



# NO MORE TEARS SISTER

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# NO MORE TEARS SISTER

## THE FILM

A story of love, revolution, and betrayal, **No More Tears Sister** explores the price of truth in times of war. Set during the violent ethnic conflict that has enveloped Sri Lanka over decades, the documentary recreates the courageous and vibrant life of renowned human rights activist Dr. Rajani Thiranagama. Mother, anatomy professor, author and symbol of hope, Rajani was assassinated at the age of thirty-five.

Fifteen years after Rajani's death, her charismatic older sister Nirmala, a former Tamil militant and political prisoner, journeys back to Sri Lanka. She has decided to break her long silence about Rajani's passionate life and her brutal slaying. Joining her are Rajani's husband, sisters and grown daughters, as well as fellow activists forced underground.

Raised in a middle-class Jaffna Tamil family, Rajani was an idealistic believer in equality for all Sri Lankans regardless of ethnicity. But with the Tamil minority suffering persecution at the hands of the governing Sinhalese, she was pulled towards Tamil nationalism. Spurred by Nirmala's imprisonment, Rajani eventually joined her sister in the fight for Tamil rights. She was unconventional to the core. Besides being a doctor and an activist, she married across the ethnic divide – to a Sinhalese revolutionary leader and former political prisoner. Although deeply in love, with two children, their marriage would not escape the crushing effects of war and political turmoil.

Over time, constant exposure to politically motivated killings by armed groups on all sides caused Rajani to rethink her position. She grew to oppose armed struggle. She saw how women are vulnerable targets in any militarized society. But her bold questioning would prove too great a threat for those who depended on the power of the gun.

Though set in Sri Lanka, Rajani's story has parallels in postcolonial societies around the world. She was part of a generation of political activists of the 1960s and '70s who dreamed of radically transforming their societies. Sadly, this idealism often fell victim to narrow nationalist agendas.

**No More Tears Sister** recounts Rajani's deeply human struggle as a wartime mother, university professor, wife and political activist. Stunningly photographed, using rare archival footage, intimate correspondence and poetic recreations, the story of Rajani and her family delves into rarely explored themes – revolutionary women and their dangerous pursuit of justice.

80 min 15 s

Order number: C9104 294

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## ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

**Helene Klodawsky** has been writing and directing social, political and art documentaries for 20 years. A graduate of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and Queen's University, her films have been screened and televised around the world and have won more than 25 awards. Her documentary credits include *Painted Landscapes of the Times* (1986), *Motherland* (1994), *What If* (1999) and *Undying Love* (2002). She has received honours from the Chicago International Film Festival, the San Francisco International Film Festival, the Jerusalem International Film Festival, the Mannheim International Film Festival, Hot Docs and the Academy of Canadian Cinema.

Written and directed by

**Helene Klodawsky**

Produced by

**Pierre Lapointe**

Cinematography

**François Dagenais**

Film Editing

**Patricia Tassinari**

The role of Rajani Thiranagama portrayed by

**Sharika Thiranagama**

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# NO MORE TEARS SISTER

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## PRESS KIT

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# NO MORE TEARS SISTER

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## Praise for NO MORE TEARS SISTER

**NO MORE TEARS SISTER – Anatomy of Hope and Betrayal**  
... voted one of the **top ten Audience Picks**  
at the **2005 Hot Docs International Documentary Film Festival**

“Four stars. A beautifully shot, beautifully produced film.”  
— *Eye Weekly*

“...a deftly made study of one woman and her family ...” and “...stylish ...”  
— *Variety*

“...powerful...” and “...unforgettable...”  
— *The Weekly Voice*

“With stunning visuals, admirable emotional restraint and poetic use of Rajani's personal letters [...] Klodawsky recaptures one family's sad saga all the way to their exile. It is one that will resonate with women and men in war-torn societies everywhere.”  
— *Newsweek – International Edition*

“The film paints a poignant portrait of a woman who must have known what the eventual cost of her beliefs would be.”  
— *Toronto Star*

“...provocative...”  
— *Globe and Mail*

“Film puts human face on Tamil Tiger tragedy”  
— *Canadian Press*

“... eye-opening ...”  
— *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

“The film is an excellent introduction to the complexities of the conflict through its skillful use of historical footage, succinct summaries by the narrator (Michael Ondaatje), rich family testimony, and striking personal pictures. [...] an excellent testament to the importance of committed political engagement with the grinding realities of the people, rather than with empty slogans, shiny utopias, and academic theories.”  
— *lines magazine*

“It is telling that the first attempt to piece together Thiranagama's life and death has been made not by a Tamil, but by a Canadian film-maker. ... vividly captures Thiranagama's transformation from a sympathiser of the Tigers' cause to one of its fiercest critics.”  
— *The Hindu*

“... Helen Klodawsky has accomplished her task well.”  
— *Tamil Week*



# NO MORE TEARS SISTER

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## ENDORSEMENTS

“This is a deeply moving film on the life and courageous witness of a remarkable person. Her commitment to peace, justice and coexistence is a great inspiration to all involved in the struggle for human rights. The film deserves to be seen by as many as possible to inspire others to take a stand for those rights.”

*Archbishop Desmond Tutu*

“NO MORE TEARS SISTER is a compelling, heartfelt and balanced documentary about a young human rights defender in civil-war-torn Sri Lanka.... But this is not just a beautiful film about a disturbing past. Rajani’s family, by the simple act of telling her story, have placed themselves at risk from the very people responsible for her death more than fifteen years ago. It is a sobering reminder that the struggle for human rights must be won anew each day.”

*James Ross, senior legal advisor to Human Rights Watch in NYC*

“Rajani Thiranagama stood up to repression and violence and refused to be silenced in her struggle to defend the rights of her community. Her killing was a blow to all those in Sri Lanka who value human rights and freedom. This moving film brings home the courage of those individuals – such as Rajani and her family – who take great personal risks to speak out for justice. At this moment, when killings in Sri Lanka are reportedly occurring almost daily, NO MORE TEARS SISTER is a timely reminder that many people in Sri Lanka still live under a shadow of fear and that human rights activists, in Sri Lanka around the world, continue to face serious threats.”

*Clare Castillejo, Researcher, South Asia Team, Amnesty International*

“NO MORE TEARS SISTER is a moving portrayal of a courageous woman whose unwavering commitment to truth and the defence of human rights led to her tragic death. The memory of Rajani Thiranagama is carried forward by this beautiful film which captures her free spirit and will no doubt touch all who see it.”

*Jessica Neuwirth, President of Equality Now, mobilizing international action to support the efforts of human rights organizations and activists around the world*

“NO MORE TEARS SISTER is about the every day and extraordinary courage of one woman human rights defender who stood up to abuse from all sectors and refused to flee her homeland. It brings us both the very particular and personal story of Rajani and how her commitment touched the lives of her family and all those around her, and also leads us to reflect on the often untold stories of how women struggle for a better world. This is a film that can be used in many settings to bring alive the meaning of working for human rights in the world today.”

*Charlotte Bunch, Founder & Executive Director, Center for Women's Global Leadership, Rutgers University, working to develop women's leadership for women's human rights and social justice worldwide*

“Rajani had a vision for her people, the Sri Lankan Tamils. She envisioned a time when they would live in peace and dignity, enjoying democratic rights and freedoms. Standing against oppression and brutality in all its forms, she is a beacon of light for a community living in fear and struggling for self-respect. She will never be forgotten; an icon for everyone in Sri Lanka fighting for freedom.”

*Radhika Coomaraswamy, former United Nations special rapporteur on violence against women; Chairperson, National Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka; director, International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo*

“The film NO MORE TEARS SISTER is a compelling appeal to both sides of the conflict in Sri Lanka to respect the human rights of everyone in the country. A powerful display of the hopes for feminist changes to gender power relations and to violence in the long, tragic war on the island, the film argues that Rajani Thiranagama’s murder in 1989, and her family’s credible advocacy for the human rights and dignity of Tamils, Sinhalese, and Muslims in Sri Lanka is in fact a universal appeal for a better world. This is a film, and a message, which are vital for human rights’ advocacy.”

*Alex Neve, Secretary General, Amnesty International – Canada*

“Rajani Thiranagama is a beacon of hope for all Sri Lankans who work for peace with justice and respect for human rights.... The film NO MORE TEARS SISTER brings Rajani back to life through the eyes of her family members in a way that adds a very human element to the life of a woman who defied many social and political norms. By exposing the dilemmas faced by her and her closest family members...the film weaves together the personal and the political in a radical and innovative form. The film not only tells us about the story of one woman, but of all women in similar circumstances, and is therefore an inspirational cinematic experience.”

*Sunila Abeysekera, UN award-winning activist has worked on women's rights and human rights in Sri Lanka and the South Asia region for over 25 years and actively lobbies the UN to mainstream women's human rights.*

“NO MORE TEARS SISTER is a moving and challenging film that tells the story of a courageous young human rights defender in Sri Lanka. Its unique contribution is in the interweaving of compelling personal narratives and complex political analysis. Individual journeys through the harsh realities of Tamil and Sinhalese politics are emblems for the confusion and suffering of the Sri Lankan people, who face murder and disappearance at the hands of extremists of all stripes. The story of Rajani is a story of traditional family virtues, breaks with social expectations, challenges to oppressive authority, and battles against ethnic nationalism. Throughout, this sad story is redeemed by love for place, for family and for the people of Sri Lanka.”

