women’s waged and family work.

In summary then, this chapter on literature explained the background of the research issue and reviewed existing literature with a view to identifying gaps as well as to gathering insights for the purpose of the present study. As derived through this review of literature this study attempts to explore the multiple interactions of women’s productive and reproductive labour as they work as female estate and apparel factory workers in these third world/postcolonial settings and the impact of gender, class and ethnicity on such interactions. The next chapter will further explain each of these theoretical constructs placing them within existing debates and finally building up a theoretical/analytical framework for this study.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

Women, Marxism and Beyond

This chapter on theory aims to achieve two related aims. It attempts firstly, to explain the theoretical notions underpinning this study by reviewing them in the light of related debates. Secondly, the chapter attempts to develop a theoretical framework for the thesis, keeping in mind - as established through the review of literature -, that knowing about the lives of ‘third world women’ requires a recognition of the intersections of gender, class and ethnicity and also that women’s material positions and consciousness need to be brought together to move beyond the ‘silencing’ of ‘third world women’.

In attempting to reach these two aims I craft this chapter around five related themes. Under the first theme; women in the ‘ongoing’ process of primitive accumulation, I discuss the Marxist and Marxist feminist conceptions of ‘primitive accumulation’, and relate it to the context of the study. Women’s productive and reproductive labour looks at Marxian classification of productive and ‘unproductive’ labour and views ‘labour’ as expended by the women workers of this study in the light of related theoretical debates. The theme, women, labour and class is essentially woven around the concepts of ‘class’ and ‘patriarchy’ and argues for employing Marxist feminism as a necessary but not sufficient theoretical base for this study. Women and historical materialism argues for a specifically feminist historical materialist basis for identifying women’s oppression within these settings. Under the final theme on; women: their specific histories and locations I discuss third world/postcolonial feminist theorization and argue for a new integrated theoretical framework for thinking of women workers of these specific third world settings.

3.1 Women in the ‘Ongoing’ Process of Primitive Accumulation

Marx (1946) starts off his elucidation on ‘so-called primitive accumulation’ in *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production* by stating “we have seen how money is changed into capital; how through capital surplus-value is made, and from surplus value - more capital” (736). He further states that “accumulation of capital presupposes surplus - value; surplus - value presupposes capitalist production” (736) and argues that capitalist production in turn requires masses of pre existent capital and labour power. This whole movement according to Marx (1946: 736) “seems to turn in a vicious cycle, out of which we can only get by supposing a primitive accumulation”. Thus Marx supposes a primitive accumulation preceding capitalist accumulation; “an accumulation not the result of the capitalistic mode of production, but its starting point” (1946:736) As Marx argues, transforming money and commodities into capital can only take place if two very different kinds of commodity - possessors come face to face and into contact. “On the one hand, the owners of money, means of production, means of subsistence, who are eager to increase the sum of values they possess, by buying other people’s labour - power; on the other hand, free labourers, the sellers of their own labour - power, and therefore the sellers of labour” (1946: 737). Marx sees this polarization of the market for commodities as the fundamental condition of capitalist production and argues that the capitalist system pre - supposes the complete separation of the labourers from all property. Thus according to Marx, “the process that clears the way for the capitalist system can be none other than the process which takes away from the labourer the possession of his means of production...” (1946:738). So - called primitive accumulation, he argues “therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer

from the means of production” (738). Marx sees the economic structure of the capitalist system as one that has grown out of the structure of feudal society. The immediate producer or the labourer can only sell himself once he is no longer attached to the soil and “ceased to be the slave, serf, or bondsman of another” (Marx, 1946: 738). To become a free seller of labour power he must have escaped from the guilds and their regulations. Hence this historical process seems on the one hand as emancipation from serfdom and guilds. But on the other hand, these freed men become sellers of labour power only after they have been “robbed of all their means of production” (Marx, 1946: 738). Thus, in the history of primitive accumulation, as stated by Marx:

...all revolutions are epoch-making that act as levers for the capital class in course of formation; but, above all, those moments when great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled as free and “unattached” proletarians on the labour-market. The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil, is the basis of the whole process. The history of this expropriation, in different countries, assumes different aspects, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different periods.... (1946:739)

Primitive accumulation has traditionally been interpreted as the “historical process that gave birth to the preconditions of the capitalist mode of production” (De Angelis, 2001:1). According to this conception ‘primitive’ indicates a clear - cut time dimension, the past, which becomes the pre condition for a capitalist future (De Angelis, 2001). Alternatively, the concept of primitive accumulation has been interpreted as a continuous phenomenon or process within the capitalist mode of production (Luxemburg, 1951;

Mies, 1998; Werlhof, 2000; De Angelis, 2001), especially in explaining the subordination of the South to the North of the world economy through a Marxian analysis. Rosa Luxemburg's pioneering work; *The Accumulation of Capital* presents one such alternative interpretation. In her thesis Luxemburg (1951), while accepting the understanding of primitive accumulation as a one - time, one - place phenomenon leading to capitalism, also points the theoretical framework in a different direction. She introduces the crucial argument that the prerequisite to capitalist production or so - called primitive accumulation is an inherent and continuous element of modern societies and its range of action extends to the entire world (Luxemburg, 1951: 371). She applies this analysis to the entire world by arguing that not only in Europe, but also in the colonies, peasants and craftsmen/women were separated from their means of production. They were robbed of their opportunities, means and traditions of production which if not destroyed outright, had to be handed over to the new masters: the colonial rulers or land owners (Luxemburg, 1951: 372).

Feminist research has further extended the analysis, bringing into this 'continuous process of primitive accumulation' women, who, were the first to be separated from their work and means of production, "their culture, their knowledge and their skills" (Werlhof, 2000: 731) and because of their reproductive capacities, from control over their own labour and even their bodies (Federici, 2004). "Thus, in a very special way, women too, lost control over their immediate living environments and even themselves as living beings" (Werlhof, 2000:731). Feminist writers (e.g. Mies, 1998; Dalla Costa, 1999; Federici, 1999; Werlhof, 2000) argue that this process is still going on even today and is

forced upon every new generation. They have coined new terms; worldwide ‘permanent’ accumulation (Werlhof, 2000) and ‘ongoing’ process of primitive accumulation (Mies 1998) to identify it. The term explains how the modern political economy, “builds upon the producers - men’s and even more so women’s - permanent worldwide expropriation” (Werlhof, 2000:731) robbing them not only historically through ‘original accumulation’ but continually, again and again through the process of ‘ongoing accumulation’ (Werlhof, 2000:732). As Dalla Costa states, “the ‘primitive’ expropriation of the land, begun five centuries ago....and still continuing today with the more recent forms of colonization and exploitation of the third world, is now linked ...to the contemporary forms of expropriation and poverty creation in the advanced capitalist countries” (1999: 12).

Federici argues that:

A return of the most violent aspects of primitive accumulation has accompanied every phase of capitalist globalization, including the present one, demonstrating that the continuous expulsion of farmers from the land, war and plunder on a world scale, and degradation of woman are necessary conditions for the existence of capitalism at all times (2004: 12-13).

Contemporary feminist theorists while drawing upon original Marxian propositions, differ from the Marxist view of seeing primitive accumulation as preceding capitalist accumulation. Rather they view primitive accumulation as an ‘ongoing’ process simultaneous with capital accumulation, and more importantly place ‘women’ at the centre of this worldwide process of expropriation and deprivation of power. It is upon this alternative theoretical claim - stemming from a Marxist analysis yet with a feminist turn - that this study is primarily based.

Indeed, feminist writers (e.g. Federici, 2004) have gone as far as explicitly stating how their use of ‘primitive accumulation’ differs from that of Marx’s. As Federici (2004) explains, “whereas Marx examines primitive accumulation from the viewpoint of the waged male proletariat and the development of commodity production, I examine it from the viewpoint of the changes it introduced in the social position of women and the production of labour - power”(12). Federici claims that her description of primitive accumulation includes a set of historical phenomena that are absent in Marx, and yet have been extremely important for capital accumulation. She identified these phenomena as:

...the development of a new sexual division of labour subjugating women’s labour and women’s reproductive function to the reproduction of the work-force; the construction of a new patriarchal order, based upon the exclusion of women from waged- work and their subordination to men and finally the mechanization of the proletarian body and its transformation, in the case of women, into a machine for the production of new workers (2004: 12).

While moving away from an orthodox Marxian view of primitive accumulation towards its feminist adaptation, this study does not regard existing Marxist feminist thinking as fully reflective of women’s lives as lived within these settings. Rather, it questions the adequacy of such thinking for fully explaining the conditions surrounding women’s labour within third world/postcolonial setting and argues for bringing in the unique features that affected (and still affect) the colonized world within its view. This becomes a task that is attempted throughout the subsequent sections of this chapter.

Relating the above discussion to my study, the ongoing process of primitive accumulation as it affected Sri Lanka is argued to be consisting of two distinct phases. The first phase coincides with colonization. This time in history when men and women were forcibly separated from their means of production and hurled as free, unattached labourers on to alien lands, is identified as the 'first phase of primitive accumulation' in Sri Lanka. It is embedded in the Marxian analysis of 'primitive accumulation' yet differs from the traditional Marxist view, as it calls for a recognition of the consequences of colonizing, and of imposing a capitalist mode of production on the colonized lands and its peoples. While viewing 'primitive accumulation' as an 'ongoing' process of expropriation this theorization places 'women'- who, in addition to everything else, have been robbed of their labour power and even their bodies - at the centre of its analysis. More specifically, this historical epoch marks the onset of the plantation economy to the Island by its colonial rulers in the nineteenth century and the bringing of pauperized landless workers from India (another British colony at the time) to work as labourers in the newly opened up lands. As such, these plantation workers - specifically the female workers among them, who to this date make up the vast majority of the estate workforce - becomes the first focal point of this study.

Similarly, the 'second phase of primitive accumulation' in Sri Lanka that resulted from the so-called liberal economic policies introduced in 1977 is viewed within the Marxist tradition, yet bringing into focus the essentials of 'feminization' as it affects capitalist production. Yet again, even at this second phase, it is 'women'- specifically poor third world women, separated from their families, robbed of their skills, and put to work on to

the global assembly lines - who are placed at the centre of this process of 'ongoing' accumulation. Accordingly, the young female workers of the newly emerged industries, specifically the garment industry, make up the second focal point of this study.

It is within this context that this study raises the question of: how - within this ongoing process of accumulation - interactions of women's productive and reproductive labour can be explained. Addressing this issue leads onto a theoretical discussion aimed at establishing the distinctions among productive, unproductive and reproductive labour, as relates to women.

3.2 Women's Productive and Reproductive Labour

In Marx's (1969: 393) view "...only bourgeois narrow-mindedness...can confuse the question of what is productive labour from the standpoint of capital with the question of what labour is productive in general, or what is productive labour in general;..." For Marx, the concept of productive labour is historically specific and he clearly distinguishes productive labour under capitalism from productive labour in general. The latter he calls useful labour "...the production of use values through the labour process...a necessary condition of human existence" (Marx, 1961:42-3). It is clear that labour viewed from the standpoint of the labour process alone is useful labour, or labour productive of use value. On the other hand, productive labour specific to the capitalist mode of production is labour which produces surplus value. Defined by Marx (1961) as:

That labour alone is productive, who produces surplus - value for the capitalist, and thus works for the self expansion of capital...Hence the notion of a productive

labourer implies not merely a relation between work and useful effect, between labourer and product of labour, but also a specific, social relation of production, a relation that has sprung up historically and stamps the labourer as the direct means of creating surplus value (509).

We are left in no doubt of Marx's views on productive and unproductive labour as he repeats the fundamental property of productive labour as; "only labour which is directly transformed into capital is productive" (1969:393), "from the capitalist standpoint only that labour is productive which creates a surplus value" (1969: 153), "productive labour, in its meaning for capitalist production, is wage-labour which, exchanged against the variable part of capital...reproduces not only this part of capital (or the value of its own labour power), but in addition produces surplus value for the capitalist" (1969:152). Marx emphasizes that productive labour in the first sense, what he calls as useful labour - is a necessary but not sufficient condition for productive labour in this second, correct sense. He explains that if productive labour is exchanged with capital to produce surplus-value, unproductive labour is exchanged with revenue to produce use value (1969: 157). As Marx further states designation of labour as productive, has nothing to do with the determinate content of that labour, or the particular use-value in which it manifests itself (1969:401). The same kind of labour may be productive or unproductive.

An actor for example, or even a clown, according to this definition, is a productive labourer if he works in the service of a capitalist (an entrepreneur) to whom he returns more labour than he receives from him in the form of wages; while a jobbing tailor who comes to the capitalist's house and patches his trousers for him, producing a mere-use value for him, is an unproductive labourer. The former's labour is

exchanged with capital, the latter's with revenue. The former's labour produces a surplus value; in the latter's revenue is consumed (Marx, 1969:157).

Drawing an example for this distinction from outside the sphere of production of material objects, Marx states that:

....a school master is a productive labourer, when, in addition to belabouring the heads of his scholars, he works like a horse to enrich the school proprietor. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of in a sausage factory, does not alter the relation (1961:509).

Later writers (e.g. Gough, 1972; Meiksin, 1981; Savran and Tonak, 1999) have made vigorous attempts to clarify the Marxist categories of productive and unproductive labour and also to classify types of labour commonly seen in modern capitalist modes of production under these headings. Discussing of Gough's clarifications as done here is more an attempt at critiquing them from a feminist perspective rather than an uncritical adoption of such ideas. Gough (1972:60) clarifies the Marxist analysis as "productive labour is labour exchanged with capital to produce surplus - value, employed in the process of production. Labour in the process of pure circulation does not produce use - value, therefore cannot add to value or surplus - value". Alongside this group of unproductive labourers Gough places all workers supported directly out of revenue - public teachers, doctors and other state employees. However, this group differs from circulation workers in that they produce use-value (1972: 60). Drawing upon Marx's analysis, Gough proposes a matrix of labour producing/not producing use - value as against labour producing/not producing surplus-value. He positions different types of workers of the present capitalist system within this matrix as follow:

	<i>labour producing use-value</i>	<i>labour not producing use-value</i>
<i>Labour producing surplus-value</i>	Productive workers in industry, agriculture distribution and services	
<i>labour not producing surplus-value</i>	Unproductive workers: All state employees, domestic servants etc. * <i>Women as domestic workers</i>	‘Pure’ circulation workers, salesman, advertising workers etc and ‘unnecessary’ supervisory workers.

Adopted from, Gough (1972) Marx’s Theory of Productive and Unproductive Labour.

(* insertion mine)

Such a categorization is far from ‘critique free’ and Gough himself draws attention to its many contradictions and ambiguities. However, the value of this matrix lies in its ability to achieve a certain amount of theoretical clarification and clear off some of the doubts and confusion surrounding the Marxist constructs of productive and unproductive labour. Even more importantly, in so far as the interests of this study are concerned, it creates a space within which women’s unpaid domestic labour can be placed in relation to other types of work and workers. As such, going by Gough’s exemplification of Marx’s explanations, women’s domestic labour should be viewed as labour producing use - value but not surplus - value and therefore as unproductive. Relating this idea to the workers of this study, it follows that their labour is productive only as long as they work within the boundaries of the factory and the field, creating surplus value for the capitalist by

producing over and above the value of their own labour power. The moment they step out of the confines of the capitalist production process, their labour, according to the Marxian classification, becomes 'unproductive'. Labour producing use - value necessary for human existence, useful from the point of view of the labour process. 'Unproductive' nevertheless, when looked at from a capitalist standpoint. Thus, in so far as Marx's theory of productive and unproductive labour stands uncontested, women's unpaid domestic labour remains 'unproductive'.

But Marx's theory of productive and unproductive labour is far from being uncontested. Rather it lies at the centre of discussions, debates and arguments that have given rise to much confusion and even controversy. Firstly, the Marxist categories themselves, especially their economic base, have been subject to close scrutiny in the form of discussions among scholars who are interested in the economic aspect of the Marxian analysis. (e.g. Mohun, 1996; Laibman, 1999; Harvie, 2008). Secondly, the place accorded to women's unpaid domestic labour within the Marxist framework has drawn widespread interest among scholars. This interest has manifested itself in the famous 'domestic labour debate' bringing forth a rich theoretical analysis of the nature of women's domestic work within the sphere of capitalist production (e.g. Dalla Costa and James, 1972; Vogel, 1973; Secombe, 1974; Gardiner, 1975; Smith, 1978; Dalla Costa, 1994; Fortunati, 1995; Federici, 2004). Some of these writers, especially the feminist activists among them (e.g. Dalla Costa and James, 1992), critique the Marxist theory for labelling women's domestic labour as useful but 'unproductive' within capitalist production.

Indeed they propose alternative theoretical bases for understanding women's domestic labour.

It is this feminist critique of the Marxist explanation of productive and unproductive labour that is of relevance in explaining the 'labour' of female workers of this study - as they move in and out of the factories, fields and homes, all through their working days, and lives, changing their labour roles between different theoretical modes - productive at one place, 'unproductive' at another. As such, the views of feminist theorists on the Marxist classification of housework as unproductive; the problem of establishing clear cut boundaries between women's' paid work in estates and factories and her unpaid work at home; the issue of who decides on the nature and strength of these boundaries, become the concerns that will be addressed through the following sections of this chapter.

Together with the re-emergence of the woman's movement in the late sixties came a flood of literature on women's oppression, some of which was in the form of Marxist analysis of the 'housewife and her labour under capitalism' (e.g. Mitchell, 1966; Benston, 1969; Morton, 1972). Juliet Mitchell (1966) analyzed the biological differentiation of the sexes and the division of labour in terms of the division between four structures: production, reproduction, sexuality and socialization. Domestic labour was acknowledged in passing by Mitchell, under the structure of production and was identified as enormous if quantified in terms of productive labour. According to Mitchell, women's liberation could be achieved only if all four structures in which they are integrated are transformed. Margret Benston (1969) argued that the roots of women's

oppression are in fact economic as women as a group had a definite relation to the means of production that was different from that of men. Benston located this difference in women's responsibility for housework thereby laying the groundwork for a new analysis of 'reproduction'. In its new form, reproduction was seen as including not only biological reproduction, but all work done by women at home and its relations to capitalist production. Benston (1969) states that women produced use - values at home, useful products and services to be directly consumed by the family, rather than producing commodities for the market. She argues that just because a woman did not sell the products of her labour that did not mean her work was any less difficult. In Benston's view 'unless a woman is freed from her heavy domestic duties, including childcare, her entry into the workforce would be a step away, rather than toward, liberation' (1969: 21). Introducing a woman into public industry without simultaneously 'socializing' the jobs of cooking, cleaning and childcare was to make her oppression even worse: the key to woman's liberation then was the 'socialization' of housework. Although Benston (1969), extended the Marxist thinking by arguing that socialization of domestic work, not only entrance of women into public industry was necessary for women's emancipation, she remained primarily within the orthodox Marxist fold.

The thesis of Dalla Costa and James (1972) however, challenged the Marxist view of seeing women's labour as outside of capitalist production. In Dalla Costa and James's view the 'true nature of the work of a housewife never emerged clearly in Marx'. They aim their critique at the heart of the Marxian analysis, saying 'domestic work produces not merely use values, but is essential to the production of surplus values' (1972:31-32).

Thus they claim women's domestic work to be productive not in the colloquial sense of being useful but in the strict Marxist sense of creating surplus value. Further accentuating their argument, Dalla Costa and James (1972: 45-46) state that domestic work is not necessarily 'feminine' work; rather they are enormous amounts of exhausting work which the capitalist system has transformed into privatized activity, putting it on the backs of housewives. These are social services as much as they serve the reproduction of labour power. Capital has liberated man from this work so that he is completely free for direct exploitation, resulting in a situation where productivity of man's wage slavery in the factory is based on women's unwaged slavery at home. Thus Dalla Costa and James (1972: 51) conclude that 'women's unpaid labour in the home has been the pillars upon which the exploitation of the waged worker's wage slavery has been build and the secret of its productivity'. Again going against the traditional Marxist thinking, they dismiss the belief that women's emancipation lies in their participation in public industry. Rather to Dalla Costa and James 'slavery to an assembly line is not liberation from slavery to a kitchen sink'. Believing that 'liberation of the working - class women lies in her getting a job outside home' is part of the problem, not the solution (1972:51). The solution, as Dalla Costa and James saw, was in arguing for 'wages for housework'. This was a point of view which came under critique for buttressing women's subordinated housework rather than attempting to eliminate the structural roots of sexual division of labour. In spite of its controversial nature, the analysis of Dalla Costa and James' analysis eventually reshaped the discourse on woman, reproduction and capitalism. Its essence was that the exploitation of women has played a central function in the process of capitalist accumulation, insofar as women have been the producers and reproducers of the

most essential capitalist commodity: labour power (Dalla Costa, 1994). As Federici (2004) reiterating this argument says:

....the power differential between women and men in capitalist society cannot be attributed to the irrelevance of housework for capitalist accumulation - nor to the survival of timeless cultural schemes. Rather it should be interpreted as the effects of a social system of production that does not recognize the production and reproduction of the worker as a social-economic activity, and a source of capital accumulation, but mystifies it instead as a natural resource or a personal service, while profiting from the wageless condition of the labour involved (2004:8).

Relating these theoretical notions to the labour of women estate and factory workers of this study, it becomes necessary to re-think the Marxist explanations drawing in the feminist arguments about the nature of women's domestic work into the analysis. For as argued here, these women have moved out of their homes into the public sphere, not in search of 'liberation' but in search of a living wage. They move amongst their homes, the fields and the assembly lines, expending their labour as mothers, housewives and factory and field workers. Going by Marx's definitions, these women oscillate from being 'productive' to 'unproductive' labour during the same working day, often working within hazy and blurred boundaries; thus it is problematic to demarcate when their 'productive' labour ends and 'unproductive' labour begins. One clear difference, however, is the fact that they are paid a wage for some parts of their work while some others go unpaid. The 'wages for housework movement' which failed to be put into practice even in the West, never reached this part of the world, not even in a theoretical form. So women continue to engage with their domestic labour, often combining it with work outside their homes, as

the 'women' of this study, who are both waged and unpaid workers; 'productive' and 'unproductive' labourers at much the same time. It is using this waged and non waged condition of women's labour then, that the main research objective of this study is crafted. That is, it seeks to explore the multiple interactions of 'productive' and 'unproductive' labour of women who are placed within the process of 'on going' capital accumulation. However, in crafting this objective this study draws upon the feminist redefinition of the Marxist categories of productive and unproductive labour and views women's unpaid domestic labour not as 'unproductive' but as 'reproductive' in the sense that women produce and reproduce the most essential capitalist commodity: labour power. It sees two ways in which women's reproductive labour reproduces labour power and is therefore integral to capitalism. Firstly, on a daily basis through care of the family so that members of the family can work effectively on a daily basis and secondly on a generational basis, reproducing the next generation of labourers for capitalist enterprises.

As explained before, this study seeks to explore the interactions of women's productive and reproductive labour as relates to a specific location in history and to a particular group of women - specifically female plantation and apparel factory workers of a third world/postcolonial location. As such, structural forces of 'class' and 'ethnicity' as applies to women who live and work within these settings are seen as affecting relations between women's labour roles. It is with a view to facilitating this argument, that the next section of this chapter discusses relations between 'women, labour and class'. Implications of 'ethnicity' for women's work are dealt with in the last section of the chapter, on women: their specific histories and locations.

3.3. Women, Class and Labour

Engels (1972) argues that in 'tribal' societies there is only a very low division of labour, and what property that exists is commonly owned by all members of the community. The expansion of the division of labour, accompanied by the increased wealth it generates, brings about the growth of private property. This involves the creation of a surplus product that is appropriated by a minority of non - producers. These non - producers consequently enter into an exploitative 'class' relationship, achieved at the expense of increased human self - alienation, with the majority of producers. Giddens (1980) taking a similar position on the 'notion of class' points out that 'property relations constitute the core of class delineation, and a minority of non - producers, who control the means of production, use this position of control to extract the surplus product from the majority of producers' (1980:28). Thus, in Giddens' view, class is defined in terms of the relationship of groupings of individuals to the means of production. This in turn is integrally connected with the division of labour, 'since a well developed division of labour is necessary for the creation of surplus value without which classes can not exist' (Giddens, 1980:28).

3.3.1 Conceptualizing class

Wright (2005) lays down a conceptual framework for understanding the foundations of the concept of 'class' within the Marxist tradition. As he describes 'as an adjective, the word class modifies a range of concepts: class relations, class structure, class locations, class formation, class interests, class conflict, class consciousness' (Wright, 2005: 7). He further states that in order to understand the foundations of a Marxist class analysis; it is

needed, firstly to figure out what is meant by the pivotal concepts of ‘class relations’ and ‘class structure’. The other terms in the conceptual menu, namely class conflict, class consciousness and so on, all derive their meanings from their link to these two pivotal concepts (Wright, 2005:7). Accordingly, Wright seeks to explain class relations and class structures by examining eight clusters of related conceptual issues. Some of the points examined by Wright under each of these clusters i.e. social relations of production, class relations as a form of social relations of production and complexity of class locations will be discussed here to the extent to which they are relevant to the study of women’s labour as attempted through this study.

Wright begins his examination of the social relations of production by noting that any system of production requires the deployment of a range of resources or factors of production: machines, land, raw material, labour power and information. In technical terms this deployment can be thought of as a production function. This ‘same deployment can be described in social relational terms: the people that take part in production have different kinds of rights and powers over the use of inputs and over the results of their use’. The sum total of these rights and powers constitute the ‘social relations of production’ (2005: 8). When the rights and powers of people over productive resources are unequally distributed - when some people have greater rights/powers over resources than others - these relations can be described as ‘class relations’. The fundamental contrast in capitalist societies is between owners of the means of production and owners of labour power (Wright, 2005: 8). Thus in capitalism the central class relation is the capital/labour relation and this determines two class locations, capitalist and worker. The

women workers of this study, tea pluckers in a plantation estate and sewing machine operators in an apparel factory, clearly belong to the latter of these two class locations. They are ‘workers’ who do not have rights/powers over means of production.

However, as Wright further explains such a simple two-location model of class locations is inadequate to understand the ‘formation of people’s subjective experiences within work. Understanding people’s experiences of work requires taking into account a set of concrete variations in working conditions such as the degree of autonomy, closeness of supervision, physical demands of work and the cognitive complexity of tasks (2005: 12) Wrights further notes that some of these variations in working conditions are actually variations in the concrete ways in which people are located within class relations. Such variations result in a considerable amount of complexity that has to be incorporated into an analysis that seeks to understand people’s subjective experiences of their work. One way of doing this is through ‘unbundling of rights and powers’ so as to reveal the ‘contradictory locations’ within class relations (2005: 13). For example, managers of corporations exercise some of the powers of capital - hiring and firing workers, introducing changes to the labour process and so on. Thus, even within the class of ‘workers’ themselves, there are some who enjoy more rights/power over means of production than others. This is a theoretical stand that gives rise to interesting analytical possibilities in exploring the experiences of women workers within these specific work settings. Accordingly, such complexities and contradictory locations within class relations are given due consideration in using class as an analytical category for the purpose of this study.

Beverly Skeggs discussing the formations of class and gender points out that, 'class has almost disappeared from feminist analysis, even those claiming a materialist feminist position' (1997: 6). However, as she further argues, 'abandoning class as a theoretical tool does not mean that it does not exist any more. Rather, class inequality exists beyond its theoretical representations' (1997:6). The retreat from class has occurred across a range of academic disciplines by either ignoring or treating class as an increasingly redundant issue. However, when such a retreat is mounted there is a need to ask 'whose experiences are being silenced and whose lives are being ignored' (Skeggs, 1997: 7). It is against such a retreat that Skeggs states 'rather than abandon the concept of class, I want to re-nuance it to show how it is a major feature of subjectivity, a historical specificity and part of a struggle over resources and ways of being' (1977:7). Use of class as a theoretical tool as done for the purpose in this study draws inspiration from such views as above. As stated previously its primary aim is bringing to light the experiences of those who have been 'silenced'. Breaking such 'silence' requires drawing attention to the inequalities surrounding their lives, of which class relations remains to be of significance.

In summary then, viewed through a Marxist conceptualization of class, the women estate and factory workers of this study are seen as belonging to the majority producers, whose surplus production is extracted by the minority non - producers who control the means of production, for their own livelihood. The non - producers, or the owners of the means of production, enter into and maintain an exploitative class relationship with the 'women' producers. This is a relationship that is achieved at the expense of an increasing 'estrangement' of 'women and their labour'.

3.3.2 *Women's estranged labour*

Marx (1959:72) describes estranged labour as "...labour that is external to the worker, i.e. it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself". A worker performing estranged labour, argues Marx, "does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind" (1959:72). Thus the worker only feels himself outside his work. In Marx's terminology "He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home" (1959:72). Marx sees such labour not as voluntary, but as coerced or forced labour. As he argues it is not the satisfaction of a need but merely a means of satisfying needs external to it (1959). This alien character manifests itself clearly in the fact that as soon as the physical or other compulsions are lifted 'labour is shunned like the plague' (Marx, 1959:72). A women's experience of estranged labour is described by Studs Terkel in the *Quest* (1976), where explaining what it feels to be working as a receptionist she says:

You are there just to filter people and filter telephone calls...You are treated like a piece of equipment, like the telephone....There isn't a ten minute break in the whole day that is quiet...I always dream I am alone and things are quiet ...where there isn't any machine telling me where I have to be every minute. The machine dictates. This crummy little machine with buttons on it. Your job doesn't mean any thing. ...Because you are just a little machine... (cited in Hartsock, 1998:45).

Work, as seen by this receptionist, is something that is not important, done at the pace set by machines or by someone who is not involved in the work itself. For her, work is something she cannot enjoy. Time at work, is time she does not have for herself - when

creativity is cut off and activities structured by rules laid out by others (Hartsock, 1998). Work that is best described as estranged labour. Through estranged labour, work that should be used for the growth of workers is used instead to diminish them, to make them feel like machines. 'Estranged labour distorts lives of workers in a number of ways, as expressed by the receptionist in describing her work. Workers are not in control of their actions during the times they work; their time belongs to those who have the money to buy it' (Hartsock, 1998:46). Women's time in particular is not their own. For even when they are away from work, women's time is controlled by others, specifically men.

Eyeing the work of women workers of this study through the conceptual lenses of 'class' and 'estranged labour', then, they are seen as the proletariat or the majority producers whose surplus produce is appropriated by the bourgeoisie - the minority non - producers who control the means of production. It could be argued that these women are placed at the midst of an exploitative class relationship; a relationship that is achieved through increasingly separating them from their labour. Also their work, as sewing machine operators and tea pluckers, can be seen as estranged labour. For it is work that does not make them content but unhappy, work that is shunned by the women the minute the compulsion is removed. Further, these women can be seen as working at a pace set by others and as not in control of their own actions, during the times they work. For their time is not their own, but has been bought by others who have the money to buy it. Finally, all these can be viewed as consequences of being 'proletariat', of having to earn a living as factory and field workers. The focus of this study, as

previously mentioned is not on the 'proletariat', but on 'proletarian women'. Being 'women' implies having additional demands placed upon their labour time. Being proletarian, the time these women spend at work is not their own, but is bought by others who have money to buy it. Being 'proletarian women', their time away from work, at their homes, is also not owned by them, but controlled by others, mostly men.

3.3.3 On Patriarchy

The concept of patriarchy has its historical origins in sociology. Sociologists (e.g. Weber, 1964) have used it to refer to a particular type of authority relationship, associated with traditional societies. Weber uses the term 'patriarchalism' to identify a "situation where, within a group which is usually organized.... as a household, authority is exercised by a particular individual who is designated by a definite rule of inheritance..." (1964: 346). The meaning of the term has evolved since Weber, especially in the writings of radical feminists (e.g. Millett, 1971) who use the term patriarchy to refer to a social system characterized by male domination over women. For Millett, "our society... is a patriarchy...where the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political officers, finance - in short every avenue of power within the society... is entirely in male hands" (1971:25). While strong in its insights into the present, radical feminist analysis is criticized for being blind to history. As an alternative to the radical feminist view, patriarchy is identified as a material, historically grounded concept by some feminist theorists (e.g. Hartmann, 1981; Beechey, 1987). Some others see it as an all - pervasive concept, rooted in all aspects of society; material, familial, ideological and psychological (e.g. Barratt, 1980; Walby 1992). As illustrated above, the issue of where it is based; 'in

production relations, in the family, in discourse, or in psychic structure' has made defining patriarchy a problem. In spite of vigorous attempts at theorization, patriarchy remains to be a somewhat 'imprecise and intrinsically descriptive construct' (Bradley, 1989: 51). However, in the absence of an alternative way of conceptualizing male domination and female subordination, patriarchy continues to be used to "penetrate beneath the particular experiences and manifestations of women's oppression and to formulate a coherent theory of the basis of subordination which underlies them" (Beechey, 1987:95). This warrants a discussion of two of the most widely debated definitions of patriarchy, as proposed by Heidi Hartmann (1981) and Silvia Walby (1992).

As Hartmann (1981:14) says "we can define patriarchy as a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women". Further explaining her position, Hartmann argues that 'though patriarchy is hierarchical and men of different classes, races or ethnic groups have different places in the hierarchy, they are united in their shared relationship of dominance over women and are dependent on each other to maintain that domination' (1981:15). "The material base upon which patriarchy rests lies most fundamentally in men's control over women's labour power. Men maintain this control by excluding women from access to some essential productive resources and by restricting women's sexuality" (Hartmann, 1981: 15). Hartmann sees monogamous marriage as an efficient form that allows men to control both these areas. As she argues, controlling women's access to resources and their sexuality allows men to

control women's labour power. Men in turn use this labour - others labour that is in their control - for the purpose of serving them in many personal and sexual ways and for the purpose of rearing children.

Even though Hartman (1981: 18) considers most known societies to be patriarchal, she does not view patriarchy as a universal concept. Rather she believes women of different class, race, national, marital status and sexual orientations to be subject to different degrees of patriarchal power, and patriarchy itself to take different forms and intensity over time. Finally, she identifies the crucial elements of patriarchy we experience today as: "heterosexual marriage, female childrearing and housework, women's economic dependence on men - enforced by status of the labour market - the state and institutions based on social relations among men - clubs, sports, unions, professions, universities, churches and corporations" (Hartmann, 1981:18-19). Hartmann's view on patriarchy is praised for extending the analysis of economic domination from the sphere of industry into the family. At the same time, it is also criticized for giving a limited, economic account of male female relations (Bradley, 1989: 54).

Walby (1990: 20) defines patriarchy "as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women". Patriarchy needs to be conceptualized at different levels of abstraction and as Walby (1990) argues, at the most abstract level it exists as a system of social relations. At its least abstract level Walby sees "patriarchy to be composed of six structures: the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in

sexuality and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions” (1990:20). As Walby argues, these ‘deep and real’ structures necessary to capture the variations in gender relations are relatively autonomous of each other. However, they have causal effects on each other, ‘both reinforcing and blocking’ (1990:21). Walby goes on to explain the six structures which according to her theorization make up the concept of patriarchy in the following way. Patriarchal production relations in the household are the structures through which women’s household labour is expropriated by their husbands. Patriarchal relations within paid work act as a powerful web of enclosures blocking women from obtaining better paid work and segregating them into less skilled, low paid work. The state, although not a monolithic entity, has a systematic bias towards patriarchy in its policies and actions. Male violence against women, in the forms of rape, wife beating and sexual harassment constitute a further structure. Compulsory heterosexuality and sexual double standards are two key forms through which patriarchal relations in sexuality are created. Finally, it is by representing women through a patriarchal gaze in the arenas of religion, education and media that the sixth structure of patriarchal cultural institutions is created (1990:21). The strength of Walby’s work on patriarchy is that it emphasizes the presence of patriarchal structures on wage labour, rather than reducing all women to housewives. However, as argued by Bradley (1989) a problem with Walby’s approach is that, by including almost every manifestation of male dominance, it loses focus and slides down to an imprecise description of patriarchy.

In spite of the critiques, both definitions of patriarchy as discussed above offer valuable theoretical insights for exploring women’s oppression as experienced by the women

workers of this study. Their lives, as waged workers in the factories and fields and as mothers and housewives at home, are lived amidst a web of patriarchal relations. For they live and work within rigid structures of patriarchy; in the household, at the work place, in state policies, in male violence and sexual orientations and finally in cultural institutions. As such, any attempt at exploring the lived realities of their lives should recognize and bring within its fold the analytical category of patriarchy as described by feminist theorists, for patriarchal relations undoubtedly impact upon their lives.

Relating this discussion to the women estate and factory workers of this study, gives rise to the related question of whether these oppressive structures impact upon their lives in the same way as they would any other group of women; or if 'patriarchy' as they experience, is different from 'patriarchy' as experienced by other women ? Simply, whether women can be viewed as a unitary category and patriarchy as a universal concept? In so far as this study is concerned, patriarchy is not viewed as a universal, all embracing concept which takes all women as one and treats them equally. It is from such a perspective that patriarchy is used as a conceptual tool for exploring the lives of women workers of this study.

Also, for the purpose of this study patriarchy is not seen as a construct that can be used in isolation, as a separate structure of oppression. Rather the focus is on the relationship between patriarchy and the capitalist mode of production. Simply, patriarchy is not seen as separate from other forms of capitalist exploitations; specifically class exploitation. As argued here, in a capitalist society, such as the one inhabited by the factory and field

workers of this study, women's oppression is inextricably linked with the capitalist order. Therefore, an exploration of their lives should be an exploration of capitalist relations, resulting from their 'class', and patriarchal relations resulting from their 'gender'. This is the focus of Marxist feminist theorization.

3.3.4 Marxist Feminist Theorization: a critique

According to a Marxist view, human nature reflects historical material conditions. In Marx's famous phrase "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (1971:20-21). Thus, the organization of economic life conditions social, political and intellectual life; and, for that reason, the capitalist mode of production, a class struggle between labour and capital, moves to the centre of analysis in a Marxian perspective (Calas and Smircich, 1996:231). Consistent with their views on human nature, feminist perspectives inspired by Marxist thinking conceptualize gender and gender identity as structural, historical and material. Thus from this particular perspective 'gender is similar to class, a social category, characterized by relations of dominations and oppression. Marxist feminism is critical of orthodox Marxist views for its blindness to patriarchy, and "adds gender to the analytical concerns of the Marxist perspective, to 'correct for' its inattention to gender dynamics" (Calas and Smircich, 1996:232). Marxist feminism is thus concerned with women's double oppression of both class and gender.

Further, Marxist feminism considers gender inequality to derive from capitalism, and not to be constituted as an independent system of patriarchy. In its view, 'men's domination

over women is a by - product of capital's domination over labour'. From a Marxist feminist perspective, class relations and the economic exploitation of one class by another are the central features of social structures and these determine the nature of gender relations (Walby, 1990: 4). Furthermore, Marxist feminism does not see the capitalist economy as best described through such concepts as market forces, exchange patterns, and supply and demand. Rather, the capitalist economy should be analyzed by focusing on relations of inequality and power. Thus Marxist feminism analyses the on going productive and reproductive gender dynamics of patriarchy, capitalist organization of economy and society pointing out that gender inequalities persist and will not change without major structural changes (Calas and Smircich, 1996).

However, Marxist feminism is not without its critiques. Heidi Hartmann in her influential essay, *The Unhappy Marriage between Marxism and Feminism*, identifies the synthesis between Marxism and feminism as problematic, where the 'Marxism' of Marxist feminism dominates over its 'feminism'. As Hartmann (1981) argues Marxist analysis of the 'women question' has taken three main forms, and all of them have taken as their question, the relationship of women to the economic system, rather than that of women and men. First, argues Hartmann 'the early Marxists including Marx and Engels saw capitalism drawing all women into the labour force, and saw this process destroying the sexual division of labour. Second, contemporary Marxists have women into an analysis of everyday life in capitalism. And third, Marxist feminists have focused on housework and its relation to capital, some arguing that housework produces surplus value and housewives work directly for the capitalist (1981:4). According to Hartmann, while such

Marxist analysis has provided essential insights into the laws of historical development, and those of capital in particular, the 'categories of Marxism are sex-blind' (1981: 2). Hartmann, in her final analysis, sees Marx's theory of the development of capitalism as a theory of the development of 'empty places' and argues:

Just as capital creates these places indifferent to the individuals who fill them, the categories of Marxist analysis, class, reserve army of labour, wage-labour, do not explain why particular people fill particular places. They give no clues about why women are subordinate to men inside and outside the family...Marxist categories, like capital itself, are sex-blind. The categories of Marxism can't tell us who will fill the empty places. Marxist analysis of the women question has suffered from this basic problem. (1981: 10-11).

According to Hartmann's argument Marxism's sex - blind categories makes it impossible to pose women's questions within its analytical framework. Describing capitalism and patriarchy as separate systems she proposes a new theoretical base where capitalism and patriarchy are brought together as parallel analytical categories for understanding women's oppression. Viewing Hartmann's critique of Marxist feminist analysis, in the light of women's situation in this specific historical location, this study argues for an extended theory of Marxism that is capable of understanding the 'woman question' within its broader analytical framework of capitalist relations. For as Vogel (1981,1983, 1995) points out, the focus of feminism should not be to take Marxist categories as given, and lament about its blind spots, but to further develop Marxist categories to shed light on the blinded areas. Simply, if Marxist categories are gender-blind, the challenge for feminism should be to make them gender-sighted. It is in this sense that this study takes Marxist feminism as *a necessary but not sufficient* theoretical framework for its inquiry.

As stated at the beginning of this discussion, Marxism identifies human nature to be reflective of historical material conditions. As he claims, it is the social existence of humans that determines their consciousness. It is this fundamental Marxist belief that inspires Marxist feminists to conceptualize women's oppression as structural, historical and material. Marxist feminism derives from the Marxian doctrine of 'historical materialism'. This is a primary postulate of both Marxist and Marxist feminist analysis. Thus, engaging with Marxist feminism calls for a theoretical discussion of 'historical materialism' as presumed by Marxism, which is the focus of the next section of this chapter.

3.4. Women and 'Historical Materialism'

Marx approaching the doctrine of historical materialism argues that 'neither legal relations nor political forms could be understood by themselves or on the basis of a so called development of the human mind'. Rather 'they originate in the material conditions of life' (1971:20). Marx goes on to explain his conclusion, which he claims, once reached became the guiding principle of his studies. As explained by Marx (1971:20) "In the social production of their existence, men invariably enter into definite relations...namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production". He further affirms that "the totality of these relations of production constitute the economic structure of society". He claims this to be the real foundation, "on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness" (Marx, 1971:20). Thus for Marx, "the mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is

not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (1971:20-21). Accordingly, from a Marxist point of view, material forces, the production and reproduction of social life, are the prime movers in history. How change takes place over time is articulated by Marx in the doctrine of ‘historical materialism’. Engels (1972), reproducing Marx’s thoughts on the materialist examination of history, states:

According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the producing and reproduction of immediate life. This again, is of two fold character: one the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organization under which the people of a particular historical epoch....live is determined by both kinds of production; by the stage of development of labour on the one hand and of the family on the other. (71-72).

3.4.1 Theorizing women’s lives; from ‘grand theories’ to everyday ‘materiality’.

Inspired by the Marxian notion that material forces, the production and reproduction of social life, are the prime movers in history, feminist writers (e.g. Kuhn and Wolpe, 1978; Mohanty, 1991, 1997, 2003; Dalla Costa, 1994, 1999; Nanda, 1997; Mies, 1998; Jackson, 1998, 2001; Federici, 1999, 2004) call for a materialist analysis for understanding women’s oppression. An analysis that takes note of women’s daily struggles for survival, the exploitative demands placed on their bodies, as waged labourers in the field and factories, as house maids, as sex workers, and also as unpaid domestic labourers. This study of women’s oppression within a postcolonial location falls within the boundaries of

feminist materialist analysis. However, while stating allegiance to a particular theoretical tradition this work is also mindful of the problematic of employing universalistic ‘grand’ theories to explain specific issues; issues relating specifically to women, and perhaps to women of specific locations. Also this study takes into account the apparent gap or the vacuum, which exists between the abstraction of ‘grand theories’, often removed from daily lives, and the un-theorized happenings of every day life. Employing universalistic theories that address issues of the wider society, to understanding women’s daily lives at a particular historical location can indeed prove to be problematic. A way out of this impasse, however, is to move away from abstract grand theories towards feminist studies empirically grounded in specific issues and contexts. This was a trend embraced by feminists striving to understand women’s lives as located at some specific point in history. It is a way of analysis that is in keeping with Mary Maynard’s (1995, 1998) view that feminism should develop ‘middle order theories’ and focus on the specifics of given social contexts, organizations and relationships, offering grounded generalizations rather than universalistic totalizing models of entire societies. Also it is a way of analysis that emphasize ‘theorizing’ rather than producing theory, making use of conceptual tools that seem useful for a particular purpose rather than being guided by a dogmatic allegiance to a particular set of concepts. In this way, argues Maynard, feminist analysis can strive to understand women’s everyday existence without losing sight of overall structural patterns of domination and subordination that have a bearing on that existence.

Further, as we shift our focus to the everyday contexts of women’s lives, it becomes clear that the material and social cannot be understood in terms of social structures alone

(Jackson, 2001). Rather, we need to account for subjectivity and agency, for patterns of gendered interactions of everyday life. Also we need to look into the ways in which such “ interaction is endowed with, and shaped by, the meaning it has for participants; the micro levels at which power is deployed and resisted as well as the macro level of systematic domination” (Jackson, 2001:287). As argued here, taking account of all this requires a social analysis that does not reduce every aspect of women’s lives to an effect of social structures, but enables us to appreciate the extent to which social structures themselves are perpetuated through human practice. In fact, we need a theory that focuses on the interpretive processes underpinning everyday life; a theory that offers a nuanced understanding of the many facets of social life, enabling us to relate meaning and subjectivity both to the everyday actualities of women’s lives and to the wider social, political and cultural structures and patterns within which those lives are lived.

It is argued that a feminist materialism as read through feminist postcolonial theorists offers such a basis; suitable for theorizing the diversity and complexity of the social, political and cultural structures, relations and practices within which women live their lives in such a way that is particularly relevant to this thesis. As Mohanty (1997) and Meera Nanda (1997) argue, a materialist analysis is ideally suited for looking at structural inequalities; the heritage of centuries of slavery, colonialism and imperialism, along with global capitalism and the new international division of labour, that are not just differences, but are founded upon real material disparities. In fact, ignoring these structural material dimensions of everyday life may result in ‘valorizing differences that cause oppression and inequality’ (Nanda, 1997). As such “materialist analysis of

systematic inequalities is as relevant now as it ever was, and remains necessary to grapple with the complexities of a postcolonial world, with the intersections of gender, ethnicity and nationality” (Jackson, 2001: 286). The world we inhabit today is ridden with severe and ever worsening ‘material’ inequalities with women at the centre of the intersection of multiple structures of oppression. The ‘material’ causes of women’s oppression; low paid waged labour and exploitation of women’s domestic labour continue to influence the ways in which women live and work. Within this context, exploring women’s oppression calls for a material feminist theorization that takes note of all social structures, relations and practices, that impact upon women, not only those relating to capitalism. Patriarchal structures as well as those deriving from colonialism and imperialism are every bit as material as capitalist structures. All these intercept and interact, often in unpredictable and contradictory ways, resulting in a social order that is not a monolithic entity, but a maze of diversity and complexity. In this sense, what we need above all is a theoretical stance that does not reduce women’s oppression to a single cause. In fact we need theories that seek to understand the lived realities of women’s lives while keeping in sight the material inequalities of the social, political and cultural structures, within which these lives are lived. Also we need theories that give due consideration to the diverse and multiple ways in which women interpret and deal with these structures, structures that result not only from capitalism and patriarchy but also from imperialism, as will be discussed further in the following sections of this chapter.

3.5 Women: their specific histories and locations

A Marxist view of women's subjugation would necessarily place the class struggle arising from the tensions between labour and capital at the centre of its analysis. A Marxist feminist approach however, would focus on gendered aspects of women's oppression, thereby adding gender as a category of analysis. In doing so, Marxist feminists view conditions surrounding women's lives through the dual lenses of class and gender. Viewed through such dual lenses as proposed by Marxist feminism then, women, or more specifically proletarian women should be seen as a unified category sharing a common way of life. Seeing class and gender as the only categories for explaining women's lives is argued to be inadequate for the purpose of this study. This argument stems from a legacy where 'black, white and other third world women have very different histories with respect to the particular inheritance of Euro American hegemony: slavery, enforced migration, plantation labour...' (Mohanty, 1991a:10). Thus, as argued by postcolonial theorists, history should be rewritten based on the specific locations and histories of struggle of people of colour and post colonial peoples, and on the day-to-day strategies of survival utilized by such peoples (Sivanandan, 1990). Rethinking and rewriting the histories of marginalized people in the third world should be preceded by knowledge about these people - knowledge that should be 'grounded in and informed by the 'material politics of everyday life (Sivanandan, 1990: 295). We need to think of their histories beyond the boundaries of existing frameworks and come up with new theories inclusive of features unique to the colonies: of slavery, enforced migration and imperial conquest. Histories of the third world, mostly unknown, un-written and under theorized, yet engraved in the daily life struggles of its people.

Feminist writers tracing the past of ‘third world women’ along the lines of their colonial legacy, paint a vivid picture of their continuing struggles for survival. They speak of how multinational capital has re-discovered ‘third world women’ as the cheapest and most easily manipulative workers (Mies, 1998). As Mohanty (2004: 235) argues, ‘it is especially on the bodies and lives of third world women that global capitalism writes its scripts’. Thus the challenge for any ‘theory’ before it speaks of ‘third world women’ is to integrate the brutal features that shape the lives of third world women as a result of their specific ‘histories and locations’ into their analytical categories. This is the aim of third world/postcolonial feminist theorization.

3.5.1 Postcolonial feminist theorization

Calas and Smircich (1996) identify the intellectual roots of postcolonial theorization as emerging from intersections of gendered critiques of western feminisms and postcolonial critiques of western epistemologies. Postcolonial feminist theorists see human nature as a western construct that emerged by making its ‘other’ invisible or almost inhuman. They hold fundamental suspicion of ‘gender’ as a stable and sufficient analytical lens that can be applied unproblematically across cultures and histories (Calas and Smircich, 1996: 238). Thus, postcolonial feminists problematize the concept of ‘gender’ as advocated in the west, and suggest the possibility of other gendered configurations in the face of the multiple oppressions produced by global capitalism. Further they create positive images of ‘third world women’ capable of agency and representation, strongly located in specific cultures and histories, and gender, race, class, ethnicity intersections (Calas and Smircich, 1996: 239). Finally they demonstrate the possibility of political action within the confines

of everyday life struggles of third world women. However, postcolonial feminist theories are sometimes subject to the critique of elitism and lack of accessibility. Also there are concerns about accepting the existence of 'other knowledge' outside the boundaries of 'Westernized knowledge'. Another major issue concerning this approach is the problem of the representational identity of the colonized. We face a dilemma in attempting to portray postcolonial subjectivities without depicting them as a romanticized 'native other'. Thus Calas and Smircich (1996:239) pose two critical questions: how can writers articulate a third world/ postcolonial subject without reclaiming a pristine original space from which to represent her agency either historically or experientially? And how can writers provide a space for representation outside the power engagements with the colonizer?

Postcolonial writers (e.g. Spivak, 1988; Ong, 1988; Minh-ha, 1989; Bhabha, 1990; Spivak, 1999), have countered these critiques through their distinct intellectual ingenuity. For example, in Gayathri Spivak's work we can identify a double move of deconstruction. First, Spivak considers the silence and muteness of the colonized (subaltern), who by intersecting his own patriarchal tradition with the interests of the colonizer, colluded in his own subjectification, and thus cannot speak for himself. The subaltern woman is even further silenced. Spivak's second move requires that the contemporary postcolonial woman intellectual develop a specific strategy for reading the history of the colonized, plotting a story that gives the (female) subaltern a voice in history (Spivak, 1999). In postcolonial analyses the researcher may first consider the position of privilege already occupied by the third world scholar and thus her

responsibility to use that space on behalf of others. Yet, she must also remember, that in giving voice, she is silencing many other voices. Thus, a second representational question is on the issue of silence. ‘What other voices are there that the scholarly voice cannot represent?’ (Calas and Smircich, 1999: 662). Some experimental texts (e.g. Minh-ha, 1989) break this linear style with images, prose, and poetry and so on which produce interstices of silence’ in order to represent the absence of other voices. Such work demonstrates that the first step toward postcolonial theorizations is a deconstructive move that emphasizes the problems of western representations. The next step belongs to postcolonial writings, which face the challenge of representing ‘the other’ through unknown subjectivities. Ahiwa Ong’s (1988) ethnography of women workers in Japanese factories in Malaysia is an exemplary work in this case. Ong’s study focuses on the production of new subjectivities as peasant women become transformed into ‘docile’ bodies’ who can adapt to factory life. However, a form of resistance by women workers, for instance was to become possessed by spirits and disrupt the work situation. This possession, based on local traditions, was a way in which agency and representation intersected, fashioning very specific contemporary gender configurations outside first world understandings (Ong, 1988). Latin American writings (e.g Sommer, 1995) offer another possibility for unique third world representations of strong political force by portraying very different gender configurations through women ‘from below’ who speak up, initiate action, fight in all kinds of struggles, while resisting any easy classification within first world images of ‘feminism’. As Calas and Smircich (1999) summarize:

... stories we have written... theory, our concepts and representations, no matter how global, represent the ways of thinking of certain people and not others. These theoretical representations have been profoundly implicated in blinding us to current

global circumstances. Thus, if we are to really engage in global conversation, postcolonial theories are an excellent place for us to start learning how to write in theoretical voices that allow spaces for ‘the other’ to ‘speak back’ (662).

