

## Women, the 'ongoing Process of Worldwide Primitive Accumulation' and Female Plantation Workers of Sri Lanka: A Marxist Feminist Analysis

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### Abstract

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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. In this paper, I attempt to read my ethnographic experiences with female plantation workers of a third world/post colonial location – Sri Lanka; in the light of this alternative theoretical claim - stemming from a Marxist analysis yet with a feminist turn. The paper is woven around the birth of Madumani's daughter, a baby girl born to an 'estate mother' during my stay at the estate and my many close interactions with the young mother and daughter and their many female relatives all of whom are working as laborers in the estate. Their stories as I narrate here shed light on the manner in which women, especially proletarian women of the third world, are placed at the center of an 'ongoing process of worldwide primitive accumulation'- as argued by Marxist Feminist writers- and robbed not only of their labour but also of their bodies, their knowledge and their skills; struggling to make a living in these third world plantation estates.

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### 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).

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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 paper 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).

Relating the above theorization to the research setting selected for this study, the ongoing process of primitive accumulation as it affected Sri Lanka 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 - become the focus of this paper.

As discussed above Marxist feminist theorists 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. In this paper I attempt to read my ethnographic experiences with female plantation workers of a third world/post colonial location - Sri Lanka; in the light of this theoretical claim. My paper is woven around the birth of Madumani's daughter, a baby girl born to an 'estate mother' during my stay at the estate and my many close interactions with the young mother and daughter and their many female relatives all of whom are working as laborers in the estate. Their stories as I narrate here shed light on the manner in which women, especially proletarian women of the third world, are placed at the center of an 'ongoing process of worldwide primitive accumulation'- as argued by Marxist Feminist writers- and robbed not only of their labour but also of their bodies, their knowledge and their skills; struggling to make a living in these third world plantation estates.

### **Ethnographic Fieldwork with Female Workers in a Postcolonial Setting**

Ceylonita estate, the site within which fieldwork of this research was carried out was a state-owned plantation located in the district of Nuwara Eliya<sup>i</sup>. Identified as the heart of the plantation industry, Nuwara Eliya is home to the highest numbers of estate workers in the country<sup>ii</sup>. 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 origin<sup>iii</sup>. 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 study<sup>iv</sup>.

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. 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. Out of this large and diverse group of female workers who became the research participants of my study Madumani, a young estate mother with a new born baby daughter and her immediate family members become the main narrators of the following ethnographic vignette, mainly because their voices as they spoke to me about living and working at this colonial estate seemed to be closely reflective of the ideas as expressed by Marxist feminist writers - placing 'women' at the center of an ongoing process of worldwide primitive accumulation; being robbed not only of their labor; but their bodies, their knowledge and their skills. Also their stories as narrated below are illuminative of the mechanization of the proletarian body and its transformation, in the case of women, into a machine for the production of new workers.

The way in which 'ethnographic gaze was directed' within the estate 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). 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 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 analyzed that this discussion now turns.

### **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 procession 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). As discussed above there is an increasing interest in 'narratives' among ethnographers as a way of analyzing 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 - employment - (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 employment 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 study. 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.

Accordingly, narrative analysis was a way of synthesizing 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). 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, which is woven around the birth of a baby girl in the estate.

Her 'story' as I narrate below sheds light on the manner in which women, especially proletarian women of the third world, are placed at the center of an 'ongoing process of worldwide primitive accumulation'- as argued by Marxist Feminist writers.

### **'Birth of a Baby Girl in the Estate': Women at the Center of an Ongoing Process of Worldwide Primitive Accumulation?**

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'<sup>v</sup> fifteen at the top division<sup>vi</sup> 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'<sup>vii</sup> of women working in their respective 'slots'<sup>viii</sup>. Many of them took time off from their 'plucking'<sup>ix</sup> 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 clinics<sup>x</sup>, 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<sup>xi</sup> 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. "Sometimes 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.

As I had gathered by talking with her and observing her work, Biso Menike's official duties as the estate midwife were centered 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 bodies<sup>xii</sup>, 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' as appears in Federici's analysis, were thought of and treated in much the same way by their colonial and neo colonial 'masters', as 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, Bisso 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 Bisso 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 Bisso Menike on our long, endless journeys on foot, to visit the women at home and at work, which were mostly centered 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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. Bisso 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 being 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 advise 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, Bisu 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, Bisu 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 Bisu 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 Bisu 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. Bisu 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 <sup>xiii</sup> to thank the gods", she told us. Unlike in the earlier events, these opinions as expressed by Madumani and Ambigeswari 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. 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 every day ...both in the field and doing all the housework. It's much better to be born a man.

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 being 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 Tamil<sup>xiv</sup>.

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 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. 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).

### **Concluding Comments**

As argued by feminist writers (e.g. Federici, 2004), Marx examines primitive accumulation from the viewpoint of the waged male proletariat and the development of commodity production, where as they examine it from the viewpoint of the changes in the social position of women and the production of labour power. They further claim that their description of primitive accumulation includes a set of historical phenomena that are absent in Marx, and yet extremely important for capital accumulation. These phenomena being "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 (Federici, 2004: 12).

Reading the stories of Madumani and her baby daughter in the light of the above argument, they are indeed reflective of the way in which the female proletarian body had been transformed in to a machine for the production of new workers. However, contrary to the arguments of contemporary feminist writers who see women as been gradually excluded from waged work - 'estate' women as evidenced above, are compelled to engage in waged and non waged reproductive work at one and the same time. In this sense the lives of Madumani and her daughter while reinforcing the arguments of feminist writers, who see women as placed at the center of an ongoing process of worldwide primitive accumulation on one hand, further extends their argument on the other, by shedding light on situations where the female body is mechanized not once but twice - estate women working as waged labourers and producing new labourers - living and working amidst a web of state enforced patriarchal relations that they seem to be unable to resist or change. Thus they are women placed at the center of an ongoing process of worldwide primitive accumulation, robbed not only of their labour: but their knowledge and also their skills as argued by Marxist Feminist writers.

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## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> 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.
- <sup>ii</sup> 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-county' or in the central hills of the island.
- <sup>iii</sup> 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.
- <sup>iv</sup> Monthly Family Health Returns from Estates, July 2008.
- <sup>v</sup> 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.
- <sup>vi</sup> 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.
- <sup>vii</sup> The term is used in estate terminology to identify a group of workers, either women or men, working in the fields.
- <sup>viii</sup> 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.
- <sup>ix</sup> Picking of tea leaves is known as plucking in estate jargon. Accordingly workers who do this work are known as pluckers.
- <sup>x</sup> 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.
- <sup>xi</sup> The teaching hospital of Kandy is a larger and a better equipped hospital some 50 km away.
- <sup>xii</sup> Here I use the term 'body' to include the aspects of maternity, childbirth and sexuality of a women's body. (Federici, 2004).
- <sup>xiii</sup> 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.
- <sup>xiv</sup> 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. Bisu Menike on the other hand is fluent in both languages and often helped me out.