*Stephen J. Toope, Chair and Rapporteur of the UN working group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances*

“The assassination in 1989 of Dr Rajani Thiranagama, a university teacher and well-known human rights activist in Sri Lanka, highlights the vulnerability of those who stand for the rights of the defenceless in conflict situations. The documentary based on Rajani’s short life provides a unique and thoughtful insight into the complexities of the ethnic conflict in the island from the point of view of the members of a family whose destinies are inextricably interwoven with it. The analysis of the root causes of the conflict is factual and balanced while the rejection of senseless violence as a means of achieving political objectives sends a potent message.”

*Owen Tudor, head of European Union and International Relations, Trades Union Congress, UK*

“NO MORE TEARS SISTER is an emotional portrayal of one women’s struggle to break the social and political barriers and fight for human rights for all. Rajani’s story, told by her family members reminds us that the fight for women’s rights and human rights is won and lost one life at a time. This film must be seen not only the importance of its message but also for the beautiful way in which it is depicted.”

*The Honourable Senator Mobina S.B. Jaffer, Q.C., Chair of the Canadian Committee on Women, Peace and Security*

“This documentary film is a provocative and passionate portrayal about the life of human rights activist Dr Rajani Thiranagama in Sri Lanka, as it is told by her family and close colleagues. We believe the story presents a situation and issues which will resonate with individuals and organizations dedicated to human rights causes around world. The Canadian Human Rights Foundation believes this film has tremendous potential as a tool for learning about many human rights issues.... It also highlights the challenges and dangers faced by human rights defender in armed conflict zones. CHRFB encourages the use of films such as this one, as an education tool for social change and building a global culture of human rights.”

*Ian Hamilton, Executive Director of The Canadian Human Rights Foundation*

“NO MORE TEARS SISTER is a compelling story of a young mother and an activist whose vision of peace means freedom for her people. This film gives a sense of justice and closure to Rajani's family. It is also about love, hope and courage. For years the government and rebels kept trying to bury the story of Rajani and only succeeded in having songs sung in her praise. In the midst of the ongoing conflict, Rajani's story constantly gives Sri Lankans a reason to affirm and celebrate themselves as a people. They should continue to do so in the name of peace and justice.”

*Indai Sajor, educator in the field of women's human rights; senior advisor to the International League for Human Rights in New York; 2003-2004 Rockefeller Fellow on Human Security and Gender, City University, New York*

“NO MORE TEARS SISTER is a beautiful, gripping documentary about Dr. Rajani Thiranagama, a young human rights defender, physician, and university teacher in civil-war-torn Sri Lanka. Following a long struggle against repression and injustice, Rajani Thiranagama paid for her refusal to be silenced by her murder in 1989. As many more lives continue to be lost in Sri Lanka in a struggle that seems without end, Rajani Thiranagama's courage is an example to those of us who live in privileged and safe settings – to inspire us to speak the truth, strongly and bravely, and to continue to struggle for peace against the ravages of war.”

*Dr. Nancy Olivieri, President, Science for Peace*

“NO MORE TEARS SISTER gives a clear picture of the extreme situations which human rights activists face when they work in places where there is armed conflict. It reminds us that while there are strong survivors like Rajani's sister and husband, there are also victims who were once strong and eager to generate change — those who have left us with a legacy of inspiring histories which ought to be told since they are a source of revitalizing energy: the type of energy that is so much needed in the struggle for human rights.”

*Teresa Dremetsikas, MD, Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture*

“NO MORE TEARS SISTER is an important milestone in breaking over three decades of silence surrounding political violence and intimidation within the Tamil community. Fifteen years after the murder of Rajani Thiranagama, the LTTE continues its political killings, forced conscription, especially of children, and suppression of dissent with impunity. In the current climate, Rajani's life, work and words continue to speak to us in prophetic tones. NO MORE TEARS SISTER is not only a tribute to the courage of one woman but speaks about the entire society and the need to change it from within. It is a film that needs to be viewed by all those who stand by justice and the people of Sri Lanka.”

*University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) UTHR(J)*

“This is a moving and ultimately uplifting film. It must be seen to understand what is happening in Sri Lanka.”

*Bob Rae, former premier of Ontario*

“Rajani's life and work is a window into the continuing struggle for democracy and human rights in the recent history of the North and East of Sri Lanka. Rajani's voice of dissent was by no means a lone one and she herself was sustained by the courage and commitment of those who struggled before her and beside her. As such, we would like this documentary to serve as a symbolic memorial not only to Rajani, but to the many unsung women and men whose struggles for social justice were brutally terminated by authoritarian forces.”

*Vasuki Nesiah, Nanthikesan and Ahilan Kadirgamar, co-editors of lines, a magazine that acts as a forum about Sri Lanka*

“NO MORE TEARS SISTER is a very powerful narration of Dr. Rajani Thiranganama's story. Through a personal story, the film gives the audience a peek into the origins of the civil war that has ravaged Sri Lanka for the past two decades and its insidious politics involving the Sri Lankan army, the LTTE and the IPKF. The chronology of events chosen from Rajani's life very poignantly describes the evolution of Rajani's political thinking. And the evolution is indeed very stark: from a revolutionary – to a political campaigner – to a Tamil nationalist – to a feminist and a human rights activist. The most telling evolution in Rajani's political life comes about when she is exposed to and embraces feminism. It is then that she realizes the limits of armed struggle whether for revolutionary or nationalistic goals. She truly lives up to “political is personal” right from when she became politically aware whether it is her falling in love with her revolutionary husband, her support for his political work, her distance from his goals of armed struggle as her politics evolved and the quality of her involvement in relationships whether with her family, her sister, her husband, her children or other men. Some of these very highly abstract but powerful notions are portrayed in brilliant cinematic hair-raising moments like Rajani slowly draping her saree, children watching corpses, Rajani working with bones and skulls and her inspiring letters. NO MORE TEARS SISTER is a film that beautifully tells a political tale employing very competent movie-making techniques.

*Vahida Nainar, Chairperson of Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice (The Hague), a global women's initiative working to ensure justice for women and an independent and effective International Criminal Court.*

“NO MORE TEARS SISTER is an absorbing narrative that tells the story of a woman who struggled to live her life, love her beloved, raise her children and change the world around her according to her conscience. It is a story that exemplifies the daily trials and heroic leaps of a woman compelled to right injustices and to create a violence-free world. It is a story that is at once particular to one woman in her context, and true for many women world wide.”

*Heather McGregor, Executive Director of YWCA Toronto*

“Hats off to everyone involved in making NO MORE TEARS SISTER! The life of Rajani Thiranagama has already been an inspiration to many of us, and this beautifully shot film will ensure that it inspires many others. It will also be an invaluable resource for human rights activists trying to explain the complex situation in Sri Lanka, where members of an oppressed community have become oppressors to other members of their own community. I will certainly use it, and hope that others will use it too.”

*Rohini Hensman, writer and human rights activist based in Sri Lanka and India, whose latest novel, Playing Lions and Tigers, tells the interlocking stories of fourteen characters who resist the dehumanization of ethnic nationalism in Sri Lanka*

“NO MORE TEARS SISTER is about the courage and resilience of women activists in conflict situations. It is about coming full circle with one’s life and embracing peace. It is about a journey to the essence of conflict: the survival of the people, the survival of day-to-day life. It is also the struggle of women fighting their way out of ethnic conflict and caring for each other.”

*Ariane Brunet, co-founder of Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights; Women's Rights Coordinator, Rights & Democracy - Droits et Démocratie, Montreal*

“This is a powerful film, which recounts the important and painful history of a family struggling to make their country better. Anyone interested in Sri Lanka, and in the courage it takes for so many Sri Lankans to stand up for what they believe in, will be moved by this story.”

*David Cameron, Professor of Political Science, University of Toronto*

# NO MORE TEARS SISTER

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## RAJANI THIRANAGAMA BIOGRAPHY

“Rajani had a vision for her people, the Sri Lankan Tamils. She envisioned a time when they would live in peace and dignity, enjoying democratic rights and freedoms. Standing against oppression and brutality in all its forms, she is a beacon of light for a community living in fear and struggling for self-respect. She will never be forgotten; an icon for everyone in Sri Lanka fighting for freedom.”

*– Radhika Coomaraswamy, former United Nations special rapporteur on violence against women; Chairperson, National Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka; director, International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo*

A Christian Tamil, Dr. Rajani Thiranagama was born in 1954, six years after Ceylon gained independence from Britain. Rajani’s life – and her death – were inextricably tied to Sri Lanka’s violent ethnic conflict. A doctor, mother and internationally respected human rights activist, Rajani worked to promote social justice in her fractured country throughout her life. She was assassinated in 1989.

Rajani’s activism began while she was a medical student in Colombo, where she led student strikes advocating for the rights of both Tamil and Sinhalese youth. She also met Dayapala Thiranagama, a radical student leader from a Sinhala Buddhist rural background. Rajani broke ethnic and religious barriers by marrying Dayapala in 1977. They had two daughters: Narmada, who was born in 1978, and Sharika, who was born in 1980.

As the violence in her country escalated, Rajani continued to witness and speak out against the oppression of the Tamil people. She first worked as a doctor in rural Sri Lanka, but then returned to Jaffna to teach anatomy at the university. Through her sister Nirmala, a Tamil militant, Rajani became involved with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), administering care to those wounded in action. In 1982, Nirmala was arrested and imprisoned under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

In 1983, Rajani travelled to England on a Commonwealth scholarship to do post-graduate work in anatomy and soon launched a major international campaign for the release of her imprisoned sister. She also joined the LTTE London Committee in order to educate human rights groups and other international organizations about the atrocities occurring in her country. While continuing to write and publish scientific papers, she also became implicated in grassroots organizations fighting for women’s rights and against the discrimination of Britain’s black people and became involved in the international campaigns of other liberation groups.