As the above discussion demonstrates that critiques confronting postcolonial feminist theorizing have been intellectually addressed and its strength as a much needed discursive space for engaging with the ‘new colonialisms’ of globalization had been forcefully established. Postcolonial approach to feminist theorization gives researchers a theoretical outline within which ‘other knowledge’- knowledge of life struggles of ‘third world women’ - that lies beyond the lens of the ‘western eyes’ can be generated and assimilated.

3.5.2 Theorizing beyond borders: what constitutes ‘third world feminism’?

According to Mohanty at el (1991:ix) third world refers to the “colonized, neocolonized or decolonized countries (of Asia, Africa, and Latin America) whose economic and political structures have been deformed within the colonial process, and to black, Asian, Latina, and indigenous peoples in North America, Europe, and Australia”. Drawing attention to problems of definitions Mohanty (1991) questions who/what is the third world? Do third world women make up any kind of constituency? If so, on what basis? She further wonders if third world women’s struggles are necessarily feminist and finally asks what constitutes third world feminism. Mohanty speaks of the dilemma of defining third world feminism as “just as it is difficult to speak of a singular entity called ‘western feminism’, it is difficult to generalize about ‘third world’ feminisms...I want to recognize and analytically explore the links among the histories and struggles of third world women against racism, sexism, colonialism, imperialism, and monopoly capital (Mohanty, 1991:

4). In the face of this impasse Mohanty suggests an “‘imagined community’ of third world oppositional struggles. ‘Imagined’ not because it is not ‘real’ but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across decisive boundaries and ‘community’ ...” (1991:4). The idea of imagined community leads us away from the essentialist notions of third world feminist struggles, suggesting political rather than biological or cultural bases of alliance. It is not colour or sex which constructs the grounds for these struggles. Rather, it is the way we think about race, class, and gender - the political links we choose to make among and between struggles. Thus, potentially, women of all colours - including white women - can align themselves with and participate in these imagined communities. Our relation to and centrality in particular struggles, however, may depend on our different, often conflictual, locations and histories. This then is what constitutes third world feminism: ‘imagined communities of women with divergent histories and social locations, woven together by the political thread of opposition to forms of dominations that are not only pervasive but also systematic’ (Mohanty, 1991:4).

Drawing from Mohanty’s analysis I view ‘third world feminism’ as a theoretical construct that can be shifted beyond existing boundaries or segregations: of the third world from the first world, the east from the west. I think of third world women as an imagined community bound together not by colour or sex but by the common political belief of how they view gender, class and race. Furthermore, I see them as a community or a group of women who put - up a common oppositional front or struggle against all forms of domination. Women within this imagined community may relate to or situate

themselves/ourselves in the struggle differently, as an effect of their/our conflicting histories and locations. Nevertheless, they/we cherish the common political belief of opposing all forms of domination and struggle against the multiple oppressive forces of class, gender and historical location. This struggle, common to all women who oppose the oppressive features flowing from class, gender or historical locations (or all of these) proves to be a meeting place, a point of intersection for the otherwise diverse thinking of Marxist and post colonial theorists. It is based on this shared political belief, common ways of seeing and opposing class, gender and location based oppression that I argue for an integrated theoretical framework drawing together analytical categories from both Marxist and third world/postcolonial feminist thinking as the most appropriate for my study.

Elaborating further, such thinking sees third world women as an ‘imagined community’ of people bound together by a common political belief. Third world feminism then, speaks of oppositional struggles of this ‘imagined community’ of black, brown and yellow women, including white women, who see women’s oppression as stemming from their specific historical locations as well as from class and gender relations. Marxist feminist theorists who view women’s oppression as a result of class and gender can fit in within this ‘imagined community’ of third world/ postcolonial feminists, thereby opening up a space for the integration of two distinct theoretical bases. This results in a shifting of boundaries that would enable a broader and more inclusive analysis than would otherwise be possible. Bringing together the analytical categories of class, gender and specific historical locations, would give better insights into the continuing struggles

for survival of women; specifically proletariat women of third world/ postcolonial locations as in my study.

Justifying this stand further, the women workers of my study, proletarian women of a postcolonial location, are engaged in a continuing struggle against myriad forces of oppression. Within these specific settings women's struggles derive from the fundamental tension or the struggle between capital and labour. The oppressive conditions under which they work can be traced back to their class and their gender. They are seen as proletarian women who are subject to 'super-exploitation' resulting from both class and gender. Thus Marxist feminism which adds gender to the Marxist analytical category of class and is concerned with women's double oppression resulting from both class and gender becomes an appropriate theoretical foundation for this work. However, as argued here, there is a third dimension that needs to be built into the analysis, i.e. the specific 'histories and locations' of these women workers. These are third world women who work in colonial plantations and neo-colonial global factories. Their specific historical location is a major determinant of their oppression. They are oppressed because they are 'proletarian', because they are 'women' and also because they live in the (post)colonized world. Failure to recognize this third dimension would limit the scope and strength of the analysis. Including the power of postcolonial thinking is an attempt at filling this theoretical vacuum.

As derived from the above discussion, this study argues for a feminist materialism, empirically grounded in a specific location in history, as an appropriate theoretical

approach in exploring the multiple interactions of women's productive and reproductive labour as happens with the third world/postcolonial context of Sri Lanka. It attempts to look at the micro politics of the 'everyday lives' of the women workers of this settings without losing sight of the macro politics of the wider social, political, economic and cultural structures as they impact upon their lives. Thus it will draw on an integrative theoretical framework bringing together the analytical categories of 'class' as derived from capitalist relations, 'gender' as derived from patriarchal relations, and 'specific historical locations' reflected in 'ethnicity' as derived from (post)colonial relations for the purpose of its inquiry.

3.5.3 An integrated theory of class, gender and ethnicity

Halvino (2008) proposing the use of an integrated theoretical approach of class, gender and ethnicity points out that there are inherent strengths in such an approach for knowing about women's lives. As she further explains, it facilitates searching for and narrating stories at the 'intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, class, nation and sexuality', 'identifying and untangling the differential impact of everyday life' within and outside organizations and finally 'linking up internal organizational practices with external societal processes' (2008:1). As such she argues for creating theory that uses 'race, class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders and blur boundaries - new kinds of theories with new methodologies (2008:1). Postcolonial feminist thinking, now embraced by both first and third world feminists persistently draw attention to the intersections of class, gender and ethnicity. Such thinking represents the present, for within the present context of globalization, feminist writers have increasingly

recognized the urgency and importance of theorizing differences as well as similarities of women living in different parts of the world (Halvino, 2008).

Theorizing at the intersections of class, gender and ethnicity is at the core of postcolonial feminism in three important ways: it focuses on the simultaneity of oppression, it has a goal of rewriting history from the social locations of women of colour and most importantly, it recognizes women of colour's agency. This third aim is achieved by resisting constructions about the 'other' that represent them as victims without agency (Mohanty, 2003). Rather, in the work of postcolonial feminists (e.g. Ong, 1988; Minh-ha, 1989; Chio, 2005), intersections of class, gender and race are embodied in postcolonial subjects; those who have been traditionally silenced and relegated speak back. They reaffirm their own agency and represent themselves beyond the traditional images of 'oppressed'. Thus, what is theorized and studied are resistance, survival and agency, not just victimization and oppression.

However, feminist scholars of colour, who claim to represent and speak for 'others' face a dilemma of revealing reflexively what these constructions tell about themselves/ourselves. Each one of them/us is located at an intersection of class, gender and ethnicity; a location which significantly influences what we see, how we see, and what we represent through our writings. For in so far as this study is concerned, 'what is known' is not thought to be completely separated from the 'knower'. As discussed before, this study argues for a materialistic theory of knowledge that is rooted in women's diverse everyday experiences of oppression. It also sees such knowledge as 'reflexive,

indexical and local: as epistemologically tied to their context of production and ontologically grounded in the interests, experiences and understandings of the knowledge - producers' (Stanley and Wise, 1993:191-92). It is based on these underling assumptions that this study employs ethnography from a feminist, Marxist and postcolonial perspective as its prime methodological approach, a detailed explanation of which is presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Women, Ethnography and the ‘Other’

The prime methodological approach of this thesis is ethnography from a feminist perspective. Accordingly, its analytical endeavour is founded primarily on data generated through ethnographic field work. However, a limited amount of archival material is drawn upon to further enrich the ethnographic data. As such, the aims of this chapter on methodological aspects are firstly, to define ethnography and to consider the emergence of feminist ethnography from among its broader areas of study. Secondly, to identify principles underlying a feminist methodology of research and to critique ‘ethnography as a feminist research practice’ in the light of values thus identified. Thirdly, the chapter aims to justify employing ethnography as the prime methodological approach for this research and to offer an in-depth explanation of fieldwork as carried out within the specific ethnographic sites. Fourthly, the chapter explains the underlying reasons for employing a ‘narrative approach to analysis’ as done in this study. The chapter concludes with a critical reflective account of ethnography as a feminist methodology of research as practiced within a specific third world/postcolonial location.

4.1 Ethnography: *definitions, origins and dilemmas*

Many writers, both within and outside of the feminist tradition, have expressed diverse views on the issue of ‘what is ethnography?’ (e.g. Clifford, 1986; Hammersley, 1992; Van Maanen, 1995; Denzin, 1997; Visweswaren, 1997; Coffey, 1999; Tedlocke, 2000; Skeggs, 2001; Atkinson, 2001; Michael, 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Beverley Skeggs defines ethnography as:

“a theory of the research process - an idea about how we should do research. It usually combines certain features in specific ways: fieldwork that will be conducted over a *prolonged period of time*; utilising different research techniques; conducted *within the settings* of the participants; with an understanding of how the context informs the action; *involving the researcher in participation* and observation; involving an account of the development of relationships between the researcher and the researched and focusing on how experiences and practice are part of a wider processes (2001: 426)”[emphasis original].

According to Barbara Tedlocke’s description, ‘Ethnography involves an on going attempt to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context. It is not simply the production of new information or research data, but rather the way in which such information or data are transformed into a written or visual form. As a result it combines research design, fieldwork, and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically, and personally situated accounts, descriptions, and representations of human lives. As an inscription practice ethnography is a continuation of fieldwork rather than a record of past experiences in the field. Because ethnography is a both a process and a product, ethnographers’ lives are embedded within their field experiences in such a way that all of their interactions involve moral choices’ (2000: 455). Tedlocke’s description while reinforcing Skegg’s ideas notes that ethnographer’s lives are embedded in field experiences which involves making moral choices.

Martin Hammersley (1992) highlights the new areas into which ethnography has extended saying, ‘long enshrined as a method, a theoretical orientation, and even a

philosophical paradigm within anthropology, ethnography has recently been extended (primarily as a useful methodology) to cultural studies, literary theory, folklore, women's studies and sociology. It has also proved useful in a number of applied areas including education, organization studies, law and management. Wherever it has been adopted, a key assumption has been that by entering into close and relatively prolonged interactions with people in their everyday lives, ethnographers can better understand the beliefs, motivations and behaviours of their subjects than they can by using any other approach'.

Notwithstanding the minor differences among viewpoints as stated above, the traditions of ethnography share the features of 'being grounded in a commitment to first - hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting on the basis of participant observation' (Atkinson, 2001:4). Further extending Atkinson's view, Amanda Coffey describes ethnography as "methods of generating data which entail the researcher immersing her or himself in a research 'setting' so they can experience and observe at first - hand a range of dimensions in and of that setting" (1999:1). These dimensions might include: social actions, behaviour, interactions, relationships, and events as well as spatial, locational and temporal dimensions. Experiential, emotional and bodily dimensions may also be part of the frame' (Coffey 1999). Coffey's view on ethnography is closely reflective of the way in which ethnography is used in my research. As such, data generation entailed immersing my self in the setting and observing and experiencing a range of dimensions including behaviours, interactions, relationships and events involving various actors in the field. Emotional and experiential dimensions made up an

important part of the frame while spatial and location dimensions contributed immensely towards further enriching it.

Details of how ethnographic traditions were built - in to my study can be further explained drawing upon Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007:3) framework of 'what ethnographers do'? Accordingly, the study was focused on two settings and selected cases within these settings, facilitating an in-depth inquiry. It involved an exploration of participants' actions and accounts in everyday contexts rather than under conditions created by the researcher (i.e. highly structured interview situations). Even though data was gathered through a range of sources including documentary evidence, participant observation and informal conversations were considered to be more important. Data generation was relatively unstructured and analysis of data involved interpretation of meanings, functions and consequences of human actions and institutional practices and how these are implicated in local and even wider contexts.

Having considered the issues of 'what is ethnography' and 'what ethnographers' do, in relation to my study of women workers and their reproductive and reproductive labour, I now move onto the question of 'what is feminist ethnography' or indeed 'can there be a feminist ethnography'. Consideration of this issue however, necessitates a prior discussion of 'what constitutes feminist research'

Over the years scholar with a feminist orientation (e.g. Stanley and Wise, 1983a Mies, 1983; Smith, 1988; Cook and Fonow, 1990) have endeavoured to discover a set of

principles that they presume as significant in identifying a research or a research method as 'feminist'. In Cook and Fonow's (1990:72) view, first of these is the necessity of continuously and reflectively attending to the significance of gender and gender asymmetry as a basic feature of all social life, including the conduct of research. Under this principle, a feminist methodology should look at women through a 'female prism' in research devoted to description, analysis, explanation and interpretation of the female world. This principle is also touched upon by Smith (1988) where she argues for locating the researcher as a gendered being as a way of attending to gender in the practice of research. In Smith's (1988) view, by acknowledging the common experiences between herself and the women subjects of her research the feminist researcher is able to bring women's realities into sharper focus. Focus on consciousness - raising is seen by Cook and Fonow (1990) as the second principle for feminist research. Stanley and Wise explain the concept as 'feminist scholars inhabit the world with a 'double vision of reality' which is part of their feminist consciousness. Through this double vision women's understandings of our lives are transformed so that we see, understand and feel them in a new and a different way at the same time that we see them in the old way enabling us to understand the seemingly endless contradictions present within life' (1983a :54). Challenging the norm of objectivity that assumes the subject and object of research can be separated and that personal and/or grounded experiences are unscientific; concern for ethical implications and recognition of exploitation of women as objects of knowledge; and emphasis on the empowerment of women and transformation of patriarchal and social institutions through research, are identified by Cook and Fonow (1990:72 -73) as

the third, fourth and fifth principles respectively, the application of which identifies a research practice as ‘feminist’.

Reflecting upon the roots of ethnography with a view to ascertaining whether it can be seen as a feminist research method, in the light of the above discussion then, ethnography has been used as one of the main technologies of the Enlightenment to generate classifications and knowledge about ‘others’ (Skeggs, 2001). There is nothing about ethnography that makes it ‘feminist’. In fact its history suggests otherwise. As Clifford (1986) points out it has been a method used for highly dubious ends i.e. ethnography has been used to spy for the US government and it is also known as a legitimating source of the colonial endeavours. Yet, it has also been used to provide important information about women’s lives. As suggested by Skeggs (2001) using ethnography in women’s studies has followed many different routes/roots as it had emerged from a variety of disciplines with different histories and trajectories. As such ‘feminist ethnography’ is seen as emerging out of debates between classical scholars and historians on the one hand and between anthropologists, Marxists and feminists on the other.

Elaborating on its broader areas of study, a first location for feminist ethnography is anthropology where ethnography is the main methodology. Sociology is a second location where ethnography is used to put women’s lives on the main agenda and to generate new theory more suited to exploring the complexities of gender, race and class. In a third location, education, feminist educational ethnographers have challenged

accepted theory and provided new knowledge for both education and girl's and women's lives. In a fourth location of cultural studies, feminists have generated a form of ethnography which pays close attention to experience in context. In all these locations and others feminist scholars have made use of ethnography in ingenious and innovative ways so that feminist principles are embedded into the research process, and are reflected in the research product - the ethnography. In fact it is the resourceful way in which feminist researchers capitalize on the features of ethnography to achieve their ends which makes it feminist. Finally as stated by Skeggs "feminists have tactically crafted an ethical and political stance out of feminism more generally and applied these to the research process, it is the way in which feminist political/ethical proscriptions are applied, that makes the research identifiably feminist" (2001: 429).

Accordingly, if ethnography is to be identified as a feminist research method it should facilitate the integration of feminist principles into its practice. Whether or not ethnography can be seen as facilitating such integration however, is subject to continuous debate and discussion as explained below.

Feminist scholars evince widespread disenchantment with the dualisms, abstractions, and detachment of positivism, rejecting the separations between subject and object, thought and feeling, knower and known and political and personal (Stacey, 1988: 21) and instead advocate an integrative, trans-disciplinary approach to knowledge. Barbara Du Bios in her essay advocating 'passionate scholarship' asserts that "the actual experience and language of women is the central agenda for feminist social science and scholarship"

(1983: 108). Stanley and Wise (1983b) argue that feminists tend to celebrate feeling, belief and experientially based knowledge which draw upon traditionally feminine capacities as intuition, empathy, and relationship. Based on such criteria, the ethnographic method appears to be ideally suited to feminist research. Indeed many feminist scholars (e.g. Duelli Klein, 1983; Reinharz, 1983; Stanley and Wise, 1983a, 1983b; Bell, 1993a, 1993b) advocate the view that ethnography is particularly appropriate to feminist research and argue that like feminism, ethnography emphasizes the experiential. They see its approach to knowledge as contextual and interpersonal and attentive to the concrete realm of everyday reality and human agency.

However, there is also concern among feminist scholars themselves about the probable limits of ethnography as a feminist method. For instance Judith Stacey (1988: 22) raises the possibility of a contradiction between feminist principles and ethnographic method when she states “I find myself wondering whether the appearance for greater respect for and equality with research subjects in the ethnographic approach marks a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation”. She discusses two major areas of contradiction, the first involving the ethnographic research process and the second involving its product. Stacey (1988:23) argues that:

...because ethnographic research depends upon human relationships, engagement, and attachment, it places research subjects at grave risk of manipulation and betrayal by the ethnographer... The inequality and potential treacherousness of the relationship is inescapable. So too does the exploitative aspect of ethnographic process seem unavoidable. The lives, loves, and tragedies that fieldwork informants share with a researcher are ultimately data, grist for the ethnographic mill.

The second major area of contradiction between feminist principles and ethnographic method is the dissonance between fieldwork practice and ethnographic product. According to Stacey, “It is the researcher who narrates, who authors’ the ethnography. Here too, therefore, elements of inequality, exploitation, and even betrayal are endemic to ethnography (1988: 23-24). Stacey, answering the question as first raised by her; ‘can there be a feminist ethnography’ concludes, “...while there cannot be a fully feminist ethnography, there can be ethnographies that are partially feminist accounts of culture enhanced by the application of feminist perspectives” (1988:26). She further advocates that feminist researchers should be vigorously self - aware and humble about the partiality of their ethnographic vision and its capacity to represent self and other.

Stacey’s thesis is countered by feminist writers (e.g. Patai, 1991; Wheatley, 1994; Enslin, 1994) who seem to feel that the moral dilemmas evoked by Stacey are not necessarily feminist, but more epistemological and ethical. It is from such a perspective that Patai replies to Stacey’s criticism of feminist ethnography saying ‘in an unethical world, we cannot do truly ethical research’ (1991:150). Similarly, Enslin argues “in a non feminist world, we cannot do truly feminist research” (1994: 545). In Enslin’s view, ‘in a world shaped by gross inequalities of gender, race, caste, class and geography, research done on the lesser privileged, by and for the ultimate benefit of the privileged, is simply not ethical. We gloss over this inequality by claiming to do research with our subjects. We pay lip service to collaboration and dialogue, and mask the very real differences among us and the ways that our research continues to buttress them’ (1994: 545).

Enslin (1994) argues it is naïve to believe that women writing and publishing women's words is in itself politically empowering. Rather, if feminism is more of a textual style than a political challenge, then it has little hopes of transforming the politics of research. The more critical political questions must be asked prior to the research and production of the text: Who speaks? Who writes? Who reads? Which 'women' is this research for? Which 'women' benefits from knowledge of women's words? Accordingly, she argues that if a feminist ethnography is possible, it would have to be written work reflecting a collective, dialectical process of building theory through struggles for change. The birth of such a work would mark not the salvation of ethnography through feminism, but rather its transformation into something else, something that is beyond writing (Enslin, 1994). 'If there could be a feminist ethnography, it would be a reflection of how the research and writing emerges from concrete engagements with and clarifications of struggles of women in all their diversity. And how the knowledge gained connects with women's struggles in the streets, farms, factories, forests, kitchens, bedrooms, hospitals, and prisons around the world' (Enslin, 1994:559). The concerns of Stacey (1988) and Enslin (1994) will be revisited and reflected upon in the light of my ethnographic experiences later in this chapter.

Diana Wolf (1996) draws attention to a yet another aspect of ethnographic inquiry, namely feminist dilemmas in fieldwork. In her view 'the most central dilemma for contemporary feminists in fieldwork, from which other contradictions are derived, is power and the unequal hierarchies or levels of control that are often maintained,

perpetuated, created and re-created during and after field research (Wolf, 1996). Power is discernible in three interrelated dimensions as:

...(1) power differences stemming from different positionalities of the researcher and the researched (race, class, nationality, life chances, urban-rural backgrounds); (2) power exerted during the research process, such as defining the research relationship, unequal exchange, and exploitation; and (3) power exerted during the post fieldwork period-writing and presenting (Wolf, 1996: 2).

Wolf further argues that ‘the first dimension of power difference cannot be altered if one is studying marginalized or poor people. While ‘first world women’ may experience multiple levels of difference when working in ‘third world’ countries’, postcolonial feminists working in their own countries experience their class and educational privilege, at the very least’ (1996:3). The second and third dimensions of power differences result from feminist researchers tending to maintain control over the research agenda, the research process, and their results. ‘By maintaining this control and distance, most feminist scholars end up benefiting the researcher more than those studied and furthering the gap between them. Such behaviour, argues Wolf, undercuts the goals of feminist research and reproduces aspects of mainstream research’ (1996:3). The relevance of such concerns to my own ethnographic work as a third world feminist researcher working in a third world/postcolonial setting will be dealt with in the final section of this chapter.

Kate McCoy (1988), in a paper on ethnographic drug research asks -‘am I just doing spy work’? Raising a point that is broadly applicable to all of the social sciences, McCoy argues that in spite of good intentions, ‘all research is to some degree surveillance’ (cited

in Lather, 2001:482). This argument interrupts the romance of empowerment that drives much current ethnography, obscuring the surveilling effects of the best researcher intentions. As feminist ethnographers (e.g. Stacey, 1988; Patai,1991; Enslin, 1994; Visweswaran, 1997) have pointed out, given the danger of research to the researched, ethnographic traditions of romantic aspirations about giving voice to the voiceless are much troubled in the face of manipulation, violence and betrayal inherent in ethnographic representation. Visweswaran (1997:614) raises suspicions of 'the dangerous ground between intimacy and betrayal' that characterizes feminist work intended to 'testify' and 'give voice'. In her ethnography of Indian women in the freedom movement against England, Visweswaran relates stories of the gaps and fissures, the blind spots of her romance of empowerment. Situating her practice within the loss of innocence of feminist methodology, she engages with the limits of representation and the weight of research as surveillance and normalization. Advising the workings of necessary failure versus the fiction of restoring lost voices, Visweswaran positions the feminist researcher as no longer the hero of her own story.

In summary, then, while there seems to be some consent among feminist scholars about the appropriateness of ethnography as a feminist research practice, there also seems to be concern about possible contradictions between ethnography and feminist research principles. Possibility of betrayal and exploitation of the informants' by the ethnographer, producing ethnographies that pay lip service to emancipation of participants while continuing to buttress their oppression, power differences that are set up and maintained throughout the research process and finally representational violence are thought of as

contravening feminist values in employing ethnography. In the final section of this chapter I will revisit and closely examine each of these concerns, in the light of my own ethnographic experiences - as a third world feminist researcher working with female workers within a third world/postcolonial setting.

Notwithstanding the concerns of feminist scholars about the appropriateness of ethnography for doing feminist research, it is chosen as the main methodological approach of my study. As such it is to explaining the reasons for selecting ethnography for my study that I now turn.

4.2 Why Ethnography? *Justifying the selection*

Mason (2002: 85) describes several significant reasons as to why a researcher might want to use ethnography as a method of data generation. Firstly the researcher might have an ontological perspective, which sees interactions, actions and behaviours and the way people interpret these and act on them as central. The researcher may be interested in a range of dimensions of the social world (not just written responses to a questionnaire, or verbal responses to an interview or written texts) including daily routines, conversations, language and rhetoric used, styles of behaviour (including non - verbal behaviour) and the active construction of documents and texts in certain settings. Therefore, observation, if not participant observation, facilitates the researcher to overcome the constraints and limits of questionnaires, interviews and so on while experiencing the real nature of 'Being' in her/his research setting. The use of ethnographic observations and interviewing for data generation within the contexts of the 'estate' and the 'factory' - the

research settings of my study - is based primarily on this ontological perspective. Within both these settings I saw behaviours, interactions and the way participants interpret and act on them as central. My interests lay not in obtaining answers to questionnaires, or even responses to structured interviews but rather to observing the daily routines, behaviour patterns, interactions and conversations of the participants' working and living within these settings.

Secondly, a researcher might decide to use the ethnographic method, if she or he has an epistemological position which suggests that knowledge or evidence of the social world can be generated by observing or participating in or experiencing 'real life' settings, interactive situations and so on because not all knowledge is articulable, recountable or constructible in an interview. This position is based on the premise that these kinds of settings, situations and interactions reveal data in multidimensional ways. The researcher can be a 'knower' in these circumstances because of shared experiences, participation or by developing empathy with the researched. They know what the experiences of the social setting feel like, and in that sense they are epistemologically privileged (Mason, 2002: 85). Thus, the ethnographic method emphasises the fact that reality is socially constructed and indeed it facilitates the researcher to explore and understand multiple realities in her/his research setting.

The use of an ethnographic approach to generate data for my study draws on Mason's argument as stated above. Accordingly, use of ethnographic observations and interviewing is firmly grounded in the epistemological position that knowledge can be

generated by experiencing ‘real-life’ settings and interactive situations. It is also believed that such experiencing allows the generation of multidimensional data on social interactions in specific contexts as it occurs rather than relying only on people’s retrospective accounts, and on their ability to verbalize and reconstruct a version of interactions or settings (Mason, 2002).

For instance, data obtained through observing and interacting with the participants of the research settings are thought to be richer, rounded and more specific than what could be ‘known’ by merely asking them to recount their experiences. Further, such encounters give an opportunity for the researcher to share experiences and develop empathy with the participants and also to explore and understand multiple realities in the settings. However such intimacy, engagement and attachment with the participants while enabling an ‘epistemological privilege’ on one hand also opens up the possibility of betrayal and exploitation of the participants’ on the other (e.g. Stacey 1988; Enslin, 1994), thereby situating the ethnographer in a state of dilemma. This is an inherent limitation of ethnographic fieldwork that needs to be acknowledged and dealt with empathy and insight by the researcher.

Mason (2002:86) highlights another reason for selecting ethnographic observation when she states “choosing to use observational methods usually coincides with the view that social explanations and arguments require depth, complexity, roundness and multidimensionality in data rather than surface analysis of broad patterns, or direct comparison of interviewee responses to a standardized set of questions”. In using this

method the researcher may claim that the data were situationally occurring, rather than clearly artificially manufactured. Accordingly, it is argued that experiencing the daily routines and interacting with the participants who live and work within these settings enables generation of rich, complex, in-depth and multifaceted data that are more appropriate for answering the research questions, than data that might be ‘artificially’ made up by comparing the responses to a standardized questionnaire distributed among participants.

Finally, in selecting ethnographic method researchers are likely to conceptualize themselves as active and reflective in the research process. Thus, users of ethnography are said to write themselves into their field notes and into their analysis. In this sense researchers should be careful not to under - estimate the challenges of analyzing their own role in the research process, neither should they over - estimate their capacity to empathize with or ‘know’ the other simply because they have been in a shared setting.

This is a challenge or yet another dilemma faced by researchers in employing ethnography from a feminist perspective. On the one hand we should strive to understand the implications of our own involvement in the research process. On the other hand, we should also be mindful of the limitations of being able to ‘know’ the ‘other’ simply because of sharing the same setting for a short span of time. One way of dealing with the first issue is, as far as possible, to acknowledge the implications of our own presence within the ‘process’ in writing up the ethnography. The second, which relates to ‘ethnographic representation’, should be dealt with in the light of ethical political

considerations specific to feminist research. Simply, the fact that ethnography even at its most robust allows only a ‘partial representation’ should not deter feminist researchers from striving to understand the lived realities of women’s lives through this methodology. The solution is not to abandon ethnography as a method of feminist research but to commit to refining and fine-tuning it to suit the specific circumstances of the settings under study, enabling the generation of the closest possible insights about women’s lives within these settings. Again this is an issue that warrants further explanation in the light of actual ethnographic experiences; a task I will undertake in the forthcoming section on methodological reflections.

4.3. Ethnography: *settings and strategies*

Writers on ethnography express diverse views on the issue of ‘what is ethnographic fieldwork’? Reinharz (1992) views ‘contemporary ethnographic fieldwork as multi faceted including participation, observation, interviewing and archival analysis’. Coffey (1991) presenting a more reflective account says, ethnographic fieldwork ‘is personal, emotional and identity work’. She further argues that ‘all fieldwork can be conceptualized in terms of the body...We cannot divorce our scholarly endeavours from the bodily reality of being in the field’ (1999:1). Together with the social, emotional and bodily dynamics as mentioned above, the intellectual issues involved in generating data through ethnographic fieldwork present a major challenge to the ethnographer. In the face of such challenge, a framework developed by Mason (2002) where she identifies several clusters of questions, each woven around an important aspect of fieldwork, becomes an effective methodological tool to be used in designing and engaging in ethnographic

fieldwork. The clusters of questions woven around finding the research setting(s), generating knowledge and significance of the setting(s), directing the ethnographic gaze, getting in and getting by, identity, relationships, informed consent and turning observations into data/writing field notes are drawn upon throughout this section (Mason, 2002). These themes are used firstly to explain how fieldwork was actually carried out as stated below and secondly to reflect upon ethnographic experiences.

Finding the research setting (s); in finding the research setting(s) within which to carry out fieldwork the ethnographer should consider where the phenomenon in which s/he is interested is located in time, space and place. The issue of how immersion in a particular setting shape what the ethnographer ‘sees’ or ‘does not see’ should also be duly considered. As stated by Atkinson *et al.* (2001: 5) “Ethnographic fieldwork and the disciplinary commitments that inform it, construct the objects of research as well as providing ways of exploring them”. Simply, how, where and in what ways we look will shape what we see. Thus the choice of setting(s) is not simply a practical matter, but a highly intellectual one, which express core elements of the researcher’s ontology and epistemology (Mason, 2002).

Ceylonita estate, the first site within which fieldwork of this research was carried out was a state owned plantation located in the district of *Nuwara Eliya*¹². Identified as the heart of the plantation industry, *Nuwara Eliya* is home to the highest numbers of estate

¹² *Nuwara Eliya* is one of the three Administrative Districts belonging to the Central Province. Sri Lanka is divided into nine Provinces; each Province consists of several Districts amounting to a total of 25 Districts in all.

workers in the country¹³. Thus, an estate located in its midst was thought to be reflective of the features specific to the plantation industry as well as to be adequately representative of the characteristics unique to its workforce. Moreover, plantations in this part of the Island identified as the ‘up country’ have resident workforces consisting of only workers of Indian origin¹⁴. Having first been brought to the Island by its colonial rulers their origins are closely linked with the country’s colonial heritage. As this study sought to explore the enduring effects of colonial power relations on the plantation labour force, the location of *Ceylonita* was ideally suited for its purpose. Further, *Ceylonita* was a large scale plantation consisting of some 200 hectares of land and 505 families, most of whom make a living as waged labourers in the estate. Out of a total resident population of 2062, 1044 were female, who became the focus of this study¹⁵. Finally, I was able to obtain permission to enter the estate, to live within its boundaries and to interact with members of its work force without any limits or restrictions. All these factors contributed towards making *Ceylonita* an appropriate setting within which to carry out ethnographic fieldwork.

SriKnit Garments, an apparel factory situated within the *Katunayake* Free Trade Zone was selected as the second site for this study. *SriKnit* was one of three factories owned by

¹³ The largest number of estates and consequently the highest number of estate workers are concentrated in *Nuwara Eliya*. Due to climatic conditions the tea plant grows best in the ‘up-country’ or in the central hills of the island.

¹⁴ Due to historical reasons agricultural workers of traditional Sinhalese villages surrounding the ‘up-country’ tea estates had been reluctant to work as labourers in colonial tea plantations. Thus, estate work forces of these estates were made up of immigrant workers. This situation had not changed and even today the workforces of these estates are predominantly *Tamil*. This is different from what is practiced in ‘low country’ estates (estates in the lower elevation areas) which employ both Sinhalese and Tamil workers. However, these estates are smaller in size and quality of tea produced is different from that of ‘up-country’ tea.

¹⁵ Monthly Family Health Returns from Estates, July 2008.

a large multinational corporation which had been in operation in the ‘zone’ almost since its inception in 1979. Accordingly, it had a long standing reputation as one of the oldest and most well established industrial units in the zone. I was able to successfully negotiate access to *SriKnit* which had a work force of 1048, 90 percent of whom were female workers. Similar to that of *Ceylonita* estate here again it was these female workers who became the focus of the research. In the face of extremely restrictive access policies adhered to by all the companies operating within the zone, the ability to negotiate access was one of the main considerations in selecting *SriKnit* as the second ethnographic site. However, its long history as a reputed manufacturing entity, large scale of operations and the work force that could be considered as representative of apparel factory workers in general were also central to the selection decision.

Since a considerable part of observing and interviewing of female workers was done in the vicinity of their living environments i.e. in boarding houses located outside of the factory premises, the actual ethnographic site in this case extended beyond the boundaries of the factory, drawing additional areas into its ethnographic fold. Sometimes it extended even as far as the traditional villages which were home to the female workers. Such inclusions link up with the following discussion on ‘generating knowledge and significance of the setting(s)’ where it is argued that not all data related to the research questions could be generated within the setting(s).

Generating knowledge and significance of the settings. Here, the issues likely to be faced by an ethnographer include: What does my research setting represent? What type of data

can it yield? What else do I need to know? Many researchers who use ethnographic methods do not view settings as naturally occurring data. Rather it may be argued that once an observer enters a setting, s/he becomes a part of that setting transforming the dynamics within them. Therefore, some of the significant developments in the thinking about reflectivity in research and the constructive nature of knowledge have resulted from the reflections of ethnographers (Mason, 2002). This understanding becomes a crucial one since it influences the ways in which the ethnographer observes as well as record such observations, how they are woven into an analysis and an argument and how the ethnographer is implicated within the process. In the case of this study my chosen role as ethnographer was to consciously look for and reflect upon data that would, upon analysis and argument help build up an understanding of the research questions.

In addition to going, being in and leaving the setting I was also engaged in some critical self-questioning about exactly how the setting produces data and if all the required data comes from the setting. The significance of such self-questioning is illustrated by Mason (2002:88) when she says “the way in which a researcher conceptualizes what a setting is and in particular what its data generating capabilities might be, has important ramifications for the nature of the knowledge they can argue to have produced”. Such conceptualization or self-questioning in relation to this study was achieved by considering how far the setting, as a physical and social place or a space, encapsulated everything that I was interested in finding out. Thus it was considered whether there were interactions, which occur ‘outside’ the setting, which may nevertheless influence what takes place inside it? For instance in the case of a *SriKnit* garments the female workers

who were the focus of observation within this setting were continually subjected to a conflicting set of interactions that occurred both inside and outside the setting i.e. their temporary boarding houses in the 'zone' as well as their homes in the remote villages. As such due consideration was given to the fact that the settings did not exist in a vacuum, but were part of a complex and dynamic socio-political process.

Such considerations made it apparent that all the data required to address the research questions were not available from within the chosen 'settings' and the settings couldn't be understood solely from the inside. This realization influenced me to stretch the limits of the selected sites by directing the 'my ethnographic gaze' beyond their physical boundaries.

Directing the ethnographic gaze; once the setting(s) were selected and their significance in generating knowledge carefully identified, another cluster of questions that needed to be addressed was in relation to directing the ethnographic gaze. In directing her/his gaze the ethnographer should consider the issues of: how data should be generated? Where do the data come from? What do they look like? What to look for and observe in the settings? Once within their selected settings ethnographers are generally interested in talk, behaviour, interactions, layouts and special elements, appearances, physicality/embodiment, procedures and so on (Mason, 2002). However, if s/he is to overcome being confused and unfocused the ethnographer needs to work out the issues of 'selectivity' and 'perspective'. This necessitates the ethnographer thinking through the process of linking up the research questions with what to look for and what to ask about

in the field. Even though generating ethnographic data is a fluid and an ongoing process a tentative plan of what to look for next, who to speak to next, and so on helps to avoid a lack of focus.

As previously explained *Ceylonita* estate at *Nuwara Eliya* was the first site within which field work was carried out. Once the initial decision of which estate to study was taken, it was necessary to identify units for analysis within the estate itself. Firstly, an overall understanding about the estates working patterns as an agricultural/industrial entity was sought. As households were seen as bringing together both the productive and reproductive aspects of women's labour, households or families in residence within the estate were considered as cases to be studied in relation to the research questions. A strategy of purposeful sampling was adopted in selecting the cases. Information rich cases were selected by talking with the estate midwife who had close knowledge of each of the families in residence. In selecting the sample of households to be studied, the life cycle of the female workers was also taken into consideration. Women and girls at different stages of their life cycles i.e. young girls, married women with young as well as grown up children, women who had no children of their own, mature women who were no longer of working age were all drawn into the sample. A major part of the field work consisted of observing female workers during their work day, and close and continuous intermingling and interactions with them during times after work. Even though centred around the households or cases included in the sample, fieldwork in the estate drew in a much wider and richer grouping of informants resulting from spontaneous opportunities

that sprang up in the field. It also included engaging in informal discussions with other members (e.g. estate workers other than female tea pluckers) of the estate community.

In observing female tea pluckers at work I was required to take up the role of passive observer due to two reasons. Firstly, plucking tea leaves was a skilled task which I was unable to perform and couldn't hope to master within a short period of time. Secondly, any attempt to interact with the workers while at work was not viewed favourably by the *Kanganys* (male supervisors of female tea pluckers) nor by the workers themselves since they worked to achieve a set target each day in terms of number of kilograms of tea leaves plucked.

However, there were many opportunities to interact and talk with the women workers while they walked down to their allotted slots in the field from their 'line rooms' in the mornings and returned in the afternoons, on their way to and from the crèches with their children, on their way to the factory to weigh and record their daily harvest and so on. There was also time to talk with and listen to them during times spend in their homes after work. As such I intermingled with them while they engaged in their daily domestic work of cleaning the house and garden, cooking, tending to their children, fetching firewood and water. The focus of all these activities was to get an insight into what the female workers thought and felt about their life and work in the estate, to hear their voice about the dual roles imposed upon their bodies as waged productive labour in the field and as unpaid reproductive labour in the household.

The way in which ‘ethnographic gaze was directed’ within the estate setting as described above, as well as later explanations of the same within the factory setting was inspired and guided by writings of feminist ethnographers’ (e.g. Mies, 1982; Ong, 1988; Abu-Lughod, 1990; Mankekar, 1993; Bell, 1993; Ganesh 1993; Schrijvers, 1993; Parameswaren, 2001; Salzinger, 2004) where they describe the methods used and constrained faced with similar situations. Significant among these being the work of Maria Mies (1982), *The Lace makers of Nasapur: Indian Housewives in the world Market*, where Mies explores ‘the roots of the relationship between capitalist development and patriarchal structures, and the effects of market - economic (capitalist) developments on poor rural women in the Third World’ (1982: 5). Carried out in two areas of the *Indian* state of *Andhra Pradesh* - among home workers around the small city of *Nasapur* and among rural workers in the *Nalgoda* district, the context of this study bears close resemblance to the social economic context of the present study. Mies, in one of her later writings on feminist methodology, describes the field work which helped generate data for *The Lace makers of Nasapur* as:

...we decided to share as far as possible, the living conditions of the rural women workers. We lived in these settlements,... we fetched water from the well as they did, cooked our food in the same way, slept on the clay ground like them....We also accompanied the women as they worked in the fields and took part in some of the work ourselves. In this way we established a relationship with them without which no research would have been possible... Alongside this direct participation in their lives we also carried out many discussions...” (1991: 71).

Mies (1991) emphasises the appropriateness of such methods to study her own and similar research problems when she says “through this participation in their lives, we learned more about the division of labour according to gender, more about working hours, wages, exploitation, patriarchal structures and the women’s forms of resistance than we would have had we followed the usual research methods ... it would never have been possible for us to gain these insights by using conventional research methods” (71-72).

Joke Schrijvers’s (1993) paper on ‘conceptualizing motherhood among Sri Lankan women’ added further methodological insights to ‘directing the ethnographic gaze’. Schrijvers’s detailed descriptions of fieldwork such as “...during our first weeks in the village, when I tried to get acquainted with the women, I had the greatest difficulty of meeting them at home as most of them worked in their *chenas* (fields) miles away from their homes. I chatted with the women in their kitchens in the early mornings when they prepared food to take to the field and I went with them on long walks to the fields from the village in the surrounding wood” (1993: 146), were especially helpful in dealing with similar situations as encountered in the field.

In addition to close interactions with female workers as described above, I also engaged in informal discussions with the estate superintendent, a technical officer and a *kangany* who were supervisors of female tea pluckers at various levels of the estate hierarchy. The estate midwife, crèche attendants, the estate medical practitioner, trade union and political activists and a religious leader, all of whom played powerful roles in the complex social web of estate life, completed the sample frame of this first ethnographic

site. Digital recording of some of the discussions and photography, both undertaken with the informed consent of the participants, facilitated the effort of data generation within the setting.

In addition to the above I also collected background information about the estate i.e. its history, ownership, present managers, number and composition of the workforce, demographic characteristics of the workforce, statistics about absenteeism and turnover of female workers, records of industrial unrest and disputes and so on. Data relating to the management of the work force was also researched paying special attention to policies governing female workers (i.e. hiring, salaries and wages, maternity leave and benefits, child care facilities).

SriKnit garment factory at *Katunayake* was the second ethnographic site selected for this research. Within this setting, the units of analysis were considered to be the boarding houses/rooms where the female workers resided. Here again the sampling strategy was one of purposeful sampling and was done with the help of a NGO activist who acted as a key informant. The sample or the cases to be studied were selected so as to include a cross section of workers who were at different stages of their work lives i.e. workers who had just come to the 'zone', who had worked as sewing machine operators for a few years, who were about to leave their jobs in the 'zone', and those who were no longer working in the 'zone' but still living in the boarding houses. In addition one worker who no longer worked in the 'zone' but who came to visit her friends was also included. Further, diverse

‘cases’ were also drawn into the sample by including workers who had young children and who were pregnant.

Similar to that of the estate, field activities took the form of observing female workers during their work day; close and continuous intermingling and interactions with workers during their non - working times, interviewing other members who make up the social fabric of these sites and gathering supplementary data from the sites.

Since permission to enter the shop floor was obtained under restrictive conditions time spent within this space was solely as a passive observer of the female sewing machine operators at work. Such passive observation of the shop floor focused on assessing the work environment both physical and emotional, observing the facial expressions and body movements of workers while they operated the sewing machines throughout the day, the level and intensity of supervision, verbal and non verbal behaviour of supervisors, including their tone of voice, choice of words and manner of addressing the workers and, workers’ interactions with each other. Observation within the premises also extended to the workers’ lunch and tea breaks, when they left the production floor and went to the canteens for short durations. Out of the shop floor, in canteens and wash rooms, I searched for evidence of the expression of feelings of workers (i.e. lyrics written on walls, newsletters or posters written by them), the way they interacted with other workers who were not from the shop floor and their mannerisms and behaviour patterns (i.e. did they appear tired and stressed or relaxed and energetic).

However, due to the impracticality of engaging in lengthy and drawn out conversations with workers while they were within the factory premises, such interactions were mainly carried out in the vicinity of the boarding houses. It was possible to meet and talk with the workers outside of their working hours in the factory, i.e. on their way to and from work, at the boarding houses after work while they engaged in cooking, cleaning and washing clothes and even while they were chatting with each other about the day's events. Weekends, especially Sundays when most of the workers did not go to the factories but spent their time in preparing daily meals, cleaning the rooms and washing clothes, shopping for essential items and so on provided a good opportunity to closely interact with them. Such times were made use of to observe their activities, listen to their interactions and conversations with each other and sometimes to ask questions. The focus of all activities within this setting was to gain an insight into how these workers viewed their productive role as waged labour in the factory and their reproductive role as mothers and housewives at home. How they viewed the conflicting demands on their labour, the reasons they attribute for such conflicts, and their solutions.

Further, I was able to gather up examples of workers' literature i.e. newspapers, collections of poems and essays and even personal correspondence. Such writings were powerful expressions of their thoughts and feelings, about life at the factory and the boarding house, their hopes for the future, their concerns and fears and finally their resistance to what they saw as the unfair use of their labour. This literature was a rich source of data which gave significant insight into their lives.

In addition I also interviewed the Group Human Resource Manager, Human Resource Development Manager, Personnel Manager, Production Manager, Company Nurse and Councillor, a Human Resource Executive, a Security Officer and a Canteen Keeper of *SriKnit* garments to obtain their views regarding the work life of female sewing machine operators. Data was also collected about the factory i.e. its history, ownership, present managers, number and composition of the workforce, demographic characteristics of the workforce, statistics about absenteeism and turnover of female workers and records of industrial unrest and disputes. Data relating to management policies and practices was also researched. Here emphasis was on both documented and undocumented data. Documented information was gathered by reading the mission statements, annual reports, and various types of documents circulated by the HRM department. In looking for undocumented data special attention was paid to policies governing female workers (hiring, salaries and wages, maternity leave and benefits, child care facilities, casual leave, grievance handling and counselling procedures, practices of conflict resolution, termination, and so on), that were actually practiced at *SriKnit*, but were not documented (unwritten practices).

Turning observations into data /writing field notes. This involves the issue of how to select from the material, information and impressions generated in the field. The ethnographer has to engage with the question of how diverse and experiential material can become the kind of data which can be used to construct convincing and meaningful arguments. In deciding what counts as data, the ethnographer has to answer the questions of what observations to record, how to record, and when and how often to record (Mason,

2002). Such decisions should be based on grounded critical judgments of what each can offer in relation to the research questions and their context.

Since writing field notes is perhaps the most significant activity in turning observations into data it is worth more elaboration at this point. According to Emerson *et al* (2001:353) “field notes are a form of representation, that is, a way of reducing just - observed events, persons and places to written accounts. And in reducing the welter and confusion of the social world to written words, field notes (re)constitute that world in preserved forms that can be reviewed, studied and thought about time and time again”. In the case of my study bulk of the field notes were written up at later points in time following observations. Here I decided to incorporate my own perceptions, interpretations and experiences into the field notes rather than keeping them separate from my observation of others. Detailed descriptions of what happened in the field, discussion of my own feelings and impressions and finally my own analytical ideas were integrated into the field notes. The reason for such inclusion was the belief that I was very much implicated in the task of generating data. Also such an effort was thought to be facilitative of a reflective and interpretive reading of data at a later stage.

The decision to integrate my own perceptions, experiences, feelings and impressions into the field notes was inspired by writings of feminist ethnographers’. For instance the practice of ‘ethnographers writing themselves into their field notes’ is noticeably evident in Joke Schrijvers’s (1993) paper *Motherhood experienced and conceptualized: changing images in Sri Lanka and the Netherlands*, where she draws on her diaries, letters and

interpretations to reflect on the dialects of her changing conceptualization of motherhood in *Sri Lanka* and the *Netherlands* over more than a decade. Schrijvers identifies the epistemological base of this practice as “...a dialectical approach considers the creation of knowledge as the non - replicable outcome of a socially and historically specific research process. Knowledge is a construct; it is created in the interaction between researchers and those whose ways of living they try to understand...” (1993: 143).

While field notes made up the major part of the data set of this study, interview transcripts, other documentary evidence (i.e. archival material, institutional records, workers’ newspapers, letters and poems and photographs taken in the field) also contributed towards further enriching the ethnographic data. As such it is to a discussion of how this data set was analysed that this chapter now turns.

4.4 Ethnography: a ‘narrative’ approach to analysis

Over the recent past social scientists (e.g. Polkinghorne, 1995; Gubrium and Holstein, 1999; Tedlock, 2000; Cortazzi, 2001; Czarniawska, 2004; Bamberg, 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Riessman, 2008) have increasingly focused on the usefulness of ‘narratives’ for reporting and evaluating human experiences. Accordingly, the power of narratives as a tool in analysing ethnographic data has come to be strongly established in the literature. As suggested by Richardson (1990) a narrative mode is equally important to the organization of everyday life - in the form of mundane stories and accounts of personal experiences - as well as to the organization of ethnographic accounts themselves. Adams (1990) points out that the narrative mode is especially important to

the character of ethnographic inquiry since it furnishes meaning and reason to reported events through contextual and processual representations. In narrating events ethnographers can show how people act and react in particular social circumstances (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This approach allows ethnographers to “display the patterning of actions and interactions, its predictable routines and unpredictable... crisis... show the reader both the mundane and the exotic” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:199). Finally, the overall significance of the ethnography can be conveyed through its narrative structure for as Atkinson (1992) argues, “beyond the fragmentary narratives persons and circumstances are the meta - narratives that shape the ethnography overall” (13). Ethnographers can carry out their task of transforming material from ‘the field’ into ‘the text’ by constructing narratives of everyday life. For this ethnographers need to critically develop the craft of storytelling. By arming themselves with this powerful intellectual and aesthetic tool ethnographers can effectively engage with the task of *storing other people’s stories* (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

If we wish to understand the deepest and most universal of human experiences, if we wish our work to be faithful to the lived experiences of people ...or if we wish our privileges and skills to empower the people we study, than we should value the narrative (Richardson, 1990: 133-134).

4.4.1 Analysis of Narratives vs. Narrative Analysis

As discussed above there is an increasing interest in ‘narratives’ among ethnographers as a way of analysing ethnographic data. However, ‘narrative’ is employed by them to signify a variety of meanings. Such multiple uses have caused a certain amount of ambiguity over the term leading to a lack of clarity and precision in its use. Employment

of 'narratives' for the purpose of this thesis draws on Polkinghorne's views on the concept. Polkinghorne, (1995: 5) defines a 'narrative' as 'a type of discourse composition that draws together diverse events, happenings and actions of human lives into thematically unified processes'. Further, he identifies narrative configuration as 'a process by which happenings are drawn together and integrated into a temporally organized whole'. Accordingly the term 'narratives' is used here to refer specifically to texts that are thematically organized around events and plots. The whole analytic endeavour therefore, is grounded in crafting such 'narratives' and emphasising its reference to a specific kind of prose text - the story - and to the particular kind of configuration that generates a story - emplotment - (Polkinghorne, 1995: 5).

Drawing upon Bruner's (1985) distinction between the paradigmatic and narrative mode of thought, Polkinghorne (1995) distinguishes between 'analysis of narratives' and 'narrative analysis. The former he describes as 'studies whose data consists of narratives or stories, but whose analysis produces paradigmatic typologies or categories' while the latter is seen as 'studies whose data consists of actions, events and happenings but whose analysis produces stories'. It is the second of these two approaches, namely narrative analysis, which was used in putting together the following ethnographic text where particular emphasis was placed on the use of emplotment and narrative configuration as primary analytical tools. Drawing on the writings of Polkinghorne (1995) and Ricoeur (1991) 'narrative' was thought of as a particular kind of discourse: the story. Further, as 'stories' are specially suited textual forms for expressing experiences of people as lived (Ricoeur, 1991), working with 'stories' was viewed as holding significant promise for

this particular ethnographic endeavour. 'Stories' are used in its general sense, to signify narratives that combine a succession of incidents into a unified episode. A storied narrative as described by Polkinghorne:

...is a textual form that preserves the complexity of human action, with its interrelationship of temporal sequence, human motivation, chance happenings and changing interpersonal and environmental contexts (1995:7).

