

GLOBAL ACADEMIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE

COLOMBO, SRI LANKA



GARI International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

ISSN 2659-2193

Volume: 09 | Issue: 04

On 31st December 2023

<http://www.research.lk>

Author: DDL Willarachchi

General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka

GARI Publisher | Literature Study | Volume: 09 | Issue: 04

Article ID: IN/GARI/ICLLS/2023/124DEC/SL | Pages: 62-70 (09)

ISSN 2659-2193 | Edit: GARI Editorial Team

Received: 27.11.2023 | Publish: 31.12.2023

CURATORIAL FOOTPRINT IN DIGITAL ARCHIVES OF LIFE: ANALYSIS OF THE LIFE NARRATIVES OF SRI LANKAN WOMEN SURVIVORS OF WAR ARCHIVED IN PROJECTS I AM AND HERSTORIES

DDL Willarachchi

General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University,

Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

In life writing, particularly in the digital sphere, the concept of the archive and the role of the curator are important especially when a third party is creating a repository containing life narratives of marginalised people. This research examines the role of the curator vis-à-vis two digital archives containing the life narratives of Sri Lankan women who have been exposed to the thirty-year war. For this purpose, the study scrutinizes the curatorial footprint, and the agency demonstrated by the curators as well as the women narrators in the process of constructing and presenting the narratives in a digital archive. Following a qualitative approach, the study examines the above-mentioned concepts based on a close reading and textual analysis of selected narratives from the digital archives *I Am* (2010-2012) by Kannan Arunasalam and *Herstories* (2012-2013) by Radhika Hettiarachchi. Based on the analysis, it is concluded that while the curators of the two projects have successfully created a niche for the life stories of Sri Lankan women survivors of war ensuring that their narratives are preserved and heard by the public, the agency of the women narrators over the manner and matter of life narration has been manipulated to an extent due to various reasons such as creative licence and practices, usage of tools, and digital dynamics etc., which has affected the balance (McLean, 2011) of contributions. However, it is further observed that

attempts at decentralising the agency of the curator have also been made to an extent.

Keywords: Life narration, Sri Lanka, women's war life narratives, digital archives, *I Am*, *Herstories*

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally defined as “a place in which public records or historical materials are preserved” (Archive, 2018), an archive is a political site where the material archived, and the act of archiving are influenced by power politics. According to Jacques Derrida (1995) who traces the word ‘archive’ to its Greek origins, “the archons [ones who archive] are first of all the documents' guardians,” and archiving is an act of power and responsibility (p. 10). As Derrida suggests, exploring an archive requires scrutiny of the curators' role. Foucault (1972) argues that an archive is not merely a repository of documents or traditions of a particular culture and refers to the archive as “a practice that causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge as so many regular events, as so many things to be dealt with and manipulated...it reveals the rules of a practice that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular modification.” (p. 130). Having contended that ‘statements’ are not mere descriptions of the world, but products of the rules for

describing the world, Foucault (1972) claims that an archive is a collection of statements which enables their “formation and transformation” (p. 130). Hence the archive can also be viewed as a politicized space where statements are constantly subjected to the politics of inclusion and omission, remembrance and obliteration, and interaction and contestation. Hence, the present research understands the archive as a phenomenon that is constantly engaged in processes of meaning making. As opposed to physical, tangible archives, online or digital archives have made our understandings of the archive and archival practices more complex; a fact recognized by the present research. Hence, the present study intends to examine the curatorial footprint in two digital repositories archiving the life stories of women who have been affected by the thirty-year war of Sri Lanka, in a life narrative perspective. Narratives studied here are selected from *I Am* (2010-2012) by Kannan Arunasalam and *Herstories* (2012-2013) by Radhika Hettiarachchi.