At a time when many Sri Lankans were fleeing the country, Rajani, with her children, returned to her birthplace in 1986 to head the Department of Anatomy at the University of Jaffna. Her work to rebuild her community after the 1987 October War is renowned. After the Indian army stormed and occupied the university to root out Tamil militants, Rajani helped found the University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR), an organization that continues to work for human rights and peace with justice in Sri Lanka.

While almost single-handedly rebuilding the devastated Anatomy Department, Rajani also fought for the release of imprisoned students and helped establish the Poorani Women’s Centre for victims of war.

Based on lengthy interviews with ordinary Sri Lankans, Rajani and three others from the UTHR compiled a detailed account of atrocities committed by all sides. They called their manuscript, which was published in 1989, “The Broken Palmyra.”

It is believed that it was an LTTE assassin who shot Rajani in September 1989, shortly after she graded the last medical exams of the term.



# NO MORE TEARS SISTER

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## TIMELINE

**1948** – After 500 years of colonization by the Portuguese, Dutch, and the British, **Ceylon**, as Sri Lanka was then named, becomes independent.

**1948/49** – The new government passes anti-Tamil legislation. The **Ceylon Citizenship Act** denies citizenship to Tamils of Indian origin (roughly 800,000 indentured labourers brought by the British from South India to work on rubber, tea and coffee estates). The **Ceylon Amendment Act** disenfranchises plantation Tamils, dropping the proportion of Tamils with voting power in the new legislature.

**December 1952** – **Nirmala Rajasingam** is born in Jaffna to a Christian Tamil family. Two years later on February 23,

**1954** – **Rajani Rajasingam** is born.

**1950s** – The country's ethnic and religious conflicts escalate as competition for wealth and work intensifies in the newly independent country.

**1956** – **Sinhala Only Official Languages Act** is passed, making Sinhalese the national language and effectively reserving the best jobs for the Sinhalese. This "Sinhala only" law was partly designed to address the imbalance of power between the majority Sinhalese and the English-speaking, Christian-educated elite. On the day the bill is introduced, Tamil political leaders are attacked and a small riot against Tamils breaks out, which lasts about four days and in which over 100 Tamils are killed. The law limits the education and work opportunities for many Tamil youth. As a result, the Tamil Hindu minority starts to push for a federal system of government with greater autonomy in the mainly Tamil areas in the north and east.

**1957** – **BC Pact** is signed to protect Tamil interests with a regional autonomy package. The BC pact is so called because it is brokered between Sinhala prime minister SWRD Bandaranayake and the Tamil leader SJV Chelvanayakam. The pact is broken under pressure from Sinhalese extremists. In 1959 Bandaranayake is assassinated by a Buddhist monk.

**1958** – Anti-Tamil riots break out when Tamils are driven away from the South.

**1971** – Anti-government insurrection. In the early 1970s, tens of thousands of educated, unemployed Sinhalese young adults joined the JVP (People's Liberation Army). In 1971, they take up arms against the government. The Sri Lankan army responds by killing over 25,000 youth. Rajani's future husband, Dayapala, is arrested, tortured and sent to solitary confinement during this period.

**1972** – Ceylon becomes the Republic of Sri Lanka. The constitution formally makes Buddhism the country's primary religion. Tamil places at university are cut back. Subsequent civil unrest results in a state of emergency in Tamil areas. The Sinhalese security forces face off against young Tamils.

**1973** – Rajani enters medical school at the University of Colombo.

**1975** – LTTE, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, known as the Tamil Tigers, is formed. They want an independent Tamil state. Many members joined the group in their late teens.

**August 1977** – Anti-Tamil riots break out.

**1977** – Rajani marries Dayapala Thiranagama, a Sinhalese student leader from a Buddhist peasant family.

**1978** – Rajani begins her first posting as an intern and doctor at Jaffna Hospital. Narmada Thiranagama is born.

**1979** – Rajani travels to a remote area of Sri Lanka – Haldumulla near Haputale – to work as a doctor. Dayapala leaves for Bangkok.

**1980** – Sharika Thiranagama is born.

**1980** – Rajani begins to teach at the University of Jaffna.

**November 1982** – Nirmala is arrested and put in prison. She is charged with harbouring unidentified persons, supposedly connected to terrorism, and withholding information.

**1983** – Rajani travels to London on a Commonwealth scholarship and launches a major international campaign to release her sister.

**1983** – The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ambushes an army convoy killing 13 soldiers. News of fallen Sinhalese soldiers sets off an anti-Tamil rampage in Colombo and elsewhere. Mobs of Sinhalese viciously kill thousands of Tamils in pogrom-like fashion. The army and elected officials do nothing to stop it. More than 2,500 people are killed. In the ensuing ethnic crisis half a million Tamils leave the country to seek refuge in India and elsewhere. Tamil refugees arrive in Canada in large numbers.

**1984** – Nirmala breaks jail with the help of the Tamil Tigers and is brought to India. Since arriving in the UK in late 1983, Rajani has developed stronger ties with the Tamil Tigers.

**October 1986** – Rajani returns to Jaffna to teach and to rebuild the Anatomy Department.

**1986** – The government retaliates against the Tamil militants, who were also receiving arms and training from India. In April 1987 the government mounts Operation Liberation, the carpet bombing of the north and east part of the country. The separatist Tigers emerge supreme among Tamil liberation movements by eliminating all other groups.

**1986** – Dayapala goes underground.

**1987** – India and Sri Lanka sign an accord to bring an end to the conflict. India intervenes after Operation Liberation and an Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) is sent to the island to end the hostilities and supervise surrender of arms by the Tamil militants. Another conflict breaks out, this time between the peacekeepers and the Tigers.

**1987/89** – In the south of the country there is a second JVP insurrection. In what has been described as a three-year reign of terror, many left-wing activists are targeted by government killing squads and ultra-nationalist groups

**1987** – Rajani and a few close colleagues form the **University Teachers for Human Rights** (UTHR) to document human rights violations by all sides in the conflict.

**1988** – Rajani and three others from the UTHR compile their detailed witnessing of atrocities from all sides. They called their manuscript “The Broken Palmyra.”

**September 21, 1989** – Rajani is gunned down on her way from work, a 15-minute bicycle ride from home. She is 35 years old. Only months earlier the LTTE entered into a deal with the Sri Lankan government and a ceasefire was declared.

**1990** – After the IPKF leaves, the ceasefire breaks down and all-out war erupts between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers.

**March 2002** – A fragile, cold peace exists between the government and the Tamil Tigers.

# NO MORE TEARS SISTER

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## **THE SRI LANKAN ETHNIC CONFLICT AND WAR A Brief History of the Conflict and the Backdrop of the Film**

After 500 years of colonization by the Portuguese, Dutch and the British, Ceylon – as the island was then called – gained independence in 1948. Though all the communities of the island fought for independence, the end of British rule released many divisions among the people — divisions fostered over many years by colonial administrators, plantation owners, missionaries and settlers.

For example, during British colonization, when the majority Sinhalese refused to work on foreign-owned plantations, the British imported large numbers of Tamil workers from Southern India. These “lower caste” Tamils were looked down upon by both the majority Sinhalese as well as the minority indigenous Tamils living mainly in the north and east.

At the same time, the British developed a strong, mostly Christian elite of English-speaking administrators and clerks to run the country. While both Sinhalese and Tamils were represented within this group, the minority indigenous Tamils were over-represented.

Competing demands on the newly independent Sri Lanka turned increasingly hostile before too long – especially when the economy slowed in the mid-to-late 1950s. Land, work opportunities and language were primary concerns. The Sinhalese, who felt resentful of their place under the British, wanted to reassert their culture, language, schools and Buddhist religion. As the majority, they voted to replace English with Sinhalese as the only official language of the country, which put the minorities at a disadvantage. The Tamil minority, on the other hand, wanted a federal system of government, with more local autonomy in the main Tamil-populated areas of the country. They also wanted official recognition of the Tamil language.

As the Sinhala majority sought to take their pre-eminent place in the young economically challenged country, the Tamil minority felt threatened. New chauvinistic laws favoured by the Sinhalese were followed with Tamil protests and counter attacks. Ultra nationalist Sinhalese gangs, spurred on by their elected leaders, were soon known for their ruthlessness. A fundamentalist Buddhist clergy did much to justify the violence and prevent compromise.

By the late 1960s, worsening economic conditions set the stage for deep class divisions among the Sinhalese population. In the early '70s, tens of thousands of educated, unemployed Sinhalese young adults joined the JVP (People's Liberation Army) and participated in a Marxist insurrection. The Sri Lankan army responded ruthlessly, killing 25,000 Sinhalese young people.

The 1970s also saw unrest in the Tamil-populated areas in the north and east. A state of emergency was imposed for several years with many discriminatory laws and heavy-handed policing from Sinhalese forces. As a result, a large number of militant, often left-wing Tamil groups emerged. Calling for an independent Tamil state called Eelam, these organizations were often embraced by teenage males from the lower castes and classes. LTTE, known commonly as the Tamil Tigers, surfaced as the most powerful and well-armed Tamil militant organization. Soon there were many clashes between “the boys” and Sinhalese forces. Killings were followed by reprisals, and counter reprisals. The government's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act was enacted and thousands of Tamil youth were arrested.

In 1983, after the ambush and massacre of an army patrol by Tamil militants, mobs of Sinhalese went on the worst rampage ever, viciously killing thousands of Tamils in pogrom-like fashion, destroying life and property. The army and elected officials did nothing to stop it. Tens of thousands of Tamils living in Sinhalese areas fled to Tamil-majority regions.