The outcome of narrative analysis as attempted here was a story i.e. a historical account, a life story or a storied episode of a person's life. In this sense, my task in using narrative analysis in this research was to combine elements of data into a story that gave meaning to them thereby contributing towards reaching the final purpose or goal of the research. The analytical task undertaken was to 'develop or discover plots that displayed the interrelationships among elements of data as parts of an unfolding temporal development culminating in the denouement' (Polkinghorne, 1995: 15). Thus, it was attempted to combine elements of data gathered through ethnographic interviewing, observations, visuals and documents and work towards integrating and interpreting them through emplotted narratives. Further, this task was carried out in a way that revealed the uniqueness and particular complexities of each story while bringing out the common threads among them. Accordingly, narrative analysis was a way of synthesising data rather than separating them into constituent parts. The term 'analysis' was used to refer to the configuration of data into a coherent whole, the final outcome of which as pointed out by Polkinghorne being:

...the storied production ...that is the retrospective or narrative explanation of the happenings that is the topic of the inquiry. ...The plausibility of the produced story is in its clarification of the uncertainty implied in the research question... (1995:19).

Narrative analysis as used for the purpose of my ethnographic study is a way of weaving together elements of data to form coherent wholes or 'stories', rather than separating them into constituent parts. Analysis is shaped in such a way so as to shed light on the uncertainty implied in the research questions through such storied productions. In so doing, this thesis moves away from the popular analytical tradition of 'separation and fragmentation' of data towards a way of bringing together and synthesizing data to form coherent wholes. This approach is based on a belief, as advocated by Mauthner and Daucet, (2003) among others, 'that the researcher, the method and the data are not separate entities but reflexively interdependent and interconnected'. As such, analysis, is not seen here as 'as a series of neutral, mechanical and decontextualized procedures that are applied to the data and that take place in a social vacuum' (Mauthner and Daucet, 2003: 415). Rather, this work acknowledges the role played by the researcher as an 'embodied', subjective and situated person who makes 'choices' (i.e. how to interpret the voices of participants, which transcript extract to present as evidence and so on), and who works within specific interpersonal, social and institutional spaces which in turn influence these choices.

As such, 'knowing' about the lives of estate and factory workers - marginalized women of the third world - as attempted through this thesis, takes on a position of 'embodied subjectivity - knowledge as thoroughly located in our embodied selves, as against objectified disembodiment', as argued by Dale (2001: 58). As Dale further points out, seeing 'knowledge as standing apart from the (embodied) person who knows' (2001:58), and believing that it is only by objectifying, fragmenting, and splitting into its constituent

parts that we can hope to understand something tends to 'replicate the dominant and marginalize the different' in knowledge creation (2001: 26-27). 'Women and people of colour' clearly fall within such marginalized spheres, and knowledge about them continues to remain buried in the backgrounds; away from the dominant discourses. If so, adherence to an objectified, disembodied approach would only lead to continuous marginalization of 'women and people of colour' in the realm of 'knowledge'. It is in the light of such thinking, that my study which seeks to explore the multiple interactions of women's productive and reproductive labour within a third world/postcolonial setting, moves away from an objectified, fragmented approach towards a subjective, embodied way of 'knowing'. Such an approach is thought to be the most appropriate in reaching the ultimate aim of this research, for we cannot hope to 'know' about the 'marginalized' by marginalizing them further.

Indeed it is 'marginalized feminists and scholars of colour' who have made the most momentous contributions towards establishing ethnography as a personal, confessional and reflexive 'way of knowing' (Foley, 2002:486). Feminist scholars of colour (e.g. Kondo 1990; Abu-Lughod, 1991; Behar, 1993, 1996,) among others, have unreservedly embedded authors' subjectivities, confessions, and reflections into their writings, greatly enriching the tradition of storytelling ethnography through their style. Perhaps this is a way of resisting a realm of knowledge that seems to value 'objectified disembodied' knowledge over 'subjective embodied' knowledge, thereby pushing the marginalized bodies of 'women and people of colour' away from its centre, further into the backgrounds (Dale, 2001). It is the writings of such scholars of colour that has given the

most powerful inspirations and insights in writing the ‘stories’ of *Lakshmini*, *Mary*, *Dishanthi* and *Dilrukshi* - stories of marginalized ‘women and girls’ of colour, as told by myself, a feminist ethnographer of colour. The endeavour of searching for and telling these stories resonates through Ruth Behar’s words, when she says:

I came to ethnography because I wanted to be a storyteller who told stories about real people in real places. I was seduced by the notion of fieldwork, the ideas of going some place to find a story I wasn’t looking for. ...the beauty and mystery of the ethnographer’s quest is to find the unexpected stories, the *stories that challenge our theories....stories we didn’t know we were looking for in the first place* [2003: 16, emphasis added].

Narrated throughout this ethnographic text are such stories; stories that are told with a ‘healthy dose of metaphor and irony’ (Foley, 2002:481) and embedded with the author’s subjectivities and reflections.

Examining the use of ‘reflexivity’ in ethnographic writing in the light of the above discussion, during the early years of its practice ethnographers’ tended to keep themselves - their feelings, emotions and thoughts - outside of the ethnographic text. In the rare instances when they were made explicit, it was in the form of separate confessional tales (e.g. Malinowski, 1967). However, over the recent past ethnographers’ have increasingly turned to including their own personal confessionals into their writings in the forms of auto/ethnographies or self stories (e.g. Ellis, 1995; Reed-Danahy, 1997). This practice has given rise to the importance of ‘reflexivity’ in ethnographic writing. The meanings (e.g. Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Callaway, 1992; Van Maanen, 1995; Hertz, 1997; Coffey, 1999; Davis, 1999; Foley, 2001; Plummer 2001), types (e.g. Denzin,

1997; Foley, 2001), styles (e.g. Marcus, 1998), strategies (e.g. Pillow, 2003) and even problematics (e.g. Snow and Morrill, 1995) of reflexivity is been widely debated by practitioners of social research. An in-depth discussion of this debate is beyond the scope of this work. However, a few of the definitions are drawn upon to arrive at an understanding of ‘reflexivity’ as used for the purpose of this study. As Charlotte Davis (1999:4) states, ‘reflexivity, broadly defined, means a turning back on oneself, a process of self reference. In the context of social research, reflexivity refers to the way in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research’. Plummer explains reflexivity as ‘a much greater social and self awareness of the whole process of knowledge creation; of the participants of the research along with the social spaces in which knowledge is produced, as well as a much fuller sense of the locations - personal, cultural, academic, historical - of the researcher’ (2001:208). As such, reflexivity for the purpose of this study is taken as a practice that contributes not only towards producing knowledge about the workings of the social world but also as offering insights into ‘how’ this knowledge was produced. However, as Grosz (1995: 13) points out ‘no matter how aware and reflexive we try to be, ‘the author’s intentions, emotions, psyche, and interiority are only partially accessible to the readers, in fact they may be only partially accessible to the author herself’. As such any attempts at writing reflexive accounts of research experiences are inevitably situated with these ‘limits of reflexivity’.

Having explained ‘how’ and ‘why’ narrative analysis is taken as the major analytical approach of this study I now turn to my journey of ‘storytelling’ ethnography, the first phase of which is a reflective account of ethnography as a feminist methodology as

practiced within a third world/postcolonial setting. While being firmly grounded in a belief of an embodied, reflective approach to knowledge, my reflexive accounts are also situated within possible 'limits of reflexivity'. The intentions and emotions which I claim to reflect upon may only be partially accessible even to my self. If so, they will inevitably only be partially accessible to the readers.

4.5 Women, Ethnography and the ‘Other’: a methodological reflection

As previously discussed in this chapter many writers (e.g. Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Hammersly, 1992; Van Maanen, 1995; Denzin, 1997; Visweswaren, 1997; Coffey, 1999; Tedlocke, 2000; Skeggs, 2001; Atkinson, 2000; Mason, 2002) have contributed extensively towards the debate centred on ethnography as a way of research. Embedded within this broader debate, are concerns raised by feminist ethnographers where they question the practice of ethnography in the light of feminist research principles (Stacey, 1988; Patai, 1991; Enslin, 1994, Visweswaran, 1997). Such critiques however, have left space for further deliberations on whether ethnographic practices indeed are paradoxical to feminist values in research. Furthermore, while a few writers claim familiarity with conditions outside of the ‘west’ (e.g. Enslin, 1994; Visweswaran, 1997), the majority of these debates and discussions fall outside the boundaries of the third world. Accordingly, they fail to fully reflect the context specific issues and concerns as experienced by researchers engaged in feminist ethnography in third world/postcolonial locations. In the following narration where I ‘reflect’ upon my own experiences of ethnographic fieldwork, I attempt to identify the extent to which existing methodological doctrines of ethnography embody the ethical political conditions as applies to third world/postcolonial locations such as mine. Instances where exclusions of such considerations required me to rethink and rework established methodological principles are also ‘reflected’ through my narration.

Reflexivity, as identified by Rosanna Hertz (1997: vii) “implies a shift in our understanding of data and its collection”. It is something that is achieved through internal

dialogue and constant and intensive scrutiny of ‘what is known’ and ‘how it is known’. Further, it involves having an ‘ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment’ (Hertz, 1997: viii). As identified by prominent ethnographers (e.g. Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Van Maanen, 1995) a reflective ethnographer does not simply report facts but actively constructs interpretations of her/his experience in the field. They also question how such interpretations came about. The outcome of such reflexivity is ‘reflexive knowledge’: insight on the workings of the social world *and* insight on how that knowledge came into being (Hertz, 1997). Accordingly, the following narration where I reflect upon my ethnographic experiences in a third world/postcolonial location is an attempt at creating ‘reflective knowledge’ about ‘what was known’ and more specifically ‘how it was known’ as happened within a particular ethical political milieu. Here my endeavour is inspired by Helen Callaway’s (1992:33) thoughts, where she says:

...reflexivity can be seen as opening the way to a more radical consciousness of self in facing the political dimensions of fieldwork and constructing knowledge ...it is a continuing mode of self - analysis and political awareness that takes into account the effects of a multitude of intersecting factors (i.e. gender, ethnicity, class) on ethnographer’s field interactions and textual strategies.

Jennifer Mason (2002) crafts her fourth cluster of questions on ethnographic design around the issue of ‘negotiating access’. Bryman and Bell (2003) identify a range of tactics that can be employed to gain access to a particular research setting; which include using friends, contacts, colleagues, and academics, getting help from a sponsor or gatekeeper and so on. Having diligently gone through some of this literature during the

preparation phase of my fieldwork, I had a meticulous plan on how I should go about the task of ‘gaining access to a research setting’. I intended to put this plan into action as soon as reaching Sri Lanka, my home country where fieldwork was to be carried out. However, I was soon to realize that ‘negotiating access’ doesn’t always work out in just the same way as prescribed in ‘methodology’ texts. Rather, as described below, I experienced, ‘negotiating access’ to occur in startlingly different ways and during the least expected moments. As part of my predetermined fieldwork plan, I had initiated contact with colleagues, relatives and friends with a view to gaining access to a plantation estate, which was to be my first research site. I did succeed in negotiating access to an estate through one such contact person. However, by the time I was ready to begin my field work, a few months later; I was told this particular estate was experiencing a situation of industrial unrest and possible strike action by unionized workers. Thus, management was reluctantly compelled to withdraw the permission to enter that they had granted me earlier. This left me in a somewhat difficult situation. With only a limited time during which to gather data, I needed to secure access to an estate as soon as possible.

My six year old son has two little girl friends; they live at the house adjoining ours, back in Sri Lanka. They have a habit of coming to visit us and forgetting to return home even after nightfall. One such night, a young girl whom I knew was the domestic help employed by these little girls’ mother came to our gate to remind them to go home. As she stood near the gate under the light of a nearby street lamp, I noticed the red *pottu*¹⁶

¹⁶ A decorative mark painted on the forehead.

she wore, an unmistakable indication of her ethnicity; this was a *Tami l*¹⁷ girl working as a domestic help in my neighbour's house. I asked her where she was from, and was told that she had been brought to the city from a far away plantation estate. Later, prompted by this encounter, I asked my neighbour and friend if she knew any one who worked in a plantation. She did know, for one of her husband's best friends was in charge of a state owned plantation at *Hewaheta*¹⁸, the *Ceylonita* estate. She promised to speak to this person, the Superintendent of the estate, about my research project. A few days later, one of her daughters came rushing in to tell me that *Nisal* uncle had come to visit them and their parents would like me to drop in for a chat. *Nasal*, who trusted his friends enough to accept their assurance about my trustworthiness, invited me to visit the estate and to do my fieldwork in any way I wanted. He even invited us, including my friend's family, to stay with him at the estate. I was amazed to realize that within minutes of meeting *Nisal I* had secured 'unconditional access' to a large state owned plantation estate situated in the Administrative District of *Nuwara Eliya*¹⁹, home to the largest number of estate workers in Sri Lanka²⁰ - one of whom had been bought to the city of *Colombo*²¹ to work as a domestic aid and whom I had marked out because of the red *pottu* on her forehead. She was called *Kumari* by her employers, which incidentally was not a *Tamil* name but a

¹⁷ An ethnic minority group making up approximately 18 % of the Sri Lankan population. (www.statistics.gov.lk/census2001/index.html).

¹⁸ *Hewaheta* is the name of a small town located in the Administrative District of *Nuwara Eliya*.

¹⁹ *Nuwara Eliya* is one of the three Administrative Districts belonging to the Central Province. Sri Lanka is divided into nine Provinces; each Province consists of several Districts amounting to a total of 25 Districts.

²⁰ The largest number of estates and consequently the highest number of estate workers are concentrated in *Nuwara Eliya*. Due to climatic conditions the tea plant grows best in the up-country or in the central hills of the island.

²¹ *Colombo* is the Commercial capital of Sri Lanka.

*Sinhalese*²² name she had picked up. *Kumari* returned to her home estate before I started my fieldwork. Before going, she came to tell me she was going home for a holiday and would bring me some ‘tea’ from the estate. She never returned to my neighbour’s house, and I never met her again. I learned she had been taken to work at another household by one of her male relatives who earned an income by taking her from house to house and collecting advance money at every place. I was to meet many other ‘women and girls’ like *Kumari* during the months to come and to learn their stories, as I engaged in my field work at the *Ceylonita* estate.

I reflect upon my experiences in ‘negotiating access’ in the light of methodological insights or ‘tales from the field’ as related by other feminist researchers where they tell us of their experiences in the field. As Wolf (1996) commenting on the gendered aspects of negotiating access says, ‘entering the field is always difficult and may pose particular challenges for women. In this context feminist researchers draw upon patriarchal relations, and even play upon their race, their class position, and their status as women, in a strategic manner, to gain access and acceptance in the field. Female researchers working in patriarchal societies (e.g. Abu-Lughod, 1990; Mankekar, 1993) have described having been introduced and gaining entry through ‘male privilege’. As Abu-Lughod (1990), an Arab-American Anthropologist, who researched Bedouin women, reveals, she was brought to the field by her father, who introduced her to and entrusted her into the care of a Bedouin patriarch. Such descriptions shed light on my experiences and remind us that gendered relations are indeed a lived and material part of ethnographic fieldwork. In seeking access to my second ethnographic site, an apparel factory, I was

²² *Sinhala* is the language spoken by Sinhala community, the majority ethnic group in Sri Lanka.

again compelled to adopt strategies somewhat similar to those described above. In this case as well, I relied upon ‘male privileges’ as identified by Abu-Lughod, (1990) and other feminist researchers. I have since considered why I was unable to negotiate access to either of these sites without having to rely upon such ‘male privilege’. One main reason for this dependence was, over the years after graduation, struggling to cope with the multiple roles of mother, housewife and female academic I had lost contact with most of my friends. I felt uncomfortable about asking them for assistance after neglecting them for so long. My husband on the other hand, had kept in touch with all his friends and it took him only a few minutes to contact one of them and negotiate access to *SriKnit* Garments, a large US based company operating in Sri Lanka. As identified by Diana Wolf (1996) all these are indeed ‘gendered aspects’ of ethnographic fieldwork. Even though I may be able to ‘methodologically’ position my access strategies alongside the writings of other feminist researchers, one question will always linger in my mind. This is a question I am unable to position, either ‘methodologically’, ‘ethically’ or in any other way. Have I been playing the role of an ‘opportunist’ in ‘negotiating access’ to my research settings? Finally I see this as a state of affairs that calls on feminist researchers to closely consider the implications of reliance on ‘male privilege’ for feminist research, on a much broader and level of analysis.

The final cluster of questions on ethnographic designing, as crafted by Mason (2002) focuses on ‘relationship’ work. Here the primary concern is on how to develop relationships in the research setting? How to gain acceptance? And so on? As I experienced, developing relationships in the field is something that happens naturally and

more often than not in unforeseen ways. As such, prescriptions telling us ‘what to do’ and ‘what not to do’ have little relevance once we are in the actual research setting. Relationships spring up and flourish, we gain acceptance, trust and friendship; not through any pre - determined plan, but as part of day to day living and interactions with people. My acquaintance with *Biso Menike*, the midwife of *Ceylonita* estate, as described below, is an example of how the least thought out meeting can turn out to be a most rewarding and enduring relationship.

On the very first day of my visit to *Ceylonita* estate I told *Nisal* I would like to spend the first few days of my stay getting myself familiarized with the surroundings. He agreed to this and promised to send some one to assist me; it was to be the estate midwife, who had over twenty years experience working in the estate. I was to meet her around 8.00 a.m. on a Sunday. Looking back at my stay at *Ceylonita* estate I now think of this meeting as a turning point in my entire fieldwork in the estate. Indeed, this woman, called *Nona* (madam) by the workers, proved to be my trusted friend and also my main contact person with the ‘women’ right throughout my work. I vividly recall the first time I saw her, slowly walking up the gravel path that ran alongside the tea bushes towards the bungalow. Her white uniform standing out in contrast to the lush green tea bushes from among which she emerged. She was in her mid fifties and had a kind motherly face, and I instantly knew I had found a friend in her. We had our first conversation standing in front of the bungalow - she declined my offer to come in and sit down. I sensed that the Superintendent’s bungalow was not a place that she would be comfortable in. So I agreed to talk with her outside, where it was still misty and cold with the sun yet to come out of

its hiding place in the far off mountains. She told me that *Mahattaya* (gentleman) (meaning *Nisal*) had called her the other night and asked her to help me - thus her prompt appearance, in her official uniform, no less, this Sunday morning. She had absolutely no problem with sacrificing her holiday for me and was smiling all the time we talked. I explained the purpose of my visit to her as carefully as I possibly could and together we thought out a tentative plan of where I should go, what I should see, with whom I should talk and so on during my stay at the estate.

We agreed that the four crèches situated in the four 'divisions' of the estate would be our first destinations. The entire estate which consisted of nearly 2000 acres of land and was home to some 500 families was divided into four divisions²³ for ease of administration. Each division had its own crèche with a crèche attendant and a helper. We also made a note to visit the pre-school run by a female teacher from the estate, the *Kovils*²⁴, the dispensary, the co-operative shop and the tea factory which more or less made up this closed enclave of the plantation kingdom. The estate school was closed for the August vacation and the teachers who were from nearby villages were away on holiday. So this was one place I missed seeing. I also had a mental list of the people I wanted to talk with including the superintendent, the two assistant superintendents, field officers, technical officers, supervisors (*kanganys*), medical officer, midwife, day care attendant(s), pre school teacher, trade union leader(s), religious leader(s) and so on. However, this list became merely a formality as I made it a point to talk with almost everybody I met in and

²³ As the top division-at the top end of the mountain range, upper division- which was next to that, middle division- at the mid lower level and finally the lower division.

²⁴ *Kovils* are places of religious worship.

around the estate, from the housekeeper (*Rajendra*), to the gardener (*Ganesh*) to the post man (*Murugaiya*). All these were in addition to my central and most important focus group: the women who worked as tea pluckers in the estate. Once I had explained my intention of including a cross section of the estate female population - to represent each stage of a 'estate women's' life cycle - in my sample, *Biso Menike* was able to suggest the households most likely to meet my requirement. She had an amazing memory and seemed to know 'almost everything' about the families who lived here. After all she had been living among them, visiting their houses daily, and assisting them at child birth and child rearing for over quarter of a century. At first I gasped at her knowledge, but soon started to retain and recall the names she uttered often. Some of these women were to become my friends, and will live in my memory long after I have finished writing my thesis.

As stated earlier, I had prepared vigorous plans and procedures on how to conduct my fieldwork before coming to the estate. Once I was in the field and specially after talking with *Biso Menike*, I reworked this designs to suit (what I thought) to be the ground realities. Both these sets of plans proved to be of considerable value to me in the field. However, I experienced another set of events and happenings; unplanned and unstructured, that I now perceive as even more useful than the planned, structured set. Meeting *Rajendra* on his way back from the boutique, talking with the group of women and men who gathered in front of *Sita Devi's* house, recording *Mary's* story at her brother's house, being invited by *Nisal* to watch the 'labour day', *Parameshwari* coming to sit beside me in the field; none of these happenings were part of a rigid design, but a

string of events occurring in the daily life patterns of women and men of this estate. As my analysis unfolds in the subsequent chapters, these spontaneous meetings and chance happenings are the ones that gave me access to ‘data’ that I now regard as most valuable and insightful for the purpose of my study.

Just as *Biso Menike* became my guardian angel during my stay at the estate, *Pramila*, a young mother who led a formidable Non Government Organization (NGO) within the Free Trade Zone (FTZ) in *Katunayake*, became my friend and informant within the factory setting. From the minute I was introduced to her, this time by a friend of my sister’s, I felt the warmth and kindness that was the very essence of this remarkable and courageous woman. *Pramila* took up my project as her own, and went out of her way to help me in every possible way. It was based on information given by her that I decided which boarding houses to visit, who would make the most suitable informants and so on. Not only did she give me invaluable insights and information about the lives of the ‘girls’, she introduced me to them as one of her friends. These introductions worked to breach any barriers that might otherwise have been created between the ‘girls’ and myself. Being a friend of *Pramila Akka* (sister) as the ‘girls’ fondly called her, was enough for them to accept me as a friend who would neither exploit them nor betray their trust. *Pramila* only asked one thing of me in return for everything she did, she made just one request, “...go back and write how my girls live.... what it is like, living inside these little concrete rooms and being worked to death inside the factories.... tell the people who buy the garments they sew, ... the suffering ‘my girls’ are going through...”. I promised her I would; I intend to keep my promise. In this aspiration, lies the ethical political

justification for striving to understand the ‘lived realities’ of their lives, as well as of the lives of ‘women and girls’ living and working in the plantation estate.

Mason (2002) identifies ‘identity’ as another cluster of questions, significant in ethnographic design. Here the focus is on what kind of identity, status or role to adopt? What impressions to create and so on. These questions are thought of as concerning the ‘ethnographic self’ (Coffey, 1999) to be negotiated and renegotiated during field work. Before commencing fieldwork I had selected the role of ‘confidante’ denoting a mature, attentive, impartial outsider (Bryman and Bell, 2003) as the ‘identity’ I wanted to adopt. However, at the time I was totally unaware of the influence that other actors in the field might have on negotiating my identity. I soon realized that this was indeed the case, for *Biso Menike* thought it her sacred duty to describe ‘who I was and what I was doing’ to the ‘women’ we met, and of course to every living soul we happened to meet around the estate. I had little choice but to let her do it her way, for the last thing I wanted to do was to offend this motherly, kind hearted woman. So, in a least anticipated way the task of negotiating my identity in the field was taken over by someone else. Sometimes I didn’t even catch some of the things she said, for the initial conversations were mostly in *Tamil*²⁵. The results however, were better than I anticipated. The women welcomed me into their modest homes and spoke to me about their lives; their fears and worries about the present and their dreams for the future, without any reservations or apprehensions. Thus, in spite of the multiple ethnic, cultural and language barriers, I experienced the women as willing to talk with me trustingly and wholeheartedly.

²⁵ *Tamil* is the language spoken by the Tamil community.

Negotiating identity within the factory setting took a somewhat different form. Here, as soon as the word 'research' was mentioned, the 'girls' identified me as an academic researching the lives of garment workers. One of them even asked me if I had met an USA based Sri Lankan scholar, researching the 'identity' of female garment workers in Sri Lanka. As far as these 'girls' were concerned, my 'identity' was already partly created, and I found myself having to step into a half way moulded model. As Wolf (1996:2) argues the type of 'identity' that was more or less enforced upon me, in this setting would lead to 'power differences' and to 'unequal hierarchies' that are created, maintained, and re-created during and after field work. Wolf identifies three levels of such differences as: power stemming from differences in race, class, nationality, life chances, urban-rural backgrounds, power exerted during the research process, and finally power exerted during writing and presenting (1996:2). According to Wolf 'the first level of power difference cannot be avoided if one is studying marginalized or poor people. She also states that while 'first world women' may experience multiple levels of difference when working in 'third world' countries', postcolonial feminists working in their own countries experience their class and educational privilege, at the very least' (1996:2). While agreeing with Wolf's identification of the junctures at which power differences are likely to arise, I fail to identify any material evidence for seeing such differences as insurmountable in so far as my experiences in the field are concerned. Rather, I experienced numerous instances where such 'power differences' were circumvented by 'women and girls' keen to relate the stories of their lives to an 'outsider' who was willing to listen. I attribute such evading of 'differences' partly to being accompanied by a person who was not just respected and trusted, but loved by the 'girls'

as an elder sister and partly to a socio-cultural heritage embedding values of friendliness and openness even with ‘outsiders’. As I sat on the bed inside *Dishanthi*’s tiny room with *Pramila*, talking with her while she cooked lunch only a few feet away; when *Dilrukshi* walked into the room and sat down in the small space between the two of us; when *Pramila* picked up and gently stroked her recently infected hand; there were certainly no insurmountable ‘power differences’ among us. Each of us was different, yet all of us were also similar in significant ways. There was an unspoken understanding; a common thread that bound us together as women workers of a third world/postcolonial location, each of us, in our own way, resisting the oppressive structures imposed upon our lives.

Furthermore, these events and happenings as I experienced fail to reinforce the views as expressed by Judith Stacey (1988:23) where questioning the feminist values embedded in ethnographic fieldwork she argues that ‘inequality and potential treacherousness of relationships (formed in the field) are inescapable’. I do not see my relationships with any of these ‘women and girls’ as exploitative, neither do I view the stories of their lives that they so willingly shared with me, merely as data or ‘grist for the ethnographic mill’. As far as I am concerned, there is an underlying purpose for striving to ‘listen to and ‘write’ their stories. As these ‘women and girls’ of the estate and the factory themselves told me, very few people want to listen to what ‘they’ have to tell about their lives. The way they ‘live and work’ is accepted as the way it ‘should’ be. Few if any, bother to question the status quo. To question would be controversial; for it is this feminized work force that energize the two most viable and valuable industry sectors of the country²⁶. If few want

²⁶ Garments and Tea bring in the highest amount of export earnings to the country. Both industries depend on a heavily feminized (and underpaid) labour force.

to listen to them, fewer still want to write about them. The socio - political milieu in which such writing takes place could easily make it counter productive for the writer²⁷. Within these contextual peculiarities, my interactions or relationships with these ‘women and girls’ fail to fit in with the descriptions of ‘exploitative’ and ‘treacherous’ as feared by some feminist writers themselves. The ‘girls’, who unlike the writers raising such concerns live within these settings, seem to be aware of these circumstances, for during the last few days of my stay with them, *Dishanthi* casually told me:

...I still can’t understand why you choose to come and talk with us...after all, very few people even like to visit the areas where we live, ...let alone talk with us. Either they are afraid or they just don’t bother. ...after all, they think of us only as ‘stupid garment girls’.

The scorn in her voice was evident when she told me this. ‘Stupid’ is the last word I would use to describe *Dishanthi*; she is one of the most intelligent and courageous girls I have ever met in my life. She is a young girl who dares to resist an unimaginably powerful capitalist setup often at immense personal risk. I do not see listening to and writing about her ‘life and struggles’ as containing ‘elements of inequality, exploitation, and betrayal’ (Stacey, 1988), and I do not think she would either. In fact what most of these ‘girls’ expected of me was to write about them, because the world needed to know they existed, and more importantly ‘how’ they existed, in their tiny space in a distant third world location.

²⁷ Two decades ago, during the period 1989/90 (known as the era of terror) more than 60,000 young Sinhalese men and women were tortured and killed by state backed para-military forces in the South of Sri Lankan. They were activists of a leftist political party which spearheaded a brutal armed uprising aimed at overthrowing the democratically elected government and capturing state power. The insurgency was aborted, but the fear instilled in the minds of people, had left a void of dissident thinking and activism yet to be filled.

Having completed my field work with *Dishanthi* and the others, I had time to search for and read a book recently published in the USA and authored by the previously mentioned female Sri Lankan researcher. I had to borrow it from the British Library Service since it was too expensive to be purchased. The book was written on the creation of identity of female ‘garment’ workers in the specific social cultural context of Sri Lanka. As far as I could comprehend the author was buttressing rather than negating the ‘identity’ of ‘garment girls’ as inferior, through her writings, perhaps as a result of an ‘anthropological’ research agenda. I am not aware if *Dishanthi* or any other ‘girl’ working in a garment factory would read this book. Nor am I in a position to tell how they would perceive this ‘representation’ of them if they did read it. Perhaps they might think of the writings as ‘representative’ of their lives in the ‘zone’, or else they might think otherwise.

Whatever I write about these ‘girls’ could be subjected to a similar test. They do want me to write; that much was clear to me right through out my interactions with them. But how can I make sure that I am writing what ‘they’ want me to write? And not something ‘I’ want to write. How can I get a judgment on this? Who is capable of making such judgments? These are deeply problematic issues to which I do not have clear cut solutions. Indeed the best solution would be for the ‘girls’ to write about their own lives.

In fact, once I asked *Dishanthi* about this, and she replied:

...we do, when we can find a little time, and *Pramila Akka* [sister] prints our poems and essays in her paper. But we have to be very careful what we write...we have not forgotten about what happened to *Menike*.our paper is read only by the ‘girls’

and some of the managers [for the purpose of surveillance] ...for us, it is what we already know.

Menike's fate, which resulted from her writing a poem titled '*life*' describing her life in the 'zone' and working conditions of *SriKnit* garments, is well known within the industry. The poem, through an oversight, had been published with both her name and the name of the company included; within days she lost her job and had to return home. Even though she was later reinstated, the event had apparently left its mark. Even when they did write, the 'girls' were cautious about what was written. The situation in the estate, as I describe below, is drastically different from what I experienced in the 'zone'. During the second day of my visit to the estate, the women (and some men) were paid their monthly salaries. I happened to be inside the office when the women came into the office to be paid. There was an opened ink pad on the desk, one by one the women dipped their right hand thumb in the ink pad and pressed it on the pay sheet. They were legally certifying the receipt of payment of their wages. This done, they took the money in both hands and carefully tucked the notes inside their jackets.

As argued by some feminist theorists (e.g. Stacey, 1988; Visweswaran, 1997; Lather, 2001) ethnographic traditions of romantic aspirations about giving voice to the voiceless are much troubled in the face of the manipulation, violation and betrayal inherent in ethnographic representation. Visweswaran (1997:614) raises suspicions of 'the dangerous ground between intimacy and betrayal' that characterizes feminist work intended to 'testify' and 'give voice'. In her ethnography of Indian women in the freedom movement against England, she relates stories of the gaps and fissures, the blind spots of her romance of empowerment. Situating her practice within the loss of innocence of feminist

methodology, she engages with the limits of representation and the weight of research as surveillance. While agreeing with such concerns about the ‘limits of representation’, I nevertheless perceive a ‘need for representation’ that outweighs this concern, as far as the lives of the ‘women and girls’ of my research are concerned. I identify a gap in writings about them that applies to both settings but for somewhat different reasons. Perhaps this justifies my attempt to ‘represent’ them through my writing; how far I am able to do so, however, remain problematic. As I see, it is only these ‘women and girls’ themselves who would be qualified to make a final judgment of my endeavour. As I presume, any accusations of ‘violence in representation’ would be less harsh than an accusation of not writing at all; leaving them to live their lives as they always have, out of theoretical debates and discussions, out of history itself.

Whenever I met and talked with any one in the estate, I (or *Biso Menike* if she happened to be with me) made it a point to explain the purpose of my visit to them beforehand. The same is true for my interactions with ‘girls’ within the environs of their boarding houses in the ‘zone’. As such, in the majority of my fieldwork encounters I was following the principle of ‘informed consent’ - a salient feature of ethical fieldwork practice. However, there was one instance where I faced a dilemma of practice in this regard. Inside the premises of *SriKnit* garments I was ‘requested’ not to speak with any of the shop floor workers, so that I would not disturb them and disrupt the work flow. I agreed to this, indeed I had little option, if I wanted to visit the shop floor. So while I stood in my assigned corner among the rows of noisy sewing machines and silent sewing girls, observing them at work, I did not have their permission or ‘consent’ to do so. Neither did

I have any opportunity of obtaining their consent for I was watched over (under the pretence of assistance) by someone from management, every minute of the time I spent on the factory premises. Having concluded my field work, I was left with the issue of whether or not to include what I heard and saw while on the shop floor, in my writing. I have decided to include them, as this understanding of the conditions they worked under is crucial to their stories.

Mason (2002) in another cluster of questions on ethnographic fieldwork, woven around the theme of ‘getting in and getting by’, raises the issues of ‘what does access really mean’? As I experienced throughout my stay in the field, what is meant by ‘access’ differs from place to place and from situation to situation. Differences in ‘access’ in turn affects the nature, depth and quality of data generated. For instance even though I obtained ‘access’ to *SriKnit* garments, being shadowed around by *Channa* or someone else every minute of the day, prevented me from interacting with the ‘girls’ during their lunch and tea breaks, as I had originally intended to do. I was told I could talk with them during such ‘free’ times if I wished. But with my faithful escort standing by my side, I saw little sense in doing so. The hurried arrival of *Channa* during my one lone visit to the ‘workers canteen’ to invite me to have lunch at the ‘executive canteen’ on the other side of the premises was another instance where my attempts to interact with the ‘girls’ within their work setting was hampered in a subtle yet effective way. I view all such experiences as situations of ‘partial access’ as I was granted throughout my stay at *SriKnit* premises.

On the other hand the unrestricted access I was given within the ‘estate’ setting resulted in my gathering up a rich pool of data that was not initially planned. Neither *Nisal* nor anybody else placed any restrictions on my movements within the ‘estate’. I was free to go anywhere at anytime and talk with any one I wished. This resulted in my forming close acquaintances with the ‘women and girls’ which turned out to be rewarding ethnographic experiences offering valuable insights.

Moreover, access as given within the factory had an ‘artificial’ flavour to it which made me think I was seeing and hearing what ‘they’ wanted me to know and not what ‘I’ wanted to find out. This was especially evident during my interviews with *Aruni*, *Chandrika* and *Mahesha* - the company Counsellor , Nurse and HRD Manager - respectively, during which all of us followed the rules of ‘effective interviewing’ but unfortunately ended up with a set of surface and mostly superfluous data. *Mahesha*, being the HRD Manager and probably a skilled interviewer himself was extremely artful about the way in which he ‘let’ me interview him. He told me exactly what he wanted to and avoided all the questions he did not want to answer. He even helped me in taking notes and in using the digital recorder to record what he said. *Aruni* and *Chandika* who were again HRD staff had similar skills in being model interviewees; they gave away very little of their emotions and politely provided brief structured answers to the questions asked. However, in contrast to these somewhat frustrating experiences, *Jarnnarz*, the female personnel manager of *SriKnit* plant, told me a lot of interesting details about what she thought of the life of the ‘girls’ inside the factory as well as outside of it. She requested me to turn off the recorder while she talked; obviously I did not try to take

notes of any thing she said but just listened on, recording as far as possible her words in my memory.

Finally, reflecting upon my experiences in making field notes and recording my ethnographic interviews, I did carry my note book, recorder and camera everywhere with me. I even made an attempt to follow the rules and write down everything I heard and record every interview. But there were instances when I broke the rules and did none of these. I just listened to what the ‘women’ had to tell me; with the note book unopened, recorder switched off and camera inside my bag. There were other instances when I used all these techniques as in the case of weighing day at the upper division crèche. Here, I left the switched on recorder on a chair and took photographs of young mothers with their babies while talking with some of them. As I immersed myself deeper in fieldwork I increasingly found myself adapting to situations and using my ethnographic tools to suit each occasion, rather than adhering to a set of rigid rules.

As such, even though I had meticulously drafted schedules of how I should conduct my interviews with ‘women’ and lists of possible questions to ask them, I rarely, if at all followed them to the letter. In fact how I did conduct these ‘interviews’, which I prefer to call as informal meetings or gatherings, was to let them ‘evolve naturally’. I found that the ‘women’ had stories to tell me which were by far more insightful and relevant to my study than the questions I had prepared beforehand. So I let them relate their stories, in their own way, taking their own time. When I did intervene, it was to make them tell me a bit more about an issue I found particularly insightful. My meeting with *Krishna Devi*

at her 'line room' where I prevented *Biso Menike* from translating and asking any of 'my' questions from this elderly woman, but attentively listened to the powerful and painful narration of her past and present life in the estate, is an example of such methodological reworking. During many such instances I merely watched and listened; seeing the multiplicity of expressions appearing and disappearing on their faces, hearing the tones of resentment, detachment, hopefulness and eagerness in their voices as they told me their stories. Every thing I saw and heard made its own impression in my mind. At the end of my fieldwork, I had stacks of field notes, hours and hours of recordings and hundreds of photographs. But to me, most precious and powerful are the images of these 'women and girls' as they live in my memory; *Lakshmini's* tired face, the anger in *Rajeswari's* voice, the despair in *Krishna Devi's* words, power of *Dishanthi's* resistance and *Dilrukshi's* beautiful smile. It is these memories that inspire me to write the stories of their lives and to reflect upon the specific contexts within which their stories should be situated and read. I presume any 'methodological' protocols I might infringe in finding out and writing about their lives to be submerged in the ultimate ethical - political aim of my work, that is of telling the stories of a group of marginalized women workers of colour, by a feminist 'story teller' of colour. It is the telling of such stories that make up the next two chapters of this thesis.

Chapter 5: Analysis

Ceylonita Estate

In this chapter the ‘women and girls’ of *Ceylonita* estate tell me the stories of their lives; moving through the different stages of their life cycles, working and living within this closely knit plantation enclave. Beginning with the birth of *Madumani*’s baby daughter, these stories go on to describe the lives of ‘little girls’ like *Poornima* and *Radha* as they grow up in the estate. *Rani* and *Madhavi*, two ‘young girls’ born and grown up in the estate tell me of their dreams for the future. The daily lives of *Lakshmini* and *Sita Devi* ‘young mothers’ who work as ‘tea pluckers’ makes clear their struggle to combine the multiple roles of mother, housewife and waged worker. Though less burdened than their sisters, ‘middle aged’ women like *Rajeswari* and *Parameshwari* continue their struggle as estate workers and each woman has her own story to tell, about life in the estate. *Mary*’s tale is one that is different from other women, for she has no family to take care of; neither does she work as a ‘tea plucker’. Yet, she too has a story to tell me, a story that I narrate here. *Krishna Devi*, an ‘elderly women’ of over eighty years of age reminisce her memories giving me a picture of life in the estate in days by gone. She ends her story by telling me that ‘estate women’ compare their lives to the two leaves and the bud of a tea bush; the bud picturing the ‘virgin daughter’ the short leaf representing the ‘young woman’ and the mature coarse leaf being the ‘old woman’. Thus, it is by telling the story of a ‘bud’, or of a baby daughter born to an ‘estate mother’ that I start my narrative of ‘women and girls’ of *Ceylonita* estate.

5.1 Beginning of Life in the Estate: birth of a baby ‘girl’

Every time I switched on the tape recorder, her loud crying was the first sound I heard, bringing back vivid memories of what I had seen and heard at her house and incessantly reminding me that this was *her* story. It is also the story of her mother, aunt and grandmother whose lives are closely intertwined with hers. But it is not the story of many others, whose task is merely to help out in its narration. The crying came from *Madumani’s* baby daughter, born only a few days after I had arrived at the *Ceylonita* estate, she still had no name of her own. So she will only be known as the first born child of *Madumani*, a twenty year old woman who shared a house with her elder sister and mother in ‘line’²⁸ fifteen at the top division²⁹ of the estate. A few days ago *Biso Menike*, had casually told me she would be visiting the new baby girl and her mother on one of her routine visits. As *Madumani’s* family was one of the households I had chosen to be included in my sample I decided that accompanying her on this visit would give me a chance of getting to know the family. Thus my long, uphill walk with *Biso Menike* this cold and misty morning, for reaching the top division was no easy task. We had to walk for about one and a half hours along dusty, rugged pathways that led up the mountain through the never ending rows of tea bushes. The monotony of our journey was broken by the ‘gangs’³⁰ of women working in their respective ‘slots’³¹. Many of them took time

²⁸ A ‘line’ is the name given to a row of houses occupied by women and men who work as labourers in the estate. The houses have no numbers of their own and are generally identified by the line number.

²⁹ *Ceylonita* estate which consisted of nearly 2000 acres of land is divided into four divisions as top division-at the top end of the mountain range, upper division - which is next to that, middle division - at the mid lower level and finally the lower division bordering the main road, for ease of administration.

³⁰ The term is used in estate terminology to identify a group of workers, either women or men, working in the fields.

off from their ‘plucking’³² to greet us and sometimes even to exchange a few words. The tea bushes and ‘pluckers’ were left behind as we reached further up the mountain range. *Biso Menike* chose to break the silence that had fallen upon us by relating how *Madumani* had attended the maternity clinics³³, without fail and had carefully followed the advice given, right throughout her pregnancy. She had been asked to go to the teaching hospital in *Kandy*³⁴ for her confinement, as the doctor had foreseen some complications. She had done as she was told and had returned home with a healthy baby. *Biso Menike* told me this was different from the situation she had had to encounter when she first came here, nearly twenty five years ago. At that time pregnant mothers had been very reluctant to go to hospitals outside the estate. On rare occasions when they had gone, they had been humiliated by the hospital staff: attendants, nurses and even by other patients. “Some times they were told they were ‘smelly’ and were asked to stay away from the wards. Most of these women did not have things like new clothes for the baby, so they felt bad about going to hospital” related *Biso Menike*. She was happy about the way things have changed over time, but she felt there was a lot more to be done by way of educating ‘estate women’ about pregnancy, child birth and caring for their infants.

³¹ A slot is the area of land allocated for each gang of workers. The slots are numbered and are the means by which work is allocated among the labourers.

³² Picking of tea leaves is known as plucking in estate jargon. Accordingly workers who do this work are known as pluckers.

³³ Once in every month a group of nurses and a qualified doctor attached to the *Poramadulla* hospital (a government hospital situated nearest to the estate at a distance of some 10 km) visited the estate and held maternity clinics at the estate dispensary/medical centre.

³⁴ The teaching hospital of *Kandy* is a larger and a better equipped hospital some 50 km away.

As I had gathered by talking with her and observing her work, *Biso Menike's* official duties as the estate midwife were centred on 'telling' women how they should manage their reproductive abilities and maternal bodies. Her midwifery role was grounded in the belief that 'estate women' were unaware of their bodies³⁵, their sexuality and their reproductive capabilities. Hence they should be advised, guided and on some occasions even coerced into performing their childbearing activities within a set of reproductive policies specially formulated by estate administrators for the benefit of the women - as they were told - and more importantly for the benefit of the estates and their owners - as I argue. Here my analysis is inspired by the work of Silvia Federici, where, exploring the reproductive activities of Western European Women during the transition from feudalism to capitalism, she argues that while in the Middle Ages women had exercised undisputed control over the birthing process, "from now their wombs became public territory, controlled by men and the state, and procreation was directly placed at the service of capitalist accumulation" (2004:89). Federici draws a parallel between the destiny of West European women in the period of primitive accumulation and that of 'female slaves' in the American colonial plantations who, especially after the end of the slave trade, were forced by their masters to become 'breeders of new workers'. Federici acknowledges the fact that there are serious limitations in this comparison. However, in spite of these differences she also sees significant similarities in the intervention of the state in the supervision of sexuality, procreation and family life of women in both cases. Based on a similar line of argument I extend her analysis to cover the lives of a group of female workers of a third world/post colonial country. These women, even though not 'slaves'

³⁵ Here I use the term 'body' to include the aspects of maternity, childbirth and sexuality of a women's body. (Federici, 2004).

as appears in Federici's analysis, were thought of and treated in much the same way by their colonial and neo colonial 'masters', as I have repeatedly demonstrated through literature. Feminist historians writing about female plantation labour in Sri Lanka have clearly established that these workers own a legacy that is close to slavery. Thus the story of their lives warrants a place alongside the stories of 'female slaves' as narrated by Federici and other feminist writers.

To return to the events that make up their story, then, *Biso Menike* is happy about how things have changed from the early days when 'estate women' were besieged whenever they set foot outside the estate boundaries within which they were supposed to be born, live, give birth and die. Her descriptions of the unpleasant incidents that took place in hospitals are indications of ethnically based discrimination 'estate women' had to face not so long ago. As *Biso Menike* and even some elderly 'estate women' themselves told me, they were looked down on by members of the majority Sinhalese community because they were of a different ethnic origin, were more deprived than even the poorest of traditional Sinhalese villagers. These women were asked to keep away from the hospital wards, they were not taken into the labour rooms but had to give birth on hospital corridors. So they opted to have their children at home, in the dark and dingy line rooms which were the only spaces that could be called their own. But this was a far from desirable state of affairs, for it had its own administrative and political implications for the state, as I discuss below.

My visit to the top division to see *Madumani's* new born baby daughter, and the numerous conversations I had with *Biso Menike* on our long, endless journeys on foot, to visit the women at home and at work, which were mostly centred around her midwifery work, brought back memories of documentary evidence I had read off some old and faded reports last year. I had come across these Administrative Reports written by the administrators of the colonial era giving precise descriptions about the 'protection of women and children' of the plantation estates at the search room of the Sri Lanka National Archives. The information I saw there was dated as far back as the 1930s. As one such report, the Administrative report of 1932, commenting on the infant mortality rate on estates states, '... infant mortality rates on estates had always been higher than for other parts of the country. ...The total number of deaths of infants less than one year of age in 1932 was 4,526. The infant mortality was 37% of the total mortality of labourers, and was equivalent to a rate of 188 per 1,000 births registered'. In another of its reports the colonial administration uncovers the reason for such deaths stating that 'facilities offered in this direction are not taken advantage of due to the 'ignorance and superstition' of the average [estate] mother (SLNA/AR, 1937). According to the Administrative Report of 1940, in that year, out of a total of 14, 237 births [in estates] ...7, 515 took place in the line rooms themselves. Before looking at this statistical data, it is interesting to note the history of such records themselves, for they tell a story of their own. The history of demographic recording, which dates back to the 16th century, identifies it as a tool used by the state in its new found role as chief supervisor of the reproduction and disciplining of the workforce (Federici, 2004). Thus, demographic recording in the form of census - taking, recording of mortality, natality and marriage rates can all be seen as

part of an attempt at controlling social reproduction. The work of the administrators of the *Bureau de Pauvres* in Lyon, France in the 16th century being cited as an earliest example of such record keeping. Going back to the statistical data, with this view in mind, these reports suggest that seventy years ago more than half the births in estates took place in the line rooms themselves. 188 babies out of every 1,000 born died at infancy, due to the ‘ignorance’ of estate mothers’. This was a figure much higher than for the other parts of the country. *Biso Menike*’s midwifery role at the *Ceylonita* estate today can be seen as a result of concentrated efforts by the then colonial and later postcolonial governments to redress the political issue of higher than average infant and maternal death rates among ‘estate women’. This was an issue that negatively affected the production and reproduction activities of the estates, and thus caught the attention of the estate owners and the state. Further, this was an unacceptable state of affairs that had to be rectified, for ‘estate children’ had to live to become estate labourers and estate women had to live to work in the estates and give birth to more children. This is a point of view reflected in the Administrative Report of 1939 which states “with the reorganization of the estate health work as detailed earlier it is hoped that maternity and child welfare work on estates would be further developed and more frequent attention paid to the care of the mother and the infant on estates, thus making it possible to bring down estate maternal and infantile death rates” (31). Data relating to birth and death rates of children born to ‘estate mothers’ and probable causes of such deaths, preserved through this historical reporting system had clearly enabled the state to carry on its supervisory role as regulator of social reproduction, taking corrective measurements as and when required. Today, *Biso Menike* is carrying out her official duties, tirelessly walking among the steep

mountains of the *Ceylonita* estate as a result of such corrective action enforced by the state. Furthermore, *Madumani* and her new born daughter represent the present of the ‘women and children’ whom the state has undertaken to take care of, as indicated in these reports. Thus, I now return to their story.

By now we were near *Madumani*’s house, which was part of a ‘line’ but was renovated and was in much better shape than the previous ‘line rooms’, I had seen. There was a young woman washing some tiny baby shirts near the tap in front of the house, and *Biso Menike* introduced her to me as *Ambigeshwari*, *Madumani*’s elder sister who shared her house with her mother and sister. *Ambigeshwari* greeted and invited us into the house, but went on with her task of washing clothes. Once inside the house, *Biso Menike* went straight into the room where the new baby was being breast fed by her mother. I opted to wait outside, but was soon called in by her. She wanted me to have a look at the baby. So I went into the room and we had a look at the new baby, who was healthy and as pretty as a rose bud. *Biso Menike* had a host of questions to ask the baby’s mother and a great deal of advice to give: on how to feed the baby, how to put her to sleep, how to keep her clean and so on. While she stayed inside the room, instructing *Madumani* on how to hold and breast feed the baby in the correct way, I went outside to talk with *Ambigeshwari*, who was still near the tap. A little away from the house, sitting on a wooden bench and pensively staring down at the barren valley below her was an elderly woman. I later learned she was *Madumani*’s mother. I was intrigued by the fact that both *Madumani*’s sister and mother, who had given birth to and raised children of their own were outside the house while *Madumani* was being carefully instructed by *Biso Menike* on how to hold

and feed her baby. Their exclusion from the private sphere of *Madumani's* bedroom, to the water tap outside the house and to the furthest end of the garden, in spite of living as an extended family in this small house and obvious willingness to help out the new mother, as made evident by the washing of baby's clothes, was a mystery to me at first. I kept thinking of these scenes and the different parts as played by real life actresses of this 'drama' that was unfolding before my eyes, and of a probable explanation for them.

Federici (2004) explains the historical process through which women had lost the control they had exercised over procreation and had been reduced to a passive role in child delivery leading up to the entry of the male doctor into the delivery room. As Federici argues, in order to change the customary 'birthing process' which women had controlled "... the community of women that gathered around the bed of the future mother had to be first expelled from the delivery room, and midwives had to be placed under the surveillance of the doctor, or had to be recruited to police women" (2004: 89).

The elderly woman sitting all by herself at the furthest end of the small garden - the women who had given birth to and brought up *Madumani*, her sister and many other children as I later learned, had no part to play in the drama staged around the birth and infancy of her granddaughter. She had not been involved in her daughter's pregnancy and childbirth, closely supervised over by doctors and nurses, and had no say in bringing up her granddaughter, which was entirely under the supervision of the midwife. She was one of the 'ignorant and superstitious' women whose knowledge about life and giving life, learned over many long years of struggling to survive in these harsh conditions had no

value in the face of modern reproductive technologies. She was a woman who was been slowly stripped of her knowledge: of any experience and wisdom she may have gathered over the years, through her sheer struggle to live. She was a woman who had no power and therefore no part to play in the lives of her own daughter and granddaughter. *Biso Menike* on the other hand, as the officially appointed midwife, had every power: she could walk straight into *Madumani's* room and advice her on every aspect of giving and sustaining life. Her power was derived from none other than the state hierarchy itself. For as mentioned in the Administrative Report of 1932, it is the state that has decided that '...of the many reasons adduced in explanation of this phenomenon [the high rate of infant mortality in estates], the failure of estate mothers to observe hygienic methods of nursing infants is considered to be the main one. The large proportion of deaths from congenital debility and pre maturity indicate that [estate] mothers require more ante-natal care'. The Administrative Report of 1937 comments on action taken on the above issue saying 'there has been considerable progress in the recruitment of qualified midwives over the years'.

So now, some seventy years later, *Biso Menike* walks from house to house enlightening estate mothers on 'hygienic methods of nursing infants' - for they are still thought of as women unaware of the functioning of their own maternal bodies, women incapable of nursing and taking care of their own children. Thus, *Biso Menike* with all her empathy and motherly concern becomes no more than a disguised agent of a state enforced patriarchal power structure that bears down upon the lives of these women. It is a structure that deprives women of any knowledge they may possess about life, by

degrading and labelling them as ‘ignorant’ and ‘superstitious’. Also it is a structure that finally takes away from women the power to make decisions about their own bodies and lives. ‘Turning the female body into an instrument for the reproduction of labour and the expansion of the work - force, treated as a natural breeding machine, functioning according to rhythms outside of women’s control’ (Federici, 2004: 91).

The baby had gone to sleep by now and *Madumani* and *Biso Manike* came out to join our discussion. Their mother quietly came into the house and went to sit near the little girl sleeping inside the room; she had not spoken a word with any of us. Outside the room the conversation basically revolved around issues of child care, with *Biso Manike* chipping in words of advice from time to time. She praised *Madumani* for heeding her advice and going to the hospital in time, for hers had been a difficult pregnancy and confinement. *Biso Menike* could still recall clearly a similar case of pregnancy she had come across many years ago. Only that time it had ended in tragedy, as she told us:

I repeatedly advised her [the pregnant women] to go to the hospital, so did the doctor who came to conduct the clinics. But her elderly female relatives: her mother, mother in law and others pressurized her to give birth at home, saying it was the family custom. And both the mother and the baby lost their lives.