In post-war Sri Lanka, the prominent narratives were hero narratives that aligned mostly with the male-centric narratives influenced by the dominant political ideologies, and the life narratives of the individuals, especially women’s narratives, from war-torn areas seemed to get sidelined. Both Arunasalam (2010) and Hettiarachchi (2013) emphasise the significance of recording the narratives of ordinary people to make documenting Sri Lanka’s conflict history more holistic. According to Hartley and McWilliam (2009) digital storytelling of ordinary people (by themselves) originated from a specific form of workshop-based storytelling practice introduced by Dana Ahtley in California in mid-1990 and became a globally significant practice in the early 2000s. The digital archive in that sense is enabled by the desire to preserve ordinary lives and vice versa. The present research critically examines the

preservation of ordinary lives via digital archiving with particular focus on the interactions of agency and mediation vis-à-vis the archived narratives, especially because the analyzed narratives are co-constructions by multiple parties.

METHODOLOGY

The primary texts of the study are selected women’s life narratives which reflect their experiences of war and violence and are extracted from *I Am* (2010- 2012) by Kannan Arunasalam and *Herstories* (2012-2013) by Radhika Hettiarachchi. Following a qualitative approach, the selected narratives will be subjected to close reading and a textual analysis.

Curatorial Footprint

The concept of curating is widely used in a panoply of contexts beyond its traditional function at a museum or gallery, and consequently, has become much nuanced, especially vis-à-vis digital archives like *I Am* and *Herstories*. Hence it is important to understand the concept of curatorial footprint in archiving. As stated by Hans Obrist (2014) the curator’s role transcends simply displaying objects, as he/she “brings different cultural spheres into contact” (p. 24). Evidently, the curator acts as a mediator between narratives, art, objects, and ideas. Commenting on how curators become agentive bodies, Karen Gaskill (2011) states that curating is “responsible for conjuring both a synergy and a dynamic that operates across a multitude of levels” and that it shifts the way in which we see and receive artworks (p.1). Therefore, curatorial footprint refers to the agency, authority, and presence of the curator in the work/s constructed and displayed.

Curating I Am

Though Arunasalam's voice is not heard in any of the narratives archived in *I Am*, save in the narrative of Sarojini Kadirgamar where Arunasalam interposes a question, prompting her for further explanation, certain segments of the narratives clearly stand out as responses to questions. This leads to the question of why the presence of the coaxer is hidden. A perverse audience (Oishi, 2006), i.e., an audience that is aware of how texts are constructed and manipulated, would feel the presence of a coaxer, who "possess(es) the power, at least momentarily to provoke stories from people" (Plummer, 1995, p. 21). The constructedness of the narrative, therefore, is felt. This is juxtaposed with the attempts of imbuing realism and authenticity into the narrative, and it makes the boundary between the real and constructed fissured.

In Arunasalam's words, "when you listen to a story, sometimes for many hours, you listen to them and direct it in a certain way...in terms of your questions. And then you go back, and you edit it" (personal communication, 2017). The omission of the curator's voice indicates an effort to consciously erase the curatorial footprint in terms of the curator's involvement in prompting and shaping the narrative. As a result, the outcome seems like an original product from the narrator herself. This adds to the element of authenticity and reality; a phenomenon discussed in detail in the section on Editing. The hidden presence of the coaxer, however, further complicates the concept of agency as it is evident that the coaxer manipulates not only the manner and matter of the narration, but also the narrator herself. Moreover, by imparting a sense of an unmediated and unguided narrative, the curator extends his manipulation over the viewers as well. Hence the erasure of the curator's voice facilitates the notion that the narratives are autonomous accounts of women, which

aligns with the curator's aim of creating a platform for unrecorded, authentic life narratives of Sri Lanka. Yet it is evident that it is the curator who shadow-scripts the narrative, which justifies the argument that there are multiple concerns affecting agency behind each narrative; the curator's influences and the narrator's choices etc., though great attempt has been made to project the women narrators as the ones in control over the narratives and process of narration. Therefore, the functioning of agency in *I Am* becomes more complex, because at this point, the attempt to highlight women narrators as the key agentive bodies is an attempt to make the narratives seem more authentic. The analysis thus reveals the power-politics behind the concept of agency, where agency in life narration is conceptualized at the surface level as belonging to the women narrators, but at a deeper level, is manipulated by the curator.