The government was widely criticized for countless cases of torture and disappearances, but justified its actions by violence from Tamil militants. At the same time, Tamil militant groups fought viciously among themselves and struck at the Tamil Muslim population. To make matters even more deadly, Tamil militants received training and arms from India as their demands for more territory grew. Few believed that the Sri Lankan government would ever concede one third of the landmass for 20% of the people. In fact, in 1986, the government retaliated by mounting Operation Liberation, which included wide-scale bombing of the north and east.

In 1987, the Government of Sri Lanka and the Indian Government signed an agreement whereby the Indian army undertook to disarm the militants, while diplomats attempted to negotiate peace on the ground with the LTTE. But before long, it became clear that LTTE and the fourth-largest army in the world had very different ideas about control and power. Initially the Tamil population was happy to see the Indian forces arrive as peacekeepers, but was soon caught in the middle between the army and militants. With ingenious guerrilla tactics, LTTE soon ground down the Indian “peacekeeping forces,” which left in 1990.

Also in 1987-89, the south saw a second violent outbreak of the JVP, who were anti-Tamil, anti-Indian and anti-government. Its merciless put-down by the government followed with an estimated 60,000 dead or disappeared.

In 1990, all out-war between the Sri Lankan government and LTTE wreaked havoc on the population again, continuing until late 2000. As LTTE suicide bombings terrorized the Sinhalese-dominated south, armed opponents battled ruthlessly in the north and east. Thousands of women and child soldiers were recruited by the LTTE. On the government side, the armed forces grew to more than 235,000. Even with LTTE in control of much of the territory of the north and east of the country, neither side was able to achieve anything resembling “victory” Neither side could win, neither side could lose. In the past two decades, the LTTE has emerged as one of the most feared and effective paramilitary organizations in the world. It has crushed and silenced all pluralist political opinion among Tamils by physically eliminating all other political groups and dissenters.

Since early 2002, a formal cease-fire and fragile cold peace has existed between the government and LTTE. The breakdown of peace talks in 2003 has left the country in limbo. The tsunami of December 2004 interrupted the downward spiral of government-LTTE relations, but has not changed the trajectory. Tamils in Sri Lanka and the world over continue to plead for fair representation and an “opening up of democratic space” in the country’s north and east.

# NO MORE TEARS SISTER

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## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

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

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

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

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

I wanted to understand how ethnic conflict and nationalist struggles impact women – be they victims of war, militant fighters or peace builders. I wondered whether there was a feminist critique of both state and guerrilla violence? It was well known that the Sri Lankan military and the opposition Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were both guilty of torture, illegal detention, disappearances and extrajudicial executions. I wanted to explore whether women were, on one hand, torn between loyalties to their ethnic community and, on the other hand, the community of women? Did oppressed minority women imagine fighting injustice in different ways than their male counterparts?

The story of Rajani Thiranagama – her courageous life, unique vision and tragic assassination – offered a compelling narrative to pose many of my questions. Rajani's evolution into a spirited champion of the rights of the Tamil people in the seventies and eighties paralleled the escalation of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Moved by her peoples' complex struggle against ruthless state violence, she believed Tamil militancy was the answer and joined the liberation movement. But when she witnessed the corruption and cruelty within, she felt compelled to document what she saw and urged her people to resist blind adherence to any leader or movement. Embracing feminism and a belief in human rights, she felt that women in particular were the primary casualties of war. Near the end of her life Rajani wrote, "*Men in battle garb, whether they come with swords or guns, on a horse or in armoured cars, the price of conquest seems heightened by the violation of women*".

I believed that by following Rajani's life story and the circumstances surrounding her untimely death, several themes could be explored: nationalism vs. anti-nationalism, the lives of women as both participants and innocent victims of war, and the belief in armed struggle vs. a critique of militarism.

Though NO MORE TEARS SISTER is set in Sri Lanka, a similar story might have been explored in Africa, other parts of Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe or Latin America. In the sixties and seventies, Rajani was part of a generation of young political activists in postcolonial societies around the world – activists who dreamed of radically transforming their societies to achieve equality and justice for all. But this idealism continues to be ruthlessly thwarted by narrow nationalist agendas in countless countries.

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

Cinematically, I wanted NO MORE TEARS SISTER to reflect the passion and beauty of Rajani's ideals. Together with my talented team, including François Dagenais (DOP), Patricia Tassinari (editor) and Bertrand Chenier (composer), I aimed at making a film that is political, feminist and aesthetic.

**Helene Klodawsky**

# NO MORE TEARS SISTER

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## HELENE KLODAWSKY

### BIOGRAPHY

A graduate of the Nova Scotia College of Art, Helene Klodawsky has been writing and directing social, political and arts documentaries for 20 years. Her films have been screened and televised around the world and have received more than 25 awards, including honours from the Chicago International Film Festival, the San Francisco International Film Festival, the Mannheim International Film Festival, Hot Docs and the Academy of Canadian Cinema.

Much of Klodawsky's work reflects her desire to shed light on aspects of human experience often hidden from public view. Her 2002 film, *Undying Love*, tells the poignant and often-miraculous love stories of several survivors of World War II. Among other prizes, it garnered the Best Television History Documentary at the 2003 Gemini Awards, as well as prizes at the Jerusalem International Film Festival and the Columbus International Film Festival, USA. Klodawsky's film *Motherland* (1994), which casts a critical eye on the North American institution of motherhood, also won top honours on the festival circuit. Her prize-winning films on women's lives include *Painted Landscapes of the Times* (1986), *No Time to Stop* (1991) and *What If* (1999).

Klodawsky has also worked in other conflict zones. In 1988, just prior to the first *Intifada*, she travelled to Israel and the Occupied Territories to film *Shoot and Cry*, an hour-length film exploring the Palestinian/Israeli conflict through the eyes of two young men – an 18-year-old Israeli conscript about to serve in the West Bank and a Palestinian worker in Israel who comes from Jenin. It premiered on Channel Four (UK) and was televised around the world.

Klodawsky is currently working on *Family Motel*, a feature-length alternative drama about a group of homeless families and refugees in Toronto who are housed together in an old motel along a busy suburban highway.

### FILMOGRAPHY

|  |                         |
|--|-------------------------|
| 2004 <i>No More Tears Sister</i>                   | Director                |
| 2002 <i>Undying Love</i>                           | Director                |
| 2001 <i>Survivors Inc.</i>                         | Director                |
| 2000 <i>In Search of Lucille</i>                   | Director                |
| 1999 <i>Hire Learning</i>                          | Co-director/Co-producer |
| 1998 <i>What if... A Film about Judith Merrill</i> | Director                |
| 1994 <i>Motherland: Tales of Wonder</i>            | Director                |
| 1991 <i>No Time to Stop</i>                        | Director                |
| 1988 <i>Shoot and Cry</i>                          | Director                |
| 1986 <i>Painted Landscapes, the Art of Sue Coe</i> | Director                |
| 1986 <i>Love's Labour</i>                          | Director                |



# NO MORE TEARS SISTER

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## PRODUCERS' STATEMENT

NO MORE TEARS SISTER originated as an international co-production and was conceived of as a three-part series entitled *Women and War*. The inspiration for the project was a Quebec radio documentary called *Femmes et la guerre*. The NFB was to produce the films with France, but the French were not able to come up with the funding; instead, it became two NFB-produced films: NO MORE TEARS SISTER, written and directed by Helene Klodawsky, and Tahani Rached's SORAIDA, A WOMAN OF PALESTINE.

The NFB was immediately captivated by Dr. Rajani Thiranagama's dramatic life and untimely death. Her story, and that of her sister Nirmala, offer inspiring models of strong women defending justice and human rights. This film powerfully demonstrates the risks faced by people everywhere who are working to promote human rights and protect innocent lives.

Throughout the programming process, it was clear that this was an important film for the NFB, because of its feminist perspective, its strong voice for human rights, and its resonance here in Canada.

As Canadians, we live in a multicultural country, and it is critical that the NFB's films reflect our rich and diverse cultural identity. This is a core value in all our programming. Canada is also home to the world's largest Tamil community outside Sri Lanka. Like all communities who have immigrated here, Tamil Canadians have brought with them their concerns about events taking place in their homeland. It is vital that Canadians understand the debate that is going on within our midst – just as it is important to us at the NFB that we make films like NO MORE TEARS SISTER, which can provide a forum to debate issues peacefully.

NO MORE TEARS SISTER also explores whether there is a feminist critique of both State and guerrilla violence, thus continuing the NFB's legacy of filmmaking that gives a voice to women, a tradition embodied by the NFB's renowned Studio D and today lives on in all NFB studios where hard-hitting social-issue documentaries by and about women are being produced.

The NFB has also carefully weighed questions of ethics and safety in the making and the distribution of this film. The security and privacy of Nirmala and other participants is of paramount concern for us and we have done our utmost to ensure their protection.

The NFB believes that Canada can serve as a model for fostering peaceful debate and dialogue on conflicts such as the one in Sri Lanka. As Canada's public film producer, we believe we have a unique role to play in creating films that help to make this possible — films like NO MORE TEARS SISTER.

**Pierre Lapointe**  
Producer

**Sally Bochner**  
Executive Producer

# NO MORE TEARS SISTER

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## PIERRE LAPOINTE – BIOGRAPHY

Award-winning producer Pierre Lapointe has been with the National Film Board for over 30 years. A historian by training, his films have been screened at festivals around the world.