All the time we were having this discussion, *Madumani*’s mother was inside the room watching over the baby. With the baby fed and put to sleep and the grandmother standing guard over her, *Madumani* seemed to be quite relaxed as she sat by her sister in the small living room. So I casually asked her how it felt like to be a mother for the first time. She replied saying “I feel very happy... but I would have been happier if I had a son... my

husband wanted a son”. Her sister recalled how the birth of her first born child who was a boy had been celebrated by her family as well as her in-laws. “We even had a special pooja at the *kovil* ³⁶ to thank the gods”, she told us. Unlike in the earlier events, these opinions as expressed by *Madumani* and *Ambigeshwari* neither surprised nor mystified me. These were familiar, commonly heard and hurtful expressions often made by family members, irrespective of their race, class or gender at the birth of a girl child into a family. I have often heard my own mother recall with disgust a letter of sympathy she had received from her father - in- law, my paternal grandfather, at my own birth, who would have preferred a grandson instead of a granddaughter. Even as a little girl these words had made me feel unhappy. Many years later my mother-in-law’s subtle comments that my husband would love our child less if I gave birth to a girl, had made me burn with anger. As a little girl I had not understood the underlying causes of such sentiments, but now I wanted to understand, to probe into them more deeply. Thus my question to *Madumani*, “but why do you want a son, when you have such a lovely daughter”? Her answer as I quote below, gave me valuable insights into understanding what it meant to be a ‘woman’ in a plantation estate.

It’s not that I don’t love my daughter, but life here is much harder for women and girls than for men. When she grows up she will probably have to work as a tea plucker, working all day for a pittance. Or else she will have to work as a domestic servant, like my sister did. It’s not easy you know. Life becomes even harder as you grow older and have to get married and have children of your own. Nearly all women around here work for ten twelve hours everyday ...both in the field and doing all the housework. It’s much better to be born a man.

³⁶ A *Kovil* is a place of religious worship of the believers of Hinduism. A *Pooja* is an offering to the *Hindu* gods. *Pooja*’s are held for many reasons, one reason being to thank the gods for giving something of value.

All this time the baby girl who was the centre of this discussion slept on peacefully, blissfully unaware that her father and mother would have liked to have a son in her place, and the *sami* of the Hindu *kovil* which I had passed on my way to the top division would not be holding a *pooja* to thank the gods for her birth. Just a few days old, she was still oblivious of the fact that her birth was thought of as a burden, within this predominantly Hindu community which was to be her home. She was also unaware that she was not as welcome as a boy child, in spite of the fact that as a grown woman she would be expected to work as a labourer in the field while working as a mother and a housewife at home, reproducing and sustaining the future estate labour force. She would discover all these slowly, as she moves through the different stages of her life: from a tiny baby girl to a young girl, from a young woman to a wife and a mother, and a grandmother. Perhaps one day she might even decide to openly resist and struggle against these forces. But today her mother and aunt were dealing with them in quite a different way. Listening to *Madumani* and *Ambigeshwari*, it appeared as if these women themselves believed it was degrading to be born a woman, and preferred to give birth to sons. There were no arguments about inequality here, nor a trace of resistance. Rather it seemed as if the two sisters accepted the lower status accorded to women in this set-up which was their way of life. A set-up where, as argued by Walby (1990) and other feminist writers, their lives were lived amidst a web of patriarchal relations brought about by production and reproduction relations, state policies, cultural practices and religious beliefs. They did not resist any of these forces outwardly. They just thought it was better *not* to be born a woman and preferred to give birth to sons. By doing so, while appearing to accept and even buttress through their own words and actions the oppressive forces of patriarchy as

they played upon their lives, they were also expressing their frustration about the lives they were leading as ‘estate women’.

I wanted to continue my discussion with the two sisters along these thoughts, to probe deeper into their reasons for wishing *not* to be born women. This was but one small incident, and I felt sure they had more to tell about why they thought the way they did. However, I had no opportunity to continue the conversation just then as it was time for *Biso Menike* to get back to her office. So we took our leave of them, with a promise of another visit to see how the baby was getting on. We did visit them often afterwards, as *Biso Menike* left nothing to chance and kept a close eye on things to make sure her instructions were been strictly observed by *Madumani*. After several such visits, I got an opportunity to ask *Madumani*’s mother about her own experiences of child birth. By this time she had given up her seat in the garden and had made it a point to sit on the floor on the front door step, and listen to our conversations. She could understand Sinhala but could speak only in Tamil³⁷. Thus I had to solicit *Biso Menike*’s support in translating her answers. *Biso Menike*, forever eager to help me out in any way she could, was more than willing to translate. *Madumani*’s mother on the other hand was far from willing to talk, and had to be persuaded by her daughters, who by this time were on friendly terms with me. She didn’t have much to tell, all she told me was that she had given birth to eight children, and all of them had lived. She specifically wanted *Biso Menike* to tell me that she had delivered all of her children in the line room, with the help of her female

³⁷ Tamil is the language spoken by the community of Tamil people; while Sinhala is the language of the Sinhalese. Most women and men I met at the estate, with the exception of the very old could understand and speak Sinhala. I can neither understand nor speak Tamil. *Biso Menike* on the other hand is fluent in both languages and often helped me out.

relatives, who had taken up the role of midwife and later had assisted her in caring for the infants. She also made the following observation, which translated with obvious reluctance by an evidently unhappy *Biso Menike* read as:

I never went to hospitals to have my children....these hospitals, they are evil. ...full of evil people wearing white suits. I will never go there. I will just die here in my house.

It is a practice in Sri Lanka for all hospital staff: doctors (who put on a white coat over their normal dress), nurses, attendants and even midwives to wear white uniforms. White is also the colour associated with death, mourning and sadness in our culture. These were the white suits *Madumani's* mother was referring to, which she saw as evil. Unlike her young daughters, this elderly woman seemed to be openly resisting the state enforced forces of capitalist patriarchy encroaching upon their lives, working in the form of a midwife with angelic intentions, who even this very minute was standing in front of us in her immaculate white uniform.

With this vignette, I conclude the story surrounding the birth of *Madumani's* baby daughter. I will return to explore the lives of *Madumani* and *Ambigeshwari* further at a later stage. But for the moment it is the end of a story, which, as Mary O'Brian in *Politics of Reproduction* argues, is a story of a little girl who is born under pre - determined, regularized conditions where human reproduction is seen to be same as commodity production. Also it is a story where the social event of childbirth has been efficiently rationalized through the forces of state patriarchy (1981:10-11).

5.2 Dolls, Sisters, and Others: being a little ‘girl’ in the estate

Chandra Mohanty’s words, “it is especially on the bodies and lives of women and girls from the third world...that global capitalism writes its script” (2003:235), resonate through the lives of *Poornima*, *Radha* and other little girls living and growing up in *Ceylonita* estate. My narration of the stories of their young lives is inspired by Mohanty’s vision when she says, “It is by paying attention to and theorizing the experiences of these communities of women and girls that we demystify capitalism as a system and ...envision anti capitalist resistance” (2003:235).

It was a Monday morning, the first since I had arrived at the *Ceylonita* estate. *Siriyalatha*, who was in charge of the lower division crèche had returned to the estate after the weekend, and I was to go and visit her this morning. Since the crèche was situated some way off and I still didn’t know my way around the estate, *Biso Menike* was to accompany me there. We started our long walk to the crèche about half an hour before ‘plucking’ began at eight o’ clock. I could see that the whole estate which had taken on a rather lazy appearance yesterday was bustling with activity this Monday morning. We met workers on their way to the field, field officers³⁸ discussing the days’ ‘plucking’ targets, the *Kanganis*³⁹ keeping a watchful eye over the members of their ‘gangs’ who were already gathered in front of the factory, and the Assistant Superintendent (*Namal*) surveying the whole scenario riding around on his motorcycle. All of them made it a point to greet *Biso*

³⁸ Field officers were staff with technical knowledge about the plucking process. There were 4-5 such officers in charge of each division. Every morning they surveyed the tea bushes and determined the daily plucking targets. All the field officers I met at *Ceylonita* estate were men from the majority Sinhalese community.

³⁹ *Kanganys* were the male overseers of female tea pluckers. Each ‘gang’ of women were supervised over by a *Kangani*, who was from the same Tamil community.

Menike, who seemed to be extremely popular among everyone. She stopped to exchange a few words with every single one of them, introducing me to everyone in the process. This practice greatly facilitated my work later on, for I got to know almost everyone we met on our journeys together. As we were getting nearer to the crèche I could see many young women walking hurriedly in the same direction. All of them, in addition to the *kuude* (wicker basket) tied behind their backs, had one or more children with them. A few of the children were still infants, just a few months old, while the others were older. They all seemed to be less than five years old. Their mothers seemed to be in a great hurry, some even running to catch up with the others ahead of them. All of us, the women, *Biso Menike* and my self were getting nearer to the crèche by now, where we could see *Siriyalatha*, standing on the door step, greeting everyone with a smile. Dressed in an *ossari*, the traditional dress worn by Sinhalese women, she was a sight apart from the women who came in with their baskets and babies, in multicoloured *sarees* draped in the Indian style. The women, as soon as they entered the premises, left their children - the infants on the cots, the toddlers on the floor and the older children sometimes even outside in the small garden - and turned to go back. They had to report to muster⁴⁰ before eight o' clock. Women who got there late were not given work for the day, but were sent back home.

We entered the small building, which was built in a much better way than the line rooms. I was later told that various non government organizations (NGOs) had helped in putting up this small building. The children greeted *Biso Menike* in their own language, Tamil.

⁴⁰ The term used in the estate to denote commencement of plucking.

Once assured she had not come to give them any medicine or injections they soon settled back to their activities, most of them sitting in a bunch on mats laid out on the cement floor. A cursory glance told me that there were children who were from 3-4 months to 5-6 years old in the room. None of them seemed to need close looking after; they just stayed there, some crying, some playing and some just looking on. The single room was divided into three parts. One had the small desks and chairs for the bigger children to sit and work, again donations from NGOs. The other two parts consisted of small cots for the toddlers and *sarees*⁴¹ hanging down from the roof, where the infants were put to sleep. There was a kitchen which was used to cook meals for the children whose mothers forgot, or in some cases could not afford, to send a mid-day meal. I could also see a toilet with buckets of clean water inside. When I first saw *Krishna Devi* she was busy filling up these buckets with water brought from a tap by the roadside, outside the compound. I soon learned that *Krishna Devi* worked as a crèche assistant. She was called ‘*pulle amma*’ by everyone, *pulle* meaning child and *amma* meaning mother in Tamil. She was over eighty years of age and had worked as a tea plucker until she was too old to work in the field. She had come here to work because her son was unable to feed her with the money he earned as an estate worker. *Krishna Devi* seemed to be a great favourite with the children. A few of them were always hanging on to the faded and torn *sari* she wore. She told me that the money she earned was hardly enough to buy the basic food she needed to survive; she also told me it was better than not having anything at all. I return later to narrate *Krishna Devi*’s story with the aid of a recording I made of her life history. But for the moment my focus remains with the small girls and boys as they sat at their

⁴¹ A *sari* is a six yards long cloth which Sri Lankan women use to dress up, in both the traditional *Kandyan* (denoting up country) and Indian styles.

usual places at the crèche. This place seemed to be a second home to them, their home during the day time, until their mothers returned in the afternoons to take them back. By now I had taken note of the fact that there were more girls here than boys. *Siriyalatha* soon gave me the reasons for this in our lengthy discussion that followed.

I started off my conversation with *Siriyalatha* by asking her about herself. She was quick to tell me that like *Biso Menike*, she too she had the necessary educational background to secure this salaried government job she held. She was not married and therefore had no children of her own. However, from the beginning of my association with her I could see a sense of empathy in *Siriyalatha* towards these little children, who were under her care. Her words, “I have been here for nearly twenty years now. This place is like home to me and I love these children as if they were my own”, bears testimony to her attachment to the children. I asked her if she knew anything about the origin of crèches in estates. Her answer as I quote below sheds light on the history of crèches as relates to the colonial heritage of ‘Ceylon’:

I can’t give you dates and things, but the crèches have been in the estates for as long as any of us can remember. Probably they were here from the times of the white people...like you saw, they [the women] bring their children here in the morning and if you stay till afternoon you will see them coming to take them back. They [the women] stay at home for about three months after giving birth. After that they bring the children and we take care of them.

I did stay at the crèche until late afternoon and saw the mothers come in one by one to take their children home. Even though it was after work they still seemed to be in a hurry, but unlike in the morning they seemed to be weary to the point of exhaustion. Many, even

before looking at the children, who were evidently happy to see them back, went straight into the small kitchen to drink cup after cup of water, apparently kept ready for them by *Krishna Devi*. This done, they exchanged a few words with *Krishna Devi* in Tamil, picked up their children and were ready to leave.

Siriyalatha is right in her assertion about the crèches being in the estates from the times of ‘the white people’. The oldest record I could unearth at the archives where the term ‘crèche’ is mentioned is the Administrative Report of 1938, where it is stated that ‘in the 3 estate sections under inspection there were 64 estates which provided crèche facilities’. In each consecutive year after 1938 the reports make reference to the number of crèches in estates which steadily rises from 64 in 1938 up to a staggering 671 by the year 1945 (Administrative Reports from 1938 to 1945), a ten fold rise in less than 10 years. If we go by the assertion that ‘socialization of childcare’ together with the entry of women into the public industry is a step towards women’s emancipation this growth in the number of estate crèches should be seen as a positive sign. Accordingly these numbers should be read as an indication that woman in colonial ‘Ceylonese’ plantations were on their way to achieving ‘liberation’ through participation in industry with support from state sponsored socialisation of childcare. However, if such an assertion is indeed capable of explaining the daily lives of women as I saw and talked with in this locale remains yet to be explored, and becomes a task I will attempt throughout my narration.

5.2.1 *Poornima*

We were talking inside a small room which served as *Siriyalatha's* office. This was adjoining the larger children's room, and all the time we were talking, my eyes kept returning to the little figures sitting on the cold cement floor. One little girl in particular caught my attention for two reasons. She was not in a group but sat all by herself in a corner of the room. She held a small plastic doll in her hands. The doll was ragged and dirty and had only one arm, but it seemed to be very precious to the little girl. She held it close and even tried to put it to sleep on her lap. Also she was keeping very close watch over a cot near to where she was seated. Every time the child sleeping inside the cot made a sound the little girl got up and peeped inside the cot. Her peeping seemed to have a soothing effect on the child for she immediately stopped crying and there was peace in the room once more. This had been going on for quite some time now. *Siriyalatha* who had noticed my watching the girl offered an explanation. "These girls learn to take care of their sisters and brothers at a very early age. *Poornima* (the little girl with the doll) is only about four years old. Yet, she takes good care of her two year old sister. Her mother works as a tea plucker and has two more children. These girls also learn to do housework; they work with their mothers at home. Even girls as young as six, seven years can cook a meal. They help us a lot in the kitchen and in taking care of the younger children. It is a good thing for them to learn this work early. " But shouldn't they be at school? I knew this was the school vacation and some older children were also at the crèche, but *Siriyalatha* apparently was referring to a more general state of affairs. "Yes, some of them are of school going age, and are enrolled at the nearby estate school. ...but they don't go very regularly". Why not? I wanted to know. "There are many reasons. Some

are simple ones like not having white uniforms to wear. Most children have only one, so when it needs to be washed they stay at home, or come here instead. Also people here see no sense in educating their children ...especially girls, so they [the girls] only attend school one or two days a week. Some of them stop going [to school] altogether after a few years”, *Siriyalatha* told me placidly.



Sisters



The first of two photographs, both taken at the lower division crèche, shows a little girl clinging onto her sister, asking to be carried. In the second photograph the little girl is carried by her sister, another little girl.

Engels (1942), in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, asks how women can continue to do the work in the home and also work in production outside the home. Marx, in ascribing wages to the mother of the family raises the question of the direction of the household; “How will its internal economy be cared for? Who will look after the young children? Who will get ready the meals, do the washing and mending”? (1961:671). What Marx and Engels don’t seem to ask, however is, when a mother works for a wage, how much of the household duties will be taken over by the daughters or the young girls in the household. They seem not to have foreseen and therefore have excluded from their analysis the effects of this ‘spill-over’ phenomenon: young girls taking over part of the household responsibilities of their mothers who were working outside the home for a wage, on the working class family. The stories of *Poornima*, above and *Radha* as I narrate below, tells us how little girls growing up in the *Ceylonita* estate struggle to cope with the additional burdens on their lives. Burdens brought about as a result of their mothers taking up the dual roles of productive and reproductive labour, as well as by other socio-economic forces surrounding their young lives.

According to what *Siriyalatha* told me, the main reason why ‘estate girls’ dropped out of school at an early age, in addition to the obvious economic reasons, was because their parents saw no sense in educating their children, especially their daughters. Now this account differs significantly from what I learned by talking with *Rajendra*, who was the chief cook at the Superintendents’s bungalow. I see *Rajendra*’s story as significant for several reasons. Firstly, it told me why, (if they did at all) ‘estate parents’ thought it was of little or no use to educate their children. Secondly, while repeating *Siriyalatha*’s views

about severe economic hardships faced by 'estate parents' *Rajendra* also told me how families struggled to overcome these constraints. What he told me about his wife and daughter is an example of how parents tried to send their children to school and even to extra lessons, with the hope of securing a better future for them, than the one they were enduring at present. My meeting with *Rajendra* was not a planned one; he was not part of my original sample. I just happened to meet him on my way back from one of my journeys, and we fell in to a friendly conversation on our way. I already knew he was married and had two children of school going age. So I asked him for details about his family. As he told me, his main worry at the time was keeping his young daughter alone at home at night. His wife was away in *Colombo*, having gone to work as a 'domestic servant' in an affluent household. She got a good salary, much higher than what she could earn working in the estate, but the children missed her very much. They were alone in the line room even at night, as he had to sleep in the 'servants' quarters' in the 'bungalow' as was a requirement of his job. *Rajendra* told me he was considering getting his wife to return home once the month was up, but not before that, since they were counting on the money she earned to buy the school books the children needed for the new term. "Everything is so expensive; I can hardly buy them a pair of decent shoes to wear. But it is essential that they go to school properly and pass the exams if they are to get better jobs". *Rajendra* then told me that he had got the necessary educational qualifications to do a 'better' job than the one he did, as the Superintendent's chief cook, but the fact that he had been born in an estate always proved to be a barrier against him, however much he tried. He had applied for many government jobs for which he held suitable qualifications, but had always been turned down. He also told me that he

belonged to a better 'caste'⁴² than the workers who did field work and that his father and grandfather had all worked as 'cooks' and not as 'estate labourers'. During one of our friendly afternoon chats *Nisal*, the superintendent of the *Ceylonita* estate (jokingly) told us that both he and *Rajendra* (his cook) held the same educational credentials. Both of them had passed the GCE ordinary level examination. But unlike *Rajendra*, *Nisal* was from an upper class Sinhalese family, had attended an elite boys' school in *Colombo*, played rugby, spoke English and had the right social and political connections. Of course he did not tell us any of these, he was a very polite and altogether nice person, but they were facts all of us knew. As *Rajendra* came into the sitting room pushing the tea trolley, I wondered if in a few years time, his son, whom he had introduced to me that very afternoon, would be doing the same job as his father.

5.2.2 Radha

Soon after our conversation, *Rajendra* brought his daughter and son to be introduced to me. I had not asked him to do so; he did it on his own initiative. I gladly took this opportunity to talk with the children, as I had their father's full permission to do so. The little girl and boy sat at a table inside the kitchen, where their father was busy preparing the afternoon tea. They refused my invitation to go into the front garden, where there was a swing and a fish pond, but preferred to stay in the kitchen. Both children appeared to be neatly dressed in new clothes and carried some school books with them. They told me they were on their way to an additional after - school class to learn English. *Radha*, at ten

⁴² Even within this estate community there was a hierarchy of casts. The type of job a worker engaged in was closely linked to his or her caste.

years, was the elder of the two; thus did the most of the talking. She told me about her mother, who was working in a house in *Colombo*. “We feel very lonely without her, and want her to come home”. At this her brother nodded in agreement with *Radha*. I asked them who cooked for them and took care of them, I knew *Rajendra* hardly had time to visit them; he was busy cooking meals at the ‘bungalow’. “No one”, said the little girl, “I cook lunch after getting back from school. We eat what is left over for dinner and go to sleep”. “But our mother is coming back at the end of this month, after she gets her salary, and she is bringing me a toy car from a shop in *Colombo*”. *Radha*’s brother managed to tell me before it was time for them to leave, to attend an additional English class. *Rajendra* later told me he had to pay Rs.200 (approximately one pound) per month for the person who conducted these classes, a teacher from a nearby school. He used the money sent by his wife to do so.

As Mohanty (2003:234 -35) points out ‘women and girls are still 70 percent of the world’s poor ...they are the hardest hit by the effects of violence. Women do two - thirds of the world’s work and earn less than one - tenth of its income. It is then the lives, experiences, and struggles of girls and women, particularly third world girls and women, that demystify capitalism in its racial and sexual dimensions - and that provide ways for theorizing anti capitalist resistance’. The vignettes as I narrate below shed light on how girl’s and women’s lives are subject to poverty, violence and even abuse by the structures of the capitalist patriarchy within which they live. They also examine how women and girls make sense of and react to such forces as they play upon the lives they lead as part of an estate labour force.

The first of these is an incident I witnessed at the lower division crèche. Since the first day I visited the crèche many times. Now I went on my own. I had learned my way around the lower division. Each day I saw mothers, fathers and sometimes even other relatives leave the children at the crèche on their way to work. I watched the children play and sleep and cry - of course no one took much notice of their crying - at their caring place during the day. By now I was used to this routine, after all this was the way of life in the plantation. But a few incidents I witnessed will never leave my memory. Nor will the anger I felt ever die away or be forgotten. Once was when I saw these children having their mid day meal for the first time. All the children, other than the 3 -6 months old infants whose mothers came into breast feed them during the lunch break, were given something to eat around mid day. Their food was kept in a large wooden box, and around lunch time *Siriyalatha* took out these parcels and handed them around for the children to eat, sitting down on the mats with their backs to the wall as was their favourite posture during the day. They did not much care for the chairs and tables - there weren't enough chairs for everyone either. *Siriyalatha* invited me to have a look at the bits of lunch before she gave them to the kids - and what I saw brought tears to my eyes. Most had only a small piece of *roti* (made from flour and water) with a bit of curry (mostly lentil or a vegetable). Some children had rice with a single vegetable while a few of them had bought nothing to eat for the whole day. *Siriyalatha* told me she never let any of her children go home hungry but cooked something for them using the scarce rations she was given each month by the estate for her own use. Some days, if there was food donated by any of the NGOs which took an interest in the crèche, she had enough to go around. Some days she used her own money to buy something to cook. It was never anything

more than rice or *roti* with one curry, and these were children under five years of age. I was also told that many of the children who no longer attended the crèche but were of school going age, made it a point to visit the crèche around lunch time, after they had come back from school, in the hope of getting something to eat.

While expressing her concern about how things were, *Siriyalatha*, however put the blame on the mothers. She told me they were careless and lacked knowledge about the importance of proper nourishment for growing children. *Krishna Devi* however had other ideas. She did not utter a word of defiance in *Siriyalatha's* presence. But one day, after making certain her superior was not within ear shot; this elderly woman related to me and to *Biso Menike* who was visiting the crèche that day, what she thought were the reasons for the pathetic little lunches the children brought to the crèche:

Nona [Madam, meaning *Siriyalatha*] is a kind person, she is good to me and loves the children...but she doesn't understand...she is not one of us. She doesn't know what it is to feed a family of many children and sometimes elderly and sick people who can't work with what we earn as labourers. We know children have to be given good things to eat, but this is all we can manage with the little money we earn.

As far as *Krishna Devi* could remember things have always been the same for them. Recalling incidents of her own childhood, she explained to me her parents' relentless struggles to feed a family of six children; with the meagre wages they earned working in this same estate. She told me her mother was paid 42 cents daily for plucking tea leaves in those days, adding "my father earned a bit more, and even I [as a child] worked in the field... yet, all our earnings put together was only just enough to buy some food". *Krishan Devi* seemed to have an amazing memory, for I later checked her story against

the documentary data I had gathered. According to an Administrative Report which gave a break down of daily wages of estate labourers, in that year, in an up country estate, a male worker was paid 49 cents (daily) as against the daily wages of female workers and children, recorded as 39 cents and 29 cents respectively (1932:8). Historical evidence reaffirms *Krishna Devi's* reminiscences of entire families, including women and children working as labourers in estates. This was how work got done in the estates in the earlier days, during a time which *Krishna Devi* colourfully described as the 'days of the white masters'. It is not only *Krishna Devi's* recollections of family wages that are preserved in history. Her memories of how families lived from this wage are also documented in official reports. As one such report, namely the Sessional Paper XXXI of 1923, figures out, the typical consumption of food for a month by an average adult 'coolly' appears as follows:

Salt: 1 ¼ measures, Maldive fish: 1/2 lb., Dry fish: 1 lb., Dhall: 1 measure, Green peas: 1 measure, Dry chillies: ¾ lb., Tamarind: 1 ¼ lb., Red onions: 1 lb., Coriander: 1/4 measure, Mustard, Pepper etc. : 1 measure (5).

The report notes that this is excluding rice which is the staple food item. At the time of formulating this data the practice in the estates was to supply rice to the workers and to set off the price against their monthly wages. What strikes me as significant about this historical data is that when I looked into the small lunch packets of the little children at the lower division crèche what food they had inside appeared to be akin to the rations listed above. An indication, as also stated by *Krishna Devi*, that lives of estate workers had changed very little over the years.

Sessional Paper XXXI of 1923 further elaborates on the consumption patterns of estate labourer's or 'coolies' as the colonial officers writing these reports prefer to call them. As the report notes:

Meat and fish very rarely figure in their diets, and they consume very little milk... coolies very rarely seem to take plantains, they eat jack fruit when they receive it free from the estate, but they rarely if ever seem to buy any. On coconut estates, where a certain number of nuts often forms part of their monthly pay, they may take a few coconuts...some coolies, especially near towns, have acquired the habit of drinking tea, with which they probably take a little sugar. ...the average cooly does consume a lot of salt which he liberally puts into his 'cunjee' or rice water' (5).

Such descriptions of past life patterns of 'estate peoples' illuminates the present life struggles of *Poormina*, *Radha* and other little girls - the main characters of this story- in more ways than one. At a first glance, it gives us a historical explanation for the state of chronic malnutrition, commonly experienced by women and girls in the estates even today. At a broader level, this data provides us with a historical backdrop against which to read and understand the lives of the girls as I saw at the lower division crèche. Even though only a small group out of many others like them, these girls nevertheless paint a vivid picture of life, as lived by little girls growing up in an estate. It is only by visualizing their past and reflecting on their present in the light of that vision, that we can see their lives in its full complexity: placed as they are at the centre of an ongoing process of accumulation, affected by and in - turn affecting the imperialist forces of their past and capitalist patriarchal structures of their present.

5.2.3 A little girl: unnamed

The second incident I witnessed was at a workers meeting. A few days before I was to leave the estate, *Nisal* asked me if I would like to attend the ‘Labour Day’, a meeting he held with his ‘staff’ and workers to resolve labour problems, as an observer. It was to be held at 4.30 p.m. that Wednesday at his office. He didn’t mind me recording the proceedings either. So I went into his office around quarter past four on Wednesday. I had no idea what to expect, for this was an event, or rather an opportunity, I had not foreseen. *Nisal* was already seated at his place at the large, polished table, which held the name board - *Nisal Samaranayake, Superintendent, Ceylonita Estate* - he was flanked by the two Assistant Superintendents, *Namal* and *Rajaguru*, who sat on either side of him. In front of them occupying a row of seats put there for the meeting I could see the field officers of the four divisions, the welfare officer, the accountant and a few other members of the estate administrative staff. I was offered a seat near *Namal*, and I quietly sat down and looked around the room. In a corridor that was off to the right side of the room I could see a group of workers standing, some of them were clutching papers they had in their hands, and clearly all of them were anxious to be heard. *Nisal* called out “top division”, using a rough tone of voice he had adopted specially for the occasion. The field officer of the top division repeated the call, urging the workers from his division to come forward. A group of men and a woman moved from where they were standing and bundled together at the small window which opened into the room - now they were able to see and talk with the Superintendent. These top division workers were asked to tell of any problems they had, which had not been resolved at the lower levels. One man, whom I knew was from the union, began to speak in Sinhala. “Why don’t you allow them to

speak? “*Nisal* snapped at him. He was not in good terms with the union and accused them of misrepresenting the workers. “They can’t speak in Sinhala”. “That does not matter, I can understand Tamil”. At this point he himself, in Tamil, asked the group to speak up. I listened to and recorded all the solved, and unsolved issues discussed at this two and a half hours long meeting. One of these incidents I recall in precise detail:

It was when issues of the lower division were being discussed. A woman and a man around thirty to thirty five years of age came forward. They looked weary and the clothes they appeared in were faded and worn out. Stammering and anxious, they told *Nisal* that both of them were not given any work this month. The field officer in charge of the division confirmed their story, adding that it was not possible to find work for them at the moment, there were ‘no leaves’, was his explanation. He was instructed to include at least one of them in the ‘payroll’ as soon as the new leafing season started as was expected with the setting in of the monsoon rains next month. “*Mahattaya*, (Sir)” came very slowly from the woman, “we have no way to live till then”. We waited for *Nisal* to answer. “All right, I will find work for you in another estate, until our bushes have enough leaves, would you like to go?” “Yes, both of us will go”. “You have to get ready to go immediately. This estate is a long way from here and its *Mahattaya* (Superintendent) wants some people very quickly. If you delay he might find someone else”. By this time the couple was engaged in an earnest conversation, then, again they appealed to *Nisal* “*Mahattaya*, we have a daughter who is twelve years old; we can’t leave her on her own”.

“I don’t think you will be allowed to take her with you to the new place. You will have to find a way. I can’t solve all your problems for you”, came from the by this time disgruntled Superintendent. There was silence in the room....until one of the technical officers spoke up, “You can send her to our house if you like. We are looking for a girl to play with our daughter ...and help a little with the housework”. The woman looked stricken and looked up at her husband, but hesitated only for a few minutes before she answered. “Yes *Mahattaya* (Sir), I will send her”. All of us, in the room, knew it was illegal to employ children less than seventeen years of age, under Sri Lankan law. We also knew that people couldn’t live on legal enactments alone. I was soon learning that to be illegally employed as domestic servants was nothing new to the little girls growing up in this estate. *Lakshmini*, one of my main informants was a young mother with two children of her own. She had talked with me in detail about various incidents of her life. One of her most bitter experiences had been, when, at the age of ten or twelve (she was not very sure about the years) she had been sent to work as a ‘servant’ in a large house in *Kandy*. She had looked so distressed telling me of this, I had not wanted to probe too much into what happened to her during that time. But *Rajeswari*, *Lakshmini*’s elder sister did tell me of how the people who had promised to look after her well had actually treated her sister. Still raging with anger she told me how when *Lakshmini* finally came home, they had found marks on her back where she had been beaten by the mistress of the house. “That day I decided I would never let that happen to my daughter...that I would never send her to work in other people’s houses ...not even if all of us had to starve to death”, this was a resolution she had kept. *Rajeswari*’s daughter is one of the

lucky ones; the little girl in my story above is not. Yet, they are all little girls growing up in this estate.

5.3 *Rani and Madhavi:* young ‘girl’s’ dreams

The eight little girls and boys were all smiles as they saw me approaching. Some of them already knew me from my previous visits to their homes. They thought of me as a friend who allowed them to play with things they found interesting, like mobile phones. This morning they were standing in a neat line along the road leading to the pre - school. They were waiting patiently in front of their teacher’s house, a ‘line’ room on the high grounds behind them, to go to school with her. All of them, other than two girls, were in uniform and wore socks and shoes. I took several photographs of them - the white powder their mothers had hurriedly applied on their dark little faces made them look altogether adorable- and of course they loved being photographed. A young woman, wearing a brown and white *sari* came out of one of the ‘line’ rooms and walked towards them. Unlike the other women, coming out of the ‘line’ rooms at the same time, with the familiar wicker basket hanging behind their backs; she carried a few books in her hands. This was *Rani*, the young pre-school teacher the children had been waiting for. She greeted her students and together they walked down the road to the school nearby, where they were joined by a few more children. The ‘school’ was one shabby room, with a door and a window. Half of it was filled with pieces of broken furniture; the other end was neatly arranged as a classroom. The children carefully deposited the plastic bags they were carrying on a table and went to sit down on the row of benches. I explained to *Rani* that I did not wish to disturb her but would like to watch while she taught her handful of

pupils. She readily agreed to this and invited me to stay as long as I liked. Having settled down into the tiny room, their first task was to perform some religious activities, which they did very solemnly. Afterwards it was the time for doing physical exercises, followed by a session of practicing Tamil and English words. I was beginning to understand why the parents who could afford it, preferred to send their children to this pre - school, founded and run single handed by this young girl. *Rani* taught them their own religion, language and a few words of English, where as at the crèche they were taught nothing. The parents were not happy about this, and many whom I spoke with voiced their concern about crèches not providing even an elementary level of teaching for their children. They feared their children might find it difficult to adjust once they went to regular school ⁴³ at the age of five. The crèche supervisors, on the other hand, were of the opinion that it was outside of their duties to teach the children, they only had to look after them. However, at the upper division crèche the children were taught to read and write and there was no pre - school there. Clearly the parents wanted their children to be taught at least a few words before they started school. But whether this was done or not seemed to be at the sole discretion of the staff in charge of each crèche. At some places like in the upper division crèche the children were taught letters, while at others, they were just left by themselves for hours no end. It seemed as if there was no clear idea about who should do what as far as primary education of children at this estate was concerned. Rather it was a situation of just allowing things to take their own course of action.

⁴³ Education up the GCE/Advanced Level and even University education is provided free by the Government in Sri Lanka and primary education is considered compulsory for all children.



Rani with her pupils

Rani found time to talk with me only after the children went home at mid day, no one came to pick them up; they just went by themselves. “Would they be safe?” *Rani* smiled at my query, and told me they would be just fine. Before I could ask her anything about herself, *Rani* asked me what I was doing at the estate. I explained my purpose to her in detail. She listened very carefully and apparently understood everything I said. I wanted to know why she was running this tiny school for a very few pupils. Her lengthy answer was much more insightful than a mere reply to my question. It told me of her life, it also told me of the lives of people in this particular community, as seen through the eyes of a young girl who did not like what she saw and was struggling to change things the best she could. I am in no position to determine how far she would succeed. I can only narrate her story, as was told to me. *Rani*’s story tells us that lives of ‘women and girls’ living in deprived third world locations such as the *Ceylonita* estate cannot be understood by placing them in a unified category. For *Rani*, as appears in my narration below, is not ‘leading a truncated life based on her feminine gender’ nor is she ‘ignorant, uneducated,

tradition - bound, domestic, family oriented and victimized' like the image of the 'third world women' produced in western literature (Mohanty, 1991: 56). In the following chronicle I gather up what *Rani* told me about her life in the estate:

As long as I can remember our family have been living in the small 'line' room you saw this morning. My parents work as labourers in this estate as have my grandparents before them. I have heard my grandmother telling we are not people of this country, but were brought here from India to work. I have three sisters who are still going to school and one brother. He has left the estate and has gone to the city [Colombo] in search of work. ...I studied at the estate school and passed all my exams. I have always wanted to be a teacher. After leaving school I tried to find a job as a teacher, but I soon understood that for us, [meaning estate people] that is no easy task.

Rani explained to me her efforts at finding a job in detail, all of which had ended in failure. "It is almost impossible to find government jobs these days. But there are many private schools in *Kandy*, but none of them liked to employ me because I was from an estate". After some time *Rani* had given up her efforts and started her small school with the help of a NGO, which provided the initial funding. At the moment she was teaching on a voluntary basis. Her hope was to secure an appointment as a teacher in a nearby government school as a result of this voluntary work⁴⁴. *Rani* told me she was happy doing this work, adding;

Someone had to teach our children. They should not be made to just pick up the wicker basket and go to work as pluckers. All of them are able to learn, like I have...

⁴⁴ This is a practice in remote parts of Sri Lanka. Young people, who are unable to find jobs, worked as teachers on a voluntary basis, and once in a few years time they were offered permanent teaching jobs as a tribute to their voluntary work.

I had to struggle to study, helping my mother in the house and taking care of my sisters and brother.

Rani's one concern was about retaining her pupils in school. She charged Rs.100, equivalent to 50 pence per child for a month to buy the material she needed for teaching. As she told me once the end of month came, some parents, who found it difficult to pay this money, quietly kept their children away. This proved to be the end of their pre-school education, for they never came back but returned to the crèches. *Rani* smiled sadly when she told me this, but concluded her story stating:

I am going to find some agency that would give me money to buy books and things. Then I can stop charging the children and they will continue to come. I always keep on trying. I am not worried that I was born in an estate. I don't want to leave...I will stay on... I am proud of my life here.

In spite of being aware that it is her ethnic origin that prevents her from finding the job that she cherishes, and moving on in her life, *Rani* does not resent her background. She wants to stay on in the estate, teaching the little girls and boys in the school she had founded. Here her views are in complete contrast to *Madhavi*, another girl who is a few years younger than *Rani*. I met *Madhavi* during one of my visits to *Ambigeswari's* house. She was a relative of theirs and had come to see the new baby. At first she ignored me, but later, when told I had come to gather data for a study I was doing about the lives of estate women, she became interested in talking with me. She had studied up to GCE Ordinary level at the nearby government school and had got good grades at the exam, the best in her school. She told me she had learned several subjects on her own since there were no teachers to teach those areas at her school. *Ambigeshwari's* husband, who was her uncle, had given her money to enrol at a training school in *Kandy* to train as a nurse.

I am going to *Kandy* next month; I have already seen this school and can't wait to go. Once I qualify and find work as a nurse, I will get my sister and my mother out of this place [the estate]. As long as we live here, we will never be able to escape from the stigma of being 'estate workers'. We have to get out of here, leave our past behind.

Madhavi's eyes were burning with anger as she uttered these words, more to herself than to me. Both *Rani* and *Madhavi* are dealing with oppressive forces that impact upon their lives in the estate. They have to combine learning with household chores because as 'estate girls' they are expected to take care of their siblings and attend to domestic duties. They have to struggle to learn with scarce resources because of their economic status. They are 'poor estate girls', thus they lack basic facilities like books and teachers at school. However, as I have narrated above, both *Rani* and *Madhavi* have successfully overcome these difficulties. One force they have found most hard to overcome, however, is related to their history and location. In *Madhavi's* own words, the stigma associated with being born in an estate. Both *Rani* and *Madhavi* are equally aware of, yet deal with the situation in opposing ways. Thus, theirs is a story about the complexity of lives as lived by young girls in the estate: their struggles to deal with the multiple oppressive forces stemming from their gender, class and historical location and their dreams of a better future.

5.4 Producing and reproducing: young mothers' dual burden

5.4.1 *Lakshmini's un-owned house*

It was around 5.00 clock in the afternoon when we began our journey down the narrow path leading away from the bungalow and towards the 'line rooms' which were home to the workers. It was a warm and sunny afternoon and everything around us from the tea bushes to the beautiful tropical flowers seemed to bask in the setting August sun. On our way we passed the tea factory where the processing of tea leaves took place daily, and there were a few people hanging around the premises. All of them stared at me making little effort to hide their curiosity. *Biso Menike* had to explain who I was and what I was doing to every single person we met on the roads. She did this very cheerfully; apparently proud of the fact that she was escorting me around.

The roadsides soon became isolated as we walked deeper into the estate territory. We passed one of the many *Kovils* (places of religious worship for believers of Hinduism), I was to visit one of them later, and came to a rocky bend in the road. Beyond this lay the 'line rooms' and I was told they were known as 'line' number six of the lower division. As my eyes slowly took in the view around me - lines and lines (hence their name the 'line' commonly used to identify estate workers accommodation) of houses with their shabby wooden walls and half broken asbestos roofs, the single window which let in only a ray of sunshine, and most notably of all the drains in front of the row of houses which were full of dirty water - I could feel a sense of shock and anger settle within me. However, I tried to mask my feelings and keep smiling as *Biso Menike* introduced me to *Lakshmini*, standing in front of her house, while her daughter happily played with the

water in the drain. What stuck me at that moment was if the surroundings of these people were drab and miserable their manner was as happy and cheerful as possible in contrast, as they warmly invited me to come into the house and sit down. Inside the house, once my eyes got adjusted to the gloom around me I could see the single room with its line of clothes, a bed and the chair I was invited to sit on, as the only furniture. I started my conversation with *Lakshmini* by asking her about her daughter, how old she was and so on which relaxed the atmosphere a little. In no more than a minute a woman from the adjoining house came in carrying a chair which was offered to the midwife. As soon as the chair was put down, she promptly joined in the conversation. The new comer, *Rajeswari*, was more perceptive and talkative than *Lakshmini* and later became one of my main research participants. These two women were sisters and lived next door to each other. I stayed with them for around two hours and, with their permission, kept my digital recorder on throughout the conversation - which turned out to be a sort of a group discussion with *Rajeswari's* teenage daughter and several other female relatives joining in. The male members opted to keep away, but some, whose curiosity got the better of them, peeped though the window to have a look. I soon learned that this was going to be a common feature of any interviews I did with them, it would never be a formal one to one interview, but informal unstructured, some times even gossipy, conversations with bits of Tamil thrown in from time to time with *Biso Menike* who was fluent in both Sinhala and Tamil taking up the role of interpreter. The households of *Lakshmini* and *Rajeswari* became a place I visited often during my stay at the estate. When I bade them good bye, it was with a promise to come back again in the morning, and I could see they

were looking forward to my visit which made me very happy and confident about the success of my first meeting.

After much persuasion, I managed to convince *Biso Menike* that I was capable of reaching the bungalow on my own - and she reluctantly took the path leading to her home near the dispensary. We had already made plans to meet again in the morning. As I slowly walked on, I could almost smell the cool, fresh air around me. A few lights were already coming up against the darkness that had reached the valley fairly soon that day. As I took the turn to the left from the factory, the superintendent's 'bungalow' at the top of the mountain range came into view. I stopped in my tracks as I took in the view once again, the picture of *Lakshmini* standing in front of her 'line' room still fresh in my mind. The sculptured pond with the goldfish and water lilies facing the beautifully furnished veranda in front of the house, the carpeted sitting rooms with the iron cast fire places (which were not used any more but bore testimony to their past glory) the huge dining room already laid for dinner - were all glittering in the bright electric lights. *Lakshmini* had told me she rarely put on the single light bulb in her house because the cost of electricity was too high for her to manage with her meagre pay. *Nisal* discussing the fringe benefits of his job once told me that his household electricity bills were paid by the government. Neither *Nisal* nor *Lakshmini* owned the houses: the 'bungalow' and the 'line room' that they lived in. Both were owned by the state as was this entire estate. *Nisal* had two houses of his own and had rented them out since coming to live here. *Lakshmini* on the other hand did not own any houses, or an inch of land. She had never been owner of any property, neither had her parents or her grandparents before that. All of them had

worked as labourers in this estate for over a century. Their history, as discovered and documented by researchers interested in exploring their origin, is similar to that of men and women described by Marx (1946:739). They are ‘...women and men forcibly separated from their means of production, torn from their lands, robbed of all their possessions, and hurled as workers on the labour market...’ They sell their labour to make a living for themselves. Like the women and men in Marx’s analysis, and like her ancestors before her, *Lakshmini* also sells her labour - power to make a living for herself and her family. Thus *Lakshmini’s* story, as I narrate below, illuminates her struggles as she negotiates her life with others: the owners of capital, who are eager to increase the values they possess by buying her labour.

5.4.2 Lakshmini’s productive, (re)productive labour

In the morning I stealthily opened the front door and stepped out of the house, so I would not disturb the household still in slumber. *Ganesh*, who worked as the gardener, was already waiting for me on the door step. He had wrapped himself up to against the morning chill, and was carrying a torch. *Ganesh* had been assigned the task of escorting me to the ‘line’ rooms that morning. As we walked down the path he showed me the plots of land he had cultivated with carrots, leeks and potatoes. He had grown these vegetables on estate land, as he had no land of his own, and gave the produce to the superintendent. He was paid a small sum of money in return, which was in addition to his wage. We passed the office and the factory, where two men were sitting on a small wooden bench. They had kept watch on the factory over night. By now they had given up being surprised by my walking around the estate at unearthly hours. They had learned through estate

gossip that I was a guest of the superintendent, whom they claimed to like very much. So they had made up their minds to like me as well, which was a great relief to me. None of these workers were the least bit hostile or suspicious towards me, and I felt comfortable and relaxed among them.

From our vantage point on high ground I could clearly see the ‘line’ rooms far down below. It looked as if dawn had reached this part of the valley long before it did the buildings up on the mountain. People, mostly women, were already up and about, some of them sweeping the small yards in front of their homes, some fetching water from the taps by the road side and some inside the kitchens lighting up the fire to prepare meals for the family. It took us only a few more minutes to reach *Lakshmini*’s house, she knew I was coming to visit her that morning, and was expecting me. I peeped inside the house and saw her busy inside the tiny kitchen. Her daughter was already up and was waiting patiently for her cup of morning tea. *Lakshmini*, like all other workers was given a free quota of processed tea leaves for use, which consisted of the lowest quality tea known as ‘labour dust’. Now she poured the tea she had prepared into the plastic cups kept on a rickety wooden table. She offered me some; I took a cup and stood by the kitchen door watching her going about her work at a great speed. It did not take her much time to finish making the few *roti* that was going to serve as both breakfast and lunch for the family. She told me she was going to use some curry left over from dinner with them. While going about her tasks *Lakshmini* managed to tell me that she had to finish a lot of the housework before going to work in the field. It would be late afternoon when she returned home and she still had to prepare dinner. *Lakshmini*, like most other women in

this estate, worked as a labourer in the field. She was a tea plucker; her job was picking tender tea leaves to be processed as tea dust. In this sense she was an active participant in public industry: a waged worker engaged in the production of marketable produce. She did this waged work in addition to the unpaid domestic work she did, as she was doing this very moment I stood watching her. This made me interested in finding out how *Lakshmini* combined the dual roles of her waged work and housework. I also wanted to understand how these combined roles affected her life as a woman living in this estate. Here my interest is inspired by the views of Mariarosa Dalla Costa presented in *Capitalism and Reproduction* (1994). In this paper, Dalla Costa builds upon her previous work and re - establishes her argument against the traditional Marxian belief that women's emancipation lies in their participation in public industry. She dismisses outright the view that women can achieve liberation by engaging in work outside of the home. Rather, as she sees, the belief 'liberation of the working - class women lies in her getting a job outside home' is part of the problem, not a solution. As I watched *Lakshmini*, busily tending to the numerous chores during the early hours of this cold morning, and as I stood watching her working under the glare of the scorching sun throughout the day, I began to realize that to explain her life as emancipated through participation in public industry, would indeed be a problematic. Thus, like Dalla Costa, I too saw a problem rather than a solution in this phenomenon, where *Lakshmini* struggled to combine her waged work with housework. *Lakshmini's* daily tasks, as I describe below, further illuminate my thoughts.

Once she had finished cooking, *Lakshmini* took the children; her son was about two years of age and was up by now, to the water pipe near the house to be washed. It was freezing cold outside but they seemed to be used to the cold. Mother and children got dressed in the bedroom which had all their clothes hanging on a clothes line running across the room. *Lakshmini's* husband was up by now and had decided to go and wait outside, most probably made uncomfortable by my presence inside the house. He was not in much of a hurry to get ready because he was 'out of work' at the moment - a common phenomenon in the estate, where men could be seen leisurely roaming the lands where their wives worked for a living. Some of them went in search of work, either to the nearby towns or sometimes even as far away as to the capital city of *Colombo*. But all in all, work for men, especially in the estate, was hard to come by. They did not work as 'pluckers'. They either worked as 'sundry gangs'⁴⁵ or else had to find work in the factory, doing various mechanical and manual jobs involved in the processing of tea leaves. However, such jobs were rare, and securing one meant having a certain amount of 'internal political power' within the estate, such as knowing someone important. I could see that even within this relatively 'powerless' community there was a group of people who were more 'powerless' than others. *Lakshmini's* husband was clearly one of them, so he waited quietly while his wife got ready to go to work.

Once I knew her well enough, I asked *Lakshmini* how she felt about her husband not doing much to help her, either by earning a living or by doing work around the house. Her answer as I quote below highlighted these thoughts:

⁴⁵ Sundry gangs consist of male workers engaged in preparing and tending the soil and weeding.

What can he do? Men don't work as pluckers ...and there is no other work around here. Housework is not meant to be done by men...its women's work. ...even if he wanted to help he wouldn't know how... it's not his fault he can't find work.

Neither *Lakshmini*, nor any of the women I talked with could give me a clear answer to the question 'why men couldn't work as pluckers'. I wanted to figure out whether an explanation for this situation, like for many others surrounding their lives, could be learned from the past. It was this motive that made me to once again visit the past, looking for reasons to explain the present. Here I was primarily trying to understand why only women engaged in the task of plucking tea leaves, which was the central work in any estate. As stated in the Administrative Report of 1932, 'coolies, when they were women worked for lower wages than men... they rarely engaged in disputes, were more suited to this work, ...which could be strenuous and repetitive, in every way'. These were the reasons for employing women for plucking tea leaves in estates, as identified by the colonial rulers at the time. Now *Lakshmini* doesn't trace nor locate any of these causes as written in her past. Neither does she blame her husband for not earning a living, and for placing the entire burden of the family on her shoulders as a result. She does not believe it is his fault; and for that reason would see no sense in fighting him as a means of relieving the dual burden she was carrying. For *Lakshmini*, her husband is not the main enemy. Rather, he is not an enemy at all. For he, like herself and many others in this estate, are living amidst a web of inequality made up of residuals of imperialism and results of capitalism, which sometimes, and most clearly in this story of their lives, are far too powerful to be overcome.

Chandra Mohanty in (2003) in *Feminism without Borders* introduces the concept of ‘relations of ruling’ as a tool for analysing the everyday life struggles of third world women:

I want to suggest that it is possible to retain the idea of multiple, fluid structures of domination that interact to locate women differently at particular historical conjunctures, while insisting on the dynamic oppositional agency of individuals and ...their engagement in daily life (55).

Mohanty further argues that systems of racial, class and gender domination ‘operate through the setting up of (in Dorothy Smith’s terms) particular, historically specific ‘relations of ruling’ (55-56). Mohanty says that, Smith’s conceptualization, even though it pertains specifically to western capitalist patriarchies, “can be used to advantage in specifying the relations between the organization and experience of sexual politics, and the concrete historical and political forms of colonialism, imperialism, racism and capitalism” (56). Rather than posit any simple relation of colonizer and colonized or capitalist and worker, this concept posits multiple intersections of structures of power and emphasizes the process or form of ruling, not the frozen embodiment of it as a focus of analysis. In describing *Lakshmini’s* everyday life, as learned while walking with her to the crèche, watching her at work in the field, talking with her on her way home from work, I follow Mohanty’s argument as drawn from Smith’s conceptualization. Accordingly I draw on the concept of ‘relations of ruling’ as a tool to analyse the operation of multiple dominative structures of gender, class, caste and race on *Lakshmini’s* life as well as her individualized and collective struggles against them.

Lakshmini had to take her daughter and son to the crèche before starting work. While we made our half an hour or so walk to the lower division crèche *Lakshmini* told me about her life as a young girl, growing up in this same estate where her mother and father had worked as ‘labourers’ before her. She had stopped going to school at the age of ten. She didn’t give me any reasons for this and I did not ask her. But she did tell me that she had gone to work as a ‘domestic servant’ to the house of an affluent family in the city. Whatever money she had earned had been used for the survival of her family. “There were days when neither of my parents was given work...that is how things are here”, *Lakshmini* told me, explaining the precarious and seasonal nature of estate work. At the age of eighteen she had returned to the estate to get married to her cousin as was the tradition in her community. She was twenty five now and had given birth to her first child at the age of twenty one. It was only after the birth of her daughter that *Lakshmini* had started working in the estate. She described her experience of finding work as “the little money we had was not enough any more....So one day I went to the bungalow and asked the superintendent to give me work in the estate”. *Lakshmini* had first become part of the estate labour force when her daughter was ten months old. At this point I asked her if all women who wanted to work had to go and meet the superintendent. She looked surprised before answering “yes, that is how we go to work in the estate”. What *Lakshmini* described was how women started work as ‘pluckers’ in the estate. They had to go and ask the superintendent, telling him why they had to work. If the Superintendent thought the women should be given work, they were made part of a plucking gang, and thus became paid labourers of the estate, like *Lakshmini* had become. Two years after she had first started working *Lakshmini* had given birth to her son. “I worked in the field until the

last day before I had him”, she told me proudly. But what she recalls most vividly about the whole event of her sons’ birth is the sum of money, equal to three months’ salary,⁴⁶ which was paid to her by the estate after his birth. Again *Lakshmini* is proud of the ‘benefits’ she had been entitled to, which she describes as:

They paid me nearly Rs. 16,000 at once. I was asked to stay home with my son for three months. Once he was old enough [three months] I took him to the *pulle kamaraya* [crèche]. I was asked to work nearby and was allowed to go into the crèche to breast feed him during the midday break.