Furthermore, while the narrators have had some power over deciding where and how they would position themselves in the narrative, and which memories, experiences and perspectives are to be recalled and shared, it is primarily the curator who chooses what and who is important enough to be included in the final product (Arunasalam, personal communication, 2017). This is taken, at least in the curator's perspective, as natural because *I Am* is also defined as a personal project for Arunasalam, and he explicitly states that it is part of his personal quest of roots and identity via understanding the life histories of Sri Lankan elders who have lived through the war and violence in Sri Lanka (2012). Though certain decisions he makes are justified under that claim, one could critique the politics of being the single authority over the digital construction of others' narratives. According to Kathleen McLean (2011), "successful conversations require reciprocity and a mutual respect

among participants, as well as mutual interest and a balance of contributions. This balance is difficult to establish when the authority of the expert is predominant” (p. 72). Arunasalam explains that he had selected the narrators for the project, where out of around 80 people who were introduced to him only 60 were selected. “The main selection criterion for me was, were they good storytellers, which was very much unlike in research projects where there were set selection criteria and selecting samples etc.” (personal communication, 2017), which is a fine example of an archive where a single person has had the authority of making crucial decisions. When examining the implications of this statement, it becomes evident that the narrators were selected to fit a model the curator had had in his mind, i.e., ‘a good storyteller’. It should also be noted that in addition to the selection process, the narrators were given a particular framework for narration by the curator, and the curator has (more or less) shepherded the narratives.

Hence, the argument here is that the project has not evolved solely from the narrators and narratives. This further problematizes the control held by the narrators over their life narratives and provokes the question whether it has hampered the very aim of creating a repository of unheard life narratives of marginalised Sri Lankans. Does the audience hear what the narrators want to highlight, or do they hear what the curator wants the audience to hear? Therefore, the ‘balance’ highlighted by theorists like Maclean (2011) is not seen in the selected narratives. Consequently, the narratives run the risk of becoming reflections of the curator’s understandings or versions of the women narrator’s life which overpowers the autobiographical element. In a way, the curator creates a particular brand of Sri Lankan women (strong, resilient and optimistic) in the post-war context, and here I extend this claim by linking it to this

particular articulation of agency. The absence of women’s voices that show continuous negative impact of war, despair etc. is a result of the curator’s understanding of Sri Lankan women and his objective of projecting them as strong individuals whose optimism creates a sense of hope in the post-war reconciliation context.

The entire process had been carefully engineered by the curator so that the aims of the project, i.e., bringing communities together to promote reconciliation (Arunasalam, personal communication, 2017), could be realised. Thus, the decision-making power is with the curator, and it sets him as the primary figure in-charge of the narrators, manner and matter of narration, and the archive. This is one curatorial practice that is being attempted to be changed in the modern digital archiving context. The new approach encourages increased involvement of the narrators/contributors, while decentralising the authority of the curators. Arunasalam (2017) states that the project has been a means of exploring his own links with the country, ethnic identity, and self. The introductory notes and comments of the producer which are seen on the I Am website provide insights as to how he resolves certain questions, doubts, and conflicts in himself as a diasporic/ Sri Lankan-born British filmmaker. His views resonate with what Salman Rushdie (1991) who, in his influential essay, *Imaginary Homelands*, highlights; “exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back” (p. 10).

Yet, though the personal quest of identity on the side of the curator is often highlighted, when viewing the project online, there is very little to be viewed in terms of his personal quest. The audience does not get any direct clues as to what Arunasalam learnt of his origins and identity, or any striking sign of his British-Tamil-Sri Lankan identity. Rather, the

focal point has shifted to capturing what Sri Lankan elders think of identity and ethnic conflict.