Lapointe's recent credits include the NFB's *Bearing Witness* (2003) series profiling people with life-threatening illnesses, which he co-produced with Adam Symansky. These three intensely moving one-hour films follow Jocelyn Morton, who died at 44 after living with cancer for a decade; 26-year-old Luke Melchior, who was born with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy; and Robert Coley-Donohue, who died of ALS (also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease) at age 74.

The provocative documentary *Salt* (2000), which takes a fresh and intimate look at today's youth culture, was also produced by Lapointe. Directed by four 17-year-olds, *Salt* was honoured with prizes at the Columbus International Film and Video Festival, USA and Vancouver's Reel 2 Real International Film Festival for Youth.

Lapointe was also involved in the groundbreaking film *Inuuvunga: I am Inuk, I am Alive* (2004). In this innovative project, eight Inuit teens document their final year at high school. The films create a rich portrait of coming of age in an Inuit village and address a broad range of issues, from the communication gap with their elders, to the loss of friends to suicide.

Lapointe's other work includes the *Transit series* (2000), which focuses on Canada's human and natural geography, and *At the Heart of the 20th Century/Au coeur du XXe siècle*, a series of short films on turning points in Canadian history.

## RECENT FILMOGRAPHY

|  |          |
|--|----------|
| 2004 <i>No More Tears Sister</i>             | Producer |
| 2004 <i>My Brand New Life</i>                | Producer |
| 2004 <i>Inuuvunga, I am Inuk, I am Alive</i> | Producer |
| 2004 <i>A Circus Story</i>                   | Producer |
| 2003 <i>Bearing Witness</i>                  | Producer |
| 2003 <i>A Border Story</i>                   | Producer |
| 2000 <i>Salt</i>                             | Producer |
| 2000 <i>TRANSIT series</i>                   | Producer |
| 1999 <i>Death Rained Down from the Sky</i>   | Producer |

## SALLY BOCHNER – BIOGRAPHY

Sally Bochner's NFB production career began in 1986, when she was co-writer and associate producer on the feature *Train of Dreams*. Sally's next major film credit was as associate producer and co-writer on the award-winner *The Company of Strangers*. She became a staff producer in the early 1990s and was named Executive Producer of the Quebec Centre in 1997.

Sally has served as producer or executive producer on some 60 films, including *Atanarjuat – The Fast Runner*, an Igloolik Isuma/NFB co-production that won the prestigious Camera d'Or at Cannes. Other acclaimed films include *Discordia*, exploring the fall-out from Benjamin Netanyahu's planned visit to Concordia University; *Cinéma Vérité: Defining the Moment*, a history of documentary film; and the Genie-winner *Westray*.

Her latest credits include the children's series *My Brand New Life*, co-produced with La Fête; *Mr Mergler's Gift*, a moving look at the bond between a piano teacher and a 9-year-old child prodigy; *The Tree that Remembers*, an award-winning examination of the persecution suffered by Iranians under the Ayatollahs' regime; and *CitizenShift*, the English-language counterpart to the NFB's Parole citoyenne website, creating space for citizens to debate vital issues.

# NO MORE TEARS SISTER

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## PRESS CLIPPINGS

\* for complete articles, please refer to the NO MORE TEARS SISTER website, at [www.nfb.ca/nomoretearssister](http://www.nfb.ca/nomoretearssister)

|  |                |
|--|----------------|
| <a href="#">Newsweek – International Edition</a> | July 11, 2005  |
| <a href="#">Variety</a>                          | June 7, 2005   |
| <a href="#">lines magazine</a>                   | May 2005       |
| <a href="#">Northwest Asian Weekly</a>           | May 21, 2005   |
| <a href="#">Seattle Post-Intelligencer</a>       | May 20, 2005   |
| <a href="#">The Weekly Voice</a>                 | May 14, 2005   |
| <a href="#">Tamil Week</a>                       | May 5, 2005    |
| <a href="#">The Hindu</a>                        | May 4, 2005    |
| <a href="#">The Leader-Post (Regina)</a>         | April 27, 2005 |
| CBC Radio One                                    | April 27, 2005 |
| <a href="#">Globe and Mail</a>                   | April 26, 2005 |
| <a href="#">Toronto Star</a>                     | April 22, 2005 |
| <a href="#">Eye Weekly</a>                       | April 21, 2005 |

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<http://msnbc.msn.com/id/8444321/site/newsweek/>

Newsweek – International Edition  
July 11, 2005 issue  
Vibhuti Patel

**Newsweek** International Edition

### FILM: Of Love And War

A tale of two soul sisters who grew up in a Tamil home in Sri Lanka comes to life in "No More Tears Sister," a new documentary from filmmaker Helen Klodawsky. Fifteen years after her younger sister—Dr. Rajani Thiranagama—was assassinated at the age of 35, allegedly by Tamil Tigers, the other, Nirmala, has broken her tormented silence. When she returned home from a U.S. college, politicized by the anti-Vietnam movement, she found an equally radicalized Rajani challenging their island nation's punishing ethnic divisions. To the consternation of their middle-class Christian parents, both women married revolutionary men. Their family lives were predictably stormy: Rajani's separation from her Singhalese husband and children posed challenges, as did his stays in safe houses. With stunning visuals, admirable emotional restraint and poetic use of Rajani's personal letters (the film is narrated by Michael Ondaatje), Klodawsky recaptures one family's sad saga all the way to their exile. It is one that will resonate with women and men in war-torn societies everywhere.

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<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117927322?categoryid=31&cs=1>

Variety.com  
June 7, 2005  
Ken Eisner

**VARIETY.com**  
Hot Docs

### No More Tears, Sister

(Docu -- Canada)

A National Film Board production, with assistance from the Sri Lankan Film Development Corp. (International sales: NFB, Montreal.) Produced by Pierre Lapointe. Executive producer, Sally Bochner. Directed, written by Helene Klodawsky.

**With:** Nirmala Rajasingam, Sharika Thiranagama, Dayapala Thiranagama.

**Narrator:** Michael Ondaatje.

(English, Tamil dialogue)

**Aspects of politics, history and ethnicity are examined in "No More Tears, Sister," a deftly made study of one woman and her family -- especially the tough-minded sisters who survived her death. A doctor, teacher and human-rights activist, Rajani Thiranagama sacrificed everything to improve the lives of ordinary Sri Lankans. She was assassinated in 1989, at age 35. Security was tight at pic's Hot Docs fest preem in Toronto, as ethnic tensions in the island nation have spilled into emigrant conclaves. But pic, mostly in English, is likely to have auds weeping at activist fests and in pubcasting circles.**

Archival footage of '60s America and colonial life in India and Sri Lanka is mixed with subtle recreations of Rajani's exemplary life, with daughter Sharika standing in for her late mom. The rest of the pic features well-shot interviews with Rajani's good-natured parents and articulate sisters, who help limn the tale of a girl growing up in an open-minded Christian Tamil family in the mixed coastal town of Jaffna.

A brilliant student, Rajani studied in Colombo and in Vietnam-era States, where she got radicalized toward dreams of Mao and Che. Back home, she became a noted surgeon and medical teacher, while quietly supporting the growing Tamil Tiger insurgency against the



dominant Sinhalese Buddhists, whose government excluded Tamils and whipped up occasional pogroms against them. At same time, she pursued romance with (and secretly married) Dayapala Thiranagama, a working-class intellectual and Sinhalese rebel who favored a multiethnic, socialistic state -- something that had both sides after his scalp.

Rajani grew disenchanted with the Tigers' violent methods (at least 25,000 young people have been killed during their uprising), as well as their lack of revolutionary knowledge, and turned her attentions to helping people in general. According to eyewitnesses, she single-handedly stood up to the Indian Army when it threatened to sack her university's medical department. She also angered Tamils by decrying Tigers' alleged use of rape as a tool for disempowering women and recruiting them as fighters and suicide bombers, leading to her eventual murder.

Potent pic reps a textbook example of how legit political movements can turn into terror platforms and ethnic cults with bystanders afraid to stand up even for meager rights. Long conversations between her ex and talkative sister Nirmala Rajasingam, once a political prisoner famously freed by the Tigers, feel stiff and stagy, briefly subverting the main story. Narration from "English Patient" scribe Michael Ondaatje adds an elegant, unobtrusive touch to this overall stylish docu, which comes in at just the right length.

Camera (color), Francoise Dagenais; editor, Patricia Tassinari; music, Bertrand Chenier; art director, Lal Haridrinatha; sound (Dolby), Sylvain Vari; sound designer, Louis Dupire; line producer, Johanne Bergeron; assistant director, Elmo Halliday. Reviewed at Hot Docs Festival, Toronto, April 26, 2005. (Also in Human Rights, Seattle film festivals.) Running time: 80 MIN.

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[http://www.lines-magazine.org/Art\\_May05/aaron.htm](http://www.lines-magazine.org/Art_May05/aaron.htm)

*lines magazine*

May 2005: Volume IV, Issue 1

Aaron Moore



### **From the Revolution to New Forms of Struggle**

### **A Review of NO MORE TEARS SISTER – ANATOMY OF HOPE AND BETRAYAL**

"We did not consider human rights work as politics. Politics was the armed struggle and the revolution. Rajani [Thiranagama] completely departed from this type of position to new forms of struggle," says Dayapala Thiranagama (Rajani's husband), to a nodding Nirmala Rajasingham (Rajani's older sister) as they look back on her life and therefore, their own lives as active participants of militant movements. This difficult search for "new forms of struggle" in the face of a disillusionment with simplistic revolutionary and nationalist politics, and the utter hopelessness and despair of Sri Lanka's civil war is indeed the highlight of *No More Tears Sister – Anatomy of Hope and Betrayal*, a documentary film directed by Helene Klodawski and released in March 2005 by the Canadian National Film Board (NFB), and soon to be released in the United States at the Human Rights Watch Film Festival. The film focuses on the life of Rajani Thiranagama, Sri Lanka's most famous human rights activist, who dedicated her life to bringing social justice and democracy to the Tamil people and meticulously recorded the human rights crimes of the Sri Lankan state, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) in the North. The LTTE murdered her in 1989, putting an end to all democratic space and independent political organization in Jaffna. Using everything from testimony by Rajani's family, her letters and writings, family pictures, primary sources, re-enactments by family members, and historical news footage, Klodawsky skillfully re-constructs her life and the complicated socio-political context that shaped it. This was a very difficult task considering that there are few surviving materials on her life, that it was virtually impossible to film in Jaffna due to security concerns, and that many of her students and associates were afraid to speak because of fear of LTTE retribution.