Lakshmini, like all other estate mothers who worked, had left her children at the crèche and gone to work in the field. She is not unduly concerned about this arrangement of child care. She thinks it is a useful way of taking care of young children while their mothers go to work in the field. Her main worry however, is the fear that she might be taken out of the ‘pay roll’ if there was not enough leaves for the women to pick; as was the case at the time I visited the *Ceylonita* estate⁴⁷. At the time she was given only three days per week to work, which meant only three days wages, as the women were paid daily. *Lakshmini* was extremely worried about how she was going to buy the daily rations she needed if working days were reduced even further. She was already in debt and told me that the owner of the small shop from which she got rice, flour, sugar and other basic things would not give her any more credit. As I listened to her I did not notice that we

⁴⁶ It is a legal requirement in the estates that every woman who gives birth while in employment be paid a sum of money equal to three times her monthly salary and be granted three months maternity leave, up to the number of three children.

⁴⁷ The estate had been poorly managed over the past five to ten years without any effort at re-planting or fertilizing the existing tea bushes. This had caused slow growth and less than average yield of tea leaves. Less leaves meant fewer women were needed to work as ‘pluckers’. This situation made *Lakshmini*’s concerned about being out of work.

had already reached the crèche and would have to go back very quickly down the same road we had come, if *Lakshmini* was to be in time to start work.

During one of our conversations while I stood watching *Lakshmini* and her gang in the field, I was informed by a field officer that, if the women stayed away from the tea bushes for more than a few days the leaves matured and became unsuitable for processing as tea. This would result in great financial losses to the estates. In this sense, women's labour was essential for the survival of the estate as much as the wages earned by selling their labour was essential for the sustenance of women and their families. Yet, in order to obtain work, women had to plead with the superintendent like *Lakshmini* had to do. Like *Lakshmini*, they were made to feel as if they were been granted a favour by allowing them to work. Thereby effectively devaluing and degrading women's labour at the very beginning of their entry into the public sphere. Thus, women entered the labour force as a group of marginalized workers who had little or no bargaining power over the conditions governing their work. The fact that, without their so called 'nimble fingers' to tend to them daily, the tea bushes would soon become valueless, is kept safely hidden away from the women. Thus, as *Lakshmini* works among the tea bushes, giving life to and adding value to the lifeless tea leaves, the value of her own labour remains hidden from her, buried beneath the great mass of tea leaves she plucks and carries on her back all day. Likewise, *Lakshmini* does not see the 'benefits' given to her at childbirth and after as apparatus facilitating the dual functioning of her body as waged productive labour and unpaid domestic labour at one and the same time. Again the fact that the estate needs her to work as a 'producer' in the field and as a 'reproducer' at home, producing and

sustaining the future labour force, essential for the survival and growth of the capitalist enterprise, remains out of sight, concealed in the ploy of capitalist welfare.

By the time we reached the area where *Lakshmini* was to work that day, the cold mist that had covered the valley was slowly giving way to the warm rays of the August sun. Women were coming out of their houses and walking towards their slots in small groups. They were of all ages; all wore brightly coloured *sarees* and carried long sticks which they lay on the tea bushes to ensure they plucked only the new tender leaves. Some of them carried huge wicker baskets while some had only plastic bags. A field officer later told me that women were finding it difficult to buy or repair wicker baskets which were used traditionally to collect the tea leaves they picked. So now they used left over plastic bags instead. As *Lakshmini's* gang assembled on the road before beginning their ascent up the steep mountain where the bushes grew, I noticed the two *kanganys* who were in charge of this group of about eighteen women. They were from the same community as the women, Tamil, but male. There was one field officer, *Jayawerdena*, who was the overall supervisor of several 'gangs' working in the vicinity. He was again male but from the majority Sinhalese community. I was soon to learn that this was a pattern of work that did not vary, women working as 'pluckers' and men working as overseers or supervisors, across the estate.

Before they began work, the women were told their plucking targets for the day would be twenty kilograms. This meant each woman had to pluck tea leaves up to a minimum of

twenty kilograms of weight if they were to earn their full pay for the day⁴⁸. If they failed to achieve this they were paid only half the daily rate in spite of working in the field the whole day. If they plucked more, they got a bonus⁴⁹. I stood by a tree and watched as the women plucked the leaves in silence, their hands moving among the leaves as if they had a will of their own. Every 1-2 minutes they threw the leaves over their heads into the baskets hanging behind their backs, never once looking back. The baskets were tied to their heads by a rope that was secured around it. As the yield grew, the baskets became heavier and the women's shoulders sagged in an effort to carry the growing weight. I attempted to set up a conversation with a *Kangani* but had to give up because he was not very fluent in Sinhala. I was later introduced to one who was, but for the moment I decided just to watch. Around one and a half hours into their work the women were given bottles of warm tea - brewed on a fire place along the road side using tea leaves from the factory - which they drank gratefully. I remembered *Lakshmini* had had no breakfast, even though they were allowed to gather around and chat over the tea I did not see her taking out her small parcel of food.

Soon it was time for the women to go to the weighing shed, to have their pick weighed and recorded in the small card they carried securely hidden under the multicoloured blouses they wore. Each woman had to empty her pick onto a mat on the ground; the leaves were then put back into a plastic bag used as the weighing bag. The anxiety on *Lakshmini's* face was almost tangible as she gazed at the hands of the scale in the hands

⁴⁸ At the time of my field work the daily rate of pay in the estate was Rs. 290.00 which was equal to approximately £1.50.

⁴⁹ The bonus was worth Rs.20.00 per each kg of leaves plucked over the daily target.

of the *kangani*, who read out the number aloud. *Lakshmini* took out her precious bit of paper and gave it to the second *kangani* who wrote down the number for her. She put the card back inside her blouse and went to sit down on a nearby rock. She had managed to pick only eight kilos so far and was behind target. One of the *Kangany*'s shouted rudely at *Lakshmini*, accusing her of being lazy. "Don't expect to be paid without having enough leaves". *Lakshmini* got up from where she was seated and walked back silently towards the tea bushes. Her face was expressionless as her hands started to work even faster than before. The final count would be taken in the afternoon, and this time near the factory. I decided to go back, and return later, after the women had had their lunch break. I was not sure if they would like to have me around while they had lunch, sitting on the ground in the shade of a tree that grew among the tea bushes. Only *Lakshmini* knew me well and even though she had introduced me to the 'gang' I did not want to intrude too much on them. So I turned to leave, promising to meet them again near the factory at the end of the day. Some way up the winding path I could see *Lakshmini* slowly taking off the basket and sitting down in the shade of a tree. She would be free of the weight of the baskets for some time, but a few women in *Lakshmini*'s gang, as soon as the baskets were taken off, began to rush down the road in the direction of the crèche. I knew they had young children and were on their way to feed them before starting the afternoon shift.

Throughout this morning, standing at my vantage point in the shade of a tree, I had witnessed how, from the moment *Lakshmini* stepped inside the boundaries of waged production, she had become entangled in a complex web of capitalist patriarchal controls. I had seen how she had to work at a pace to suit the interests of the estate as determined

by her male supervisors. How she was under the constant surveillance of male overseers, as was the practice in estates. How she became the target of abusive comments tinged with sexist and even racist undertones, all of which were borne in silence. I had watched her as she stood by silently as her production was measured and her earnings were determined, again by male overseers. Why was women's work in the field ordered in this way? Had it always been like this? I would like to have stayed on with the women, to ask them what they thought of this work pattern, but I felt it was too soon to do so. I did not know the 'gang' well enough, and more importantly they did not know me enough to trust me with their feelings, to tell me what it felt like to work under the malevolent gaze of *kanganys*' day in and day out. So I thought it was best to postpone probing into these issues until later, when we knew each other better. In the meantime I had a chance to talk with one of the *kanganys*, this time with one who spoke Sinhala and who was introduced to me by *Ganesh*.

5.4.3 Women, Men and Machines

Ganesh introduced *Ramaiya* to me when the latter came to the superintendent's office on an errand during the mid day break. *Ramaiya* was a relative of *Ganesh*, was around fifty years of age and was clad in a pair of khaki shorts and a shirt as was customary for *kanganys*. *Ganesh* had assured me I could ask *Ramaiya* any thing I wanted to know. So I asked him to tell me about his family, for how long they have been working here and so on. And he readily started with his story, beginning "we have always worked as *Kanganys*, not as labourers. It is only men who belong to a higher caste that get to work as *Kanganys*". He explained to me that he belonged to a high caste, adding that the

female workers who worked under him were all from low castes⁵⁰. “My father and my grandfather were all *Kanganys* in this same estate, and they had worked under the *sudu mahattays* (white masters). At that point, since he seemed to recall a bit of the past I asked him if he knew where they had originally came from:

Of course, from *India*, and it is us *Kanganys* that were in charge of going to *India* and bringing down people from the poor families to work here. These people ...we brought as workers were ‘out-casts’ [belonged to low castes], they had no land, and if they had not come here they would have died.

I sensed that *Ramaiya* was proud of the doings of his fore fathers, who had been instrumental in recruiting labour for the colonial tea plantations from South India. Then a tone of regret crept into his voice as he related that their status had gone down since the early days, when being a *Kangany* had meant to be the sole ‘regulator’ of women both in and out of the field. “Things are not the same any more, now even people from ‘other’ castes are allowed to work as *Kanganys*...that is not good”. But his answer when I asked him why women had to be watched over by *kanganys* in the field gave an insight into his prejudices and the conditions women had to work under. He told me:

Why, that is how it should be, these women...they are very lazy. If we don’t watch them they pluck mature leaves...they even put in debris into the baskets to make up the weight...they are not good...they cheat.

He also told me that it has become difficult to control the women over the years because of the unions. “They don’t respect us as they should, and sometimes they threaten to go to

⁵⁰ According to *Ramaiya*, his family belonged to the *Maravan* cast, which was a high cast. The female workers who worked under him were all from low casts such as, *Patayan* and *Chakkili*.

the union”⁵¹. He seemed to have a rather bleak view of the union but refrained from uttering any adverse comments against these all - powerful political apparatuses that dominated estate politics. However, I was to hear severe comments about the union and its role in the estate from less guarded and more critical workers, both women and men, later. Since I had asked him about his family *Ramaiya* explained that his son was in charge of the withering machine⁵² at the factory. Many young boys had been eying this job, which was much better then working in the field as part of a sundry gang, but *Ramaiya*, with the help of *Ganesh* who knew the *Sina Dorai*⁵³, had managed to secure it for his son. He was doing a great job, I could go and watch him at the machine this afternoon if I liked. I promised him I would. In fact I did see *Ramiya’s* son and his machine while waiting near the factory for *Lakshmini* to get back from her plucking. While the officer in charge of the factory - which had been in operation since the 1840s - explained the technical details of the production process to me in great detail, my eyes took in the scenario around me. Women from another plucking gang had just brought in their pick to be weighed, and the leaves were straight away put through a whole in the ground to start their long journey, through a set of very old but still functional machines to end up as heaps and heaps of tea dust by the last set of machines. These were then packed, transported to the harbour and exported, and finally ended up on supermarket shelves in Europe. I was told that all supervisory level jobs in the factory were held by men of Sinhalese origin. The machine operators and other manual workers were also

⁵¹ The Ceylon Workers Congress or the CWC as it was popularly known was the dominant trade union of estate workers.

⁵² A machine in the factory which was used to dry away the moisture from the freshly plucked tea leaves.

⁵³ Term used by older workers to refer to the superintendent. This is a Tamil term, *sina* meaning big and *dorai* meaning master.

male but were from the estate Tamil community. The few women I saw inside the factory were sweeping the floor around the machines, laying plastic bags on the floor to collect tea dust or cleaning the floor of any unwanted items. As I thanked the factory manager and came out I saw *Ramaiya* proudly standing by his son near the withering machine.

What I had seen in and around the *Ceylonita* estate so far had informed me that the estate work process started with preparing the soil for planting of tea bushes and ended with the packing up of processed tea. How work was patterned, and performed by diverse groupings of workers, throughout this long and drawn out process, reflected an intricate intersection of gender, class, and caste and race relations. The positioning of female workers within this complex web of relations had a direct impact on the way their lives were lived, both at and away from work. Placed at the top of this structure I saw men who were from the majority Sinhalese community. Like *Nisal* they held both state political power, and societal power. Below them were professional workers, appointed by the state, armed with educational credentials, and performing specialist tasks required for the efficient functioning of the estate. *Biso Menike*, *Ananda*, who was the estate medical officer and *Siriyalatha* were at this secondary level. All of them were again from the Sinhalese community. At the technical level, all the field officers and supervisors at the factory were men of Sinhalese origin. The people of the Tamil community mostly entered the labour force at the level of *kanganys*, and all *kanganys* as *Ramaiya* informed me, were men. In most cases they were men of a higher caste. The jobs of cook, barber and the like were also performed exclusively by men in estates. Men who worked as sundry gangs were also of Tamil origin but of lower castes. Now *Lakshmini's* place was clearly

at the lowest step of this hierarchy. *Lakshmini*, like all others who plucked tea leaves with her in the field, was a woman, she was from the minority Tamil community and belonged to a caste known to be lower than others. As a result of this degraded positioning, *Lakshmini*, and all other estate women, were the subjects of 'relations of ruling' of all the women and (mostly) men above them, on complex social and organizational hierarchies which worked to reinforce each other. Being thus positioned at the lowest intersection point of an intricate gender, race, caste and class structure was apparently weighing down *Lakshmini* much more than the weight of her basket as she struggled down the steep mountain path with it this very moment, bringing the leaves she had plucked into the factory to be fed into a machine which was being dusted and swept clean by another woman.

Lakshmini had still not made it to the factory. But *Jayawardena*, the field officer in charge of the lower division that day, was already here. So I had time for a brief conversation with him. I wanted to find out how the women's daily targets were determined, and at my request *Jayawardena* explained the process to me⁵⁴. It was late afternoon now and I could see the members of *Lakshmini's* gang slowly descending from among the tea bushes at the mountain sides where they had been working all day and taking the path leading to the factory. They were followed by the *kanganys*. The field officers were waiting for them in front of the factory. The women queued up to weigh and record their daily pick, and I could see that the long hours of working in the hot sun

⁵⁴ The minimum daily amount of tea leaves to be plucked by a woman was decided on a daily basis. It was done by field officers after carefully looking at the tea bushes in the plucking area. If there were more leaves on the bushes the women's plucking targets went as high as 22-25 kilos per day. On the other hand if there were less leaves they were given a lower target.

had left its mark on them. They looked listless and tired and seemed eager to go home. I was relieved to see that *Lakshmini* had managed to reach her required pick for the day. She smiled with me as I joined her on her way home. Several other women, who had worked alongside *Lakshmini* in the field, also fell in line with us, and we walked down the narrow roads towards the line rooms. I could sense that no one was in the mood for lengthy conversations; it looked as if all they wanted was to reach their homes before sunset. We took the last bend in the road by the rocks, and were greeted by the sight of *Lakshmini's* son, sitting on the ground in front of the house, patiently waiting for his mother to come home. His sister had gone to a nearby house to play. Both of them had been picked up from the crèche by their father, who had left them at home and had gone down to the town nearby. The little boy smiled happily as he saw his mother, and looked eagerly towards her hands. "Everyday he hopes I will bring him a sweetmeat from the boutique, but I do so only very rarely", *Lakshmini's* words were spoken to no one in particular. Her first task upon reaching home was to light the fire and prepare some tea for herself and the children. She sat down for a while to drink the hot cup of tea which seemed to give her some energy as almost immediately she got up and carried the things she had used for cooking in the morning to the tap outside the house for washing. She told me the children got hungry early and she had to start preparing dinner for them immediately - this by way of an excuse for not having much time to talk with me. Also she wanted to go to sleep as early as possible to save on electricity. The 'line' rooms were supplied with electricity recently but they found the bills forbidding, and some households still preferred to use the oil lamps. *Lakshmini* had decided to cook some rice and make a curry from some potatoes she had got from a neighbour who grew them. As

she took out the rice from its bag under the table she quietly glanced inside the bag - making sure there was enough left for tomorrow, for pay day was not near and price of rice was high. As *Lakshmini* finished cooking and sat down on the stone steps in front of the house to wait for her husband, night had already fallen on the estate. It was dark outside, and I knew it was time for me to go back. I would not be coming back tomorrow morning to *Lakshmini's* house. Yet, I knew *Lakshmini* would get up and light the fire and begin her work just the way she had done today. She would do it for many days, months and years to come, for this was her 'way of life' in the estate.

5.4.4 Sita Devi

The story of *Sita Devi*, a mother with three young children and who like *Lakshmini* is working as a tea plucker in this same estate, further illuminates the relationship between the welfare systems designed around the crèches and the working of women's bodies simultaneously as productive and reproductive. *Sita Devi* lives in the middle division of the estate with her family of three children. Two of her children are attending the middle division crèche; her eldest son is of school going age. All this information I had gathered from *Biso Menike*, before actually going to visit *Sita Devi* one afternoon. The middle division was an area in the estate I had not visited so far, and *Biso Menike* had agreed to come and show me the way after work. By this time she herself was getting interested in my project. She was very keen to make sure I had all the information I needed, and sometimes even came out with suggestions of her own. I listened to everything she had to tell me very carefully. After all she was the person who had been working in this estate for over twenty five years, and I was the 'outsider'. It was late afternoon by now, but it

seemed as if the last rays of the setting August sun had decided to be kind to the people who were yet to finish their work for the day, for it still gave out some light. We could see women descending from the mountain range with bundles of firewood heaped on their heads, some men were watering the vegetable plots near their houses and young boys were dragging the goats they owned homewards. As we walked further on, the landscape started turning desolate. We had to pass some barren land on our way to *Sita Devi's* house, and this part of the estate looked to be even more remote and isolated than the other places we have visited. There was hardly a living soul in sight and I was glad I had not attempted this long walk by myself. At last we were there - *Sita Devi* was out doing some washing at a nearby well⁵⁵ and greeted us with “*Nona* [madam], how good of you to come this way”. She hurriedly went inside the house, leaving her unfinished washing by the well, and asked us to come in. *Sita Devi's* little house was not part of a long ‘line’ of houses but stood alone, and was in a worse condition than the average ‘line room’ I had visited so far. This part of the estate had no electricity or tap water, and had very few houses, which could more accurately be described as huts made of wood and roofed with dried coconut leaves. It was dark inside the house and we had to bend our heads to get through the door. *Sita Devi* was looking around her searching for a place for us to sit, but all she managed to find was a small stool, which she placed in the middle of the room. She covered the stool with a piece of cloth and invited me to sit on it. Inside the room I could see a bundle of fire wood as the only other item of furniture. I suggested that we talk outside, as it was not yet dark. This proved to be a good idea, for we were soon provided with some chairs from a nearby house and more importantly were joined

⁵⁵ A deep hole dug in the ground to get water.

by some more women. I asked *Sita Devi* how old her children were, and she looked at *Biso Menike* for help. *Biso Menike* laughed at her, but she, unlike the mother knew the ages of all the children and even their names. *Sita Devi* was carrying her youngest child, a one year old boy, while she talked with us, and her husband stood near by, carrying the other. After the initial introductions I asked *Sita Devi* who took care of the children while she was at work:

I have no one of my own [meaning female relatives] to help me with the children.

My family is at *Lulkandura*⁵⁶ estate. I came here only after getting married. I take the children to the *pulle kamaraya* [crèche] and the *pulle amma* [crèche attendant] takes care of them.

Recalling the experiences of the birth of her three children, *Sita Devi* told me she had been paid the ‘three month bonuses’ for all her children. She had used the money to pay off some of the family debts. “We would have liked to repair the house with some of it...but the debt owner came after us and made us pay him”, *Sita Devi*’s husband said regretfully. Another woman who had joined in the conversation said she had done the same with her ‘child birth’ money. At this point *Biso Menike* took it upon herself to remind the women that the money given to them after child birth was meant to be used for the new baby and the mother, for giving them nutritious food and so on. The women openly laughed at her for this, remarking:

aney Nona ! [oh Madam], you know very well how poor we are. We always use this money to pay our debts...that is why we have three children...and come to you after that [meaning to get advice on family planning].

⁵⁶ An estate situated nearby, which incidentally is home to the first tea plant to be planted in Sri Lanka.

After this candid remark by one of the more outspoken women *Biso Menike* made no more mention of what they should or shouldn't do with this money, which the women called the 'three months bonus'. By this time we were joined by two or three men, who apparently had felt encouraged by the presence of *Sita Devi's* husband in the group. So I had one big group of people gathered in front of *Sita Devi's* modest house, all ready to talk and share their life experiences with me. We talked about many things, from the three months bonus to the gratuity money the women got at retirement. As the women told me rather sadly, in most cases their gratuity money was also used to pay back debts that had gathered up over the years they had been working. Even though our conversation was not centred on the most cheerful topics, the women always laughed aloud at the slightest opportunity. They made fun of each other, especially when talking about their child birth experiences. They even made jokes about some *kanganys* and field officers⁵⁷, whom they seemed to dislike, commenting on their personal traits and appearances. But none of them made the least negative comment about *Nisal*, whom they fondly called as *Mahattaya (sir)*. I will never be sure whether this was because they knew I was a guest of his or because they were actually fond of him. Perhaps it was a combination of both.

Everything I have seen and heard about the lives of these women, men and children living in this estate vicinity spoke of a struggle against absolute poverty. They lived in temporary shelters made of mud and dried up leaves; they owned only a few items of clothing and cooking utensils as their sole possessions, they were continually in debt and gave birth to children as a means of earning some extra cash to pay up their ever

⁵⁷ A category of estate workers, who ranked higher than the *Kanganys* and were mostly men of Sinhalese origin.

mounting debts. Still they were able to laugh at life itself; at themselves, at the male overseers who kept watch over them while at work, and at this entire set - up that was strangling the very breath out of their lives in its vicious and inescapable grip. It seemed to me that this was their way of coping with the unimaginable hardships of their lives. It was not one of anger or resistance or striving for change, but of calm acceptance of things the way they were, the way they had been ever since they had come to this Island as hired labourers in colonial plantation estates. It seems as if, while the socio - political situation outside of the plantation world had been subject to significant change, giving rise to a new world free of colonial bondage, the situation within the estates had undergone little or no change.

It was beginning to get late, and I decided to change the discussion to draw in the men who were still standing near by. This was the first time they had approached me without apprehension and I wanted to make the most of it. So I asked them why the middle division still had no electricity supply. All at once a group of angry voices told me how a politician had promised before the election that if he won the electorate of *Hanguranketta*, where the *Ceylonita* estate was situated, the whole estate would have electricity by the end of the year. He had won and was in his fourth year in office, and they still had no electricity. "Have you spoken to the union"? I asked, cautiously. The reply came in an instant, "It's no use ...they are all on the same side". I was not sure whose side that was. What I was sure of however was it was not the side of these women and men. Inside the house, *Sita Devi's* eldest son was trying to read his school book by the light of an oil lamp which flickered in the cold night wind blowing through the open

doorway. It was pretty late by now and I told *Sita Devi* I would come to visit her again. I knew where she would be working this week and was planning to see her in the field.

Mohanty (2003) develops the concept of ‘relations of ruling’ further by applying it to understand the structures of domination affecting the lives of women in a traditional Indian society. While commenting on the complex relationship between the economic interests of the colonial state and gender relations in rural Indian society she states “patriarchal practices were shaped to serve the economic interests of both the landowning classes and the colonial state” (62). The everyday experiences of *Lakshmini*, *Sita Devi*, and other women, as they work in the field, when seen through this perspective as proposed by Mohanty, establishes how the patriarchal practices of this traditional estate society, which closely resembles the traditional Indian society of Mohanty’s analysis, is shaped to serve the interests of the owners of capital as against the interests of owners of labour or in this case ‘women’. In this way, the landowning class, who in this particular case is the state, like the colonial rulers before them, are generating and accumulating surplus value, at the expense of forming an exploitative relationship with the female labour force, of which *Lakshmini* and *Sita Devi* are part. Thus, the effects of these structures on their lives in the field, and their reactions to them, as I describe below, sheds light on the complex relationship between capitalist interests and patriarchal relations in this particular estate society.

A few days after I had gone to visit *Sita Devi* at her home, I went to slot number twenty four of the middle division where I knew she would be working that week. The women were gathered under the shade of a tree having their cup of morning tea when I approached them. Other than *Sita Devi* herself, there were a few more women in the gang, whom I had got to know on various occasions: at the crèches with their children, near the factory bringing in their produce and so on. Today they smilingly greeted me into their group; one of them even offered me some tea off the boiling pot by the road side. Feeling encouraged by their greetings I joined in the discussion, which was centred on accusing a *kangany* who had apparently reprimanded them in the morning. The women felt they were insulted and were angry and disturbed. They were still whispering about this incident to one another when they returned to their positions at the tea bushes. Soon it was time for the first weighing of the day, and the *kanganys* seemed to be in a bad mood for they kept shouting at the women for the slightest thing. Once it was for dropping some leaves on the ground by mistake, once it was for being slow. With each telling off the tone of voice became harsher and the choice of words even more offensive and insulting than before. Altogether it was a tense and uneasy atmosphere with both the women and their overseers taking on an antagonistic disposition. But the final fiasco came when one woman accused a *kangany* of entering a lesser number of kilos in her card than the amount she had actually picked. She was almost crying while saying that this was done purposely and she had lost half her wage even yesterday due to the same reason. The *kangany* scolded her in filthy language; I did not understand some of the Tamil terms he used but the few words I understood in between were more than enough to tell me what he meant. The woman did not argue any further, but went back to her

picking. From where I was standing I could see her hands moving towards her eyes from time to time, wiping down the string of tears slowly tickling down her sunken cheeks. This time I did not return during the mid day break, but stayed on with the women while they had their lunch sitting on the ground under a tree. They were obviously angry about what had been happening and expressed their feelings in various ways. I asked *Sita Devi* why they listened to all this abuse in silence. She answered me as:

It is no use to argue, no one will take our side....once we complained to the *Mahattaya* about him [meaning this particular *kangany*] and it only made things worse for us....no one will scold him if we complain. But if we talk too much [meaning continue to complain] *kanganys* will tell them not to give us work...they will tell them we are difficult to control.

The woman in *Sita Devi's* gang had reacted in much the same way as *Lakshmini* to reprimands by *kanganys*. Simply they had just listened to the abusive and even filthy words flung at them unmercifully by their male supervisors. As *Sita Devi* told me, to react would be of little use, and may even make things worse for them in the field. The male supervisors reigned over them in the field, and were more loyal to the owners of the estate than they were to their own kith and kin. As a result the women were subject to continuous stalking by them while they attempted to attain the production targets as determined by the owners of the estate. Here the women were placed in a unique position where their oppression as proletarians was increased by proletarian men of 'higher castes' who were supervising them. It was a situation which clearly made these women the subjects of a super- exploitation stemming from their class, gender and caste.

At the end of the day I asked *Sita Devi* if I could walk with her to her home. She agreed to this, but first she had to pick up her two children from the middle division crèche which was a good one mile away from where she was working. On the way she told me about her worry of not having enough fire wood at home to cook dinner. It had rained the day before and all the wood she had put out to dry had got soaked. Wet wood didn't light well and gave out a lot of smoke. So before reaching the crèche she stopped at several places to collect some dried up sticks which she bundled up and carried on her head. Once we reached the crèche we found that both her children had fallen asleep on their mat laid on the floor. *Sita Devi* hurriedly asked them to wake up, and the two sleepy children were led away towards home. The children were sleepy and could hardly walk, but *Sit Devi* had no way of carrying even one of them because she needed both hands to balance the bundle of fire wood on her head. She quickly refused my offer of help saying, "we are used to this *nona* (madam), we do this every day...the children always fall asleep when I get late to come... maybe they are hungry". After getting back, *Sita Devi* washed the children's clothes, dragging water from the deep well near her house, before she finally got down to cooking dinner. As I left her house she was still trying to light up the fire using the sticks she had picked up on the way. Apparently they were not dry enough, for they did not light up but only gave out a lot of smoke darkening the whole house. The two little children were sitting cuddled up near the fireplace, waiting for it to light up and give them dinner.

The experiences of *Lakshmini* and *Sita Devi* as observed by me while they engaged in their daily lives, working simultaneously as waged worker in the field and mother and

housewife in the home, defies easy explanations in the light of existing theoretical notions of women's productive and reproductive labour. Firstly, the life experiences of these women problematizes the traditional Marxian belief of seeing women's unpaid work in the house as 'unproductive' in so far as they do not create surplus value. Rather they reinforce the Marxist feminist view that women's domestic labour in the house does create surplus value by producing and reproducing the labour power needed for the continuous existence of the capitalist enterprise. Furthermore, they re-establish the Marxist feminist belief of seeing working class women's entry into the public sphere not as a means of achieving emancipation but as a way of increasing her oppression through placing a dual burden on her body. However, the unique managerial apparatus deployed by the capitalist enterprise to facilitate the dual functioning of women's body as productive and reproductive labour, as applies to this specific third world/postcolonial location is not fully explained through the existing theoretical notions. For instance when Marxist feminist writers argue that engagement of working class women in waged work, in a situation where childcare and housework is not socialized, increases their oppression, the daily lives of *Lakshmini*, *Sita Devi* and others like them, while within this argument in a general way, also falls outside of it in several specific yet significant ways. For as far as this particular group of women is concerned 'socialization of childcare' in the form of the crèche where their infant children are taken care of during the day time while they work in the field, works as a managerial mechanism through which their bodies are appropriated into two distinctly stages as productive and reproductive, simultaneously expending their labour for the benefit of capital. This is not an explanation directly derived from the existing theoretical frameworks. Rather it is an extension of the Marxist

feminist argument to embrace the work and life conditions of a group of third world, proletarian women, who have, for a very long time been labouring to earn a living, outside of the theoretical notions surrounding women's productive and reproductive labour.

An explanation of the daily lives of *Lakshmini* and *Sita Devi* and other estate women like them requires such an extension of Marxist feminist thinking, by drawing in the specific conditions within which these women live and work. The insufficiency of existing theoretical traditions to fully explain the oppressive conditions surrounding the lives of this specific group of women necessitates the emergence of a new way of thinking. Simply, we need theories of our own; theories that build on Marxist feminist views by integrating the 'specific lived experiences' of women like *Lakshmini* and *Sita Devi* into their explanatory frameworks, if we are to portray their lives and place them at their rightful position alongside the global women proletariat. Such a new way of thinking about the lives of these women would result in their lives being 'written into history' as opposed to being 'written out of history' as has happened during the past. This is the theoretical endeavour I seek to achieve through my research. It is also part of the ultimate ethical-political aim of this entire work.

5.5. Less burdened than their sisters? : ‘mothers’ with grown up children

5.5.1 *Rajeswari*

The daily lives of both *Lakshmini* and *Sita Devi* have given me insights into the way in which young mothers in this estate setting struggled to divide their labour between two opposing ends; as productive labour in the field and reproductive labour at home as was expected of them as ‘estate women’. While they were paid a price for the productive component of their labour which was barely adequate for their sustenance, their reproductive labour went entirely unpaid. Nevertheless, their unpaid reproductive labour contributed towards creating surplus value for the capitalist in much the same way as their productive labour. While the owners of the means of production accumulated their capital through this exploitative relationship with women, the owners of labour, young women, like *Lakshmini* and *Sita Devi* as in my narration above struggled to cope with the dual roles imposed upon their bodies.

However, *Rajeswari*’s life as I describe below differs from that of her younger sister *Lakshmini*’s in significant ways. Firstly *Rajeswari*’s story informs me that the life of an estate woman who is nearing middle age and whose children are grown up is not as hard as that of a woman with young children. Secondly *Rajeswari*, does not fit into the popularly known mould of ‘subservient and docile’ third world woman who is easily controlled and manipulated by her male supervisors. Rather, my observations of her daily life revealed an independent and assertive woman who is shrewdly perceptive of her surroundings and who is not afraid to struggle against what she sees as unjust. On several occasions I had witnessed *Rajeswari* picking up arguments in the field with *Kanganis* and

even trying to defend other women. Here she appears as ‘an agent, who made choices, had a critical perspective on her own situation and thought and acted against her oppressors’ as opposed to being ‘victims of...capital as well as their own traditional sexist cultures’ (Mohanty, 1991: 29) as some other women I had met in this same vicinity. A description of my interactions with her, as I narrate below, further illuminates this view.

Every time we met in the field she asked me to come into her house for a visit. While I was going in and out of her sister’s house and conversing with her, *Rajeswari* several times asked me why I was not coming to visit her. She was obviously unhappy about this and even thought it as an insult. So I made it a point to visit her one afternoon, after the ‘women’ had got back from the field. She greeted me with a warm smile and I noticed that she had bathed after work and was looking fresh and relaxed. She wore clean clothes, had combed her hair neatly and was even wearing a red *pottu*⁵⁸ on her forehead. I specially took in her neat appearance which was somewhat in contrast to *Lakshmini* who always looked a bit dishevelled. *Rajeswari*’s small house seemed to be in better order than her sisters’, it was clean and tidy and she was the owner of a few items of furniture, a few chairs, a table which was used by her daughter to keep her books on and even a small television set. When I went in she had already started preparing the family dinner, and she invited me to come inside the kitchen. She apologized to me, not once but several times, for the clouds of smoke that filled the house explaining that she had run out of firewood and had used some coconut shells to light the fire. She told me they had to walk

⁵⁸ *Pottu* is an ornamental mark painted on the forehead.

far and wide and reach the shrubs that grew on top of the rugged mountains to collect firewood that was used for cooking. *Rajeswari*'s kitchen had clean pots and pans which she kept hung on to the white washed wall. I asked her about her days' work as a start up to our conversation. I soon learned that she had a lot to tell about her life in the estate and unlike *Lakshmini*, who was timid and shy, needed little or no prompting on my part. She had a razor sharp mind and a critical outlook about her life as a female worker in this estate. *Rajeswari* described her experiences of working in the field as:

Everyday we get up early in the morning, we rush to work, and they won't allow us to work if we are a minute late. We have to listen to nasty words of *Kangani's*...no one speaks kindly to us. They always shout. Have you seen how we eat? We keep our food on the ground... like animals... some times stones and sand gets into what we eat. What sort of life is this?

Rajeswari was critical of the low wage they were paid "the price of rice is getting higher everyday...yet, our wages are the same. We can't even buy the basic things we need". She told me she wanted to get out of the estate and find work that paid more. But she couldn't leave her teenage daughter. Also she was helping *Lakshmini*, by giving a hand with the housework and sometimes taking care of her young children. She talked to me about her parents and her early life in the estate. I learned she was around forty years of age. One incident that she described about her family with deep distress and even anger was about how her mother had died at the age of fifty five. They had been unable to take her to a doctor in time, and *Rajeswari* told me how as a young girl she had run all the way to the 'bungalow' at midnight to get a vehicle. But help had come too late, and she still believes her mother's life could have been spared if there was some one around to help them. She explained how their lives had taken a turn for the worse after that, her father taking to

drinking heavily and how she, as the eldest daughter had taken up the responsibility of looking after the younger siblings. She still felt a sense of responsibility towards her younger sister and didn't like to leave her to cope with all her work by herself. "It's very hard when the children are young, I have to stay and help her".

She told me her life had got a little easier over the years. She had a grown up son who was working in a soap factory in *Colombo*. Her husband was also employed outside the estate, which put her in a much better financial position than her sister, whom she helped out in every way she could, both financially and otherwise. She was especially proud of the fact that her son was getting a good salary and was sending money home. She told me she was saving up to build a house on a plot of land the family had been given by the estate. They would never get to own the land, but were allowed to built a house using their own funds which was a much preferred option to living in the line rooms. She had got a loan against her Employees Trust Fund⁵⁹ balance from the Housing Development Authority⁶⁰ to start work on the house, and happily invited me to come and see the foundation of her new house. She explained it was going to be much better than the one they lived in now, with two rooms, a veranda and a kitchen. She was hoping her son would get married and live there and told me "...after all, our children cannot be made to suffer as we have". Another of her resolutions which stands out clearly in my mind is when she said "I will never allow my daughter to work in this estate. I want her to study and get out of this misery." She also told me that she slept in the cold veranda outside so

⁵⁹ Employees Trust Fund (ETF) is a government regulated fund. Each month a pre determined percentage of the workers monthly salary is credited to their ETF account balances. The government contributes another percentage. The balance is paid to them at retirement. Further they are allowed to get loans for specific purposes against the balance in these accounts.

⁶⁰ A government institution which gave financial support to low income families to build houses.

her daughter could use the only room in the house to do her studies at night without any disturbance. Her daughter was standing by the kitchen doorway listening to her mother while she talked and I saw the same determination in her young face that shone in *Rajeswari's* worn out yet still pretty face. *Rajeswari's* daughter however, declined to speak with me, her mother told me she was shy but I read her cold and unfriendly behaviour towards me as resentment for interfering in their lives.

Earlier, I had noticed *Rajeswari* getting into arguments with *Kanganis* and sometimes even with field officers while at work. Today I asked her if she was not afraid of what they might do, for many women I talked with had voiced their fears of the possible consequences of talking back to the supervisors, even when they thought they were being punished unfairly. *Rajeswari* clearly had different ideas from them, for she told me:

What can they do? If we don't go to the field what will happen to the leaves? They can't pluck leaves; they can only shout.... they [the *kanganis'* and field officers] don't understand they are only workers... like us.



Rajeswari in her kitchen

5.5.2 *Parameshwari*

Parameshwari and *Sita Devi* belonged to the same plucking gang; also they were related to one another. It was *Sita Devi* who introduced *Parameshwari* to me as an aunt of her husband; when I went to visit her in the field. It was my second day in the field with them, and I was sitting on the ground under a tree, while the women had their midday meal. From where I was seated I could see them taking out the food which would serve as their lunch, consisting mostly of *roti* which they had hurriedly wrapped up in pieces of news paper. I had never seen them buying or reading newspapers. However on many occasions I had noticed them collecting bits of thrown away paper; they used these old papers to wrap things. *Parameshwari*, who had finished eating early now came and squatted near me, cup of steaming tea in hand. She was dark skinned and slightly built, but seemed to have a lot of energy in her thin body and was the best plucker in her gang. I asked her how long she had been working in the field. "...ever since my husband died, I was around twenty five then." She told me of her past life, struggling to bring up three young children on her own.

My son was only four years old at the time. The other two children were very small.

I left the children at the *pulle kamaraya* [crèche] and went to work in the field. I picked them up on my way home ...those days I could give them only one meal a day. Now my son is grown up, he is working at a shop in Kandy... my daughter is still going to school.

Then she told me of her plans for her son's future, "I have already found a girl for him to marry". She wanted him to get married soon and settle down in the house she had managed to build using her savings. "What about your daughter"? "I will arrange her future after asking what my son has to say about it". I asked her why she had to listen to

her son, to which she replied. “He has worked at the shop ever since he was twelve years old to help feed our family; of course I have to listen to him”. I did not ask any more questions, I had often seen young ‘*Tamil*’ boys working as helpers in grocery shops in the cities. I had even made it a point to speak a few words with ones who worked in shops nearby. If the shop owners were not nearby they talked freely about their lives in the city away from home. What they had told had made me realize it was indeed a hard life, harder perhaps than their lives in the estates, among their own people. There were no laws to protect them, no fixed salaries, no working hours, no leave, no gratuity; they worked endless hours under extremely harsh conditions to earn a little money which they sent home to their mothers and sisters. Thus as I listened to *Parameshwari* I was not surprised at her wish to listen to her son. *Parameshwari* ended her conversation with me by saying that once her son got married she would stop working in the field and would go to live with her son and his new bride “We will live in the new house. I have worked hard for a long time. I know my son will take care of me now...he will also look after his sisters”.

Heidi Hartmann in *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* asks “who benefits from women’s labour? Surely capitalists, but also surely men, who as husbands and fathers receive personalized services at home...” (1981:9). Hartmann further argues that “men have a higher standard of living than women in terms of luxury consumption, leisure time, and personalized services... and that men have a material interest in women’s continued oppression ” (1981:9). Hartmann acknowledges the fact that there might be differences in how this relationship between men and women works, depending

on class, ethnic and racial groups. However she maintains that the exploitative nature of the relationship does not vary across these diverse groupings. It is based on this line of thinking that Hartmann calls for a parallel struggle by women against both capital and men at one and the same time.

Now, what I heard from *Parameshwari* about her son and the two stories below, where I further describe my experiences at the *Ceylonita* estate, informs me that Hartmann's argument does not fully explain the relationship among men and women as it takes place within this specific estate setting. In fact the incidents that I narrate below can only be understood and explained through an analytical perspective that sees the forces of capitalism as having an interest in the continued exploitation of both women and men in their struggles to live their lives within these harsh estate surroundings. Finally, not even the most astute theorists would be able to convince women like *Parameshwari* above, and *Mary* in my story below, that their oppression would be ended by struggling against their own sons, brothers and fathers.

5.5.3 Sons, brothers and fathers

What *Parameshwari* told me about her son taking up household responsibilities from an early age was retold by Ganesh when relating his life story to me. I had only one reason for wanting to hear *Ganesh's* life story: He insisted on telling it to me. By now he knew enough about my work to gather that I was visiting women who had children, and who were leaving them at the crèches to go to work. So one day he told me "I have four children, and I took all of them to the crèche". He viewed this as a good enough reason to

be interviewed, and invited me to visit his house on a day when he would not be on duty, tending the beautiful garden surrounding the superintendent's bungalow. Sundays were his days off from work, and one Sunday afternoon he made a special visit to escort me to his home. His wife had gone out when we made it to the line rooms where he lived. So I began interviewing *Ganesh* himself, with the recorder on, no less. I had sensed he wanted to be interviewed this way. He told me he was fifty years old, in fact he looked much older, and the hard outdoor life had aged him quickly. His family had lived in this estate for as long as he could remember. He had nine siblings altogether, four sisters and five brothers. *Ganesh* told me how, as the eldest boy of a large family, he had started to do whatever work he could find to support his parents. He had dropped out of school at a very early age and had gone to *Kandy* in search of work. Some years later he had managed to get the job of gardener and had returned to the estate. All of his brothers and sisters were still attached to the estate in one way or another, living here with their families - none had actually gone away. He told me it was a tough life, and that they never had any money however much they worked.

He went on to explain how the 'chit' system⁶¹ worked, and observed, "We work and work ...but at the end of the month we hardly get any money into our hands". He was also worried about the various other deductions that were made against their monthly salary, which included deductions for the union, for the *kovil* for the *dhobi*⁶² and barber and so

⁶¹ Under this system a worker is given a 'chit'/a piece of paper by the field officer indicating a sum of money. The money value is calculated based on the number of days he/she he would work for that month. The worker can purchase food from the estate cooperative against this 'chit'. At the end of the month the amount of the chit/s would be deducted form her/his salary.

⁶² *Dhobi* is the name given to a person who washes clothes for pay.

on. At this point he went into the house to get his pay slip for the month of July, to show me.

What *Ganesh* told me about the ‘chit’ system made me think back about another rather bitter incident that I had witnessed on the ‘Labour Day’ when issues of the lower division were being discussed. As I sat watching, a man came timidly near the window, and stood there without speaking. His eyes were shrunken in his thin unshaven face. “What’s your problem”, some one shouted at him. He hesitated for a minute, and then replied, “The *kangani* refuses to give me any more ‘chits’” - it was not an accusation, just a statement. “I can’t, I have already given him more than his quota for the month” replied the *kangani*, who was also there. *Nisal* wanted the records checked and a long procedure of getting the ‘books’ from downstairs and checking them followed. The man stood by his place at the window, his face blank of any emotions. It was announced that he had been given ‘chits’ over and above the amount he was entitled to. “He will have to work for at least another two weeks before we can give him any more credit”, was the accountant’s verdict. The man looked on. “He has been in debt for a long time now”, whispered *Namal*, who was seated next to me. “You have to be careful about how you spend your money ...don’t spend too much on food” shouted one of the field officers. Still the man did not utter a word. Then very slowly, he said to no one in particular “I don’t mind going hungry, but I can’t watch my children starve”. *Nisal* ordered the accountant to write him a ‘chit’ for Rs.1, 000 to be deducted from his future earnings, and scolded the man for being a ‘fool’. Once the meeting was over I spent some more time inside the office, talking with the Union leader. By the time I was ready to leave, the workers had already

left the building. It was nearly night time, but a few of the office staff who was doing overtime were still at their desks. There was a man standing by the office door, obviously he had been there for some time now. As I passed through the door he smiled at me timidly and said he was waiting for the ‘chit’.

Ganesh went on with the story of his life in the estate. By this time several of his relatives, who lived near by, had joined *Ganesh* in his sitting room. Among them, one woman, whom *Ganesh* introduced to me as his sister, joined in the conversation. At first she supported her brother in what he was saying, emphasizing that without his earnings as a young boy her entire family would have been in a desperate situation. Soon she became the dominant speaker and took over the conversation from him. I watched on and listened to her views attentively for I found her to be different from any other woman I had met so far.

5.6. *Mary*: a woman who is not a ‘mother’

Mary was *Ganesh*’s sister. She was around forty years of age, of medium height and was dressed in a skirt and blouse which made her look different from the women I usually saw in the estate who were generally dressed in saris or long clothes. But the real difference was in her manner, the way she spoke and the anger that never seemed to leave her flashing eyes as she told me about her life in the estate. The story of *Mary*’s life as she told me without any prompting or invitation on my part is a story with a difference. *Mary* is not burdened by the dual roles of waged work and housework. The reasons for this situation are simple: she has no children of her own, also she is not given work in the

estate. Further, it is the story of how a woman in this predominantly Hindu community could be oppressed by the insensitive religious and cultural forces that are put in place and enforced by members of this society themselves. *Mary*, although free from the dual burden born by women of similar age, is subject to a dual burden of a different nature. She has to cope with the social stigma of being a barren women and a widow on the one hand, while dealing with the economic consequences of not being given work in the estate on the other. She is being punished by her own community for not being a ‘mother’, and by the capitalist system within which she lives, for not contributing towards reproducing its future workforce. *Mary* thinks she is been treated unfairly and rebels against the forces she sees as oppressive by changing her religious and cultural affiliations and openly challenging the status quo.

Mary began her story by telling me she was a widow and had no children. She lived by herself in a ‘line’ room next to her brothers. It was not safe for a woman to live alone in a house, and she had been the subject of unwelcome sexual advances by the male members of her community. *Mary’s* only relief was that her brother and his wife lived near by and kept a close eye on the happenings around her house. She told me she was very grateful for this and did what she could to help them in return “I have helped my sister-in-law a lot in taking care of her four children”. “I may not be a mother, but that does not mean I am uncaring ...like some people seem to believe. I love the little children I helped bring up”, was how she expressed her feelings to me. She went on to tell me of the agonies she had undergone as a young married women who was unable to give birth to children. Of how she had been forced to take part in various religious activities that were believed to make her fertile. She described several pilgrimages she had made to the temple at

*Munneswaram*⁶³ to pray for the gift of a child. Throughout these years she had been insulted and ridiculed by her own community; she was not allowed to take part in social activities and had to take a back seat in all family rituals. Her life as a barren woman had taken its worst turn when, as she described, “my husband was asked by his relatives to marry another woman...a woman who would give him children...but then he became ill and died”. She described the malicious way in which she was treated after the death of a husband:

I was made to feel as if it was my fault that he had died...he died of illness, how can it be my fault, or misfortune? All my gold jewellery was taken away from me...they asked me to break the bangles I wore on my wrists...saying a widow should not have jewellery. I could wear only white.

Left with no means of survival *Mary* had gone to ask for work in the estate. But she was never given work as a plucker. I asked her if she knew of any reasons for this treatment. She hesitated for a moment before answering “women who have children are always given work”. *Mary* was extremely critical about everything around her; she described the conditions surrounding her life as unfair and evil. Her venomous comments were aimed at everybody from the superintendent, to the *kanganys*, to the union, to the *sami* at the *kovil*, whom she described, rather to my surprise, as a thief who lived on other peoples’ earnings. She told me she had found a better priest, not of a *kovil*, but of a church in the town. She went to see him every Sunday and it was this newfound Christian faith that had made her change her name to ‘*Mary*’. She never told me what her name had been before she had changed it. “They know of my situation and give me money to buy food; I clean

⁶³ *Munneswaram* is a place of Hindu religious worship on the Islands Western Coast. It was believed that a woman could become fertile by praying to the gods at this temple.

the church for them in return”, Mary told me describing her friends in the church in town, and for the first time in our discussion I could detect a sense of peace and happiness in her tone and manner.

5.7. Twilight of estate life: reminisces of a ‘grandmother’

The three stories that follow, of *Krishna Devi*, *Lechchami* and of another woman whose name I could not learn, are morbid stories of ‘old age, disease and death’ as experienced by women I met at the *Ceylonita* estate. Their stories tell of the ways in which women continue to be oppressed by forces surrounding them - the capitalist production system that does not free even old women like *Krishna Devi* from its vicious grip, pays wages that does not allow women like *Lechchami* who are terminally ill to obtain medical treatment they so desperately need, that robs women of their young children and ultimately even their sanity - throughout their lives. Also they are stories of how structures of capitalist patriarchy, surfacing in the form of religious and cultural practices, continually suppress women as a group of ‘inferior beings’ whose status is seen as lower than that of men. Finally, they are stories of how the specific historical locations of these women; the fact that they are descendants of a migrant labour force brought to this Island by its former colonial rulers, still plays on their lives, thereby effecting a triple structure of oppression on their lives - of capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism.

5.7.1 *Krishna Devi*

I had first met *Krishna Devi* during my visits to the lower division crèche and had made a mental note to visit her at her home during the course of my stay at the estate. My stay at the estate was drawing to an end and I had still not gone to visit *Krishna Devi* as I had intended to when I first met her. I had been waiting for a word from *Biso Menike* as I needed her to assist me in recording *Krishna Devi's* story. This afternoon she came to meet me with the suggestion that we make the planned visit. When I saw *Krishna Devi* at the 'line', she was wearing the same *sari* I had first seen her in, and was carrying her granddaughter while her daughter-in-law prepared the family dinner. She had a room on her own in the same 'line', and told us that she had just come in to help her daughter-in-law while she cooked. We decided to stay on in the kitchen where the glowing fire gave out a warm welcome unlike the cold and damp room in front. I was equipped with my camera, the recorder and of course *Biso Menike* as translator. *Krishna Devi* knew why I had come, and got on with her story without a preamble. It was as if she had been waiting for a chance to tell someone of her long and tiring journey through life - for hers was a story that stretched back to the time of the *sudu mahattays* - the colonial masters who ruled this land and proudly roamed the estate on horseback. I had scribbled some questions I had wanted to ask *Krishna Devi* on a piece of paper and had given them to *Biso Menike* before we came in. As she went on, the conversation was translated to me piece by piece by *Biso Menike*. I listened: fascinated as tales of how 'young women' were forcibly taken away and kept at the bungalow, were related by this elderly woman.

If there was a pretty girl who caught the planter's eye a message was sent through the *Kangani*, for her to be brought to the bungalow. Even married women were not

safe. The women were helpless because the whole family would be thrown out of the estate..., where were they to go?

Krishna Devi's story was linked up with her past memories and present experiences. She explained how she had worked in the fields as a young girl, and how as a young mother she had left her infant son at the crèche and continued working. She had worked as a plucker throughout her adult life till it was time for retirement. Now at the age of eighty two she was still working, helping to take care of children whose mothers went out to work. *Krishna Devi's* own granddaughter, whom she was carrying even while talking with me was among the group of children she helped take care of at the crèche. Coming out clearly and forcefully through her story was the fact that she had been working to earn a living for as long as she could remember. She told me she at the age of eighty two she was tired of working:

I feel very tired working at the crèche all day. It is hard work looking after little children. I have to do all the cleaning and cooking and supplying water...but I can't stay at home. I will be a burden to my son...so I will go to work...all this will end one day when I die.

At some point during our discussion, *Krishna Devi* told me that 'estate women' identified themselves with the tea bushes. The women generated new life by giving birth to children and the tea bushes sprung up new leaves; thus both were thought of as symbols of regeneration and fertility. The 'two leaves and the bud' they plucked from the tea bush were compared by women to the stages of their lives. The *bud* was the 'virgin daughter' the *short leaf* represented the 'young woman' and the *mature coarse leaf* was the 'old woman'. She laughingly told me that she was now very much a *mature leaf* soon to fall off and to be replaced by a *bud*. Even though she smiled when she told me this, written

on her elderly and lined face I read traces of deep seated sadness and bitterness. For more than once during our discussion I got the impression that *Krishna Devi* was looking forward to death as a means to end the long and hard struggle of her life. One sentence she uttered still rings clearly in my mind “when you are dead you don’t have to work any more...and there is no worry about what you are going to eat tomorrow”.