To explain this absence, revisiting Rushdie is effective as he further elaborates that “...physical alienation from [motherland] almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands...of the mind” (Rushdie, 1991, p. 10).

What Arunasalam’s project amounts to, in terms of his identity quest, is a re-creation of an ‘imaginary homeland of the mind’. He revisits the past via the life narratives of Sri Lankan elders, and re-constructs a particular past within the scope of his perceptions. It is this version we mainly see in the archive. Therefore, I argue that the presence of the curator in the archive in terms of agency is quite strong, though it is not distinct. Hence, the audience does not draw Arunasalam and his identity quest into the discussion generated by the digital narratives though it is explicitly stated by the curator that the project is highly personal for him. In that sense, we see the curator merging unnoticeably into the background. What he learnt remains private to him, while the audience gets to see it only via his re-constructions of life narratives. But this is problematic as the curator has taken great effort to project the narratives as authentic life and war histories constructed by the narrators themselves, in order to make the archive more realistic. In other words, his attempt is to highlight the autobiographical element over the

biographical element, though due to his control over the narratives, it is the opposite that happens. Here it can be detected parallel life narrative frameworks where the act of narration is done by the narrators, while the curator guides and shapes the construction of the same narratives. This exemplifies how the concept of agency is also split and fractured. Thus, the workings of agency take a subtle form here, almost disguising curatorial agency as the agency of the narrators—hence, the need to look beyond the archived narratives if one is to trace the presence, and control wielded by the curator over the manner and matter of narration. Upon scrutiny it is evident that curatorial footprint is strong and constant from selection to recording to production and archiving of narratives. It could be then argued that heavy mediation curtails the agency wielded by the narrators over the manner and matter of narration.

Curating Herstories

Herstories, in contrast, has employed a different strategy focusing on thematic and gender-based criteria in terms of selection, and inclusion/exclusion. Hettiarachchi (2013) has accepted narratives of all women who volunteered for the project, and given five predetermined forms (letters, trees of life, timelines, photo essays, and videos) within which the narrators are free to narrate. According to its curator, *Herstories project*¹, from the outset, aims at bringing to the fore the voices of women who have experienced war, and the narrators are positioned within that

¹ The project started as a response to the political context in the aftermath of war and Hettiarachchi claims that she first conceived the idea while working as a development practitioner the UNDP during the Tsunami phase and the war.

While talking to people about their needs she has encountered life stories, but archiving them was never an option as it did not fall under the scope of her job. The realization that it is a loss of valuable history has made her initiate Herstories (personal communication, 2017).

concept of agency with the expectation of placing the women narrators in a position where they are able to exercise the power of telling their lives and leaving their footprint in the socio-political and historical record of Sri Lanka. Hettiarachchi (2016) claims that the stories,

“Reflect serious socio-political, economic and human rights issues and for the women, this was an opportunity to place it on record in their own words, which was perceived as important for justice. It showcases the self-actualisation that comes with authoring personal histories rather than it being mediated on their behalf” (p. 5).

The above comment mainly stresses two things amongst others: the importance of officially recording these voices and encouraging the narrators to have power in authoring their narratives. In terms of agency, it is noteworthy that by providing means of presenting/representing themselves in the digital sphere, it is the curator who enables the women narrators to exercise agency which resonates with Spivak’s (1988) statements, “Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task” of speaking for the subaltern because “The subaltern cannot speak” (p. 104). However, Hettiarachchi (2016) states that her attempt is to facilitate the voices of the subaltern by providing a space for their stories, and not necessarily to speak for them. But Hettiarachchi’s (2016) notion of ‘self-actualisation’ can also be critiqued because in a project outlined by a curator where the frameworks for narration are pre-determined, how much agency do the women narrators wield vis-à-vis the manner and matter of life narration? These questions will subsequently be explored in detail with reference to the five formats of life narration on Herstories. Letters, the starting point of the project, (i.e., every participant was required to write their life

and war experiences in the form of a letter), were encouraged to be written in the narrators’ personal space at their own pace. Hettiarachchi’s rationale for the idea was that,