By carefully tracing the intertwined lives of Rajani, Dayapala, and Nirmala, the film shows how Rajani eventually came to embrace and practice “new forms of struggle.” Influenced by Nirmala and the general support for Tamil militarism among Sri Lankan Tamils in the militancy’s early years, Rajani began to help the LTTE in Jaffna and in 1984 became a leading figure in their political office in London while campaigning for her older sister’s release from a Sri Lankan state prison. She began to question the organization, however, after Nirmala’s escape and subsequent break with the LTTE. Nirmala recounts how she and her husband sought to “inculcate progressive values of human rights and democracy” among young LTTE cadres through political training, but met with fierce resistance from the leadership. “We realized that this was a military outfit that operated with cutthroat ruthlessness operating at the center,” Nirmala adds. After hearing Nirmala’s experiences and descriptions of internal killings, and escaped cadres’ descriptions of the LTTE targeting other militant groups, crushing dissent, and creating an atmosphere of fear in Jaffna, Rajani also breaks with them. However, unlike Nirmala, who was forced into exile in London, Rajani returned to Jaffna in 1986 to “be with her people.” In the context of indiscriminate bombing, disappearances, torture, rape, and harassment by state forces, internal and external killings, torture, kidnappings, recruitment of children, and intimidation by the LTTE, and random shelling, shooting, and detentions by the IPKF, Rajani struggled to listen and meet the various needs of the Jaffna Tamil people, and more importantly, gave them a voice against these powerful actors. Rather than the top-down, simplistic politics of LTTE fanatical nationalism, Sinhalese racism, and high-handed Indian interventionism, Rajani worked from the bottom up, developing multiple forms of struggle against all of these harmful ideologies.

The film shows her dedication to rebuilding Jaffna University, which was gutted by war, the destruction of Jaffna civil society by militancy, and the migration of the intelligentsia abroad. According to Nirmala, Rajani’s commitment to the students was legendary. She never discriminated against them based on political belief, and often went to the Indian IPKF brigadier general to demand their release from arbitrary detention. She was the only one to confront the IPKF when they raided Jaffna University, according to an anonymous human rights activist. Women also held a special place in her politics since they bore the most hardship and suffering during the war. The LTTE used them as suicide cadres or frontline fighters or in Nirmala’s words, “cannon fodder for their war machine.” The Sri Lankan army bombed their homes, kidnapped their husbands, and raped them. The IPKF did much of the same. It was women who “kept the homes going and civil society running” during the war, Nirmala adds. Rajani was an advocate for women desperately looking for their disappeared husbands, who were kidnapped or killed by one of the three parties. She started the Poorani Home for Destitute Women, which gave strength to raped women who were shunned and ignored by everyone. “Her sharp tongue” spared no one, not even the LTTE (“the so-called leaders of the people”), who were no different than the Sri Lankan army or IPKF in not caring for the people. The LTTE mandated death and destruction for the Tamil people, even calling for the death of five hundred to a thousand Tamils at one point. “The bloody Tigers have withdrawn while we the sacrificial lambs drop dead in lots,” she writes, describing how the LTTE used civilian death to advance their cause. In sum, Rajani tirelessly strove to create a “politics of the people” in a context where no one bothered to listen to or empower them. Such a politics had no ready-made formula. In fact, Rajani said that she at first “did not know where to start organizing,” and simply threw herself into the lives and needs of the people. “One needs enormous energy to restart, lose, restart lose, restart, lose,” she writes in one of her letters. Yet out of this unceasing commitment to students, women, the displaced, the disappeared, the destitute, and so on, Rajani was able to plant the seeds of a renewed civil society that was rapidly being destroyed by narrow, fanatical nationalism.

Many of her human rights accounts have been published in *The Broken Palmyra* (1990) by the University Teachers of Human Rights (Jaffna), a group of university teachers fighting for democratic space and human rights in Jaffna. This collection of eyewitness accounts carries on the spirit of Rajani’s original idea to “expose the atrocities of the IPKF and the irrationality, fanaticism, and blindness of the Tigers” in a report on the plight of women to be called *No More Tears Sister*. *The Broken Palmyra* exhibits Rajani’s people-centered politics and commitment to “stand up and fight” for the Tamil community. It is not merely a “neutral” documentation but rather a testimony to how the LTTE, other militant groups, the Tamil democratic parties, the Sri Lankan state forces, and the IPKF failed time and time again to root their politics in the people, and in fact, used and abused them, thereby destroying civil society in the process. More importantly, however, it documents the various resistances of the people within that very context. The LTTE, however, would not tolerate any outspokenness that “undermined the struggle,” and shot Rajani in September 1989, thus ending the open activities of UTHR in

Jaffna. The powerful pictures of the October 1989 commemoration protest for Rajani in the film demonstrates the persistence of civil society even within such a climate of fear. One of Rajani's colleagues at Jaffna University told me recently how she expressed fear at publishing her accounts but in the end was determined to speak out for her community. "If intellectuals are scared to speak out, you can imagine how the average person feels," he added. The film and book both attest to the latent strength of people to find new forms of struggle and the continued importance of *politicized* human rights work that would enable the people to speak out against oppression even in a context of killing, abduction, and intimidation. Only then can the culture of fear and silence be broken.

One question running through my mind was how this film could serve as a means for further political organization both in Sri Lanka and abroad. The film is an excellent introduction to the complexities of the conflict through its skillful use of historical footage, succinct summaries by the narrator (Michael Ondaatje), rich family testimony, and striking personal pictures. This piecing together of history through visual and aural fragments brings events such as the JVP insurrection of 1971 and its brutal repression, the 1983 anti-Tamil riots, the rise of Tamil militancy and the LTTE, and the Indian intervention very much alive. Moreover, personal accounts bring out the difficult struggles and negotiations of the participants. We see Dayapala's determination to build a multi-ethnic mass revolutionary movement, his personal struggles between family and politics, and his political conflict with and eventual turn to Nirmala's human rights politics. We also see Nirmala's grappling with LTTE politics, her pain at being in exile, and guilt over involving Rajani in the Tamil militancy. Rajani's letters often show frustration and despondency over the situation in Jaffna. History is not a simple linear narrative but is actively shaped by the hard decisions and struggles, victories and defeats of real people. As a means of political organization, the film de-naturalizes the notion of "timeless ethnic conflict" and shows the central place of political action in changing the course of events. There are no ready-made formulas for peace nor any objective or neutral position from which to view the conflict dispassionately – only the hard-fought gains and painful losses of everyday struggle. For those who are committed to solidarity work or social change in Sri Lanka or elsewhere, the film demonstrates the importance of always trying to understand the problems from the view of the people, not simply from the view of the parties or international NGOs or think tanks. In the example of Rajani, only a committed engagement to the difficult, changing realities on the ground with the firm goal of creating a democratic, plural, and equitable society can bring about any kind of significant social change.

[...]

But despite this danger of particularizing Rajani's life and exoticizing the politics of Sri Lanka, the film is an excellent testament to the importance of committed political engagement with the grinding realities of the people, rather than with empty slogans, shiny utopias, and academic theories. The civil war in the north and east of Sri Lanka is the story of betrayal after betrayal of the Tamil people, to the point where the average Tamil person no longer trusts politics and is fearfully resigned to continued exploitation and disempowerment. Unfortunately, the so-called "peace process," involving many international governments and NGOs, as well as billions of dollars in promised money, continues this tradition of ignoring the people and being complacent on political killings, child recruitment, the stripping of democratic rights, and the harassment of minorities in the north and east. I have personally heard Yasushi Akashi, Japan's special envoy to Sri Lanka for Reconstruction and Rehabilitation, tell a large group of Japanese college students about his "realistic" approach to resolving the Sri Lankan civil war, which also explicitly meant not pushing the LTTE too much on human rights. I have also heard a leading "conflict resolution expert" say how he "thinks very highly of the work of UTHR, although finds their approach unproductive." Yet despite this so-called "realistic and productive" dismissal of the people by the peace experts, there are still many like Rajani who continue to speak out against violence and injustice and for a plural, democratic society in Sri Lanka (often anonymously and at great risk to their lives). This film is part of a growing chorus of voices inside and outside Sri Lanka who are refusing to be silent and are finding innovative ways of making their voices heard. This could only bode well for the Tamils of the north and east, who have been brutalized by those in power for too long.

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<http://www.nwasianweekly.com/editorial/seattlefilm24.21.htm>

Northwest Asian Weekly  
May 21, 2005  
Pat Tanumihardja



### **Seattle International Film Festival notes & reviews**

**"No More Tears, Sister: An Anatomy of Hope and Betrayal"**

Canada

May 22 at 11:15 a.m., June 1 at 4:30 p.m.; Broadway Performance Hall

This is one of those films that makes you realize how narrowly focused the mainstream media can be. Amidst the conflicts in the Middle East and everywhere else the United States has a self-interest, Sri Lanka's tale still deserves to be told.