Krishna Devi at the crèche

Lechchami in the field



We met *Lechchami* on our way to *Radhamnai's* house in the top division. She was one of the women working in the vicinity that cold morning, and who for one moment looked up from the tea bushes to greet us with the now ever so familiar “*nona* [madam], where are you going? *Biso Menike* told everyone where we were going. It was during one of these brief encounters that *Biso Menike* asked one woman, who looked elderly compared to the others in the field, and who looked a bit fragile “Have you been to the hospital as I asked you to?” The woman apparently had not. *Biso Menike* climbed up to where she was working and they had a conversation in Tamil. At the end of which, I saw the woman making a gesture with her hands. Some time ago a group of volunteer doctors had come to the estate and taken blood samples of about hundred and fifty women who were over forty five years of age. The reports were recently sent back to the EMP⁶⁴, and there were nine cases marked as ‘bad’ reports. The women with reports marked out as bad were advised to go the teaching hospital in *Kandy* for further examinations and treatment. But *Lechchami*, the woman I had just seen making a sign with her hands, had not yet gone to the hospital. *Biso Menike*, told me all this, explaining why she had to go and talk with the woman. “...we think she might have cancer, it is important she goes to hospital as early as possible, but how can I tell her that she might be terminally ill? It will upset the whole family”. *Biso Menike* was facing a dilemma here; she obviously did not want to be the one to break the news. “What did the hand signal mean”? I asked. “They use that gesture of the hands to indicate they have no money at the moment. That is why she is

⁶⁴ EMP denotes the term Estate Medical Practitioner. Every estate had a resident EMP who was a government officer, appointed by the Ministry of Health.

postponing her visit to the hospital”.⁶⁵ That afternoon, coming back from our visit to the top division, we met *Lechchami*’s husband on the road, and *Biso Menike* almost pleaded with him to take his wife to see a doctor. “I will *nona* [madam], as soon as I get my pay this month” he promised. *Biso Menike*’s muttered words matched my thoughts when she said “It might be too late by then”.

5.7.2 Disease and death in the estate

This was not the first time I had witnessed the distressing effects of medical problems on the lives of ‘estate people’, both young and old. Another incident which I recall was when I saw a young mother walk into the crèche carrying her sick child. The little boy, who was barely two years old, was running a high temperature. He was wrapped in a piece of linen cloth and desperately clung to his mother. Both *Siriyalatha* and *Biso Menike*, who had come for a visit that day, were full of concern and asked what was wrong with the child. We were told he was unwell, and had been for the past two days. The mother was asked why she was carrying the sick child around with her without taking him to the doctor. “I will go in the afternoon, when my husband comes back from work” was her reply. In the meantime she wanted *Biso Menike* to tell her what to do, to make the fever go down. That was why she had come here. She was told what to do by the obviously very concerned midwife and was also given two tablets of *panadol*. And she went away carrying the sick child with her.

⁶⁵ Medical advice and treatment at government hospitals are provided free of charge. But they need money to pay for the bus to go to Kandy. In August 2008 when I was doing my fieldwork bus fares had increased sharply due to rising fuel prices, making even public transport a luxury for estate and other low income workers.

She has no money to take the child to the private dispensary nearby. That is why she is waiting until her husband comes back. I guess he had gone to borrow some money from a money lender.

This was the explanation I was given about the incident by *Biso Menike*. A few days later I interviewed *Ananda*, the Estate Medical Practitioner (EMP), who gave me a full account of how the medical system in the estate was run and what he had been able to do towards improving the health conditions of the workers during his long stay here. Ten minutes into the discussion, I switched off the recorder; I did not want to record what he described as his achievements, and my gaze fell upon rack after rack of medicine cupboards - devoid of any medicine - filling the room. *Biso Menike* later told me that the government no longer supplied free medicine to the estate dispensary. The workers had to go to the nearby government hospital if they wanted free medicine. This was some ten kilometres away and there were very few buses on the roads. Or they had to visit the private dispensary nearby and consult a doctor who charged money. *Biso Menike* knew of incidents where children had died simply because their parents had been unable to find money to give them the necessary medical treatment. The little boy I saw was one of the lucky ones. He was taken to hospital in the afternoon and soon recovered from his brief illness. The boy and his mother in the vignette I narrate below are two of the unlucky ones.

I got to hear details of their story through *Nisal* who related it to me in the midst of a gathering of his planter⁶⁶ friends one night. He told me how he had come to know of an

⁶⁶ The term used to describe a person who was in charge of a plantation.

estate family who were postponing the burial of their six year old son, who had died of fever, because they were unable to buy a wooden casket to bury him in. “ I gave them some money out of my monthly salary, I couldn’t just stand by and do nothing. After all the boy who had died was the same age as my daughter”. I already knew of this incident, having come across the deceased boy’s mother one day. *Biso Manike* who had been with me had related the whole story to me. I could clearly recall the woman’s grief - stricken face as she wandered aimlessly around the estate. She told us she was going to the *Kovil* to do a *pooja* for her son. “There are no *Kovils* on that side of the estate; people say she has gone mad”, *Biso Manike* whispered in my ear. The women didn’t hear this comment; I don’t think she would have cared even if she did. She just walked on, in the opposite direction, in search of the *Kovil*.

Silvia Federici (2004: 63-64), critiquing Marx’s analysis of primitive accumulation, says “we do not find in his work any mention of the profound transformations that capitalism introduced in the reproduction of labour - power and the *social position* of women.” Federici, seeking to extend the Marxian view of primitive accumulation by bringing in feminist considerations argues, “It was *also an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class*, whereby hierarchies built on gender...became constitutive of class rule” (2004: 64). How hierarchies built on gender degrades the social positioning of a woman from her birth as a girl child to her death as an old woman in this estate is depicted in the following encounter, where I walked in to the very ‘*Kovil*’ the woman in my narration above was searching for.

I have often passed this *kovil* on my way to the ‘line’ rooms, but had been a bit apprehensive about going in. Today I was again near this place of religious worship and had some spare time on my hands. I gathered up my courage and went in; the whole place looked a bit eerie, with statues of *Hindu* deities⁶⁷ looking down at me. I was taking a closer look at the statues some of which were a bit frightening - especially the ‘*Kali Amma*’ statue which was of a female demon - and didn’t hear the *Sami*, who was in charge of the *kovil* enter through the back door. He looked at me a little disapprovingly, as I hurriedly explained my purpose. Summoning what little knowledge I had about *Hinduism* to the rescue, I tried to embark on a ‘religious’ conversation with him. This proved to be the correct thing to do and I could see that the frown that had first come to his face on seeing me inside this ‘sacred place’ was slowly fading away. He explained his role to me as the head *Sami* of the *kovil*, and about the various religious ceremonies⁶⁸ the estate people engaged in throughout the year. Cautiously, I came out with the question that had been forming in my mind “Do women take part in these functions”?

They do, but they are forbidden from entering the *kovil* on days when they are ‘unclean’ [meaning when women were menstruating]. If they do, it might pollute this place of worship forever. It is my sacred duty to keep the *kovil* clean for the gods.

He repeatedly informed me that women were not allowed to enter the inner rooms of the *kovil*, but did not tell me why. I asked him to tell me about the religious ceremonies that were part of the daily lives of estate workers. As he explained, a ceremony was held at the *kovil* to celebrate the birth of a boy child. Then there were certain religious functions

⁶⁷ *Siva, Vishnu, Murugan, Kathireshan.*

⁶⁸ *Deepavali, Thai Pongal, Maha Shiva Rathri*

to be performed at a marriage ceremony, and at a funeral. All these called for his valued services, and he was paid a small sum of money which was deducted from the workers' salaries. He went on to explain the importance of performing the funeral ceremony correctly, or else the dead man or woman will not be able to rest in peace. He added that women were not allowed to walk to the graveyard with the body of her dead relative. I didn't ask him why, maybe I didn't want to hear him reply saying "it's because the women might pollute the grave yard". Perhaps this rule was of little importance, because women were allowed in the graveyard once they were dead, as long as they were accompanied only by their male relatives.

I read my experiences at the *kovil* where I learned the story of 'women and graveyards' in the light of Silvia Federici's argument where she says "capitalism...has planted into the body of the proletariat deep divisions that have served to intensify and conceal exploitation. It is in great part because of these imposed divisions - especially those between women and men - that capitalist accumulation continues to devastate life in every corner of the planet" (64).

In summary then, the above stories tell us how women and girls like *Radha*, *Madhavi*, *Lakshmini*, *Sita Devi*, *Rajeswari*, *Mary*, and *Krishna Devi* live their lives within this plantation estate: engaging in the roles of daughter, sister, mother, grandmother, often combining them with waged work and surrounded by the dominative forces of class, gender and ethnicity. Having told their stories, I now move on to look at a work setting

that is vastly different to *Ceylonita* estate in many ways. Yet, the *Sri Knit* factory, my second ethnographic site, is also similar to *Ceylonita* in that here again it is women, specifically ‘young girls, who make up the vast majority of the work force. Thus, it is to telling the stories of how these ‘girls’ live and work within the regimes of a global garment factory that I now turn.

Chapter 6: Analysis

SriKnit Factory

The first part of this narrative woven around the lives of ‘sewing girls’ of *SriKnit* factory begins with a journey to the ‘other side’ of the town, where they live, away from their homes and in temporary boarding houses. *Tamara* who no longer works as a ‘sewing girl’ tells me of her ‘new’ life as a mother and a housewife. Stories of *Ramani* and other girls in *Margaret Aunty’s* boarding house informs me not only of their lives as ‘sewing girls’ in the ‘zone’ but also as mothers, daughters and sisters at their homes. What they tell me and what I see around the ‘zone’ make me rethink the dual burden of women as applies to these workers. *Sureka and Sakuntala*, a young mother and a mother to be, both tell me of the impossibility of taking care of their families while working in the ‘zone’. *Dishanthi* and *Dilrukshi*, two sisters, one about to leave her job and the other a ‘new girl’ on the shop floor, tell me of their reasons for leaving and coming to the zone respectively.

The second part of this narrative takes me inside the factory, where I meet *Kumara*, *Mahesh*, *Jarnmarz* and others and hear their views about the ‘sewing girls’ and their work. The ‘girls’ however, who incidentally makeup the vast majority of *SriKnit’s* work force, are kept hidden in the shop floor, working on their machines; ‘estranged’ labour on the global assembly line. My encounters with them are limited to ‘watching’, for I am not allowed to speak with any of them while at work. *Minsala’s* story as told here is based on what I saw and sometimes over - heard while I stood at my corner at the end of line two, watching her, head bent low over her machine, tears pouring down her young face onto the garment in her hands.

6.1. Mothers, Daughters, Sisters and ‘Sewing Girls’: rethinking productive and reproductive labour

6.1.1 A journey: to the ‘other’ side of the town

I was on my way to meet *Pramila*, the present leader of *Dabindu*⁶⁹ (drops of sweat), in her office at *Averiwatta*.⁷⁰ The road to *Averiwatta* was through the *Katunayake* high security zone. *Katunayake*, which boasted the only international airport of Sri Lanka, had good reason to be called an area of ‘high security’ having twice been the target of fearful guerrilla attacks⁷¹ in the recent past. My national identity card, which had come out of my handbag at the outset of the journey, never went inside again for I had to give it out for inspection at every check point on the way - and there were a good many of them. I held on to it as if it was my most treasured possession, for without it I would soon end up at the nearest police station, and would miss my appointment with *Pramila*. We turned to the right at the huge name board displaying the words, ‘*Katunayake* International Air Port’. The road leading to the airport and to the free trade zone beyond ran wide and smooth - the multi - coloured bougainvilleas on either side of the newly carpeted road shimmering in the brilliant August sunshine. The road to *Averiwatta* which ran almost parallel was narrow, dusty and full of potholes and people, mostly young girls. I kept glancing down at the piece of paper in my hand where I had scribbled down directions to the *Dabindu* office. *Pramila* had told me the way to her office over the phone last night,

⁶⁹ *Dabindu* is one of the prominent Non Governmental organizations (NGOs) operating within the *Katunayake* Free Trade Zone. Funded by an international agency, its objectives are to ‘fight for workers’ rights’ and to organize workers to collectively struggle against exploitative policies of global companies. Source: Publication of *Dabindu* Collective, 1997.

⁷⁰ A small town located in the vicinity of the *Katunayake* Free trade Zone. Boarding houses of garment factory workers are concentrated in this area.

⁷¹ Attacks launched by *Tamil* separatists fighting for a ‘homeland’ in the Northern part of the Island.

but her instructions had not been very clear, and this was the first time I had taken the road leading to *Averiwatta*. On all other occasions it had been the other (better) road I had taken, which led to the airport terminal and to all the factories of the ‘zone’⁷². The driver of the van, who had accompanied me on many of these other trips, wanted to know why I was going this way, adding “this is not a good area you know”. I didn’t ask him for an explanation, for I knew of the stigma attached to working as ‘garment girls’ held by some local people. We continued driving down the same road for sometime, and I was more than relieved to see the name board, *Dabindu Collective, Welaboda Road, Katunayake*, set up in front of a small house. This was the office from which *Pramila* organized the work she did on behalf of the ‘girls’ working in the ‘zone’.

My relief at locating the office soon turned into dismay as my eyes took in the strange landscape before me, spread as far as the eye could see. As I stepped out of the van and walked down the gravel road towards the office, I was overcome by a strange feeling of disbelief. This was different from anything I have ever experienced in my life. Having lived most of my life in and around the not so affluent areas of *Colombo*⁷³, families living in slums was a sight I was very much familiar with. But this was different. There were no families here, only young girls around the age of 18 -25 could be seen in and around the small rooms, built of concrete blocks and roofed with asbestos sheets. These were small blocks of land - fenced in by barbed wire - each holding some 30 to 40 rooms, and hardly anything else. There were no trees, no free land, no breathing space, nothing but

⁷² I use this term to denote the popularly used Sinhala name for the Free Trade Zone, *Kalape*

⁷³ *Colombo* is the commercial capital of Sri Lanka. As common to any developing country in the region it has a large population of pauperized families living in congested dwellings known as slums or shanties in its vicinity.

heaps of concrete, asbestos and barbed wire. The land owners around the 'zone' certainly knew how to make the most of whatever land they possessed, for the entire landscape was dotted with makeshift structures of varying shapes and sizes, all serving as boarding houses or rooms for the 'girls'. At first glance the whole place appeared to be unreal, a scene out of a movie maybe. It was too overcrowded, too congested, too appalling to be real. But it was, this entire set - up and most of all the scores of young 'girls' I saw outside their 'rooms' this Sunday morning were indeed real. This was how they lived. These were the 'homes' to which they returned after eight or more hours of arduous work at deafeningly noisy factories at the other side of this land. It was around 11.00 o'clock in the morning by now, but I could see some of these 'girls' had only just got up as they were washing their faces near a common well⁷⁴. I later learned they had worked the night shift and had come back only at 2.00 o'clock in the morning. Some others had piles of clothes to wash, some were chatting with friends, and the few who were inside the rooms were getting ready to cook lunch. I got to know this because once the doors were opened everything that was happening inside the rooms could easily be seen by anyone walking down the road.

My sister's' friend, who had known *Pramila* for sometime, had described her as warm, friendly, and very chubby. I soon found all these to be true as I saw a smiling woman by the entrance of a modest house converted into an office. She guessed who I was and greeted me cheerfully and started talking as if she had known me all her life. She had so much to say, and never stopped talking even while she opened the office doors, switched

⁷⁴ A well is a deep hole in the ground from where water was drawn out.

on the computer and found a chair for me to sit down. Once seated I looked around the room which had two computers, a table and a few chairs, and a cupboard full of books, magazines and papers - which later proved to be a treasury of information for me. *Pramila* made her son sit down near her; greeted two young girls who came in to help her with her work and continued talking with me all in one breath. She told me how she had started coming to the *Dabindu* office with her mother⁷⁵ as a little girl, and had gradually taken over her role as leader of this oldest and most respected NGO in the 'zone'. I let her talk on - about what the movement had done for the workers, what she thought of the life of 'garment girls' and so on until finally she asked me "what exactly are you doing ?" I explained my study to her in detail. She told me of some research work she had done herself, about the lives of garment workers and promised to give me copies of her work. Also she agreed to introduce me to some 'girls' who were either working or had worked at *SriKnit garments*, the factory to which I had gained access beforehand. I told her of my intention of getting to know a number of girls who were at 'different stages of their work life', meaning some who had a few years of work experience, some who had joined recently, some who were expecting children or who had young children to take care of. She smiled at my request of wishing to meet some workers who had young children or who were pregnant. Her views as I state below, were echoed and re echoed by almost every 'girl and woman' I was to meet during my stay in the 'zone':

What makes you think we might have a lot of pregnant mothers or women with young children here? Just wait till you get to see how they live here and work in the

⁷⁵ *Pramila's mother Ranmali was the founder of Dabindu.*

factories, then you will understand what I say...they work here for five, six years...
then leave [their jobs in the zone].

In spite of her scepticism *Pramila* did her best to find the whereabouts of a few workers who did have young children or were pregnant and to introduce me to them. She also arranged to contact *Tamara*, a girl who had left her job at *SriKnit* garments a few years ago to return to her home town in *Kandy*⁷⁶. She had got married since leaving the 'zone' and was now mother to a little girl. *Tamara's* story becomes the starting point of my journey through which I seek to understand the ways in which the 'women and girls' I meet in the 'zone', *Tamara, Sureka, Sakunthala,, Dishanthi and Dilrukshi*, among others, strive to negotiate the multiple dominant structures of capitalist patriarchy and neo - colonialism as applies to their specific historical locations, while engaging in their daily lives as 'sewing girls' on the global assembly line and as mothers, daughters, and sisters outside of it.

Chandra Mohanty (2003:55), in *Feminism without Borders* argues that, 'systems of race, class and gender domination do not have *identical* effects on third world women'. Mohanty sees such systems of domination as operating through the setting up of (in Dorothy Smith's words) particular, historically specific 'relations of ruling' (Smith, 1987:2). Further, she positions third world women and their struggles at the intersections of these relations of ruling. Drawing on Mohanty's theoretical assertion, I place the 'women and girls' who struggle to live their lives within this particular capitalist industrial setting at the intersections of a complex structure of class, gender and historical

⁷⁶ *Kandy* is a town in the Central part of Sri Lanka, some 72 kilometres away from *Colombo*.

location. My attempt to explore the complexities of their lives is further inspired by her vision where she says:

I want to suggest that it is possible to retain the idea of multiple, fluid structures of domination which intersect to locate women differently at particular historical conjunctures, while at the same time insisting on the dynamic oppositional agency of individuals ...and their engagement in 'daily life' (Mohanty, 2003:55).

Accordingly, throughout my journey, where I meet *Tamara, Ramani, Sureka, Sakuntala, Dishanthii, Dilruksi and Minsala* and others and seek to understand the lived realities of their daily lives, is the belief that while being placed at the intersection of multiple dominative structures of oppression, these 'women and girls' nevertheless oppose and struggle against these oppressive structures that enclose their lives as proletarian women of a postcolonial location.

6.1.2. *Tamara, Ramani* and others: production, reproduction and beyond

Once I told *Pramila* I would like to talk with *Tamara*, she took it upon herself to contact her and arrange a meeting. First, we needed to find *Tamara's* home address and *Pramila* asked some girls who came into the office regularly to assist her in this. One day, *Ramani*, one of *Tamara's* friends who were still in the 'zone' walked into *Dabindu* office. She told us *Tamara* wrote to her regularly, she even had some letters with her; which she handed over to *Pramila* so that she could know the address. Being one of the few 'girls' who had worked in the 'zone' for a longer period of time, *Ramani* was closer to *Pramila* in age and the two were best of friends. I later learned that they shared a past of bitterly fought struggles over the years they had known each other. *Pramila* quickly

read through one of the letters in her hand and a smile came to her face. “Would you like to read this?” She asked me. At first I was doubtful whether I should, “go ahead and read it, it’s nothing confidential, and besides it is a ‘heartening’ letter. It’s very rarely that I get to read something like this.” Sensing that *Pramila* wanted me to read the letter, I took it in my hands. I was glad I did, it was a heart warming story of the life of a young mother; so full of love and concern for the ‘sisters’ she had left behind in the ‘zone’. A few thoughts *Tamara* had penned down in this letter to her best friend, as she calls *Ramani*, which I see as significant in my effort to understand the story of her life, are as follows:

I take *chuti* [pet name for her daughter] to the *Montessori* [pre-school] every morning. ...when I get home I have a few hours to do my sewing. I get a good income from it, especially during the festive seasons. I will come to see all of you very soon....how is *Ranmali nenda* [aunty]? It is because of her that I am living like this today.

I was able to understand *Tamara*’s sentiments as expressed in her letter much better once I was able to talk with her in person a few weeks later. Also I obtained her permission to use it in my writings; even though she smiled broadly when I asked her if I may, and inquired, “Who would want to know about my life”? I told her many people would.

As she had promised in her letter, *Tamara* came to visit her friends over the August vacation, when her daughter didn’t have to go to the pre - school. My first impression on seeing her was that she looked tranquil and happy, and altogether pretty in the traditional *ossari* ⁷⁷ she wore. As I watched her while she stood among her friends, cheerfully

⁷⁷ *Ossari* is the traditional dress of Sinhalese women.

chatting away, her daughter playing near by, I thought she looked quite different from the ‘girls’ I saw around the ‘zone’ everyday. *Tamara* appeared to be healthy and lively, where as the ‘girls’ I saw here daily mostly looked weary and lifeless. Having being warmly greeted by her friends *Tamara* came over to where I was standing. I told her I had read her letter to *Ramani*, and would like to know more about her life, in the ‘zone’ as well as after she left work. She agreed to tell me all I wanted to know, obviously *Ramani* or *Pramila*, or both of them had talked to her about me previously. *Tamara* began her story by telling me about her early life, in a far away village in the central part of the country. As eldest daughter in a family of four children, she had given up her education after the GCE ordinary level examination and had come to the ‘zone’ in search of work. She said she didn’t want to be a burden to her parents, who were farmers. *Tamara* described her feelings, when as a young girl she had to leave her family and come to an unknown city as:

It was a long time ago, and I was a very young girl. I was lonely and frightened and wanted to go home...but I knew I couldn’t. ...My father was old and my sisters and brother were still at school. I had to earn money to send home.

She described how she had made friends with *Ramani*, and how *Pramila*’s mother had helped both of them overcome their fears and continue in their jobs. Both ‘girls’ had used a major part of their wages to support their parents and younger siblings. “Every month we sent money home. After paying the boarding house owners we had very little left. There were days when we had to stay without eating.” *Tamara* had worked in the ‘zone’ for seven years and little by little had managed to save money to buy some gold

jewellery⁷⁸ for her self. Five years ago she had resigned from her job to get married to her cousin. “Why did you have to leave your job to get married?” I asked her. The look that came into her face, when I asked this, made it quite clear that she thought it a very stupid question indeed. Nevertheless, she chose to answer me. Her answer as I state below, was endorsed by her friends who were still in the room, for many nodded their heads in agreement with what *Tamara* told me:

That is what most of us do. We work for a few years..., collect a bit of money and leave to get married. We would die if we work here for longer than that. How can we work here and have a family? There are no houses in the zone, only rooms. At home, both my mother and mother-in-law help me to take care of my daughter. Who could do that here?

During the first few years of her marriage, *Tamara* had been busy in her new role as mother and housewife. She told me her husband didn’t like her talking about her life as a ‘sewing girl’. “He thinks it is degrading to work in the ‘zone’. He didn’t even like me writing to my friends, but I did, without letting him know”. With her daughter growing up and going to pre-school, she had started sewing clothes for her friends and neighbours for a small charge. Having followed a sewing course while in the city, *Tamara* was a skilled seamstress, and now she had a steady flow of orders which gave her a considerable income of her own. I was curious to know what *Tamara*’s husband thought about her sewing garments at home. “He doesn’t mind, its not sewing that is considered shameful, it’s living and working here in the zone”. Many times during her conversation with me *Tamara* gratefully recalled *Ranmali*’s advice in getting her to follow a sewing

⁷⁸ In Sri Lankan culture it is considered a must for a girl to own gold jewellery, which is counted as part of her dowry at marriage. Every girl I spoke with told me of their ambitions to buy at least a gold chain and a few bangles. For some, this was their sole savings for the future.

course. “If not for her, I would have been just like most of these ‘girls’; they sew garments for the export market, but many of them can’t sew up even the simplest garment by themselves”.

Deskilling of workers as happened on the assembly lines was an issue *Pramila* had repeatedly brought up during our discussions. She had talked to me about the shop floor work patterns where ‘division of labour’ and ‘specialization’ made one ‘girl’ concentrate on sewing only one small part of a garment. Such processes of mass production, while achieving increased efficiency on the assembly line also generated a mass of ‘sewing girls’ who could not complete even a simple garment by themselves. “They sew the same item again and again on the lines, come back, get some sleep and return to the lines the next morning. There is never time to do anything else”. *Pramila* thought of this set up as an exploitation of their lives and labour. In fact she had much more to say on the issue:

People outside the ‘zone’ think of these ‘girls’ as uneducated [*nuugath*], and ignorant [*moda*]...some even publish numbers to create that impression⁷⁹ [*mata hadanna*]. I have been with them for a long time. There are ‘girls’ here who have university degrees, who can dance, sing, act, paint, write stories and poems... they have many talents [*dakshatha*]...but they have no opportunities [*avastha*] to pursue them. ...they are daughters of poor parents [*duppath demawpiyange duvala*]. It is their ‘class’ [*panthiya*] that has sent them to the zone. (Within brackets, I have noted the exact Sinhala words used by *Pramila*).

⁷⁹ Here *Pramila* was referring to statistical information that appeared on various government as well as company owned publications giving detailed descriptions of the low level of educational attainments of garment factory workers. She saw this as a strategy of justifying their continued exploitation, especially lower than average wage levels.

Mohanty, highlighting the danger of using common indicators to describe third world women, states, 'While they may be useful and necessary these presumably 'objective' indicators by no means exhaust the meaning of women's day-to-day lives'. She further argues that "The everyday, fluid, fundamentally historical and dynamic nature of the lives of third world women is here collapsed into a few 'frozen' indicators"(2003:48).

Here, Mohanty criticizes the use of 'objective' indicators such as education, life expectancy, nutrition, fertility, income generating ability and so on to describe and 'categorize' third world women as traditional, backward and illiterate, saying such analysis freezes women in time, space and history (2003: 48). *Pramila* uses this same argument to explain the lives of third world women who work in the global garment factories. She sees such descriptions as a strategy of ensuring continued exploitation of third world women by global capital and its local allies. In her view, and also in mine, 'categorizing' the women workers of global garment factories as 'uneducated', 'unskilled' and sometimes even 'immoral' is indeed a conscious scheme of continually repressing them as a subordinated, inferior workforce, who are compelled to make a living by selling their labour power to the global capitalist enterprise.

Pramila, is not a (postcolonial) theorist, she spends her time walking from 'room to room' to see for herself how her 'girls' are getting on. However, what she thinks about the lives of these 'girls' reaffirms the theoretical notions as articulated by postcolonial feminist writers. *Pramila* identifies 'class' as the dominant structure that compels 'girls' to seek employment in the 'zone'. She also draws on the diverse talents and abilities that

the 'girls' bring with them to this mechanized setting. However, she has little hope of seeing such talents being pursued by the 'girls' to achieve self fulfilling careers in future.

The note of deep regret and even sadness in her tone was unmistakable when she told me:

It's no use *miss*⁸⁰ ...*all* their energy and talents are 'drained' [*ura gnnawa*] by the machines...they come here as young girls, full of life and 'dreams' [*balaporothisu*].

They bring the 'strength of their hands' [*atte haiya*] to sell....and go back with nothing ... [their bodies] worn out and anaemic...there are many others 'at the zone gates' [*kalape gettuwa langa*] to take their place.

The 'girls' as identified by *Pramila* bring their labour power to the 'zone' to sell for a price, because they have no other means of survival. In coming to the 'zone' they are removed from the familiar surroundings of their homes; and they work for a wage, sewing garments on the global assembly lines. Recurring at this particular historical juncture is a phenomenon similar to that which was identified by Marx as the pre - requisite for primitive accumulation "coming face to face and into contact of two very different kinds of commodity - possessors. On the one hand, the owners of money, means of production, who are eager to increase the sum of values they possess, by buying other people's labour - power; on the other hand, free labourers, the sellers of their own labour - power, and therefore the sellers of labour' (1946: 737). What is happening today, in the third world, which attracts owners of the means of production, to set up their manufacturing outfits lured by a large supply of cheap female labour, is another phase of primitive accumulation as identified by Marx. However, this present day phenomenon can be better explained through the views of Marxist feminists (e.g. Dalla Costa, 1999; Federici, 2004) who see primitive accumulation not as a once and for all epoch in history

⁸⁰ This is the term which she sometimes used to address me.

but as an ongoing, continuous process of accumulation that passes through different parts of the world at different times and in different forms. However, what is left unexplained or lies outside the theoretical frameworks of both Marxism and Marxist feminism is the dynamics of oppositional agency of individuals in the face of structural forces of domination. As theorized by postcolonial feminists (e.g. Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 2003) and even more importantly as identified and practiced by ‘women and girls’ like *Pramila* and *Dishanthi* who are not theorists but who nevertheless live their lives within the contexts of third world/postcolonial locations, third world women negotiate the effects of structures of domination on their lives in diverse and dynamic ways. In this sense what is required is not an attempt at explaining their lives as passive and ‘frozen’ in time, space and history - which indeed is an unfair exclusion of their wisdom, courage and ultimate sacrifice - but an attempt at exploring and explaining their lives as engaged in an ongoing struggle against forces of domination enclosing them, and the diverse effects such forces have on their lives as individuals. For as Mohanty (2003) asserts the dominative structures of class, gender and historical location, while impacting powerfully on how their lives are lived, does not; however have *identical* effects on the lives of third world women.

The expression on *Pramila*’s face when she handed me another letter, extracts of which I quote below, was quite different from her look of happiness when asking me to read *Tamara*’s letter earlier. This was one of the many letters, written up in neat Sinhala script and faded through time, which *Pramila* had kept with her for years. They were written by ‘girls’ who were no longer in the ‘zone’, and hidden between the lines of beautifully

formed letters, were shadows of regret and sadness, of their past lives and also of their present ones. The writer of this particular letter begins by telling *Pramila* about her new life:

Sometimes I miss the factory and all of you. It is very difficult to live without any income of my own. I am living at my husband's home with his mother and sister...I have nothing at all. They give me food and even help me with my baby. But sometimes I can feel their hostility. ... Now I regret not listening to you and learning some thing. I don't even know how to sew a baby shirt for my son. We never thought what was going to happen to us later...There was no time to think.

The life of this particular 'girl', as reflected through her letter is not what is experienced by *Tamara*, who at least for the time being, does not seem to hold any deep regrets about how her life is lived. *Ramani's* story, as I learned after many hours of listening to and talking with her, differs considerably from both these accounts. Even though she had come to the 'zone' at the same time with *Tamara* and many others who were no longer here, *Ramani* still lives in a boarding house and still works as a sewing machine operator. The story of her life, as I narrate below, tells us why she is left behind in the 'zone':

The first time I saw *Ramani*, was when I visited a boarding house with *Pramila*. I had noticed her because she had not talked much, but had quietly gone on with her task of folding up some clothes, while the other girls eagerly chattered away with each other and with us. Also she looked a bit older than the others in the group - on our way back I asked *Pramila* about her. "That is *Ramani*, she had been here for a long time now, she never got married, she keeps an eye on the younger girls and is a kind hearted person even though rather quiet". The second time I met her was when she walked into *Dabindu*

office with some letters, which paved the way for my meeting with *Tamara*. Now, all the time I was talking with *Tamara* inside the room, *Ramani* was trying to get friendly with *Tamara's* daughter. At first, the little girl did not respond and kept running back to her mother, but after many promises of sweets and even a toy, *Ramani* managed to win her over. A little while later, both of them went to look at a fish tank outside. I asked *Tamara*, why her friend was still unmarried and still working here. *Tamara* took a deep breath before telling me, "It's because there is no one who is willing to marry her" She didn't tell me anything else, nor did I ask her. I didn't ask *Ramani* anything about her past life for a long time to come, even though I met her often and we talked about many things. She was fond of reading and we discussed the novels we had read. Gradually, as we got to know each other better, she herself came out with little incidents about her life. Never fully and proudly like *Tamara* had done, but little things here and there that nevertheless gave me a clear picture of what her life had been over the past fifteen or so years. The reasons she gave for coming to the 'zone' were very similar to what *Tamara* had told me. Like *Tamara*, *Ramani* had also come to the 'zone' as a young girl nearly eleven years ago:

I couldn't just wait for my parents to support me; they were not able to... My father was a labourer, he had no regular income, and there were five more children in our family. I wanted to help them and build a future for myself.

Ramani continued her story to tell me how she had carefully saved up money for a dowry and had finally decided to get married to a person her mother had chosen for her:

The groom's side of the family came to our house one day,⁸¹ but later they sent a message to say they didn't want their son to marry a 'garment' girl'. I asked my mother not to look for any more proposals.⁸² I am going to work here. I used all my savings to send my younger sister to a better school in the city...I want her to study and do a 'good'⁸³ job ... not to be a 'garment girl' like me.

Many of the 'girls' I had met and talked with, told me of their hopes of returning to their homes, of getting married and of having families of their own. In fact for some of them, it was their main reason for coming to work in the 'zone', so that they could collect money for a dowry, which they saw as a precondition for marriage. While some of them were able to fulfil their dream of becoming a 'wife and a mother', some others like *Ramani*, were prevented from doing so, ironically due to the very reason that they had come to the 'zone' to work as 'sewing girls'.

6.1.3 Daughters, Sisters and 'Sewing Girls': 'dual burden' revisited

As the *Dabindu* anniversary celebrations⁸⁴ were drawing near *Pramila* spent more and more time getting together the events she had planned out for the day. She made it a point to personally visit the boarding houses to get as many 'girls' involved in these events as possible. "I can also have a look around these places when I go like this" She told me. "Some of the land lords around here run boarding houses which are not fit even for

⁸¹ This was customary in case of arranged marriages in our culture.

⁸² The common term used to describe arranged marriages.

⁸³ I asked *Ramani* what a 'good' job was. Working as a teacher, nurse or a bank clerk was a few she could think of. Working as a sewing machine operator in a garment factory was not a 'good' job in her view.

⁸⁴ When I met her in 2008 *Pramila* was busy getting ready to celebrate the 25th anniversary of *Dabindu*.

animals to live in, let alone young girls” This afternoon I asked her if I could join her on her visit. “Yes, come and have a look for yourself”. On our way *Pramila* showed me a modern two storey house closely guarded by a seven feet high parapet wall. She told me how a local resident who had owned a small house and some bare land had built rows and rows of concrete rooms and rented them to the ‘girls’ who came to work in the ‘zone’ at exorbitant rents. “Now they live over there (pointing to the new house) and run a string of boarding houses around the ‘zone’ ”. I was told that the place we were visiting today was one such boarding house. It was known among the ‘girls’ as *Margaret entige bordima* (boarding house of Aunty *Margaret*), *Margaret* being the name of the landlord’s wife, who acted as owner manager of these residential halls. We had to cross the public road and the rail road that ran parallel, to get to the place which was guarded by a barbed wire fence. Several ‘girls’ were bathing/washing clothes by the well, the few items of clothing they had hung up on the fence was all that separated their bathing space from the rail track and the public road which was full of people at all times. Once inside the ‘house’ I noted that unlike the rooms I had previously seen, it had a long narrow hall with two rows of twin beds on either side. Other than for the beds the hall only had some suitcases, cardboard boxes and clothes lines full of various items of women’s clothing running across its width.

As it was still the early afternoon, only a handful of its occupants were inside the hall. All of them appeared to be on very good terms with *Pramila*, who sat down on the nearest bed, saying “I am getting too old to be doing all this walking about, why doesn’t one of you take over from me”. The ‘girls’ laughed at that, “That’s not possible *Pramila akka*

[sister] because none of us will stay here for more than a few years, you are surviving only because you don't work in a factory. Otherwise you would not be here by now" This was their response to *Pramila's* request for a future leader. Of course *Pramila* knew this and had voiced her concern about the issue during one of our many conversations. "One major reason why I can't organize these 'girls' is this very short span of work life. Just when I get them aware and involved in things they are ready to leave and I have to start all over again". In *Pramila's* view the managers of factories operating inside the 'zone' preferred this practice of short work cycles of sewing machine operators. "They like it this way, they know there is little time for 'organized resistance' [*sanvidanthmaka virodatha*] when the 'girls' always go back to their villages after a few years". "But why do they leave?" My question was directed more at the 'girls' than at *Pramila*, for I already knew her views on the issue. One of them was quick to tell me "You would too miss, if you had to live in a place like this and work in a factory all day". Throughout that afternoon, I listened to them talking with each other and with *Pramila* about various issues that were of significance to them. Once or twice I joined in the conversation, but for the most part I was a silent onlooker, while they talked about their lives on the assembly lines, at the boarding house and at their homes. All the time they talked they were also going about their daily tasks of tidying up the hall, folding clothes and preparing to cook dinner at a small area at the end of the hall which served as a 'common' kitchen. In the following story I describe some of their thoughts, fears and concerns, as I heard that day, which explain the ways in which structural forces of capitalist patriarchy play upon their lives as 'sewing girls' on the global assembly line on the one hand, and daughters, sisters and (future) mothers and housewives on the other. Moreover, they

inform us of the ways in which they either buttress or resist these dominative structures through their thoughts and actions which are never static and simple, but always complex, dynamic and diverse.

Half an hour or so after first entering their residence I found myself standing at the far end of the long hall, while the 'girls' got ready to cook dinner. *Pramila* was sitting on a small chair near by, still complaining about aching legs. The 'girls' teased her, saying she was too fat, "Try and lose some weight. When you are thin like us, you will feel better.". "I can't help being fat...it's in my genes". *Pramila* obviously was not the least bit sensitive about how she looked. "As for you lot ...you never listen to what I tell you ...the little food you eat is not enough for 'girls' of your age" By now I had seen what they were going to cook for dinner; which was some rice and a vegetable. The 'girls' pooled their groceries, took turns in cooking and shared their meals. I learned this was a popular arrangement among groups of 'girls' living in the larger boarding houses; 'common cooking' was thought to be more practical and also less expensive in view of their cramped living spaces and the ever rising cost of basic food items. Now, at *Pramila's* comment of their 'eating habits' one of the younger 'girls' came out with the following reply:

You are right *Pramila akka* [sister], but do you honestly think we can afford to spend any more on food. Yesterday I gave Rs.2000 to *Margaret aunty* [as rent]....and I

have to give Rs.2, 000 for the chain I am getting made for my sister. You know what our salary is⁸⁵ and this month we don't have overtime.

A few others joined in the discussion with similar sentiments about how difficult it was to spread their meagre income among many pressing needs. They were especially critical about the high rents charged by landowners around the 'zone', and also accused the shop keepers in the vicinity of selling food items to them at higher than average prices. "They know we don't have time to go to other shops, so they sell things to us at higher prices", was how one of them explained the pricing practices of shop owners in the vicinity of the 'zone'.

"What is that chain you just talked about"? *Pramila* asked from the girl who had started the discussion. "It's for my elder sister. Her wedding is next month, and I have to finish paying for it before that" was her explanation. "Fine, you starve yourself to death so that your sister will have a gold chain, I am not telling you anything more." I was not sure of the mix of emotions in *Pramila's* voice when she said this; sarcasm, sadness, both or anything else. "But I have to do it, my sister must have a chain or people [meaning relatives and in-laws] will laugh at her. The young girl was clearly trying to defend her actions. "So let them laugh, who cares, they laugh at us any way, saying we are 'garment girls' ". This was a remark from another girl in the group. After a few more comments about what they thought of gold chains, marriage and dowries the conversation drifted in another direction.

⁸⁵ The wages of sewing machine operators are determined by a Wages Boards Ordinance. In 2008 the minimum wages level was Rs.8, 000 (approximately £ 44) per month. Most workers engaged in overtime work to supplement their income.

“Did you know *Smart Shirt*⁸⁶ had fired *Kamani*?” *Pramila* asked from no one in particular. The ‘girls’ apparently knew of the incident, but they were not aware of the reasons behind the termination. So *Pramila* explained the details to them and told that *Kamani*, a sewing machine operator of *Smart Shirt* had taken a day off to visit her ailing father. She had failed to return to work the next day. A supervisor had sent a strongly worded warning letter to her home. She had come back with the warning letter, thrown it in the supervisor’s face and had walked out of the factory. “*honda wede* [good] ” the ‘girls’ echoed in unison, “That woman [the particular female supervisor of *Smart Shirt*] is a vicious demon. Some months ago she sent another ‘girl’ home [fired from work] saying she took too much leave”. Taking leave was apparently a very sensitive issue with the ‘girls’; all of them were from far away remote villages, and the only time they got to see their families was when they went home on leave. “I am going to ask for three days leave for my sister’s wedding. If they say no, I will go anyway,” the young girl who was paying for a chain for her sister said from where she was trying hard to light up the fireplace. From where I was standing, I could clearly see the smile that came on to *Pramila*’s face at these words.

I read my experience above as illuminative of the incredibly intricate ways in which the ‘girls’ deal with the structures of capitalist patriarchy weighing down on their lives. In the case of the young girl above, on the one hand, she struggled to pay for a gold chain for her sister, so that she would have a dowry and would not be humiliated by her relatives, who obviously upheld patriarchal social norms. On the other hand she was determined to

⁸⁶ *Smart Shirt* is a large multinational corporation operating three factories in the Zone.

rupture the forces of capitalist discipline at her work place, which she knew might prevent her from attending her sister's wedding. Also every 'girl' in the room unanimously endorsed *Kamani's* act of defiance which had resulted in her losing her job. Not a single one of them tried to warn their housemate against doing something similar, even though they were apparently fully aware of the possible consequences of such disobedience. By openly endorsing such insubordination they were indeed resisting the forces of rigid capitalist discipline that sought to make them apparatus of the global assembly line and were revealing the importance their families at home had over their waged employment in the 'zone'. My experiences with the 'girls' at Auntie *Margaret's* boarding house intrigued me into looking further for similar acts of subtle resistance as practiced by the 'girls' and resulted in my gathering up a collection of poems. These were written by the 'girls' and published in the form of newspapers or small booklets by the *Dabindu Collective*⁸⁷. Below are extracts from one such poem, the title of which I have translated to read as 'with great pleasure I inform you' [*ita satutin danwa sitimi*]. It reflects the thoughts of a 'garment girl' on receiving a warning letter from her supervisor while at home on leave, and probably of many others like her including *Kamani* and the 'girls' at Auntie *Margaret's* boarding house.

⁸⁷ The Non Government Organization of which *Pramila* is the present leader.

itha satutin danwa sitimi....!

nuba visin evannata yeduna

‘warning letter’ eka

kisindu pamavimakin thorawa

‘section leader’ vithin lebuna

‘estuthi’hada pathlenma nowunath

(nena kumak kiyannada...?)

dawas thunsiya heta pahama

weda karanta

puluvankamak nethiweema pilibandawa

mage balawath shokaya...!

wedidura leewothin

ma sathiwiiya uythui ma danna

(nubath denagatha yuthu)

Erudina, pohodina, boho kananak

maa nubata sewaya kara ethi bava

etha vedagath karunakkwa

perala danvanu kemaththemi...!

with great pleasure I inform you...!

the ‘warning letter’,

you happened to send me

was received without any delay

through the ‘section leader’

‘thank you’even though not from the bottom
of my heart

(what else to say...?)

My deep regrets...!

for not being able to

work for

three hundred and sixty five days.

writing further

that I have worked for you

on many Sundays and *Poya*⁸⁸ days

that I know are mine

(that you should know as well)

as a very important matter

I wish to write back...!

⁸⁸ *Poya* day is a day of religious importance and is a public and commercial holiday.

<i>boho tejash ethuwa</i>	with such supremacy
<i>nuba visin evannata yeduna</i>	the ‘warning letter’
<i>‘warning letter’ eka</i>	you happened to send
<i>(boho garu saru nethuwa)</i>	(with little respect)
<i>udasana seethala dara keballi</i>	is kept carefully inside a ‘shopping’ ⁸⁹ bag
<i>Avuluwa genuma pinisa</i>	to light up in the mornings,
<i>‘shopping’ kawaraye baha</i>	the cold logs of the fireplace
<i>prewesam sahithawa tebu bawa</i>	I wish to inform you with pleasure...!
<i>Etha satutin danwanu kemaththem...!</i>	
 <i>ethin nevathath thuthi</i>	 so thank you again
<i>mee...yata(ha)th (novana) sevika</i>	this is(dis) obedient worker

by : *Merci B. Neththasingha*

Source: *Vinishaya karanu mena*

(for judgement), *Dabindu* Publication, 1999.

Here, in her very own style of writing and using a combination of Sinhala and a few English words that are commonly used on the shop floor, *Merci* tells us what she thinks of the ‘warning letter’ she had been sent. She had kept it to light up her fireplace at home;

⁸⁹ This is a type of plastic bag that is commonly used to put in groceries.

probably the only task she can think of to use it for. Hidden between the lines of her writing she also tells us that her employer had taken the first step in putting her out of work, an act that would cause a 'fire' that threatens to consume her life.

After that first time, I visited Auntie *Margaret's* boarding house time several times, always in the afternoons as most of the 'girls' were on day shifts. Once they were back from the factories, the 'girls' didn't have much to do. It took them only a few minutes to tidy up the hall. This done, they took the clothes that needed to be washed to the well outside, and washed them while having their baths. As cooking was done on a shift basis, those not on roster for the day got on to their narrow beds, (they had no other place to sit) and chattered with each other. They talked about the factories; about targets they couldn't meet, food they couldn't eat and supervisors they didn't like. There were also regretful recollections of their home; of elderly parents and young siblings. More often than not their discussions held a note of depression and dejection. It was only when they were talking about the future that their faces showed any sign of life, happiness and hope. They talked endlessly about how they were going to spend their lives once they were married and living away from the 'zone', as wives and mothers. All the 'girls' joined in such discussions, telling each other about their hopes and dreams. But *Ramani*, who sat on her bed at the end of the hall, had nothing to tell; she just listened with a vacant look on her kindly face.

As Engels (1972:137) in the *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* explains, in the old communistic household managing the household was a public and socially necessary industry. However, with the emergence of the patriarchal family and even more so the single monogamous family, household management lost its private character. “It became a *private service*; and the wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production.” (Emphasis original). Engels extending his analysis to explain the situation of the ‘proletarian wife’ under conditions of mass production states:

Not until the coming of modern large - scale industry was the road to social production opened to her again - and then only to the proletarian wife. But it was opened in such a manner that, if she carried out her duties in the private service in her family, she remains excluded from public production and unable to earn; and if she wants to take part in public production and earn independently, she cannot carry out family duties (1972:137).

Engels sees the modern individual family as ‘founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife’ and argues that ‘the first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industry, which in turn demands abolishing of the monogamous family as the economic unit of society’ (1972:137-38).

Reflecting upon the lives of ‘sewing girls’ of my vignette above in the light of Engel’s argument, the phenomenon identified by Engels when he highlights the inability of proletarian women to combine the roles of providing ‘private services’ in the household while earning independently by participating in public industry underline the dilemma faced by these ‘girls’. Their work in the factories enables them to take part in public

production and to earn independently. At the same time it also prevents them from providing private services, first in their extended and then in their own monogamous family units. To this extent Engel's analysis sheds light on the daily life patterns of these 'women and girls' as they struggle with the multiple roles of being mothers, daughters and sisters of their private family units on the one hand and being waged workers of large - scale public industries on the other. However, rather than engaging in a collective struggle to abolish the monogamous family as the economic unit of society thereby paving the way for their liberation as advocated by Engels, these 'girls' seem to view giving up their independent earning ability, returning to their villages and establishing new monogamous families as *the* path to liberation.

Writers with a Marxist feminist orientation (e.g. Dalla Costa , 1975: 7) viewing the same phenomenon from a different perspective argues that "advocating that the liberation of working class women lies in her getting a job outside the home is part of the problem itself and not a solution to it". In their opinion, 'slavery to an assembly line is not liberation from slavery to a kitchen sink'. But yet again, even such Marxist feminist arguments fail to shed light on the thoughts and aspirations of third world 'girls' who work in global garment factories, as they eagerly await the day when they would be freed from being 'slaves' on the assembly lines and would return to their homes to be wives and mothers. The stories of *Sureka* and *Sakuntala* as I narrate below gives further insights as to why these 'girls' dream of leaving the 'zone' and turning to their homes.

6.1.4 Sureka and Sakuntala: productive labour as ephemeral?

By this time all the ‘girls’, who worked with *Pramila* as volunteers at *Dabuindu* office, knew of my work and some were actively interested in it. This morning one of them came in excitedly, saying, “*miss*, *Sureka* is back from her village, we can go and see her”. I knew who *Sureka* was; I had even been anticipating her return from her hometown of *Matale* with her baby. I told her I will postpone the visit till tomorrow, not wanting to bother her after a long journey with a child. “That’s good, I will talk to her on my way home and tell her about you, so she will be ready to see you tomorrow”, promised *Pramila*, from her place at the corner of the room, where she sat stitching up a costume to be used at the up coming anniversary celebrations. By now I was getting as excited about the celebrations as they were, I especially wanted to see *Dishanthi* performing her *pooja netuma*⁹⁰ which was to be the opening event, but knew I was going to miss seeing it. One day, while we were discussing my work at the Open University of Sri Lanka, *Dishanthi* had asked me if we had any dancing courses. “I love dancing *miss*, I love all forms of art ...but I have hardly had an opportunity to learn anything all the time I was here. My life here has been an endless fight with heartless machines, but it’s only for a few months more, I am leaving next year.”

Next morning on my way to meet *Sureka*, *Dishanthi*’s words were still ringing in my mind. Nearly every ‘girl’ I met in the ‘zone’ repeatedly voiced their hopes of going back to their villages; to get married and start families of their own. *Sureka* was a married

⁹⁰ *Pooja Netuma* is a traditional form of dance performed by young girls which was the opening event of most cultural ceremonies in Sri Lanka.

woman; she had even given birth to a baby girl recently. I was already informed of these facts about her by the other 'girls'. Yet, she still lived in the 'zone', in one of the tiny concrete rooms that had a door in front, one window and got as hot as a furnace when the August sun blazed over its asbestos roof during day time. *Sureka's* room into which I walked in that morning was identical to the one *Dishanthi* shared with her husband (which I had seen before), the only difference was that instead of the pictures of babies around *Dishanthi's* bed, hers had a real baby girl on it; sleeping peacefully under a small covering of net. This room also had a clothes line on which a few baby clothes were hung on to dry, a plastic bath and a few toys. There was a feeding bottle and some baby food on the table, all covered up carefully with a plastic sheet to keep away the flies. "I have just managed to put her to sleep, I can't get anything done while she is up, she expects to be carried all the time", *Sureka*, every inch the proud young mother of her first child, said smilingly as she greeted me. I saw she was getting ready to wash some clothes and told her we could talk by the well. All the time we were outside *Sureka* had one eye on the baby, ready to run into the room at the slightest noise. She told me she had given up her job as a 'sewing girl' at *SriKnit* garments upon her daughter's birth, but continued to live in the 'zone'. Even before I asked her, she explained why:

My husband works as a security guard in one of the factories. So he has to live near to the 'zone'. ... this is not a good place to bring up a baby ...we don't even have the basic facilities here. I prefer to go back home, but my sister-in law ⁹¹ doesn't like it much when I go there.

⁹¹ It is the tradition in Sri Lankan for the youngest son to live in the parents' house with his wife; daughters are expected to live in their husband's houses.

I knew the area *Sureka* described as her home to be part of a beautiful village, very unlike the unpleasant, overcrowded city she had come to work in. “Why did you give up working?” I asked her.

I didn’t want to ...it is very difficult to manage with my husband’s salary, but I had no way of taking care of my daughter. I have no relatives to help me ...I have to pay all what I earn to hire some one [to take of a child] ...so I had no choice. I gave in my resignation at the end of the three month [maternity leave] period.

These are some of the things *Sureka* had to tell me while she washed the few baby clothes by the well outside her room. She just had time to put them out to dry before the baby woke up, and I took my leave of her, making a mental note to come and see her again. When I got to know her better *Sureka* told me that she had come to the ‘zone’ after years and years of trying to find a ‘good’ job. She also told me how ‘other’ girls in her village, less qualified than her, were able to find jobs in banks and schools, because they had political connections⁹². It was in a bitter tone of voice and with a cynical smile on her pretty face that *Sureka* explained to me the procedure of finding work in the ‘zone’:

For ‘us’ the ‘zone’ is the only place we can find work. ...there is no need to ‘know’ anybody to find work here, you just walk in with your certificates...or even without any, and the people at the gates make sure you are hired at once.

Sureka had worked at *SriKnit* garments for three years before getting married to a person whom she had met in the ‘zone’. She had continued working throughout her pregnancy and described her experiences during that period. “For as long as I could, I didn’t tell anyone in the factory I was expecting a child. I knew they would not like it”. She told me

⁹² In a context of acute unemployment the criteria for securing a ‘good’ jobs was not educational qualifications but having links with politicians. This is more or less standard practice in Sri Lanka and is identified as one of the main causes of youth unrest and rebellion.

that the factories practiced an unwritten policy of not recruiting married women. “They [meaning the management] will never tell you this, but it is always the young unmarried girls who are recruited, sometimes ‘girls’ lie and tell they are not married”. I asked her if pregnant workers were offered any concessions on the shop floor, and she told me:

Yes, we were given a fruit after lunch, [free] transport to our boarding houses and a medical check up [at the company medical centre] ...but the difficult part was working on a machine for hours and hours....we were never taken off the lines...not even during the last weeks [of the pregnancy].