“...particularly in collecting women’s stories, letters offer privacy and space away from the male gaze, because if you’re talking to people in a public place there will be other men (family members, sons, fathers) who are hovering around which will constrict the woman’s ability to tell a story. Not only that, they [men] may directly intervene and tell them what to say” (personal communication, 2017). Theoretically, the letter format facilitates privacy and self-expression (Plummer, 2001). Though the women had been instructed to write within the framework provided, i.e., the letters must include their personal history (family, where they come from, childhood memories etc.), their experiences of war/violence, their hopes and dreams, and their present status, “they could write as much they wanted within or beyond those” (Hettiarachchi, personal communication, 2017). The framework itself coaxes personal information out of the narrators, and following the requirements mean that the narrators have to divulge such information. When examining the narratives, it can be seen that some narrators have given elaborated accounts under the suggested themes, while others have been rather unforthcoming (see Figure 1).

Dear Brother,

We were displaced from here in 2008. We went to various places such as Wisyamadu, Moongilaru, Jeyapuram and then to Suthanthirapuram. On account of intensive shelling we went to Wisyamadu again and stayed there for a month. Then we went to Thevipuram. We roamed wherever our legs took us. Then we went to the nanthikashal area and then to Mullivaikkal. We were hungry and we were stepping on corpses. Then we came to the army controlled area. I learnt that on the way my husband died. I do not know how it happened. My son was with me alive. Then they took us to the camp. They provided relief food items and water. We spent 3 or 4 days even without tea. In 2012 we were resettled. Now my only hope is to educate my son. He has sat the G.C.E. O/L examination. I must send him for higher studies.

with love
Ammah

Figure 1: Letter 15- Killinochchi (Herstories, 2013)

The above letter is a mere account of movement and factual recording of

personal history, and though the narrator covers the required themes, there is a sense of suppressed emotion and histories. In letter writing “a form of hidden censorship and selective screening may take place” (Plummer, 2001, p. 55). This could result from their awareness of the narratives being displayed in public. The immediacy of the post-war context could have made the women narrators subconsciously mediate the content. This substantiates Hettiarachchi’s claim that the narrators have had the freedom to choose which incidents to narrate, and how; “it is auto-ethnographic work, so it’s their choice what to write. It also gives them the ability to self-censor; if they think ‘I don’t want this or I don’t want to say it this way’, then they self-censor” (personal communication, 2017). The narrators also have had the opportunity to draft, edit, re-draft and choose the best version to be handed over because it allows them to write at their own pace. Thus, they have had time and space to recall, select, construct/reconstruct, reflect upon, and edit lived experiences. Since they could write ‘within or beyond’ the framework, it is evident that the framework was flexible and not rigid. Especially as they were aware of the narratives being displayed on public platforms, they may have made their own decisions on inclusion/exclusion of content, ways of expression etc. The narrator thus wields some control over the process of constructing the narrative. However, moving away from a strictly theoretical perspective, the autonomy exercised by the life narrators can be problematized.

Firstly, the lack of detail could also result from the narrator’s lack of language skills to articulate her experiences. What if the lack of vocabulary or writing skills were the actual limitations? One might confine oneself to mere description when one does not have the linguistic tools to discourse upon the war experience in depth. Another point of debate is based on

the concept of literacy and agency. All participants have been expected to engage in writing activities (Hettiarachchi, personal communication, 2017). So, we are immediately looking at a set of women who are literate. The subaltern is not a homogenous entity (Spivak, 1988), and one cannot assume that all Sri Lankan women survivors of war are literate. Literacy has a strong nexus with one’s agency, and the women who were illiterate may have refrained from volunteering for the project. So, despite the curator’s intention of providing a platform for the unheard stories of Sri Lankan women survivors of war, there exists another faction of marginalized women who do not have the agency to come forward. Thus, exploring the articulations of agency in Herstories leads to the discovery of absences. A perceptive audience is left pondering over the absent women and their narratives. Subjecting the narratives to close reading reveals the multifaceted nature of agency and its linkages to education, literacy and socio-economic status via the presences and absences of agency in the narratives.