Life on Sri Lanka, a small island nation off the southeast coast of the Indian subcontinent, has been marred by more than two decades of ethnic conflict, mainly between the majority Sinhalese who make up the national government and the minority Tamil rebels who form the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

In this beautifully shot documentary, we learn about Dr. Rajani Thiranagama, a human-rights activist who had a vision of peace and justice for her war-torn country. Rajani devoted her life to promoting social justice and fought tirelessly against the oppression of the Tamil people. She was assassinated in 1989.

Narrated by Rajani's family members, "No More Tears, Sister" weaves her personal story with the violence of the ethnic conflict as a backdrop, giving an insight into this complex struggle that continues today. More than this, it is a story about family, love and justice, and proves that one person can make a difference.

Though a sad tale, it is also hopeful, serving as a symbolic memorial to Rajani and to the many unsung heroes and heroines who struggled for social justice before and after her.

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[http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/movies/224999\\_siff20.html](http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/movies/224999_siff20.html)

Seattle Post-Intelligencer  
May 20, 2005  
Gianni Truzzi



### **Roll 'em -- the Seattle International Film Festival gets on with the shows**

**NO MORE TEARS, SISTER: An Anatomy of Hope and Betrayal (Canada)**

The 1989 murder by the Tamil Tigers of Dr. Rajani Thiranagama, a Sri Lankan physician and human rights activist, is put into full context by her surviving family in this eye-opening documentary. Born into the privileged Tamil minority that benefited from British colonial rule of Ceylon, Thiranagama and her elder sister progressed from reading Jane Austen to Karl Marx once national independence spawned a corrupt and repressive state. After marrying a like-minded but ethnically different revolutionary, Thiranagama supported the Tigers who helped her sister escape political imprisonment, but grew disenchanted with their brutal doctrine. Interviews alternate with re-enactments by her daughter to reveal a flawed yet brave woman who dared to criticize both sides in a civil war. Grade: B-

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### **Dr. Rajani Thiranagama - The Story of an Assassinated Human Rights Activist**

"Men in battle garb, whether they come with swords or guns, on a horse or in armoured cars, the price of conquest seems heightened by the violation of women," wrote Dr. Rajani Thiranagama, a few months before she was assassinated in Jaffna, northern Sri Lanka.

And, it was exactly the subject of "woman and war" that captivated Montreal-based filmmaker Helene Klodowsky and formed the beginnings of yet another powerful film. "The real heroes in any war are the people. And, it is the strong women that help keep families, neighbourhoods, societies and nations alive during turbulent times, like in Sri Lanka," Helene said in a recent interview to Voice.

She was moved by the courageous story of Dr Rajani -- a mother, anatomy professor, author and symbol of hope -- who was killed at the age of thirty-five. "Rajani Thiranagama's life was marked with vision. Her tragic death demonstrates the dangers faced by women everywhere who are struggling for human rights in the face of violence and corruption," reflects Helene.

The filmmaker believed that by following Rajani's life story and the circumstances surrounding her untimely death, several themes could be explored simultaneously: nationalism vs. anti-nationalism, the lives of women as both participants and innocent victims of war, and the belief in armed struggle vs. a critique of militarism.

Helene has been writing and directing social, political and art documentaries for 20 years. A graduate of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and Queen's University, her films have been screened and televised around the world and have won more than 25 awards.

Her recent film "No More Tears Sister" offered food for thought and triggered off animated debates, when shown at a world premiere at the Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival in Toronto last month. The film will screen at the Seattle Film Festival, the Human Rights Watch Film Festival in New York and the Banff Television Festival later this spring.

"I knew that creating a portrait of a slain human rights activist would be no easy feat - especially given the fact that there were no surviving archives, few photos and, due to security concerns, no access to filming in Jaffna where Rajani lived and worked. In addition, most of her friends, former students and colleagues were far too fearful to speak about her on camera. Almost everything would have to be constructed, but based on careful research I wanted "No More Tears Sister" to reflect the passion and beauty of Rajani's ideals. I aimed at making a film that is political, feminist and aesthetic," adds Helene.

A story of love, revolution, and betrayal, "No More Tears Sister" explores the price of truth in times of war; Rajani was anti-war in every sense, openly condemning the LTTE's strategy and failures, just as she condemned the actions of the Sri Lankan military and the Indian Peace Keeping Force. She was shot dead as she cycled back home from the University one evening in September 1989. The bullets that killed her are believed to be that of an LTTE assassin's.

"One day some gun will silence me and it will not be held by an outsider but by the son born in the womb of this very society, from a woman with whom my history is shared," wrote Dr. Rajani in 1989, a few months before she was killed. And, to film her story, Helene traveled to the other side of the globe, researching and documenting one gutsy woman's journey and in the process opening up the violent, ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka, to the entire world.

Fifteen years after Rajani's death, her charismatic older sister Nirmala, a former Tamil militant and political

prisoner, journeys back to Sri Lanka. She has decided to break her long silence about Rajani's passionate life, and her brutal slaying. Joining her are Rajani's husband, sisters, and grown daughters, as well as fellow activists forced underground. Stunningly photographed, using rare archival footage, intimate correspondence and poetic recreations, the story of Rajani and her family delves into rarely explored themes – revolutionary women and their dangerous pursuit of justice.

The film, a production of the National Film Board of Canada dwells on the theme: Sri Lankan Tamils must debate how to stop retributive killings in the community, not who's next.

The film, based mainly on interviews with members of Rajani's family and on archival material, and narrated by the Sri Lankan-Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje, vividly captures her transformation from a sympathizer of the Tigers' cause to one of its fiercest critics.

Following Rajani's killing, Jaffna saw a few protests but they quickly fizzled out when the LTTE began contacting participants individually, asking them to pipe down.

As the documentary notes, those were the last spontaneous instances of free expression in northern Sri Lanka.

"The sensitive subject of the film made it impossible for a filmmaker from within Sri Lanka to make the film. Someone from outside was needed to tell Rajani's story," says Helene. The film was conceived of as a three-part series entitled *Women and War*.

"When I was first approached by the National Film Board of Canada to make a film about women and war, I considered myself up to the task. Besides making films about other conflict zones, I had lived close to the shadows of war. My mother survived the Lodz Ghetto and other concentration camps. Questions about war and women's experience in war were part of my daily vocabulary," recalls Helene.

She was drawn to the subject of women's experience of war in Sri Lanka - a conflict that scholar Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah has called the "ethnic fratricide" of his country.

Raging in various degrees of intensity since 1983, it has been one of the least known but more intractable wars of the postcolonial era. Labelled as a "forgotten war," it has caused at least 65,000 deaths, displaced up to one million people, resulted in severe human rights abuses, and compromised Sri Lanka's once promising development.

"I wanted to understand how ethnic conflict and nationalist struggles impact women - be they victims of war, militant fighters or peace builders. I wondered whether there was a feminist critique of both state and guerrilla violence? It was well known that the Sri Lankan military and the opposition Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were both guilty of torture, illegal detention, disappearances and extrajudicial executions. I wanted to explore whether women were, on one hand, torn between loyalties to their ethnic community and, on the other hand, the community of women? Did oppressed minority women imagine fighting injustice in different ways than their male counterparts?"

Embracing feminism and a belief in human rights, Dr Rajani felt that women in particular were the primary casualties of war. This film powerfully demonstrates the risks faced by people everywhere who are working to promote human rights and protect innocent lives.

This was an important film because of its feminist perspective, its strong voice for human rights, and its resonance here in Canada, which is home to the world's largest Tamil community outside Sri Lanka. Like all communities who have migrated here, Tamil Canadians have brought with them their concerns about events taking place in their homeland. It is vital that Canadians understand the politics and social issues of Sri Lanka.

"Rajani had a vision for her people, the Sri Lankan Tamils. She envisioned a time when they would live in peace and dignity, enjoying democratic rights and freedoms. Standing against oppression and brutality in all its forms,

she is a beacon of light for a community living in fear and struggling for self-respect. She will never be forgotten and is an icon for everyone in Sri Lanka fighting for freedom.”

Helene's candid style of filmmaking accompanied by the interweaving of compelling personal narratives and complex political analysis makes the film unforgettable. Though set in Sri Lanka, Rajani's story has parallels in postcolonial societies around the world. She was part of a generation of political activists of the 1960s and '70s who dreamed of radically transforming their societies. Sadly, this idealism often fell victim to narrow nationalist agendas.

For years the government and rebels kept trying to bury the story of Rajani and only succeeded in having songs sung in her praise. In the midst of the ongoing conflict, Rajani's story constantly gives Sri Lankans a reason to affirm and celebrate themselves as a people. They should continue to do so in the name of peace and justice.

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[http://www.tamilweek.com/Rajani\\_Thiranagama.html](http://www.tamilweek.com/Rajani_Thiranagama.html)

Tamil Week  
May 5, 2005  
D. B.S. Jeyaraj



### **Rajani Thiranagama: A true heroine of our times**



More than fifteen years have passed since Rajani Thiranagama nee Rajani Rajasingham was brutally gunned down at Thirunelvely, Jaffna on September 21<sup>st</sup> 1989 as she was cycling back home from the Jaffna University. She was Professor of Anatomy at the Jaffna Varsity medical faculty. The 35 year old mother of two daughters was also a human rights activist, feminist, critic of narrow nationalism and opponent of irresponsible militarism. No one has officially claimed responsibility for her killing and several attempts have been made by those close to the perpetrators to deflect blame elsewhere. Despite these moves the people at large know who the killers were though not many dared to say it publicly.