Sureka told me she had worked through the months of her pregnancy because she needed the money for the baby. She had stayed in her village during the three months maternity leave period. At the end of this time she had returned to the zone; but only to hand in her resignation. Now she was living in this room with her baby daughter. She told me of her hopes for the future as; “I am going to build a small house in the village, and take my daughter away from this place”. As *Sureka* told me, she seems to see her stay in this room as temporary, just as her work as a ‘sewing girl’ in a factory was temporary. She had come here because she had little or no option of finding any other type of work. Similarly, she was staying here only until she could build a house for herself in the village, at which point she would leave the ‘zone’. But as *Pramila* had repeatedly reminded me, there were many others like her at the ‘zone’ gates waiting to come in and fill up the space left by *Sureka* and others on the assembly line.

Many of the things that *Sureka* told me about working during her pregnancy and giving up her job afterwards, were reaffirmed by *Sakuntala*, who was in the seventh month of

her pregnancy when I met her. I talked with her while she was getting ready for her monthly visit to the maternity clinic. There was a file on the small table by her bed; she told me it had all her medical records inside. She even asked me if I would like to have a look at them. Apparently she was very worried about some of the things the doctors had told her. Sensing that she wanted to share her worries with some one, I took a look inside the file. In the background I could hear *Sakuntala's* anxious voice. "They [the doctors] keep telling me the baby is not growing as expected...they want me to rest and eat well". I did not tell her any thing at all. Inside the file, in one of the blood reports, her haemoglobin count was marked as 'very low'. *Sakuntala* continued her explanation:

The doctor should tell that to our supervisor... she even scolded me for going to the toilet... saying I went too many times. She is also a woman, she even has children of her own. But for usshe thinks we live only to give [production] targets'

Sakuntala went on to tell me she lived in this room with another 'girl' since her husband lived away from the 'zone' in their hometown. She had come to work here soon after finishing her GCE ordinary level examination and had been working as a machine operator for nearly four years, before getting married last year. She told me she had saved some money and had also bought some jewellery from the wages she had earned. This had served as the dowry for her arranged marriage. She described the choice of her marriage partner as, "It was arranged by my parents. I had to say yes to whom they chose". Her marriage had been made on the promise that she would leave the 'garment job' and return home. "I will only be here till the end of October, after that I can also collect my gratuity money⁹³". "Don't you like to work on"? I asked her. "How can I do

⁹³ A sum of money paid to workers when they resign from employment after working for five years or more.

that?” “How can I look after a child while working in the factory?” I had no answers to these questions; I also knew she didn’t expect any answer from me. Each one of these ‘girls’ had their own set of answers to the questions imposed on their lives. Their answers were not identical, but were as varied and diverse as the expressions passing across their young faces when they told me of their hopes for the future. Nevertheless, all these answers seemed to invariably lead them in the same direction; away from the productive and towards a new reproductive phase in their lives. In the case of some ‘girls’, like *Dishanthi* in my story below, this demarcation was even more pronounced than with others.

6.1.5 *Dishanthi*: untying reproductive from productive labour

The first time I saw *Dishanthi* she was standing in front of a small table washing some rice, and the first thought that stuck me on seeing her was, how pretty and refreshing she looked even within these seemingly unpleasant surroundings. Her boarding house, for which she paid (as she later told me) one third of her monthly wage, consisted of a single room; which served as the bedroom, the living room and the kitchen. It had a single window and a wooden door in front, through which *Pramila* directly walked into the room, calling out in her loud cheery voice, “I have brought a visitor to see you”, whereupon *Dishanthi* who was standing by the table on which she had all her groceries and cooking utensils including a small cooker, looked up. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming *Pramila Akka*, I would have postponed cooking, now that I have put the rice in the water, I will have to finish washing it and keep it on the cooker, or it will get

spoiled”. Both *Pramila* and I told her to finish what she was doing, and she asked us to come inside and sit down on her bed which was only a few feet away from where she stood cooking. There was a small television set on a stool, a fan that stood near the bed, a chair and a suitcase, in addition to the bed and the table in the room. So far *Dishanthi* hadn’t asked what I was doing inside her room. I looked at *Pramila* inquiringly, she understood my anxiety and replied “Don’t worry, *Dishanthi* is one of my best comrades, she had been great at organizing ‘girls’ inside the factories against this appalling system, and we have won some of the battles we have fought together”. I saw a slow smile of satisfaction spread across *Dishanthi*’s pretty face at these words of praise, and I knew this slender girl who stood before me in her simple cotton dress was no ordinary ‘garment girl’ - this was someone who wasn’t afraid to fight, and given the socio - political contexts within which their battles were fought it also meant not being afraid to die. *Dishanthi*’s story as I narrate below is a story of incredible courage, of living the hard present and dreaming of a better future, for herself and for others like her.

Dishanthi was the eldest daughter of a family of five children; she had two brothers and two sisters. She told me she had gone to a primary school near to her home but had later gained admission to *Bandarawela*⁹⁴ Central College, a better school in the town as a result of passing the government scholarship examination. “I was very good in mathematics, all my teachers said I could go to University”. In addition to being good in her studies *Dishanthi* had represented her school in singing and dancing competitions and had won prizes at regional level competitions. “Like all poor children we had many

⁹⁴ *Bandarewela* is a town in the central part of the country.

economic hardships, but we were happy living in our small house with our parents” was how *Dishanthi* described her life to me as a young girl in her village. When she was seventeen years old her father who worked for a timber merchant had had an accident at work. For *Dishanthi* this was a turning point in her life:

Everything changed after that... my mother tried her best to feed us by working as a domestic servant. ...we had well to do relatives, but nobody helped us and I soon realized I had to help my mother...my sisters and brothers were still very young.

What followed was a heartbreaking story of a young girl coming to the ‘zone’ in search of work; going from factory to factory, moving from room to room, in search of some relief, but always ending up with the same cruel treatment. “At first I thought I would die of exhaustion. I couldn’t bear the hard work inside the factory...but after some time, I just got used to things”. Within a few months of her coming to the ‘zone’ *Dishanthi* had met *Pramila* near the factory gates, distributing the monthly copy of ‘*Dabindu*’. This meeting had been the beginning of a strong friendship, for on that first day *Dishanthi* had undertaken to take the papers inside the factory and distribute them among the ‘girls’ which was a task forbidden by management. *Pramila* still laughed when she talked of this incident, “She didn’t even know what was written on them, yet she took the papers from me and hid them inside her blouse”. “I knew enough *Pramila Akka*, I knew who you were, they talk about you inside the factories”. From that day onwards the two of them had become a formidable team, doing what ever they could to organize the ‘girls’ to collectively resist the oppression forced on them both within and outside of the factories. *Dishanthi* had met *Saman*, a young boy who worked as a mechanic in the ‘zone’ as a result of this work a few years ago. They were married now and were living in this room

where we sat talking. I met *Saman* later that day, when *Dishanthi* got him to pose for a photograph I wanted to take.

All the time she was talking with me *Dishanthi* went on cooking, explaining that she had to prepare lunch for her sister who had to go in for an ‘overtime’ shift that Sunday. I was told she was sleeping in the next room, having worked a night shift yesterday. “She is only eighteen years old *miss*, and I tried my best to stop her from coming here, but she didn’t listen to me”, *Dishanthi*’s voice, for the first time in our conversation, held a touch of regret, as she talked about her sister. *Dilrukshi* had woken up by now and came in to see what was going on, she was younger and even prettier than *Dishanthi*, but most of all I could see that she was not as thin as her sister. She came in and sat down near *Pramila* near the bed. “*Dishanthi* was just like this when she first came here, but look at her now,” saying so, *Pramila* took the younger girl’s hand in hers. I saw her glancing down at her fingers. “She had a rash in her right hand, it is better now”, she told me. “Yes, thanks to you *Pramila Akka*”, and *Dilrukshi* explained how her right hand had got infected as a result of sewing rubber gloves; *Pramila* had taken her to see a doctor. She no longer worked for this company, but had joined another, one that supplied branded ladies garments for the European market. I asked *Dilrukshi* why she had decided to come to the zone, in spite of her sister’s attempts to stop her:

What else can we do *miss*, there are no jobs in our villages. I couldn’t let *Akka* [elder sister] go on suffering ...she had done enough for us ..., now it is my turn.

Seated on the bed in between *Pramila* and myself *Dilrukshi* told us how *Dishanthi* had taken the sole responsibility of their family on her slim shoulders for many long years. How she had sent her entire salary home, working hours and hours of overtime to earn

more so they could continue going to school. “Some way or other we managed to live through those horrible years ... we are older now. But *Akka* had to sacrifice the best years of her life for us”. *Dilrukshi* made no attempt to hide the tears that ran down her cheeks as she told me more about what their lives had been. “I couldn’t stay at home and let her go on suffering ...and I am not going back either, however much she might scold me”, her young voice was firm as she told me this. None of us had anything more to say about her being too young to work in the ‘zone’ after that. Having thus established her right to stay, *Dilrukshi* sat with us on the bed and joined in the conversation; she had some time to spare as the afternoon shift started at 2.00 o’clock. *Pramila* stayed on as well and we had a friendly chat for about another one hour or so, until it was time for *Dilrukshi* to go to the factory. By this time her sister had finished cooking, and we decided to go back to *Pramila*’s office. I asked if they would mind me taking a few photographs, they agreed to my request smilingly. But *Dishanthi* wanted to wash her face and put on a new dress before appearing for the photograph. Shown below is one such photograph I took of her.



Dishanthi



The concrete room where she lives

As I took several more photographs of them, my gaze fell on the pictures of beautiful babies, pasted on the rough concrete walls around the room. *Dishanthi* caught my gaze and smiled, both of us knew of this local practice of married women keeping pictures of babies inside their bedrooms. “I love kids, but we have decided not to have any until I quit my job next year”. She had already told me of her plans of leaving her job in another year; once she had collected some money for herself. She had worked for five years in the zone, yet didn’t have a cent to her name so far. Given below are *Dishanthi*’s reasons for not wanting to become pregnant while working:

We go to the factory every morning... we struggle with [production] targets all day.

We get back to our rooms at night ...only to go back the next morning. It is slowly killing us. I used to be healthy, but now I get tired very soon....I don’t think I have enough strength in my body to carry a child while working at a machine all day.

What *Dishanthi* described as a ‘day in their lives’ is further illuminated in this poem, written by *Menike*, a sewing machine operator at *SriKnit* garments in 1987. The company had fired her for writing this which had (mistakenly) been published by *Dabindu* under her true name. She was later reinstated and her poem entitled *life* gained wide publicity as portraying the lives of ‘garment girls’. Below is a translated version of it; used extensively by *Dabindu* and other organizations in their campaign against *Menike*’s termination.

Life

I wake at 4.30 before dawn

gather courage to light up the fire

I wash my face

gulp down some tea

and leave for work in the early morning

I start work at 7.00 am

my supervisor (miss) calls me

and orders my production for the day

I regret my inability to give

the full production

miss scolds all of us and leave

at 10.30 we get a sip of tea

with neither flavour nor sugar

we take it because we are hungry

we bear all this because we are poor

I fell ill the other day

miss didn't allow me leave

struggling to work while sick

I might fall dead at 'SriKnit garments' one day

I sit at the machine at 7.00.am

miss comes to me at 8.00 a.m.

she asks me what my production is

I tell her what I am able to give

I get a pain in my chest

miss asks me to go to the sick room

I stay there for 15 minutes

I come back again and sit at the machine

My mother is not aware how much I suffer

only I know how much I suffer

I go in the morning and return at night

I suffer so much pain in my body

We are not given leave

other than in an emergency

even then it is after much scolding

we who are poor are hurt in this way

By: K. P. Jayasundara Menike

Source: A Review of Free Trade Zones in Sri Lanka,

Dabindu Publication, 1997⁹⁵.

⁹⁵ The poem was first written in 1987. Its translated version which I quote here appears in a *Dabindu* publication some ten years later.

Menike's description of a machine operator's life as well as what *Dishanthi*, *Sureaka* and *Sakuntala* told me about their work on the assembly lines falls into sharper focus when viewed together with my own experiences of how work gets done inside the factories. However, most of the managers and the supervisors whom I met and talked with, inside the factory, seemed to view this same set up in a different way than the 'girls'. This situation gives rise to interesting contradictions which will be further analysed in the light of related theoretical explanations, later on in this chapter. But for now, it is *Dilrukshi's* turn to tell us about her life, as a new girl who had joined the ranks of sewing machine operators in the 'zone' fairly recently. Her story as I narrate below sheds light on another (unpleasant) side of life as lived within the 'zone'.

6.1.6 *Dilrukshi* :(re)fashioning female labour roles

One day, *Dilrukshi* asked me if I had seen any of the garments they sewed in the shops in *England*. She had got into the habit of coming and hanging around me when ever she saw me at the *Dabindu* office which was very near to where they stayed. I had got so accustomed to having her around, I actually missed her refreshing presence when she did not show up. She was so young and full of life and brought back loving memories of my own sister who being a good few years younger than me used to follow me around in much the same way, until she grew up and migrated to another country in search of her own dreams. Now at *Dilrukshi's* question, a picture of row after row of beautifully designed high priced garments at the *Marks and Spencer* outlet at *Leicester City Centre*, flashed across my mind. I have seen the label 'made in *Sri Lanka*' attached to some of them. "Maybe I have, I am not sure if they are the very ones made at your factory, but I

have certainly seen some put out for sale”. “Who wears them *miss*? “She wanted to know now. “Well, they are mostly bought by ladies who have a lot of money, because they are very expensive”. I have read the price tag attached to a winter jacket at the packing section at *SriKnit* and the price of one jacket was twice the monthly salary of a ‘girl’ on the shop floor. “Do they look pretty in them? I looked at *Dilrukshi*’s shapely young figure in her badly tailored frock, made out of an unattractive, cheap material and replied “not as pretty as you”. She smiled at me, and added as an afterthought “I would love to have a nice dress. I have never had one in my whole life”. I knew *Dilrukshi*’s whole life was not behind but in front of her, and wondered if even this simplest of wishes would come true for her. From my previous talks with some of the other ‘girls’ I was already aware from where they brought the few items of clothing they possessed. They had told me about their shopping trips to a clothes bazaar, where women who purchased ‘cut pieces’⁹⁶ made dresses out of them at home and sold them at very low prices. “This is all we can afford to buy with what is left of our salaries, after paying rent and sending some money home”, they had told me.

These conditions are illustrated further by Maria Mies’s, where, explaining the new international division of labour (IDL), she says “this strategy of mobilizingthird world women is only one side of the global division of labour. ...it is not enough that these commodities are produced as cheaply as possible. They also have to be sold. In the marketing strategies of the western ...corporations which are thriving on the export-oriented production in third word countries, western women play a crucial role too, but

⁹⁶ Excess material no longer wanted by the large factories.

this time not as producers but as consumers ” (1986: 120). Mies’s argument of viewing ‘third world’ women as producers of consumer goods at cheaper rates to be consumed by ‘first world’ women, exemplifies my experiences with *Dilrukshi* and other ‘girls’ as described above.

At the age of eighteen and having just started on her job in the ‘zone’ *Dilrukshi* did not appear to me as being overly worried about her future; for the moment her interests lay in figuring out who gets to wear the fashionable garments they sew at the factories and whether she would be able to buy something of equal worth. Yet, at some point in her life, she too would have to make a choice between being a ‘waged worker’ and being an ‘unwaged housewife’. Choosing the latter, like almost all these ‘girls’ seem to do, would inevitably result in her returning to the isolation of the monogamous family. As Dalla Costa (1975) in her essay *Women and the Subversion of the Community* argues, this is a situation working class women should strive to avoid. In Dalla Costa’s view ‘necessity and search for economic independence had reverted women to the typing pool or to the assembly line, in which there is no salvation. ...But the struggle for the working women is not to return to the isolation of the home’ (1975:14). Rather, as she sees:

...women must...discover their own possibilities...The challenge for the women’s movement is to find modes of struggle which, while they liberate women from the home, at the same time avoid on the one hand a double slavery and on the other prevent another degree of capitalist control and regimentation (1975: 15).

Writing nearly a decade later and drawing special attention to the plight of third world women working global sweat shops, Mies (1986) reiterates the views as first articulated

by Dalla Costa. Accordingly, in her view, “the mystification that women are basically housewives, is not an accidental side effect of the new IDL, but a necessary prerequisite of its smooth functioning: it justifies low wages, prevents women from organizing, keeps them atomized, and gears their attention to a patriarchal image of women”(1986:120).

Reflecting on the lives of *Dilrukshi* and others in the light of such assertions, if they are to achieve the ‘liberation’ aspired to by feminist writers they should neither return to the isolation of the home nor be subjected to the control and regimentation of the capitalist work organization. However, these ‘girls’ as explained by Mies, confronted with patriarchal images of women seem to be driven by a (false) hope of a better future as mothers and housewives at home. Indeed such ‘dreaming’ diluted efforts of organized resistance against capitalist controls work. Most of these ‘girls’ saw waged work only as a transient stage in their lives, until they got married and had families of their own; thus, at least for the time being they seemed to prefer the ‘isolation of the home’ to the capitalist regimentation at work.

6.1.6.1 Women, labour and violence

Whenever, *Dilrukshi* or any of the other ‘girls’ complained about the unjust manner in which they were treated in the factories, I always asked them why they did not organize more effectively against these forces which they saw as exploitative of their labour. I got a range of responses from them; from looks of utmost disdain to detailed explanations of why, more often than not, they were compelled to play the part of submissive spectators of a system that was slowly robbing them of their knowledge, abilities and energy. The

story of *Ranjith's* life (death) as I describe below, explains to a great extent why there was so little organized resistance among these women and men, against a system that was as brutally ruthless as it was exploitative.

It was a Sunday afternoon, and I was inside *Dilrukshi's* room, helping her to fill out an application form for a course of study I had downloaded for her. I had told *Dilrukshi* that I would be coming back next year and would help her with her studies. Outside the room a group of young boys, including *Krishanthi's* husband were playing a game of carom, on a board they had laid across a concrete block. We could hear bits of their conversation from where we were seated, which alternated among cricket - a favourite topic among boys in our country irrespective of their background - the war in the north and general political situation in the country. *Saman* told the group of an attempt to form a new union with the backing of a left wing political party. Immediately there was caution from the others. *Saman Aiya* (brother) please be careful, don't forget what happened to *Ranjith*." The name rang a bell... and later I asked *Chamila* who *Ranjith* was. "*Ranjith* was killed and burned on tyres during the 1987/89 insurrection...he was a close friend of my parents". *Chamila* recalled how, one day on her return from school she had been told by her mother that *Ranjith mama* (uncle) had been killed. She had gone to the place where the tyres were still burning with her mother. "We knew it was him because we could see parts of the black trouser he had worn the last time we saw him ... he had come to our house before going for the inquiry". *Chamila's* voice broke at this point, and I told her I didn't want to know any more. Later she gave me a small booklet to read which revealed the brutal details of why and how *Ranjith* was killed:

Such murderous acts are initiated through a coalition of company management, police and unofficial killer groups against rebellious workers....first (the management) tries to control such workers by getting thugs to assault them outside the factories. If such actions fail a plot gets on the way to eliminate them. Murdering of M. Lionel and H.M. Ranjith in 1989 is a good example of this. (A Review of Free Trade Zones in Sri Lanka, 1997:21).

This report goes on to say how *Ranjith*, who worked as a moulding machine operator at *Floral Greens*⁹⁷ and who was identified by the management as a ‘trouble maker’⁹⁸ was deliberately involved in a dispute with another workers who were loyal to the management. Following this dispute which ended in a fight between the two workers, *Ranjith* had been terminated on charges of assault. The termination was to be reviewed at a domestic inquiry, and *Ranjith* was allowed to appear with a legal adviser. *Ranjith* and *Lional* (his legal advisor) made their way to the inquiry on the 27th of October 1987 at 4.30 p.m. The inquiry had dragged on until 7.30 at night. Later it came to light that the Personnel Manager of *Floral Greens*, *Ms. Priyani Abewardena* had called the person holding the inquiry and requested him to delay the process until 7.00 p.m. or 7.30 p.m. The inquiry had proved *Ranjith* to be not guilty, and they had come out on to the road to return home:

A white Hi-Ace van blocked *Ranjith*’s and *Lional*’s way near the 18th milepost. Some unidentified men assaulted them and forced them into the van. The next morning,

⁹⁷ *Floral Greens* is a factory making artificial flowers in the FTZ.

⁹⁸ *Ranjith* had led groups of workers to protest against the use of malfunctioning machines at the factory. The managers saw him as a threat that had to be stopped or if not eliminated.

people saw their partly burned bodies at the *Raddoluwa* Church junction. (A Review of Free Trade Zones in Sri Lanka, 1997: 22).

Published on the cover page of November, 2007 issue of *Dabindu* newspaper was a photograph of a group of workers participating in commemorative ceremony to mark the twentieth anniversary of *Ranjith's* murder. After two decades from his death they were still faithful to the memory of a fallen leader. For that was exactly how *Chamila* described *Ranjith* to me, when I asked her whether it was safe for her to engage in her work with the 'girls'.

Ranjith mama (uncle) was killed because he was a leader...he saw through this system and sought to overthrow it. They [the management] saw him as a threat...all that we are able to achieve is a small picketing...asking for a bonus, a decent meal or a uniform for the 'girls'...they know we are not powerful enough to change things.

The story of *Ranjith's* death and *Chamila's* reflections on her own efforts inform us that resistance was tolerated within the 'zone' only within certain boundaries. In fact these experiences made me realize that this was indeed a vicious set up where dissent was allowed only as long it did not affect a change in the status quo. Initiating action that showed any signs of extending beyond these boundaries was dealt with accordingly; thus the concern of the group of boys about *Saman's* move to form a new union. As first hand bearers of many bitter experiences, of which *Ranjith's* death is but one; the 'girls' obviously had little reason to believe that they could be 'freed' from the rigid capitalist controls surrounding them at work, through any resistance they may offer. Thus, for them, the only way of achieving 'freedom' or 'liberation' from the controls they were subjected to inside the factories was in returning to their homes. Back to the 'isolation' of the monogamous households; to being 'slaves to the kitchen sink', which, at least within

this particular setting, seemed to be the only viable alternative to being ‘slaves to the assembly line’. A situation that was aptly summed up by *Chamila*, when one day, during the last few days of my visit to the ‘zone’, she unexpectedly told me:

I know this is not what you want to hear or write about. But this is how things are...and there is very little any of us can do to change it ...but we have to keep trying.

Simple yet powerful words from a woman who had dedicated her life to a cause she believed in. These words were indeed an insightful explanation of the lives of ‘women and girls’ as I saw during my visit to the ‘zone’. For I saw them as engaged in a continuous struggle against forces of capitalist patriarchy and neo colonialism that had them pinned down at the intersecting points of a cruel class, gender and historical location hierarchy. How these structures impacted on the lives of ‘women and girls’ as I sometimes witnessed within the ‘zone’ were abusive and even violent.

Zillah Eisenstein in her book, *Global Obscenities: Patriarchy, Capitalism and the Lure of Cyberfantasy* writes, “women’s and girl’s bodies determine democracy: free from violence and sexual abuse, free from malnutrition and environmental degradation” (1998). My experiences while I watched *Dilrikshi* getting ready to report for the morning shift at the nearby factory, while I walked with her to the factory gates and also what I had learned previously by listening to some of the ‘girls’ and reading certain newspaper articles makes me believe that women’s and girl’s bodies in this particular space are not free from violence and sexual abuse. The ethnographic vignettes and other evidence sheds light on how women’s and girl’s bodies are subject to sexual violence and abuse by the dominant structures within which they live. They also examine how ‘women and

girls' make sense of and react to such forces as they play upon the lives they live, as part of an industrial labour force.

One Monday morning, when I reached *Dilrukshi's* boarding room the entire neighbourhood was up and getting ready to report for the morning shift at their factories, all of which were situated at a walking distance. The line of rooms where *Dishanthi* and *Dilrukshi* lived had about twenty to thirty rooms, in about five or six lines spread over a small area of land. Most rooms had at least two occupants - all sharing one common well to get water from, bath and wash cloths. There were two toilets at a corner of the premises, each with a queue of girls waiting outside for their turn to use them this morning. *Dilrukshi* was already up, and came out to meet me. She had worked till 10.00 o'clock yesterday night on an overtime shift and was yawning and looked very sleepy as she stood in front of her room. Neither of the sisters had to prepare meals for themselves as the factories provided them with lunch and breakfast, and even dinner if they did the night shift. They complained about the food and said laughingly; after all even they realize that we have no time to cook. To my surprise, *Dilrukshi* was ready to go to work barely half an hour from waking up. She wore a cotton frock which fell up to her knees, had a pair of rubber slippers on her feet, and carried only her small purse and an umbrella. "Is that all you need?" I asked her. "This is all that we are allowed to take past the gates". Fair enough, I thought, all that was needed inside the factories was their labour power, which gave life to the thousands of machines that lay still, until the 8.00 o'clock shift started, and their seamstresses came into join them on the 'floor'. We fell in line with a stream of 'girls' all on their way to work. As the by - road joined the main

road leading to the 'zone', the stream became a sea of workers - they all looked different, yet they all looked alike - for all of them were female and all of them were young. I already knew that the few men who were making their way towards the factories were not employed as sewing machine operators. I could see another group of men on the roads this morning who were not going to work at all, they were just hanging around, some standing by the roadside, some on bicycles or motorcycles, and some even inside parked cars - their intention being to 'look at' and make filthy remarks aimed at the 'girls'. *Dilrukshi* who was walking by my side soon became a prime target of their abusive, callous words. Some even dared to come close enough to touch her; she shrank away from their reach, but remained quiet. Some of the more timid girls tried to hide themselves among large groups of fellow workers in a bid to escape from the unwelcome attentions and advances. *Dilrukshi* looked around her; I knew she was searching for her sister and brother-in-law. She drew in a sigh of relief when she saw them a little way off; she was visibly upset and even frightened by everything that was taking place. My feelings were not of fright, but of seething anger of the unspeakably cruel happenings to which I was an unwilling witness this morning. For me it was just one morning, but for the 'girls' on the road this was part of their daily routine, another common experience of their lives as sewing machine operators of the global assembly line. Like such other equally bad or even worse treatment to which they were subjected daily, this too was borne in silence. We were nearing the factory gates now and I was more than relieved to see the security personnel guarding the entrance. The 'girls' were making their way into the factory premises through a small gate by the side of the main entrance, under the watchful eyes of two male security officers standing on either side of it. From time to

time one of them came forward to open the iron gates to let in the brand new cars carrying the company executives. I was not allowed inside this factory, so I decided to walk back, along the same road I had come, towards the *Dabindu* office. I was to learn what went on inside the closely guarded gates of these factories at a later date.

The unpleasant incidences of this morning in fact were not the first of its kind I had witnessed since coming to the 'zone'. I had faced a somewhat similar situation before, when I was getting back at night after visiting a boarding house. *Dishanthi* had been with me at the time and unlike *Dilrukshi*, who was visibly frightened and shaken, had been undaunted. Seething with anger, she had told me of far worse incidents that had happened in the 'zone' from time to time, some of which I have cited below. The happenings of this morning made me reflect upon this previous incident I had shared with *Dishanthi*. It was fairly late at night when we left a boarding house which we had visited, *Dishanthi* had already asked her husband to come and meet us. "These roads are not safe at night, even for two people", she explained. Once on the narrow and dark road I quickly understood why, there were men of all ages hanging around the dark alleyways as if waiting for their prey. "Anything can happen here *miss*, and *Dishanthi* related a few stories where 'girls' getting back to their rooms after the night shift had been robbed of their gold jewellery, abused, assaulted and even raped by these gangs. "But why isn't anything done about this", I asked her. "We have tried everything we can think of, from complaining to the police to writing to the newspapers. But in the end it comes down to providing our security ourselves. Now we never go out at night unless as a large group and with a few boys to accompany us". At the *Dabindu* office, lights were still on, and a group of people

including *Pramila* and her husband, and some of the volunteers were waiting for our return. Before leaving, *Pramila* double - checked to see if all the girls had escorts to accompany them home. Nothing was taken for granted here, for we were in the 'free trade zone', where all laws - not only the labour and tax laws relating to investments - were relaxed, and everyone had to look after their own security if they wanted to survive. For some of the stories that I was told about what happened to the 'girls' on lonely pathways and roads specially after dark were not things to be taken lightly, they were dangerous - sometimes even to the point of being life threatening. Some of these incidents had been given wide publicity by media and I had collected many paper cuttings of them. Described below are a few such well known incidents:

In 1988, a woman worker of *A.J. Milton*, who was returning by bus after the night shift, had jumped off the moving bus to avoid the advances of the conductor. She died on the spot.... (A Review of Free Trade Zones in Sri Lanka, 1997: 19).

Around 10.30 p.m. on 31st of May 1989, a girl who worked for *Star Garments* had gone to a boutique in the area with her fiancé. A gang of seven men had assaulted her escort, taken her to a lonely spot and had raped her. She was found lying on the road by some by passers. She had been robbed of her gold chain and Rs.200. After staying in hospital for two weeks she left her job in the 'zone' and returned to her village. (A Review of Free Trade Zones in Sri Lanka, 1997: 20).

Four incidents of rape were reported from *Katunayake* in 1993 and three such incidents were reported in 1994. The dead body of a woman worker was found

beside a road in 1995. She had been murdered and all her gold jewellery stolen. In 1996, a woman worker was raped by four men near the 18th mile post in *Katunayake*, on her way back from work. (A Review of Free Trade Zones in Sri Lanka, 1997: 20).

On the 12th of November 2007, *Mudiyanseelage Chamila Dissanayake*, a ‘sewing girl’ who worked for *Smart Shirt* went to a medical clinic held at the *Negambo*⁹⁹ government hospital.on the same day her body was seen by hospital staff lying near a window outside the hospital building. A hospital cleaner giving evidence at the inquiry said she had seen a ‘doctor’ dragging the body of a ‘girl’ across a corridor towards a window in the sixth floor. It was proved that the ‘doctor’ in charge of this particular clinic, had taken *Chamila* to his room, drugged and raped her and had pushed her, while still unconscious, out of a window in the sixth floor of the building. She died a few hours after being discovered... (*Dabindu News Paper*, 2007: 1).

Media reports as stated above, stories I had been told by *Dishanthi*, *Pramila* and others and what I myself had witnessed in the ‘zone’ made me realize that these workers in addition to other hardships they faced were also subjected to continued violence, as a result of their gender. Indeed they were subjected to such violence not only because they were women but because they were ‘proletarian women working in global garment factories’. As such, the humiliation, degradation and the ultimate danger to their lives as faced by these ‘girls’ can be seen as another example of how their lives are affected by the multiple dominative structures of class, gender and specific historical locations within

⁹⁹ *Negambo* is a town near *Katunayake*.

which they live. Also this appears to be a situation where any resistance offered by the 'girls' are of little or no use simply because the forces surrounding them are too powerful and too venomous to be defeated. Finally, it is a situation where the best these 'girls' can hope for, is to protect themselves in any way they can and to 'escape' to the sanctuary of their homes and villages - which they have left as a result of severe economic hardships in the first place -, at the first opportunity available. Indeed it is a vicious circle of precarious employment out of which neither the 'girls' nor any of the feminist writers studying about their situation seem to have found a clear way out.

Meeting *Tamara*, *Ramani*, *Dishanthi* and other girls, talking with *Pramila*, reading the poems and letters written by the 'girls' and seeing the vicinity where they lived, had given me important insights into their lives as lived within this setting. However, there was another side to their lives in the 'zone' that I had not yet witnessed. I had not yet seen the noisy and crowded shop floor with its rows of machines nor heard the shouting of the supervisors the 'girls' endlessly complained about. As such, I was yet to fully comprehend why the girls always 'dreamed' of leaving their jobs and returning home. Indeed I was soon to find out what awaited the 'girls' inside the factories into which they walked in every morning at the 'other' side of the 'zone'.

6.2 ‘Girls’, Machines and Labour: on the ‘line’ between production and reproduction?

6.2.1 Inside the factory: accessing the inaccessible

Companies operating within the ‘free’ trade regime of the Board of Investment of Sri Lankan, or BOI as the institute is popularly known, are extremely ‘restrictive’ when it comes to allowing ‘outsiders’ to enter through their closely guarded gates. Simply, none of the companies having factories within the ‘zone’ welcomes visitors asking how they run their enterprises. All of these companies have been given a mandate by the Sri Lankan government to operate more or less ‘freely’ within the boundaries of the ‘zone’. Limiting access for ‘outsiders’ into their territory is one of the many concessions; exemptions from laws relating to inland revenue, exchange control and customs, to name a few, granted to zone investors. All such concessions, including ones related to ‘limited access’ are fully utilized by these enterprises. Yet, there are ways and means of negotiating access to the ‘zone’, a strategy of using personal contacts being one that usually works - and works fast at that. With limited time within which to search for a vast amount of data, being one of my major concerns in field work I decided to embark on this tried and tested method of exploiting personal friendships for research purposes. It may be difficult to gain access to the ‘zone’, but it is not too difficult either, for within less than one hour of making our first telephone call to *Rajiva*, one of my husband’s former classmates, who now held the position of ‘Group Human Resources Manager’ of a reputed garment factory (operating outside of the zone) I had managed to secure an appointment to meet one of *Ranjiva*’s colleagues, *Kumar*, the ‘Group Human Resources Manager’ of *SriKnit Garments* - a group of companies situated inside the free trade zone

(FTZ) premises. I was to meet him at half past ten the following Monday. Obtaining initial permission was followed by a prolonged tussle of getting security clearance to physically enter the 'zone', which proved to be much more difficult than the former. However, I was finally allowed to drive through the 'zone' gates which represented the entrance to a closely guarded prison house. Once inside, I took a deep breath of relief and looked around me; at the large buildings housing the seventy eight industrial units surrounded by their sky high walls, at the wide network of roads spanning an area of nearly 200 hectares and the very few people on them. For the 8.00 o' clock shift was already well under way and the 80,000 strong 'zone' work force was busy at their respective work stations inside the factories. *SriKnit* Garments Plant I, where the group HR department was located was not too difficult to locate. I went inside and sat down in the lounge and was told to wait awhile, by a person who came in from inside the office. *Mr. Kumar* was a bit busy, and would call me in as soon as he was free. I agreed to wait, and for the sake of doing something glanced through the note book in my hands where I had jotted down some facts about the company. Going by my notes, *SriKnit* Garments was a well established BOI company, and a pioneer investor in the zone - having opened up its first plant at *Katunayake* as far back as in 1978. It was a USA based trans-national company having a presence in New York, Hong Kong, London and China. The group owned seven factories - three inside and four outside of the zone - together employing a workforce of over 10,000 and producing a massive 800,000 pieces of garments per month for its major US and European markets. *Limited Stores, Sears, Marc Jacobs* and *Ann Taylor* are among the major buyers who retail marketed their 'product base' overseas -

classified as ‘woven apparel women’s wear’ including any item from a tailored jacket to a sandblasted pair of jeans to all varieties of lingerie and sleepwear in various fabrics.

Some half an hour or so later the same person came back to tell me I was to go and meet *Mr. Mahesh* , the Manager in charge of Human Resource Development, as the meeting *Mr. Kumar* was in was going to drag on for some time. He said he would come to show me the way, so together we made our way to the HRD office, and were greeted by *Mahesh*, who later proved to be a friend and a good informant. It was with him that I discussed the purpose of my visit, and he seemed willing to help, especially in arranging interviews with the Company Counsellor and the Nurse who worked for his unit. He also agreed to talk with me during some of his less busy hours. My escort, who had introduced me to *Mahesh* and left, came back with the message that *Mr. Kumar* wished to speak with me in his office. I took my leave of *Mahesh* after arranging to come into his office first thing the following morning for my interview with the Counsellor. Even though *Mahesh* appeared to be taking decisions on his own, I could sense that everything was done under the close instructions of his boss who had probably already briefed him on my visit and the extent to which they would allow me ‘access’ to what went on inside this concealed environment.

During the next few days, I met many staff members of *SriKnit* Garments who were directly involved with managing the ‘sewing girls’ some of whom I had already met outside of these premises. All of them were willing to tell me what they thought about these workers; their working conditions inside the factory, their lives in the boarding houses

and in their villages, how they were recruited, what was done to orient them, how they were trained and developed, counselling and welfare facilities they had access to and so on. I went from one air conditioned room to another, interviewing *Kumar, Mahesh, Jarnnarz, Aruni* and *Chandrika*, according to a timetable they had given me.

All of them had different things to tell me. They had differing viewpoints about the same situations depending on their position in the organizational hierarchy, job responsibilities, work experiences and even individual values and insights. However, one idea kept on surfacing and resurfacing right throughout my interviews with them. They kept on telling me that the ‘sewing girls’ were here (meaning in employment) only for a short period of time. The reasons for this state of affairs and even the time period identified as the ‘girls’ relatively short ‘work life’ again differed from person to person. However, there was one underlying fact that did not differ. ‘The ‘girls’ would leave their jobs and return to their villages...’ was the one idea that was held in common. Some of them, like *Jarnnarz* who was responsible for recruiting new workers saw this as a problem, while for some others it was not a cause for concern. It was just how things were, how things had always been in the garment industry. There was no reason to be concerned, there were plenty more ‘girls’ in the villages, who were ready to fill up the places of those who left their jobs. These were some of the commonly held views. My interactions with each of these staff members, as described below, sheds light on ‘their side of the story’ about the ‘sewing girls’ of *SriKnit* garments. Embedded within these descriptions are views expressed by a few people whom I did not interview by prior appointment, but who nevertheless gave me important insights into the lives of ‘sewing girls’ as they saw and understood. They

are *Samantha*, the young security officer on duty at the entrance to *SriKnit I*, *Channa*, the trainees HR executive who became my regular escort while on the company premises and the canteen keeper in charge of the ‘workers canteen’ which I visited more or less without permission. Their views which are also stated below seem to reflect yet another aspect of factory life that was not fully revealed through my formal interviews.

6.2.1.1 Kumara, Samantha and Channa

Middle aged, heavily built and of a friendly disposition, *Kumar*, looked every inch the professional manager that he was. He asked me to sit down and after an initial exchange of greetings wanted to know the exact purpose of my study. I told him about my research, without attempting to hold back on anything, for I had already decided that his shrewd gaze would see through any cover - ups I might try to make about my true intentions. He had worked his way up from a floor manager and had nearly thirty years of experience working for a cross section of garment factories around the country. He knew the industry - both its good and evils - like the back of his hand and I guessed I had a better chance of getting the information I needed by adopting a direct, up front approach with him. This was the strategy I used throughout my interview, and was happy with the results, for once he knew I was not playing any games of hide - and - seek, he talked with me in an open and friendly manner, relating many incidents of interest and relevance to understanding the work patterns, behaviours, attitudes and even problems faced by female sewing machine operators. He spent about two hours, a considerably long time considering his hectic schedule, discussing various aspects of the industry with me, and had no objections to the interview being recorded. The few questions I asked in between

were merely directed at getting the conversation back on track, whenever I felt he was deviating from issues related to shop floor workers. Other than for these minor interruptions, I allowed him to tell me what he thought fit and indeed he did tell me a lot of things about the ‘girls’; what he knew about their lives in and around the work settings as well as outside of them, drawing upon his long years of experience.

He told me the ‘girls’ who worked as sewing machine operators in garment factories mostly came from remote villages in Sri Lanka. He attributed their reasons for coming to the city in search of work to lack of economic development in the regions. “There are no jobs for these ‘girls’ to do there, so they come here”, was how he expressed his opinion in this regard. He also told me his views about the many problems they faced as a result of making this transition from the village to the city.

They are innocent village girls...they know very little about life in the city. ...the ‘zone’ is very precarious place to live... there are men who ‘hunt’ these girls. ...They live off their salaries and leave them after some time.

He also told me of the various awareness programmes the HR department had initiated to minimize such happenings but ended up saying “It is very difficult to keep them safe....they easily fall into such traps. After all, they are young girls who should be living with their parents”. After a lengthy description of his concerns about looking after the moral values of the ‘girls’ *Kumar* finally came to the issue of the absenteeism and turnover of ‘sewing girls’. He had the daily, weekly, monthly and annual turnover figures on a large white board behind him.

You see that chart ...it is very difficult to balance the lines when they take leave like this ...and most of these 'girls' never return to work once they get married...we don't blame them for that. Of course they can't work in a factory once they have children to take care of. ...but my worry is that they take too much leave...our (turnover and absenteeism) figures are much higher than for other companies...we are doing our best to correct that.

Once on the issue of 'child care' *Kumar* told me *SriKnit* garments once offered facilities where young children of staff members were looked after during the day. But he also told me that this facility was limited to executive staff and was never extended to cover shop floor workers. Even this facility was not in operation any more, as the company was cutting down on costs. I asked him if he had ever considered offering such a facility to the shop floor workers as a method of retaining them in work. He had an interesting answer for me:

That is not possible...we don't have the finances for that sort of commitment...also it is not necessary ...it is best for these 'girls' to go back and look after their families...even my wife doesn't work.

Once I had concluded my interview with him, *Kumar* arranged for me to take a guided tour of the factory premises. This time I had a different escort, a young executive from the HRD department. While showing me around, *Channa* asked me where I had studied, he himself was a final year undergraduate at a local university and seemed happy to talk about his studies with me. After some time *Channa* became a little less guarded in his manner and came out with a few inside stories about the way 'girls' in the factory were treated by their superiors. He told me he was not happy here and was looking for a job outside the garment industry.

I have a younger sister of my own. It is hard for me to watch these ‘girls’ being treated as if they were inhuman. I can’t do anything to change things here. So I have decided to find some other job.

This was how *Channa* described his views to me about the ‘girls’. Halfway through our tour he politely asked me not to repeat any of the things he had said to his superiors. I assured him I wouldn’t. It was nearly 3.00 o’ clock in the afternoon by now and was time for me to get back. I didn’t want to detain *Channa* any longer, who had clearly been instructed not to let me out of his sight. He followed these instructions to the letter, only he made it look as if he was doing it for my own safety - in case I got lost or couldn’t find my way around. I fully realized his intentions but pretended otherwise and thanked him heartily for showing me around. Once I was safely outside the gates he made his way towards his office. I stood outside, waiting for the driver to pick up my message. He had disappeared out of sight, obviously bored by a long day of waiting, and I had to wait for some time at the gates for him to arrive. The young security officer who recognized me from our encounter in the morning smiled at me. Encouraged by his show of friendliness I asked him where he was from, the most common way of picking up a conversation with a stranger in our culture. He was ready to talk and told me he was from small village in *Anuradhapura*, some two hundred kilometres away from *Katunayake*. I asked him a little about his home town, which was near to the war zone, and where fierce fighting between the government forces and separatist guerrilla groups were raging even at this very moment. He told me one of his brothers, who worked as a soldier in the army had died in battle only a few months ago. His younger brother had also joined the Army. “That is the only job available for people like us, *miss* ...and it pays well. Much better than this security job I do. I am here only because I can keep an eye on my sister who is working

in the zone”. I asked him what he thought about the job his sister did, as a machine operator in another similar factory just around the corner. His views closely reflected what I had already heard from the ‘girls’ themselves:

It’s the worst possible job for any ‘girl’ to do, they are given impossible targets.

They have to walk to their rooms late at night, after doing overtime. That is why I do this job...to look after my sister...

Described above are three viewpoints as expressed by men who had first hand experience of the problems faced by ‘girls’ working as sewing machine operators in the ‘zone’. Each of them realizes there are problems that need to be addressed, and each has derived his own sets of solutions to them. *Kumar* identifies causes outside of the company as giving rise to most of the problems faced by the ‘girls’ and thinks creating awareness among them would resolve some of the issues. *Samantha* had found a job as a security personnel in the ‘zone’ so as to ensure the safety of his sister who works as a machine operator. *Channa* is thinking of leaving his job because he dislikes the way ‘sewing girls’ are treated on the shop floor. But unlike *Pramila*, *Dishanthi* and some of the other ‘girls’ I had met before, none of them identify what they experience as a problem stemming from the exploitative relationship between labour and (global) capital in its quest to create surplus value at the expense of third world women. Neither do they envision any form of collective action towards dealing with such issues and problems.

6.2.1. 2 A Day at the HRD Unit; with Aruni, Mahesh and Chandrika

I was to meet *Aruni*, the Councillor who was entrusted with the task of looking after the welfare of the shop floor workers, at 10.00 o’ clock the following morning. It was

arranged for me to interview her inside an air conditioned room, known as the training room, which was part of the HRD department, and which lay just beyond *Mahesh's* office. The two rooms were separated from each other only by a glass partition and *Aruni* who came in promptly at 10.00 o' clock had to walk through her boss s' room to where I was waiting for her inside the training room. Needless to say our discussion was very formal, very structured and extremely official. She answered all my questions dutifully, never volunteering any additional information, never letting her emotions or feelings to get in the way, and I wrote down her answers in the small notebook I carried with me. She told me about the duties involved in her job, how she went about her assigned task of 'counselling' the 'girls' on the shop floor, the problems she faced in her work and so on. As she appeared to be no more than twenty years of age herself, I put in a query about her qualifications, especially in relation to the work she was supposed to do, and any experience she may have gathered in the field. She had none and had only just joined the company last year, straight after school. One major point that came out repeatedly throughout her conversation was the importance of retaining the female shop floor workers, especially the new ones who showed a high tendency to leave their jobs during the first few months. "This is the most important aspect of my job; I make it a point to visit the shop floor and talk with the new workers and encourage them to stay on. Our aim is to keep them at least for two, three years", *Aruni* told me, explaining the purpose of her 'counselling'. She identified a lot of reasons as to why the 'girls' left their jobs, all of them related to conditions outside of work; problems with the boarding houses, missing their loved ones at home and so on. Never once did she come out with any problems related to the actual work they did inside the company as a cause for their

apparently high turnover. Judging by what she told me, sitting in our comfortable chairs inside this room, it seems as if the ‘assembly line’ was an attractive place to work, and the ‘girls’ left their jobs simply because they had problems outside of work. She also told me about a quarterly magazine she edited on behalf of the HRD Department, *Mandakini*, and even gave me a few copies to look at. In the latest copy, published in June 2008, was a list of names of four female workers. Under a heading which read; ‘best wishes from *Mandakini* to the new born babies’, the names of *T.M. C. Malani*, *Sarojani Taranga*, *Manoja Dishanthi* and *Nadika Sananmalee* were published as ‘new mothers’ who had returned to work after maternity leave during the last three months. Printed on glossy paper alongside the names of their mothers, were the names and colour photographs of the babies themselves. Turning through the pages of the magazine, I casually asked *Aruni* how many of these ‘mothers’ were still working at the factory. Her answer was, “All of them have left”.

6.2.1.3. A break at the workers’ canteen

At the end of my interview with *Aruni*, I made my way to the HRD department, which was only a few feet away and asked *Channa* if he could show me where the workers’ canteen was. *Mahesh* was out at a meeting, and after a minutes hesitation he agreed to show me the way. I told him I wanted to buy some food, which was only a part of the reason why I wanted to visit the canteen. We made our way across the premises to where the workers’ canteen was, and found it empty of anyone other than the canteen keeper and two helpers busy piling up stacks of aluminium plates, ready for the first batch of workers who would come in for their twenty minute lunch break at twelve noon. It was a

long hall filled up with rows of wooden benches where the ‘girls’ would sit down with their plates. I told *Channa* I would be O.K. by myself and that I would have a snack and come back in time for my second interview for the day, with the company Nurse. Actually I was hoping to hang around when the workers came in, maybe even to have a few words with them by myself. I purchased a cool drink and stood by the counter drinking it. The canteen keeper asked me if I was a new worker. I told him I was writing a book about the garment workers, and had come here to get some information. “Oh, you want to write about these ‘girls’?”. He seemed to like the idea and I decided to ask him a little about what he thought, of the factory and the ‘sewing girls’. He had been here for about five years now and had seen and heard many things, most importantly he seemed willing to share them with me:

Its pretty hard work, what these ‘girls’ have to do. They have to sit at the machines all day...if they fail to give the ‘target’ they get scolded, some times in bad language.

Some of them even work during lunchtime to catch up I know, because they talk [about these things] over lunch. I wouldn’t want any one of my own to come here.

I am sure he would have told me a lot more, if not for the hurried arrival of another messenger from the HRD unit, to tell me that I was to have lunch at the ‘other’ canteen which was meant for the executive staff. He had come to take me there. As I walked out with him, I saw the first few workers pouring into the canteen - I had missed my chance of meeting them inside their work arena. Going in through the swing doors of the ‘executive canteen’ my first feeling was one of relief from the hot and humid atmosphere that had been all around me for sometime now. This was another room that was air conditioned against the exhaustingly high temperature common to our country throughout the year. Inside the cool and comforting room I could see neatly arranged tables adorned

with table cloths and vases of fresh flowers, a soft music filling the room, and a buffet style lunch laid out for the ‘staff’ to enjoy at any time they wished to come in. A few of them were already inside the room; some serving up their food, some reading the daily papers and some sitting close to the large TV screen fixed on a side wall watching a cricket match that was been broadcast live. The person in charge of the ‘executive lunch room’ came out and invited me to sit down. Unlike my informant at the ‘workers canteen’ he appeared rather stiff and unnervingly polite. I decided it would be of little use trying to talk with him and silently sat down at the nearest table, with the intention of finishing my lunch as soon as possible and returning to the HRD Unit for my meeting with *Chandrika*, the company nurse.

My interview with *Chandrika*, took place in the same room as with *Aruni* in the morning and under more or less similar circumstances. *Chandrika* even stopped to exchange a few words with *Mahesh*, who was back in his seat by now, before coming over to where I was seated inside the training room. The only difference was that unlike *Aruni*, *Chandrika* was middle aged and wore a nurses’ uniform and the questions I posed her were different from the ones I had for *Aruni*. I saw no sense in asking the same questions when I felt almost certain that I might get very similar answers. So I asked her to tell me about what she thought of the health conditions of the shop floor workers. She told me as far as she could tell a vast majority of them were suffering from anaemia:

They don’t get enough iron... their diets lack in proteins...Often they come into the sick room complaining of headaches, dizziness and backaches. ..I give them some tablets and send them back to the floor.

This was how she described her main responsibilities to me. She also had some special duties when it came to dealing with pregnant workers, such as instructing them to go and register at the nearby maternity clinic, to officially inform the supervisors and so on. “Why do they have to inform?” I asked her. “It is for their own good, because they get some special benefits like free transport to their boarding houses and some fruit to eat after lunch. I asked her if the pregnant workers got taken off the line and assigned any other type of work.

No. It is difficult to balance the lines as it is ...we have fairly high turnover rates.

Any way, only a few of them will work the full nine months... even if they do, they rarely come back after the three month maternity leave.

At this point she told me a story of how a new mother had come back from her village, bringing her three month old baby with her, given the baby for her [the nurse] to hold and had gone and given in her resignation. “She desperately wanted to keep the job, but had no way of taking care of the baby while working”, explained *Chandrika*.

Next day, *Mahesh* was able to set aside some time from his busy schedule to talk with me. I interviewed him in his office, notebook in hand, recorder by my side on the table, we were undisturbed by any one other than for his staff members, who occupied the adjoining room and came in from time to time to get instructions on various routine matters they were dealing with. *Mahesh* proved to be a model interviewee - he made sure everything he said was accurately recorded in the digital recorder on the table and even paused at regular intervals to facilitate my note taking. For more than two hours he talked about the many programmes and events initiated by the HRD unit to train, develop and

altogether drive the shop floor workers towards becoming a content, motivated workforce. During our long interview, *Mahesh* described the many workshops that had been organized, even showed me photographs and video clips of them; a broadcasting programme called the '*SriKnit FM*' where the 'girls' could request for their favourite songs to be aired through the intercom; a meditation programme aimed at improving their spiritual wellbeing; the library where novels were stocked up for the 'girls' to borrow and read during their free time and many other equally well - meaning activities all undertaken by him and his staff at the HRD unit. During my chance visit to the workers' canteen the previous day, I had spotted a huge and colourful poster covering an entire side wall, listing the maternity benefits offered to shop floor workers. *Channa* had told me it had been hung there recently by the HRD unit. So, now I asked *Mahesh* about this and was told it was their latest incentive scheme aimed at expectant mothers working on the shop floor. He said the 'girls' were very happy about the new scheme and promised to give me some printed material outlining how it actually worked. "About how many pregnant workers do you have in this plant at present?" I asked him. "Well, about nineteen or twenty at the moment." He knew the numbers off hand. He also told me there were 1048 workers on the plant I shop floor at the moment and 924 of them were female, and that a large majority of female workers were within the age group of 18 - 25. I asked him about problem of high worker turnover, especially among machine operators, which had been an issue of concern at all the other interviews I had so far held. *Mahesh* endorsed what his colleagues had said; he even had a novel terminology to describe the phenomenon, and called it the 'natural turnover' related specially to female workers in

the factory. He seemed to accept this as the normal order of things, and was not at all disturbed by the occurrence as some of his colleagues were.

