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Women and the Nation's Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka

Neloufer De Mel

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This book explores the development of nationalism in Sri Lanka during the past century, particularly within the dominant Sinhala Buddhist and militant Tamil movements. Tracing the ways women from diverse backgrounds have engaged with nationalism, Neloufer de Mel argues that gender is crucial to an understanding of nationalism and vice versa. Traversing both the colonial and postcolonial periods in Sri Lanka's history, the author assesses a range of writers, activists, political figures, and movements almost completely unknown in the West. With her rigorous, historically located analyses, de Mel makes a persuasive case for the connections between figures like actress Annie Boteju and art historian and journalist Anil de Silva; poetry whether written by Jean Arasanayagam or Tamil revolutionary women; and political movements like the LTTE, the JVP, the Mother's Front, and contemporary feminist organizations. Evaluating the colonial period in light of the violence that animates Sri Lanka today, de Mel proposes what Bruce Robbins has termed a 'lateral cosmopolitanism' that will allow coalitions to form and to practice an oppositional politics of peace. In the process, she examines the gendered forms through which the nation and the state both come together and pull apart. The breadth of topics examined here will make this work a valuable resource for South Asianists as well as for scholars in a wide range of fields who choose to consider the ways in which gender inflects their areas of research and teaching.

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