Secondly, the notion of personal space; for some of the women (ex: those living in Ranaviru villages, or in their own homes) it could have been possible to find personal space at their residence. But for a majority of women who were either living in camps or temporary shelter at resettlements, finding personal space would have been more challenging. In a shared space where space is more communal than private (see Figure 2), can a woman find privacy?



Figure 2: Interior of a hut shared by the narrator's family (Herstories, 2013)

Thirdly, could she be away from the gaze and intervention of others? If, for instance, there are other family members present, the women narrators may choose to voice their stories in a manner that would not lead to any friction or revelation of highly personal content which they are not comfortable sharing with those around them in the event of her writing being seen by others. Therefore, it can be argued that even their control over the matter of narratives is curtailed because of the influence or presence of a third party. Hence the curator's expectation of the agency wielded by the narrators may not be actualized.

CONCLUSION

Digital archiving, as discussed, further complicates the notion of agency. The curators, being the ones with the technical knowledge and access to the digital, exercise power over the life narratives in deciding which content is archived and how. When viewing the overall project, it is evident that they are not merely curated archives but works of art too. From the designing of the websites to the display of narratives, the artistic involvement and active agency of the curators is felt. Hence, editing becomes a tool that enables Hettiarachchi and Arunasalam to leave a strong curatorial footprint bordering on artistry. Yet the tendency to overpower the voices of the women narrators is a concern that cannot be overlooked in a life narrative trajectory. Because both projects stress their aim of archiving the unheard narratives of Sri Lankans who have faced war and ethnic violence, the excessive mediation (especially in videos, photomontages, and photo-essays, and in creating the overall framework for the narratives) by the curators becomes problematic. If the women narrators do not

get control over the manner and matter of life narration in a space dedicated to her, mediation causes more harm than good. Therefore, in terms of agency in life narration, mediation becomes a double-edged tool.

REFERENCES

- Archive. (n.d.). Retrieved August 30, 2018, from <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/archive>
- Arunasalam, K. (2009). *The Project. I Am*. Retrieved from <http://www.iam.lk>
- Arunasalam, K. (2010-2012). *I Am*. Retrieved from <http://www.iam.lk>
- Derrida, J. & Prenowitz, E. (1995). *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. *Diacritics*, 25(2), 9-63.
- Foucault, M., (1972). *The Archeology of Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gaskill, K., (2011). *Curatorial cultures: considering dynamic curatorial practice*. Presented at ISEA - The 17th International Symposium on Electronic Art. Istanbul, Turkey.
- Hartley, J. & McWilliam, K. (2009). "Computational power meets human contact." In J. Hartley & K. McWilliam (Eds.), *Story circle: Digital storytelling around the world* (pp. 3-15). Singapore: Blackwell Publishing.
- Hettiarachchi, R., (2012-2013). *Herstories*. Retrieved from <http://herstoryarchive.org>
- Hettiarachchi, R., (2016). *Practice Note 1: Memorialisation and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka*. Sri Lanka: Search for Common Ground.
- McLean, K., (2011). *Whose Questions, Whose Conversations?* In B. Adair, B. Filene & L. Koloski (Eds.), *Letting Go?: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World* (pp. 70-79). Philadelphia: The Pew Centre for Arts & Heritage.
- Obrist, H. U., (2014). *Sharp Tongue, Loose Lips, Ears to the Ground*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.

- Oishi, E., (2006). *Visual Perversions: Race, Sex, and Cinematic Pleasure*. *Signs, New Feminist Theories of Visual Culture*, 31(3), 641-674. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/498988>
- Plummer, K., (1995). *Telling sexual stories: power, change and social worlds*. London: Routledge