Most of these girls' work here for five or six years, collect some money for their dowry, purchase some gold jewellery and other items needed to set-up house keeping, collect their gratuity money¹⁰⁰, and leave to get married.

"You don't see this as a problem"? I wanted to know. "Of course not, we are very happy for them. We often attend the wedding ceremonies and give them an expensive gift on behalf of the company" He told me.

As far as *Mahesh* and even *Kumar*, *Aruni* and *Chandrika* were concerned, it was very 'natural' for the 'girls' to be leaving their jobs once they were married, and had children. None of them however, explained to me why the 'sewing girls' gave up their jobs after a few years while other 'professional' female workers, some of whom like *Jarnnarz* below, even held managerial positions, continued in their jobs, combining their work and family lives without too much trouble after marriage and until even retirement. The 'girls' themselves, surprisingly enough, did not talk about the *difference* between their situation and the situation of their 'better paid' sisters who did not live in boarding houses on the 'other' side of the town but were from affluent homes in the city. The difference, as will be further analysed later on, was one of their social position, which reiterates the importance of 'class' to knowing about the lives of women apparel factory workers.

¹⁰⁰ According the Shop and Office Ordinance, which is the prime piece of statute governing the terms and conditions of their employment, the 'girls' become entitled to withdraw their gratuity money after completing five years in service.

6.2.1.4. *Jarnnarz; the female personnel manager*

I met *Jarnnarz*, the female Personnel Manager of *SriKnit* Plant I, on my way to observe the shop floor. Her office, unlike the HRD unit, was situated very close to where the actual production process was taking place. The room I entered with *Channa*, now my permanent escort, was cluttered with letters, papers, files and white boards fixed all around its four walls. And its occupant, again unlike the staff at the HRD unit who always looked calm and collected, seemed to be busy to the point of distraction. She was answering the telephone, glancing through a file in front of her and trying to talk with two workers who had come into the office to meet her all at the same time. *Mahesh* had already told her of my visit - so she greeted me, apologized for being so busy and asked me to sit down. Feeling almost guilty about troubling her further, I decided to wait a while for things to settle down a bit. They never did, for as soon as she had dealt with the issues at hand another couple of workers came into the room, this time about a disagreement with a supervisor. In spite of the never ending demands on her time, *Jarnnarz* somehow found time to talk with me as well. Only, she requested me not to switch on the recorder while she was talking, to which I readily agreed. In her hurried and excited tone, she told me her main concern was to ensure that there were enough machine operators to balance the eleven production lines of *SriKnit* Plant I on a daily basis. The white boards surrounding her on the walls all held figures, numbers and charts giving her information she needed: on the daily absenteeism rates, turnover figures calculated on weekly and monthly basis, the number of shop floor workers who were pregnant, the number on maternity leave at the moment and so on. She told me that the charts were updated daily to ensure timely action was taken. Action taken basically consisted of

maintaining a pool of excess workers who covered up for absent workers on a line. Also the Personnel Department was running a widespread and ongoing recruitment campaign, covering far away remote villages to attract new workers in place of the ones who left. *Jarnnarz* described how she herself went on ‘recruitment trips’ to find new ‘girls’ who were brought to *Katunayake* in company- owned buses and who after two weeks of ‘in-house’ training were assigned to work as machine operators on the lines. As at that date, Plant I had a daily absenteeism rate of 4% - four workers for every hundred, being absent on any given day - and a monthly turnover rate of 6%, which read as six out of every hundred workers leaving their jobs every month. These, according to *Jarnnarz* were figures rather on the high side, considering industry averages. She openly blamed the harsh conditions on the shop floor for the state of affairs saying:

They [meaning the production staff] derive very high efficiency rates¹⁰¹...when the ‘girls’ are unable to reach these targets they are scolded, sometimes even in filthy language. So they leave their jobs and go home, and I have to find workers to keep the production lines going. How am I supposed to do this? To make matters worse these ‘poor girls’ have a very hard time outside the factory-in their boarding houses. They should close down all the factories in the ‘zone’ and relocate them in the villages. That should solve most of these problems.

This was how she expressed her opinion about the extraordinarily chaotic situation she was dealing with. At the end of voicing her concerns, she double checked with me to ensure nothing she said was recorded. Our discussion was cut short as *Jarnnarz* got a call from *Mr. Kumar* asking her to come into his office straightaway. Before leaving she promised to meet me again if she could, probably over lunch, which was the only time

¹⁰¹ Number of items a worker has to complete per hour to be within the target production.

she was free. I did not get an opportunity to talk with *Jarnnarz* again, even though I saw her many times on my visits to the shop floor which was through a corridor alongside her office. I never saw her alone, but always surrounded by one or more persons who seemed to have pressing issues to get sorted out. So I refrained from disturbing her and went past the ‘personnel office’ to my assigned place at a corner of the shop floor. The more time I spent in this corner, as a ‘silent’ observer of the deafeningly noisy shop floor, the more I understood what she had meant: about the ‘girls’ being driven to achieve impossible production targets, about how they were treated by the line leaders, about how their work was structured as cogs in an enormous operation. Further, I was also able to fully understand what *Dishanthi* and the other ‘girls’ had meant when they had told me of their dreams of giving up their jobs and returning home. Finally, I was able to recognize the pain I saw in the *Ramani*’s eyes when telling me of her decision to stay on in the ‘zone’ simply because she lacked an alternative to this incredibly brutal way of life, on the assembly line.

6.2.2. Minsala and others: estranged labour on the global assembly line

Marx describes estranged labour as “labour that is external to the worker, i.e. it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself” (1959:72). A worker performing estranged labour, argues Marx, “does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind” (1959:72). Marx sees such labour not as voluntary, but as coerced or forced labour and argues it is not the satisfaction of a need but merely a means of satisfying needs external to it. This alien character manifests

clearly in the fact that as soon as the physical or other compulsions are lifted 'labour is shunned like the plague' (1959:72). Hartsock, using the Marxian concept of estranged labour to explain women's work, argues 'work that should be used for the growth of workers is used instead to diminish them, to make them feel like machines. Estranged labour distorts the lives of workers in a number of ways; workers are not in control of their actions during the times they work; their time belongs to those who have the money to buy it. Women's time in particular is not their own, but is almost always controlled by men' (1998:46). The labour of 'sewing girls' who worked on the eleven assembly lines of *SriKnit* plant I, as observed from my vantage point at a corner of the shop floor, has many of the characteristics of estranged labour as identified by Marx embedded into its process. Their work, as portrayed in the following sketch, can be explained as external to their essential beings, work that does not make them content but unhappy, work that 'mortifies their bodies and ruins their minds' and work that is shunned the minute the compulsion is removed. Also they work at a pace set by others and are not in control of their own actions during the times they work. The time they spend on the shop floor is not their own, but bought by others who have the money to buy it. How the labour of *Minsala*, a new worker, and also other 'girls' on the lines are subject to rigid capitalist discipline on the shop floor and also how they react to such appropriation of their labour is elucidated through the following story.

The time I visited *SriKnit* garments coincided with the time that all eleven assembly lines of *SriKnit* I were busy churning out garments, mainly winter clothes, to be shipped to their destinations in the Western markets, before the cold weather set - in and

Christmas shopping began in earnest. I was already aware that visiting the shop floor, which was the centre of this process of production, was not going to be an easy task. As I had anticipated, obtaining permission to visit the shop floor proved to be a somewhat sensitive issue. It was only after repeated assurances on my part, both to *Kumar* and *Mahesh* that I would not speak with the workers nor disrupt the production floor in any way that I did obtain permission to actually go inside the plant. *Channa*, as usual was entrusted with the task of showing me the way and together we made our way towards the production floor, which was in the same building complex as the Personnel Manager's office. At the door, *Channa* stopped and explained to an officer who was standing by it that he was taking me to see the shop floor. I later learned that he held the position of Production Manager, one of the most important and best paid jobs in the garment industry. At first he looked dubious, "*Mahesh* has sent an e-mail around about this", *Channa* explained further, and we were allowed to walk through, but not before I was given a closely scrutinizing look over by the overbearing boss of production. Inside the swing doors and on the shop floor, I was overcome by the deafening, repetitive and nerve racking sound of the machines which seemed never to stop. A loud music was played through the intercom as if to submerge the jarring sound of machinery that filled the air. But it only added to the confusion, and together with the harsh sounds of line supervisors shouting at the 'girls' and the production assistants shouting at the line supervisors - they had to shout to be heard - and so on, the whole place took on a crazed atmosphere.

Channa smiled at my look of distress saying “You will get used to it after a while”. He proved to be correct for slowly, as my ears adjusted to the unfriendly sounds and my eyes learned to see through the haze of women, men and machines, I began to visualize the patterns emerging from among parts of the structure that seemed unconnected at first. I soon realized that nothing was out of place within this seemingly disordered place. In fact, everything was in order, everything was within the system and working in precise accordance with the carefully laid out production process: the classic example of what textbooks called ‘the process layout of production’. It started from the store room, where piles of material were stored up waiting to be brought down to the cutting area. The cutting area was basically a space for male workers, who were in charge of the enormous cutting machines. Women were employed here only on minor tasks such as rolling down layer after layer of fabric on the cutting table and collecting and labelling the cut pieces. Once the fabric was laid on the long cutting tables to a height of over one foot the men used the machines to cut them according to the blocks already laid on top of the pile. Designing, pattern making and even laying out the blocks on the fabric were highly skilled jobs some of which were supported and/or supervised by specially trained staff flown in from overseas. Once the fabric was cut and labelled, the pieces were ‘fed’ to the lines. Plant I had eleven assembly lines each with a workforce of 25 to 30 machine operators - all female. Altogether there were 328 sewing machine operators, 447 helpers (the younger, inexperienced ‘girls’) and another 273 male and female workers in charge of cutting, ironing, finishing and packing, who made up the one thousand strong shop floor work force. Once the cut pieces were ‘fed into the lines’ (brought there by the helpers), it was time for the sewing ‘girls’ to get on with their part of the process. Each

‘girl’ was assigned with sewing up one small part of the garment (today they were sewing a winter jacket), usually starting from the collar. Each ‘girl’ had a plastic box near her machine containing the pieces allocated to her. Once she had finished a few items they were passed up the line to the next ‘girl’. Thus, the process continued until the finished garments went through the stages of checking for defects, ironing, finishing and packing - all performed by women and supervised mainly by men - until they were finally ready to be shipped. A fabric which came out of its place in the store room only that morning would find itself turned into a finished garment, ironed and labelled, neatly packed into a cellophane cover and stacked inside a shipping container stationed outside the rear entrance of the factory door, ready to reach the port of *Colombo*, all within one working day. It was an amazingly efficient operation - a management wonder - to say the least.

But my interest lay not in this frighteningly efficient and chillingly mechanized process itself, but in the workers who made it happen. The female workers outnumbered their male counterparts nine to one on the shop floor. From my corner at the end of line two I could see how they worked on - all too clearly. At first I tried to focus on all the workers - for I could see the whole of line two from where I was standing - but soon I realized it was a fruitless effort which would only serve to confuse me. So I fixed my gaze on the machine nearest to me, handled by a young girl, who had never once looked up since we first came in. So engrossed was she in what she was doing, She was most probably unaware of our presence there. I watched her for a long time, bent over her machine, one foot on the energy box, managing the power supply to the machine, right hand on the wheel of the machine controlling its speed, left hand holding the piece of cloth at its place

under the needle. There was nothing strange in the posture itself; it was how any of us would sit at a machine. But what was unbelievable was the sheer speed at which she worked, never once lifting her head, never moving an extra muscle, other than for the precisely measured movement of hands, tossing one after another partly sewn garment into the box by her side on the floor, for hours no end - that was what made the whole set - up look incredible. It seemed as if she was part of the machine herself, the human arms which gave it life. Yet, how did she do it, how did her slender body cope with the tremendous strain of this, strenuous, repetitive, continuous work for eight hours a day, for six days a week, for four weeks a month, for months and for years? For how long could she actually go on doing this before everything became too much to bear, when she could no longer absorb this tension, this sheer force of work and the noise which was almost unbearable? More importantly, why did she have to work at this breathless pace?

It was *Channa* who provided me with answers to these questions. The ‘girls’ were given daily production targets, predetermined after meticulous ‘time and motion’ studies conducted by qualified staff who sewed sample items inside a room nearby. Each morning the lines were balanced according, allocating the workers and machines among them to achieve the desired rate of efficiency. For the workers it meant having to finish a minimum number of items per hour. Today they were working to achieve a target of seventy items per hour, which gave them under a minute to complete one item. From their stations adjacent to the lines, special monitoring teams filled up and tallied production records on an hourly basis. It was the responsibility of the line supervisor to ensure that everything went on smoothly, without delays, breakdowns or bottlenecks. To

achieve this, the line supervisors, the majority of whom were men, were directly dependent on the 'girls' to sew up their quota for the day. This dependence gave rise to somewhat peculiar and even vicious patterns of work relations on the floor. If the 'girls' lagged behind target it was the line supervisors who got the blame. So it was a continuous struggle on their part to keep the 'girls' working, sewing on and on, achieving the given target at whatever cost. Many methods: ranging from production bonuses and incentives, to persuasions, to shouting at 'girls' at the top of their voices were used by the stressed supervisors to keep things going. It was one mad rush, to ensure shipments were made in time and goods delivered as promised, to adorn the retail outlets in - far off countries. The logic underpinning the speeding up of the production process was simple. A higher rate of efficiency meant greater productivity which brought down the 'cost' of producing an item thereby increasing the profit margin. Since availability of low cost labour was the basic reason why trans- national firms such as *SriKnit* had located their assembly lines on third world shores in the first place, it was only rational that they sought to keep labour costs down. They achieved this by paying higher salaries to a fewer number of people such as the production manager and some of his more senior staff and by using them as 'tools' to exploit the majority work force who had to work more for less pay. It was a strategy that had achieved the desired results over the past thirty years and was still doing so with remarkable success.

There was some fifteen minutes to go before the lines broke up for lunch and the 'girls' got a precious twenty minute break. I could see that one 'girl' less than half way down the line had more unfinished items by her side than the others. Her face looked anxious as

she glanced up at the clock on the wall and attempted to sew faster, apparently she was not as skilled at her job as some of the others around her. The supervisor of the line, who had been watching her for some time now came down the aisle towards her, she did not look up as he approached, but bent down even lower as if to hide her face. “What do you think you are doing? You will not get up from the machine today until you finish this lot”. The shouted words were audible even where we were standing, and a few heads went up at the unwelcome sound. There were no replies, not from the offender, nor from anyone else in the room, but the look on their tired, drawn out faces was of one of deep resentment, even anger. It was lunch time now, and one by one the ‘girls’ got up from their cramped up places by the machines to go out and join the lunch queue inside the canteen. All but one young girl, who sewed on, bent low over her machine.

The canteen staff was ready to receive the first batch of girls, who were from the lines one to three - the ‘girls’ went to lunch in groups, over twenty minute slots spanning from twelve noon to two o’ clock. They had to stand in a long line to collect their aluminium plates. With plate in hand they moved towards the long table where three people were standing behind the huge containers of rice and curries ready to serve them. Once their plates were filled the next step was to find a place to sit. The room was quickly filling up, but each girl somehow managed to find a space on the rows of benches. They didn’t talk much but quietly ate up their share of rice and curries before getting up to wash their plates and hands. At last free from the noise of the machines, I asked *Channa* the reason for the multi coloured headgear the ‘girls’ were wearing. All of them had on the same dull green uniform - which made them look colourless and drab - over their normal set of

clothing, but the caps which covered up their heads were green, blue or orange. I was told it was designed for ease of identification - green meant regular machine operators and blue was for helpers. Orange caps were worn by the pregnant shop floor workers and were seen few and far between. Interestingly enough, male shop floor workers did not have a uniform, nor did they wear caps of identification. I had seen a few other female staff on the floor, who as *Channa* later informed me, worked either as quality controllers, time study officers or in some rare instances even as production assistants. None of them were in uniform, but were dressed fashionably in whatever way they seemed to fancy - in *sarees*, dresses, jeans or trouser suit. Everything they wore from the high - heeled shoes to the glittering gold earrings spoke of a higher purchasing power. As they walked up and down the aisles among the uniformed 'sewing girls' it was apparent that they knew of their powerful positioning within the organization. In the same way the 'uniformed girls', who at this moment were having lunch sitting down on the wooden benches, knew of their powerless standing.

Most of the first batch of 'girls' had finished eating by now, and after a quick visit to the rest room, returned to their machines. I was rather surprised by their behaviour as I thought they might prefer to spend some time outside. I soon understood why they had gone back, for inside the room it was cool, and one by one the 'girls' who had gone inside stretched down on the cement floor by the side of their machines - to sleep for five minutes - to rest their tired bodies before the afternoon session started. I quietly came out of the production floor and walked towards the HRD unit, feeling I had seen enough for one day.

As long as I did not talk with the 'girls' my presence among them was more or less tolerated by the executives in charge of production. So I came and went as I liked, but always playing the part of dumb observer. However, as I was not deaf nor blind I could hear and see a lot of things that went on daily on the production floor. Some of these incidents, however, made me wish I could neither hear nor see them. My last few memories of the shop floor were especially unpleasant. Then, again, the whole experience of watching some three hundred or more 'girls' struggling with their machines daily had been a painful and a sad experience to say the least. I loathed it when *Sarath*, the extra -obnoxious supervisor of line two, started shouting at the 'girls' who were slow or who made mistakes. As a rule the 'girls' never reacted to his rude behaviour but silently got on with their work. But once during my stay with them, their tolerance finally gave away, and I could glimpse a fragment of the flaming anger that must have been carefully hidden away in their aching hearts and souls. It was when *Minsala*, the young girl who had not been able to reach her target the other day, was asked to continue working through lunch for the fourth time in the week. By now I knew her by name, for she was been constantly pulled up and shouted at by *Sarath*, who seemed to derive a sadistic pleasure in doing so. Today, she was behind time again and just as he was walking down the aisle after cruelly reprimanding and threatening her *Sarath* was confronted by an apparently more mature and experienced worker of line two who challenged him - unafraid, and uncaring of all possible consequences. "How dare you keep harassing her? You know full well she is new and can't sew as fast as the rest of us". And to my utter amazement others down the line joined her in the outburst adding:

We know why you are so tough with her, it's because she doesn't tolerate your advances. *Ruchira*, in line four is also new, but *Mala Akka* [line four supervisor, who was the only female supervisor on the floor and who had been promoted from among the 'girls' themselves], never scolds her but sits at her machine and helps her finish the work. If you do this ever again we will go to *Perera* sir and tell him we can't work with you.

Their shouting was disturbing the entire floor and subsided only after the production assistant came rushing in to calm them down. I saw *Sarath* walking away to the furthest end of the room, where he remained for quite a long time, before gathering up enough courage to come anywhere near line two again. But he let *Minsala* alone, who during the whole nauseating scene had gone on sewing, her head bent low over the machine.

As Anna Pollert, explaining the lives of women tobacco factory workers argues, 'a vicious circle between gender oppression and working - class exploitation is set up which both perpetuates women's relegation into the domestic sphere and intensifies their exploitation as workers' (1983:98). Even though placed in a vastly different context, experiences of *Minsala*, as described above is closely reflected through Pollert's argument; for in addition to being exploited as low waged labour on the global assembly line *Minsala* is also subject to gender oppression resulting from being a 'young girl'. Likewise there are similarities between how women worked in tobacco factories in Britain in the 1970s, as explained by Pollert, and the lives of women apparel factory workers of this third world setting. Pollert, bringing in examples of what happened inside the tobacco factory during a strike explains how women workers organized against

capital. Even though not as organized as Pollert's workers, the 'sewing girls' of *SriKnit* factory, while being closely surrounded by multiple dominating structures are not passive victims but are engaged in a continuous struggle against them. Indeed the angry outburst of 'girls' of line two against *Minsala's* harassment was one situation where their 'anger', mostly concealed beneath a facade of subservient behavior, came to be surfaced. Finally, as argued by Pollert, it is only by organizing against capital in their role as working class woman that these workers can hope to be freed from the multiple oppressive forces surrounding their lives.

Watching *Minsala* on the assembly line, listening to *Dishanthi* telling me of her plans to leave the zone, seeing the sadness in *Sureka's* face remembering the serenity of her village, hearing the worry in *Sakuntala's* voice telling me about her unborn child and noting the happiness with which *Tamara* described her life to me away from the zone, brought back memories of *Ceylonita* estate, raising questions in my mind about similarities and or differences of how women lived and worked within these different work regimes. Synthesizing the stories of 'tea pluckers' of *Ceylonita* estate and 'sewing girls' of *SriKnit* factory as attempted in the final chapter of this thesis aims to search for answers to these questions. While doing so, in this chapter, I also attempt to critique the extent to which exiting feminist thinking, specifically Marxist and postcolonial feminist thinking is reflective of the way in which women's productive and reproductive labour roles interact within these third world/ postcolonial settings.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Women, Stories and Struggles

This final chapter brings together the ‘stories’ of ‘tea pluckers’ and ‘sewing girls’ as narrated throughout this ethnography. Such synthesizing of stories attempts firstly, to search for patterns of interactions of women’s productive and reproductive labour within plantation estates and apparel factories. Secondly, it seeks to critique the extent to which existing feminist thinking, specifically Marxist and postcolonial feminist thinking is reflective of the patterns of interaction of women’s reproductive and productive labour revealed through this ethnography. Drawing from this critique, this study argues for an integrated theoretical framework of ‘class’, ‘gender’ and ‘ethnicity’ as offering the most powerful reflection of these women’s lives as they strive to balance their productive and reproductive labour roles within these work settings. Finally, it sees these ‘women and girls’ as engaged in a continuous struggle against the exploitative structures around them. It is with the ultimate ethical political aim of giving strength to their struggles that this study narrates the stories of their lives.

7.1 Women in the ‘ongoing process’ of primitive accumulation

Recollecting my memories of *Ceylonita* estate, *Madumani*, a young mother who had recently given birth to her first child listens obediently as *Biso Menike*, the estate midwife instructs her on how to feed and clean her child. I am asked to wait outside as *Biso Menike* carries out a bodily check on *Madumani* inside her bedroom. I am not told of the purpose of this inspection; neither do I want to probe further into the issue. On our way back *Biso Menike* tells me she had instructed *Madumani* not to have any more children

for a few years. “It is the policy of the estate. Anyway, these people have to be told everything”. Although not directly stated, her words explain to me that the estate needs these women not only as production workers but also as reproduction workers, producing the future work force on a generational basis. As such, not only women’s productive labour but their reproductive labour as well is subject to close regulation by the estate.

On another day, in the ‘zone’, *Dishathi*, a young garment worker who had got married recently tells me of her desire to have a child. “I love children....and want to have a baby of my own. But I have to wait till I leave my job...how can any one take care of a baby while working in the ‘zone’?” Her concerns are echoed by *Sureka*, *Sakunthala* and other girls who live in the zone and are either mothers or expecting a child. Their stories tell me that the factory does not require these ‘girls’ to work as reproductive labourers but only as productive labourers, which place the ‘girls’ in a situation of having to sacrifice one role to take up the other. The ‘girls’, even though faced with similar dilemmas, had their own ways of dealing with them, which made each story they told me somewhat different from the other.

These stories, drawn from among many others told throughout this text inform us how these women workers are placed at the centre of an ongoing process of ‘primitive accumulation’. Stories of how women worked (and still work) in the plantation estates in Sri Lanka and their way of life in and around the ‘zones’ working as ‘sewing girls’ reminds us over and over again that these women are indeed ‘robbed not only historically through original accumulation but continually, again and again through the process of ongoing accumulation’ (Werlhof: 732). Federici’s thoughts when she says that ‘the

female body had been turned into an instrument for the reproduction of labour and the expansion of the work-force, treated as a natural breeding machine, functioning according to rhythms outside of women's control' (2004: 91) are remarkably reflective of the way in which *Madumani* is treated by *Biso Menike*. For here she becomes a woman who has lost control over her own body, a woman whose reproductive labour is subject to regulation by the capitalist enterprise, of which the midwife is the agent. In this way she becomes a symbol of what Dalla Costa argues to be 'more recent forms of colonization and exploitation of the third world' (1999: 12).

As stories of *Madumani*, *Dishathi*, *Surake* and *Sakuntala* further illustrate, being placed as they are at the centre of an ongoing process of primitive accumulation, these women workers are trapped into a situation of having to balance their 'labour' between productive and reproductive roles. Feminist scholars writing of both local and global contexts (e.g. Elson and Pearson, 1986; Wijayatilake; 2001; Jayaweera, 2002) have already problematized certain aspects of women's reproductive labour, as they work on the global assembly lines and plantation estates. However, these existing studies do not specifically address the issue of why and how women deal with their multiple labour roles within these settings. Nor do they attempt to look for differences, if any, between such interactions as happens within these different work regimes. This results in an apparent mystification of women's reproductive labour, through its definition as natural and therefore frequently outside of social and economic studies. By searching for patterns of interactions between women's productive and reproductive labour as happens within estates and factories, this discussion attempt to demystify this phenomenon. Furthermore,

it attempts to ascertain whether existing feminist thinking, specifically Marxist feminist thinking, continues to downplay and relegate reproductive labour, by drawing on empirical finding from these specific work regimes.

7.2 Women's productive and reproductive labour: A demystification?

Federici claims that her description of primitive accumulation includes a set of historical phenomena that are absent in Marx, and yet have been extremely important for capital accumulation. She identified these as:

...the development of a new sexual division of labour subjugating women's labour and women's reproductive function to the reproduction of the work-force; the construction of a new patriarchal order, based upon the exclusion of women from waged- work and their subordination to men and finally the mechanization of the proletarian body and its transformation, in the case of women, into a machine for the production of new workers (2004: 12).

These historical phenomena as identified by Federici then, subordinate women's labour by placing it outside of waged work, limited to reproduction of the work - force. The proletarian body, specifically the female proletarian body has been transformed into a machine for the production of new workers. Watching *Lakshmini*, a young mother working as a tea plucker at *Ceylonita* estate struggle through her daily routine: rushing through her household tasks at day break, walking down the rugged estate paths to the crèche with her children, plucking tea leaves in the scorching sun and returning home with the last rays of the setting sun to attend to the remaining housework, I wonder whether her way of life is fully accounted for in Federici's argument. Not only the stories of *Lakshmini* and *Sita Devi* as they struggle with the multiple burdens of being mother,

housewife and waged worker at one and the same time, but the stories of, *Rajeswari* and *Parameshwari*, whose children are grown up but who still work to support their families, and of *Krishna Devi* and *Lechchami* who continue to work into their old age simply because they have no other way of surviving, seem to be left outside of Federici's argument.

Simply, Federici's words when she states that, 'women have been left out of waged work', fail to fully explain the way of life of women workers who have always been, (and are still) working for a wage, in plantation estates in Sri Lanka. That said her thinking is reflective of the lives of these women, in so far as her assertion about the mechanization of the proletarian body and its transformation into a machine for the production of new workers is concerned. In fact, in so far as these women workers are concerned, their bodies seem to be mechanized not once, as argued by Federici, but twice, for the production of surplus value *and* for the production of new workers for the capitalist enterprise. If someone is left out of waged work at all within these settings, it is not women but men, for as I happened to witness during my stay at the estate, men could often be seen walking around freely while their wives worked both as waged workers in the field and as unpaid workers in the households.

Returning to my experiences at *SriKnit* factory in the light of this same theoretical assertion, here again Federici's words fail to fully reflect the lives of *Dishathi*, *Dilrukshi*, *Sakunthala*, and *Ramani*, all of whom are 'sewing girls' working for a wage in the global garment factories of this third world/postcolonial location. These 'girls' like the women

plantation workers are compelled to work, selling their labour power to make a living for themselves and for their families. However, Federici's argument about the female body being transformed into a machine for the production of new workers seems to relate to these 'girls' in a different way than it does for female estate workers. Such differences and probable causes for them are explained through the following discussion.

The lives of 'sewing girls', while being similar to that of 'tea pluckers' on one hand, as women working for a wage, are also different from them on the other. Unlike women in estates, none of these girls seemed to be coping with the multiple roles of being mothers, housewives and waged workers at one and the same time. In fact, if and when they wanted to get married and have families of their own, they nearly always thought of giving up their jobs in the 'zone' and returning to their villages. This apparent separation of waged and family work seemed to be common in the 'zone', just as it was customary to see women combining their waged (productive) and unwaged (reproductive) work in the estates.

When *Dishathi* told me of her decision to stop working as a 'sewing girl' so that she could have the baby she dreamed for; when *Sureka* spoke to me of her life, first as a sewing girl and now as a young mother living temporarily in the 'zone'; when *Tamara* described her life away from the 'zone' taking care of her daughter; when *Sakuntale* explained her plans of returning to her village at the end of her pregnancy, all of them, in their own way, were telling me of the difficulty or the near impossibility of combining their productive labour roles as 'sewing girls' working for a wage and reproductive

labour roles as mothers and housewives. Living as they were at a specific location in history, and forced into working as ‘sewing girls’ on the global assembly lines these girls were indeed struggling to cope with the conflicting demands on their labour. Their struggles were as varied and diverse as the expressions passing over their faces when they spoke to me of their lives: eager and hopeful at times and distressed and sorrowful at others. Their struggles however different in style, and strength, seemed, sooner or later to lead on to the same inevitable end of causing a rift or separation between their productive and reproductive labour roles as waged ‘sewing girls’ in the ‘zone’ and unpaid housewives/mothers at home.

Explaining this argument further, when *Kumar* told me shop floor girls usually left their jobs after working for three or four years; when *Jarnnarz* expressed her concern over the higher than average turnover rate of shop floor workers; when *Mahesh* described the wedding ceremonies of ‘sewing girls’ after which they did not come back to work; when *Aruni* showed me the photographs of babies whose mothers no longer worked at *SriKnit*, all of them in fact were reinforcing what I had already been told by the ‘girls’ themselves: that it was nearly always impossible for them to combine their productive and reproductive labour roles and that many of them sacrificed one for the other. Still resonating in my mind is *Chandrika*’s account of how a ‘sewing girl’ had left her job, “She came back to the factory at the end of the maternity leave period with her baby, asked me to hold the child and went in and handed in her letter of resignation....She told me she needed this job desperately, but had no way of taking care of the child while working”. Besides explaining the difficulties of combining productive and reproductive

labour roles where these ‘sewing girls’ were are concerned, these stories also reveal the subtle ways in which managers of these apparel factories seemed to justify and even celebrate the event of ‘girls’ leaving their jobs after getting married. Indeed throughout their conversations with me *Kumara*, *Mahesha* and even *Chandrika* to some extent, all made an effort to convince me that it was best for the ‘girls’ not to be working any more once they were married and had children. The ‘girls’ on the other hand had a different story to tell; as shown in the story above, as well as reflected in the stories of *Diahnathi*, *Sakunthala* and others, they left their work as sewing machine operators not because they did not want to work any more, but because they found it impossible to combine their waged productive labour with their reproductive labour.

Returning to my experiences at *Ceylonita* estate when I walk with *Lakshmini* to the crèche where she leaves her two children before starting work; when I follow *Sita Devi* home from the field almost dragging her two sleepy children behind her who had been at the crèche all day; when I listen to *Paremeshwari* and *Rajeswari* telling me of their experiences of leaving their young children in the care of the crèche attendant during their infancy and most of all when I hear the laughter in the women’s voices when they tell me they get pregnant to earn the sum of money paid to them at the birth of their children, there is indeed a marked *difference* between the stories of these women and the stories of ‘sewing girls’ as I heard while at *SriKnit*. These two groups of women, working under two different work regimes were negotiating the multiple interactions of their productive and reproductive labour in diverse ways; closely interwoven with each other at times and completely separated from each other at others.

Differences in the ways in which women's labour roles interact within estates and factories can be seen as closely bound up with the inherent nature of these work settings. Being immigrants of Indian origin estate workers have always been (and still are) marked out as stigmatized in ethnic terms, but as such highly suitable for work which is also stigmatized as of the lowest order - agriculture and production of raw material for more advanced economies. In a situation where immigration of Indian workers no longer happens and *Sinhalese* women are reluctant to work as 'tea pluckers', the workforce of an estate has to be regenerated from within the estate itself. This results in a situation where estate women have to work as productive workers *and* reproductive workers, 'reproducing the future estate workforce' at one and the same time. Also, living as they are confined within the plantation enclaves, their working and living spaces are situated in close physical proximity to one another, resulting in a close intermingling of their productive and reproductive labour roles. Such close intermingling of work roles facilitated by free child care facilities in the form of crèches seems to conceal, at least to some extent, the multiple exploitative demands placed on their labour.

In complete contrast to this set - up, within the garment factory setting, the working and living spaces of 'girls' are separated from each other. Their homes are situated in far off remote villages, to which they return after a short span of work life. When girls like *Dishanthi* and *Sakuntala* return to their homes to fulfil their dreams of becoming mothers and housewives engaging in the reproductive phase of their labour, they are replaced by new workers, who take up their places on the assembly lines. Thus, the factories have

little reason for attempting to retain these workers, neither are they dependent on them for regenerating the future 'factory work-force'. Unlike estate workers who belong to a minority ethnic group, apparel factory workers are mainly from the majority Sinhalese community. As such, there is always a large group of young girls with little or no job opportunities elsewhere, from among whom the factories easily draw in new workers in place of those who leave.

This vicious circle of young girls working as productive workers on the assembly lines for short times periods and thereafter as reproductive workers at home has been happening ever since the inception of global garments factories in post - independent Sri Lanka. Likewise, 'tea pluckers' being bound to work both as productive and reproductive labourers at one and the same time has been the practice in the estates from the days of the colonial rule. While being different from each other in certain ways as discussed above, the work regimes of plantation estates and apparel factories are also similar in certain other ways. Prominent among these is the fact that within both settings, women make up the vast majority of the work force. Not only are these workers women, they are also proletarian women of the third world. The lives of these women workers then, as explained in the following discussion, are closely affected by their gender, class and ethnicity.

7.3 Women at the intersections of gender, class and ethnicity

Embedded throughout this ethnography are many illustrations of how ‘women and girls’ live their lives at the intersections of class, gender and ethnic relations. This simple sentence spoken harshly by *Pramila*, during one of my conversations with her while at the ‘zone’, “They are daughters of poor parents (*duppath demawpiyange duvala*). It is their ‘class’ (*panthiya*) that has sent them to the zone”, perhaps is a more powerful explanation of why girls like *Dishathi*, *Dilrukshi*, and *Ramani* work as ‘sewing girls’ in global garment factories, than offered by any theorist. *Ramani*’s words when she told me “I couldn’t just wait for my parents to support me; they were not able to. My father was a labourer, he had no regular income”, echoes *Pramila*’s views as well as reflects the thoughts expressed by many ‘girls’ I met and talked with, within this setting. Their predicament as proletarian women is expressed eloquently by *Menike* when, in her poem entitled *life*, she tells us:

....at 10.30 we get a sip of tea

with neither flavour nor sugar

we take it because we are hungry

we bear all this because we are poor

As *Pramila*, *Dishathi* and other girls themselves told me and as I understood by sometimes taking with, sometimes listening to and sometimes just watching them, the primary reason why these ‘girls’ were compelled to work in the ‘zone’ was because they were ‘poor’. Thus, their class becomes a major determinant of ‘why’ they work as ‘sewing girls’. As such ‘how’ their productive and reproductive labour roles interact

during their work lives as ‘sewing girls’ on the global assembly line and even thereafter, is also closely affected by their class. Simply, being proletariat women intensifies their dilemma in struggling to balance the conflicting demands on their productive and reproductive labour.

Even though none of them, perhaps with the exemption of *Rejeswari* and *Mary*, were able to express their thoughts in the same perceptive way as *Dishathi* and other girls at *SriKnit* factory, written into their every word, reflected in their every expression and revealed by their every action were evidence that they were indeed proletariat women. The grief stricken look on the face of an estate mother who had recently lost her son due to lack of medical attention; the desperate gesture of *Lechchami*, telling *Biso Menike* she did not have money to go to the hospital; the unlit fire place of *Sita Devi’s* house; the distressed look in *Lakshmini’s* face when she told me of her worries of being out of work, are among a few of the many instances that inform us how being proletariat women, who have no way of living other than by selling their labour for a wage, affect their lives. However, for these ‘tea pluckers’ of *Ceylonita* estate as well as for the ‘sewing girls’ of *SriKnit* factory, their ‘class’ is not the only determinant of their oppression, rather as illustrated below, it is being ‘women’ as well as being ‘proletariat’ that subjects them to the dual oppression surrounding their lives.

Minutes within meeting me at her brother’s house at *Ceylonita* estate, *Mary* a middle aged ‘estate’ woman was telling me of her pain of being childless and widowed. “All my

gold jewellery was taken away from me...they asked me to break the bangles I wore on my wrists...saying a widow should not have jewellery...I could wear only white.” Having escaped into a sanctuary offered by another faith, *Mary* however, seemed not to be closely affected by such patriarchal practices any more. But this was not the case for many ‘estate women’, for they were under the constant supervision of male *Kanganys* while at work and closely watched over by their husbands and/or other male relatives while at their homes. *Madumani*’s wish to give birth to a son, *Lakshmini*’s view that men should not engage in housework, *Parameshwari*’s undying obedience towards her grown up son and beliefs that prevent any of them from entering places of religious worship are all illustrative of the way in which patriarchal relations affect the daily lives of ‘estate women’. Indeed Walby’s (1990: 20-21) writings where she recognizes expropriation of women’s household work by husbands, segregating women into less skilled, low paid work, male violence against women in the forms of rape, wife beating and sexual harassment, as structures making up a web of patriarchy within which women live their lives, is clearly reflective of such empirical evidence.

At *SriKnit* factory *Minsala*, a new worker is continuously subject to malicious scolding by her male supervisor. *Minsala*’s story as well as numerous other incidences of harassment, rape and even murder of ‘garment girls’ as heard from the ‘zone’ offer sufficient evidence that within this factory setting as well, women and girls’ are caught up in a web of patriarchy, made up of a “system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby, 1990: 20).

However within this same work regime, I met and talked with female workers who unlike the ‘sewing girls’, did not appear to be subject to any form of harassment while at work. In fact workers like *Jarnnarz*, the female personnel manager, *Aruni*, the female counsellor and even the company nurse who was female, seemed to go about their daily tasks confidently and independently. They were definitely not under any close or undesirable male supervision, and any ‘supervision’ they got was always friendly and amicable. As such, their work day was in complete contrast to the shop floor workers, who often did not dare even to lift up their heads from the garments they were sewing for fear of being scolded. Similarly at *Ceylonita* estate, I never witnessed the midwife and the crèche attendants, all of whom were paid employees of the estate and also women, treated in the same degrading way as the women who worked in the field plucking tea leaves, but always with respect and even admiration of their work.

As Wright (2005: 8) points out, in capitalism the central class relation is the capital/labour relation and this determines two class locations, capitalist and worker. However, as Wright further explains such a simple two-location model is inadequate for understanding the ‘formation of people’s subjective experiences within work, for this requires taking into account a set of concrete variations in working conditions such as degree of autonomy, closeness of supervisions, physical demands of work, cognitive complexity of tasks’ (2005: 12) and so on. Reading the work experiences of women estate and garment workers in the light of this argumentation then, unlike some female workers such as managers, teachers, nurses and midwives, these women engage in work with little or no autonomy, close supervision, greater physical demands and so on. As

such it could be argued that their hierarchical positioning within the working class itself, subjects the 'sewing girl' and 'tea pluckers' to even more intense levels of exploitation than some other women workers. Simply, the oppression surrounding their lives as women who work for a wage is intensified by the 'nature' of the work they do. This in turn affects relations between their productive and reproductive labour roles. Further explaining this viewpoint, in so far as women workers who occupy 'positions of power and authority' within these work settings were concerned, they did not seem to be faced with the same dilemmas and hardships as the 'tea pluckers' and 'sewing girls' in trying to combine and or separate their productive and reproductive labour roles. In fact any difficulties that they may have faced in balancing their productive and reproductive labour roles seemed to be smoothed over by the fact that they were paid a wage that enabled them to pay for child care and housework if they so wished.

Madhavi, a young girl whom I met at *Ceylonita* estate tells me of her reasons for wanting to leave the estate, "I will get my sister and my mother out of this place [*the estate*]. As long as we live here, we will never be able to escape from the stigma of being 'estate workers'. We have to get out of here". Unlike *Madhavi*, *Rani* the young pre - school teacher does not want to leave her home, but wants to stay on and fight. However, she like *Madhavi*, sees her 'ethnic origin' as a barrier to securing the teaching appointment she covets. Even though many of them did not seem to want to discuss their ethnic background with me, the women often hinted at their different ethnic origin and the lower social status associated with it. Sprinkled throughout my conversations with *Lakshmini*, *Sita Devi* and *Rajeswari*, are subtle remarks like, "We are different from the women who

live in the villages”. “Our grandparents have come from India to work”. “Our children have to be sent to work as servants in others families”, all of which tells us that these women, in spite of their apparent reluctance to discuss the issue openly, were aware of the ethnic differences affecting their lives. In most instances the women seemed to accept this situation and did not appear to be angry about it. Nevertheless, I did not miss out, nor have I forgotten the contempt in *Rajeswari’s* voice when she told me why women from the nearby villages did not work in the estate. Of course they don’t work as tea pluckers. They are *Sinhalese* women.”

Chandra Mohanty (2003) in *Feminism without Borders* says that systems of racial, class and gender domination ‘operate through the setting up of (in Dorothy Smith’s terms) particular, historically specific ‘relations of ruling’ (55-56). As Mohanty further argues, Smith’s conceptualization, even though it pertains specifically to western capitalist patriarchies, “can be used to advantage in specifying the relations between the organization and experience of sexual politics, and the concrete historical and political forms of colonialism, imperialism, racism and capitalism (56).”

Mohanty’s argument as drawn from Smith’s conceptualization of ‘relations of ruling’ is powerfully reflective of the daily life struggles of *Lakshmini*, *Sita Devi*, *Mary*, *Dishanthi*, *Minsala* and other ‘women and girls’ of *SriKnit* factory and *Ceylonita* estate, as they struggle to combine the conflicting roles of their productive and reproductive labour living as they are at the intersections of multiple dominative structures of class, gender and ethnicity. The concept of ‘relations of ruling’ rather than positing any simple relation

of colonizer and colonized or capitalist and worker, posits multiple intersections of structures of power and emphasizes the process or form of ruling, not the frozen embodiment of it... (Mohanty, 2003:56). Thus it offers useful insights in explaining not only the operation of multiple dominative structures of gender, class and ethnicity on the lives of 'third world women and girls' but also their individualized and collective struggles against these oppressive structures - as will be further illustrated below.

Even though, these women workers appeared always to be surrounded by multiple structures of domination, as argued above, the power with which each structure played upon their lives seemed to differ from place to place and time to time. For instance, as far as the estate workers were concerned their 'ethnicity' seemed to be the most powerful structure, and the one that they found most difficult to overcome. On the other hand, in the case of 'sewing girls' who were mostly from the majority Sinhalese community, it was their class that had driven them to the 'zone' in search of paid work. At both settings gender was a major determinant of their oppression since it was being women that had made them 'tea pluckers' and 'sewing girls' in the first place. However, at certain times gender became an even more powerful oppressor than at others, the situations as faced by *Minsala*, *Mary* and even *Dilrukshi* being examples.

Undoubtedly the structures of class, gender and ethnicity closely affect the ways in which women live within these work settings. However, rather than being mere victims, as often depicted in writings about them, these women workers resisted and struggled against these structures. Drawing in a related theoretical explanation, Jackson (2001) argues that,

as we shift our focus to the everyday contexts of women's lives, it becomes clear that the material and social cannot be understood in terms of social structures alone. Rather, we need to account for subjectivity and agency, for patterns of gendered interactions of everyday life. Relating such thinking to the stories of *Dishathi*, *Lakshmini*, *Dilrukshi* and *Rajeswari*, it becomes clear that the lived realities of their lives cannot be understood in terms of social structures alone. Rather, as their stories clearly illustrate, women's subjectivity and agency becomes as important as the structures themselves in understanding their lives. Simply it is necessary to look at the "micro levels at which power is deployed and resisted as well as the macro level of systematic domination" (Jackson, 2001:287). Such thinking compels us not to reduce every aspect of women's lives to an effect of social structures, but to appreciate the extent to which the structures themselves are challenged through women's resistance.

Further explaining this argument in the light of my ethnographic experiences, alongside the subdued voices of *Madumani* and *Chamila* who are thought of as 'victims' of this system of capitalist globalization, we also hear the voices of *Dishanthi*, *Rajeswari*, *Rani*, *Madhavi* and others, who are not restrained by, but are continuously struggling against the exploitative forces surrounding their lives. I vividly recall the determination in *Dishathi's* voice when she told me "We are poor girls who have no other way to live than work here [*in the zone*], but our lives will not always be like this, we will fight to make things better....if not for us, then at least for our children ". Indeed many voices I heard and incidents I witnessed throughout my stay at *Ceylonita* estate and *SriKnit* garments made me believe in the strength of *Dishathi's* words. Seeing the 'sewing girls' of line

two speaking up against a supervisor who was harassing one of their co-workers, at the risk of losing their jobs; hearing *Rajeswari*, herself struggling to hold up the heavy basket of tea leaves tied on to her head, getting into verbal battles with the *Kanganis* on behalf of other ‘pluckers’ of her gang, reading *Marci’s* poem ridiculing a letter of reprimand sent to her by a supervisor; seeing the anger in *Madhavi’s* eyes telling me of her desire to escape from her life as an ‘estate girl’, noting the hatred in the voices of ‘girls’ at *Auntie Margaret’s* boarding house when speaking of one of their supervisors; hearing the resolve in *Rani’s* words telling me of her intention to keep her pre-school for the estate children going, made me realize that beneath the apparent serenity of these ‘girls and women’ there was also resistance.

Turning towards a theoretical approach that does pay attention to women’s resistance in the light of the above discussion, Mohanty’s view that “...it is possible to retain the idea of multiple, fluid structures of domination that interact to locate women differently at particular historical conjunctures, while insisting on the dynamic oppositional agency of individuals and ...their engagement in daily life” (2003: 55) can be seen as significantly reflective of the lives of ‘women and girls’ as lived within these ‘third world’ settings.

Explaining further, postcolonial feminists theorize and study resistance, survival and agency, not just victimization and oppression. In the work of postcolonial feminists’ (e.g. Ong, 1988) women who have been traditionally silenced and relegated speak back. They reaffirm their own agency and represent themselves beyond the traditional images of ‘oppressed’. Relating such thinking to the lives of *Lakshmini*, *Sita Devi*, *Rajeswari*, *Rani*,

Dishanthi, Merci and others, it is by placing them at the intersections of class, gender and ethnicity and seeing them as struggling against fluid and multiple structures of domination, as argued by post colonial feminist theorists, that their lives can be best understood. Postcolonial feminist thinking which adds women's specific historical locations to the Marxist feminist categories of class and gender and pays attention to women's *résistance* then, can be seen as offering the closest reflection of women's lives as lived within these third world/postcolonial settings.

7.4 Women, stories and struggles

One day near to the end of my stay at the 'zone', I tried to thank *Pramila* for helping me with my field work. She cut me off in her usual abrupt way saying, "You don't have to thank me, go back and write how my girls live...what it is like, living inside these little concrete rooms and being worked to death inside the factories". I promised her I would; indeed my writing of their daily struggles of survival is in partial fulfilment of this promise. At another day and place I happened to be inside the office when the 'tea plukers' of *Ceylonita* estate came in to be paid their monthly salaries. There was an opened ink pad on the desk, one by one the women dipped their right hand thumb in the ink pad and pressed it on the pay sheet, confirming the receipt of their wages. As was common to many estate women (and men) these women did not know how to read or write. But they did 'know' and were willing to tell me about the harshness of estate life and their day- to - day struggles for survival. It is their stories' that have so far remained written out of history, and I have attempted to capture through my writing.

Once, during my many discussions with her, I asked *Dishathi*, why the ‘girls’ didn’t write more about their experiences in the ‘zone’. She answered me with a smile, “We do write miss, whenever we can find a little time. But we have to be very careful what we write...we have not forgotten about what happened to *Menike*”. I soon learned that *Menike* had lost her job as a result of writing a poem about her life in the ‘zone’. Echoes of words as spoken by *Dishathi and, Pramila* and images of women with ink stained fingers drive me to write the (mostly unwritten) stories of their lives. Writing ‘their’ stories undoubtedly is the most significant contribution of my study. Seeing knowledge about these women workers of the third world as grounded in the ‘material politics of their daily lives’ drew me to adopt a methodological approach of ‘feminist ethnography’ for the purpose of this study. However, rather than merely adhering to the doctrines of ‘feminist ethnography’ as advocated by Western feminist theorists I attempted to develop a reflective account of the extent to which existing principles of ‘feminist ethnography’ are reflective of the ethical political considerations which apply to a third world/postcolonial research setting like mine. Such reflective accounts of ethical political dilemmas in carrying out ‘feminist ethnography’ within postcolonial settings further enrich the debate of ‘ethnography as a method of feminist research’ and thus become the methodological contribution of my study.

Turning towards its theoretical orientation, in this study I argue for the development of a threefold theoretical/analytical framework taking into consideration ‘class’ as derived from capitalist relations, ‘gender’ as derived from patriarchal relations, and ‘specific historical locations’ reflected in ‘ethnicity’ as derived from (post)colonial relations as the

most appropriate for understanding the daily life struggles of ‘tea pluckers’ and ‘sewing girls’ of this third world/postcolonial location. As such, Marxist feminist and postcolonial feminist thinking which pay attention to the analytical categories of class, gender and ethnicity become the theoretical foundation of my study. However, rather than thinking of these theoretical approaches as given I attempt to explain the extent to which they are reflective of the daily life struggles of ‘women and girls’ of this study by drawing on empirical findings. Such critical reflections where I look at ‘stories of third world women workers’ in the light of Marxist and post colonial feminist theorizations - spread out through the empirical chapters and finally drawn together in this concluding chapter - can be cited as the theoretical contribution of my study.

As stated earlier, narrating the stories of ‘tea pluckers’ and sewing girls’ of these work settings is what I see as the most significant contribution of my study. However, their stories as I narrate here might be different from what they themselves might relate. My writing of them cannot, and does not claim to be ‘fully representative’ of their lives, for I am neither a ‘tea plucker’ nor a ‘sewing girl’, only a ‘feminist storyteller of colour’ striving to narrate the stories of their lives.

Further elaborating on the limitations of writing ‘their stories’, as explained under the methodological approach, observing and interacting with female estate and factory workers at their work places, homes and lodging houses made up a major part of the data gathering efforts of this study. However, at each encounter, my presence among them altered the daily routines and disturbed the equilibrium of the setting, at least to some

extent. If and to what extent these disturbances occurred - simply if the women and girls would have behaved and talked differently if I had not been there - will remain unknown. This is an important but also an inevitable limitation of the study. Also my ethical political sympathies may have encouraged me to focus on some aspects of their lives more than others, making me see one side of their story rather than another. Undeniably this is another important yet inevitable limitation of my study. Partial and closely guarded access that was given to me within the premises of the *SriKnit* factory, language barriers that came up within *Ceylonita* estate, as a result of my inability to speak Tamil, possibility of minor errors in translating the interview transcripts from Sinhala to English can be cited as additional limitations of this study.

The most significant limitation of my writing however, stems from the issue of whether it can change, even in a small way, the lives of these 'women and girls'. As history reveals, in so far as these workers are concerned, any change for the better has come slowly and often painfully. If anyone is to be applauded for bringing about even these trivial changes it is women like *Pramila* who even today lives with 'her girls', helping them in whatever way she can, and indeed girls like *Dishathi* and *Rani* who are fearless enough to struggle against forces which more often than not are too powerful to be defeated. Simply writing about their lives as I have done here, though perhaps better than totally ignoring their existence, is far from sufficient to help them in their struggles.

Finally, irrespective of whether my writing can help them or not, struggles by these women workers will continue, and change, however slowly, will come. Even as I write

these last few lines there are reports of female garment factory workers of Cambodia and Bangladesh, nearby third world countries, being engaged in violent street struggles against low wages and poor working conditions. As a newspaper reporter writing of one such incidence says, “Thousands of Cambodian garment workers have mounted a series of strikes over low pay, loss of jobs and poor working conditions in recent weeks....on 27th July 2010 riot police used electric shock batons to beat women workers after charging protesters at a factory (Braddock, 2010). Another reporter in an article entitled ‘*Machinists against the Machine - Bangladeshi garment workers' struggles*’, describes garment factory workers of Bangladesh and their struggles as, “85% female, paid some of the lowest wages in the world; expressing some of the highest levels of class struggle in the world at present, trade unions have very little influence or restraint on these struggles, they are self - organized by workers on the job” (Marut, 2010). Such ‘militancy’ on the part of working class women, specifically working class women of the ‘third world’, while strengthening some of the arguments of this study, perhaps guides us towards a path for further research on women and their labour.

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