A decade and a half however fails to erase the indelible memories of Rajani among those who knew her. Her brutal murder has not been forgotten. Whenever the human rights violations of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam are referred to in detail her name always crops up. Whenever the tragic plight of women caught up in Sri Lanka's long drawn out "Machismo" war is highlighted her murder is usually focussed upon. Whenever the story of the Tamil liberation struggle going terribly wrong is discussed the murder of Rajani Thiranagama is always an issue cited.

She was truly a heroine of our times and an unforgettable symbol of its enveloping tragedy. As former UN special rapporteur on violence against women and current chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy observes. "Rajani had a vision for her people, the Sri Lankan Tamils. She envisioned a time when they would live in peace and dignity enjoying democratic rights and freedoms. Standing against oppression and brutality in all its forms, she is a beacon of light for a community living in fear and struggling for self-respect. She will never be forgotten; an icon for everyone in Sri Lanka fighting for freedom.”

One agency that has remembered Rajani is the National Film Board of Canada. The land of the Maple leaf has made a name for itself in the realm of documentary films. "No More Tears Sister - the anatomy of hope and betrayal" is the title of an 80 minute film on the life and times of Rajani Thiranagama produced by the Canadian Film Board. It is written and directed by Montreal based Canadian film maker Helene Klodawsky. The narrator Michael Ondaatje the Sri Lanka born reputed author now domiciled in Canada. A novel feature in recreating the life of Rajani is the portrayal of her mother by Sharika the younger daughter now in her early twenties.

The Canadian feature documentary will have its world premiere at the Hot Docs International Documentary Film Festival being currently held in Toronto. "No More Tears Sister" will screen at 9.45 pm on April 26<sup>th</sup> at the Isabel Bader theatre and at 7.30 pm on April 28<sup>th</sup> at the Innis Town Hall.

Unlike most recreations of a contemporary personality the story of Rajani provided a stiff challenge for the filmmakers. There was very little documentation or authentic correspondence. Many of those who knew her or were associated with her were too scared to be filmed. Moreover filming in Jaffna where Rajani grew up, lived and died was out of the question because of the political climate. One also supposes that an element of secrecy had to be maintained at all times due to the sensitive content and theme of the film.

Despite these problems that would have defeated most film makers of Cinema verite Helen Klodawsky has accomplished her task well. She was fortunate that family members and a few fellow human rights activists and feminists were courageous enough to come out openly. Rajani's parents the Rajasinghams, sisters Nirmala, Sumathy and Vasuki, daughters Narmada and Sharika, husband Dayapala Thiranagama and some unnamed activists have all been interviewed and the life of Rajani unfolds on screen through their accounts mainly.

The vivid and perceptive comments made by Nirmala and Dayapala are the chief strengths of the film. The story of Rajani is inextricably intertwined with that of her elder sister Nirmala a political activist cum feminist in her own right. Rajani's story cannot be told without relating the story of Nirmala also. In that sense this film is as much about Nirmala as it is about Rajani. Nirmala has broken her long "public" silence on Rajani's death in this film. While not dwelt on forcefully the film leaves no doubt in the viewers mind about the forces behind Rajani's assassination.

Dayapala Thiranagama comes off very well. Both Rajani and he came from contrastingly different backgrounds. He provides many fresh insights into Rajani's life. The scenes showing Nirmala and Dayapala in conversation are illuminating. A revealing moment of truth for anyone familiar with the rise and fall of the Tamil liberation struggle would be the one where the comment is made that political activism is no longer the armed struggle but that of upholding human rights.

The story of Rajani is interwoven with the violence of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. What made Helen Klodawsky the daughter of a concentration camp survivor herself take up this tale? This is what she says – "I wanted to understand how ethnic conflict and national struggles impact women – be they victims of war, militant fighters or peace builders. I wondered whether there was a feminist critique of both state and guerrilla violence. It was well known that the Sri Lankan military and the opposition Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were both guilty of torture, illegal detention, disappearances and extra-judicial executions. I wanted to explore whether women were, on the one hand, torn between loyalties to their ethnic communities and on the other hand the community of women. Did oppressed minority women imagine fighting injustice in different ways than their male counterparts?

"The story of Rajani Thiranagama – her courageous life, unique vision and tragic assassination – offered a compelling narrative to pose many of my questions. Rajani's evolution into a spirited champion of the Tamil people's rights in the seventies and eighties paralleled the escalation of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Moved by her people's complex struggle against ruthless state violence, she believed Tamil militancy was the answer and joined the Liberation movement. But when she witnessed the corruption and cruelty within, she felt compelled to document what she saw and urged her people to resist blind adherence to any leader or movement. Embracing feminism and a belief in human rights, she felt that women in particular were the primary casualties of war.

"I believed that by following Rajani's life story and the circumstances surrounding her untimely death, several themes could be explored. Nationalisms anti-nationalism; the lives of women as both participants and innocent victims of war and the belief in armed struggle vs. a critique of militarism.

"Though "No More Tears" is set in Sri Lanka, a similar story might have been explored in Africa, other parts of Asia, the middle-east, Eastern Europe or Latin America. In the sixties and seventies, Rajani was part of a

generation of young political activists in post-colonial societies around the world – activists who dreamed of radically transforming their societies to achieve equality and justice for all. But this idealism continues to be ruthlessly thwarted by narrow nationalist agendas in countless countries.

“Cinematically, I wanted NO MORE TEARS SISTER to reflect the passion and beauty of Rajani's ideals. Together with my talented team including Francois Dagenais (director of photography) Patricia Tassinari (Editor) and Bertrand Chenier (Composer) I aimed at making a film that is political, feminist and aesthetic.”

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<http://www.thehindu.com/2005/05/04/stories/2005050404401100.htm>

The Hindu  
May 4, 2005  
Nirupama Subramanian



### **From killing to killing**

*Sri Lankan Tamils must debate how to stop retributive killings in the community, not who's next.*

"ONE DAY some gun will silence me and it will not be held by an outsider but by the son born in the womb of this very society, from a woman with whom my history is shared," wrote Rajani Thiranagama in 1989, a few months before she was killed in Jaffna, northern Sri Lanka.

As those who knew journalist Dharmaretnam Sivaram, or knew of him, mourn his brutal death last week, the words of the 35-year-old doctor, teacher in the medical faculty of Jaffna University and committed human rights campaigner seem prescient not only of her own end, but of all the other victims of the cycle of intolerance, killing, and revenge that is the distinguishing hallmark of Sri Lankan Tamil politics.

[...]

It is telling that the first attempt to piece together Thiranagama's life and death has been made not by a Tamil, but by a Canadian film-maker. Helene Klodawsky's *No More Tears Sister*, sponsored by the National Film Board of Canada, was screened last week at the Canadian International Documentary Festival in Toronto (this writer saw it by arrangement in Chennai). The film, based mainly on interviews with members of Thiranagama's family and on archival material, and narrated by the Sri Lankan-Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje, vividly captures Thiranagama's transformation from a sympathiser of the Tigers' cause to one of its fiercest critics. Sivaram's death makes the film all the more important.

Following Thiranagama's killing, Jaffna saw a few protests but they quickly fizzled out when the LTTE began contacting participants individually, asking them to pipe down.

As the documentary notes, those were the last spontaneous instances of free expression in northern Sri Lanka.

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### Film puts human face on Tamil Tiger tragedy

TORONTO (CP) -- In 1989, a young professor who headed the anatomy department at the University of Jaffna in Sri Lanka was killed while riding her bike home after grading exams.

[...]

"I think this film and the story of Rajani (touches on) many generic issues about human rights, about justice, about armed violence. They are not exclusive to Sri Lanka," said the older sister, Nirmala Rajasingam, in a telephone interview.

[...]

Rajasingam, who was also once a pivotal figure in the LTTE movement, has so far made her killing accusations only at small gatherings. This is the first time she has come out so publicly. The Tigers have never claimed responsibility for the murder and no one has been charged, she noted.

Because of her accusations, the NFB has taken a number of precautions, such as keeping the project quiet during its two years in production and not giving out information about where Thiranagama's family currently lives. In fact, the Film Board is becoming somewhat expert in maintaining security surrounding controversial documentaries, particularly after last year's premiere of *What Remains of Us*, a documentary that directly puts some Tibetans at risk of imprisonment.

Security concerns are nothing new to Thiranagama's family. Rajasingam, for instance, can no longer return to Jaffna because of worries about her safety. "I'm not underground, but I'm being very cautious about where I go, what I say, who I meet, that sort of thing. Once the film is shown, I'll have to take greater precautions," she said.

"We as a family and myself personally, we made a very conscious decision to go public about the killing of Rajani. We thought long and hard about it. It was our decision. We were ready to tell the story, because really the whole discussion about Rajani's murder wasn't a closed chapter," Rajasingam said.

The NFB film was shot with the full co-operation of the family, although family members did not have the final say in its content, said Helene Klodawsky, the director of *No More Tears Sister*. The documentary has been endorsed by a host of notables including former Ontario premier Bob Rae and former United Nations special rapporteur on violence against women, Radhika Coomaraswamy. It is narrated by Michael Ondaatje.

Rajasingam, who talks at one point in the film about how she feels responsible in some ways for what happened to Thiranagama, is careful to add that she is the one making the film's main accusations, not the other family members.

But what unfolds in the documentary is not just a story of how a family got caught up in armed rebellion. It's a far more complicated story of how Rajasingam, the older sister, was buoyed by 1970s leftist radicalism and early insurrections in the country. She wound up becoming involved with the Tigers and was imprisoned by the state. Thiranagama had also become a strong supporter of leftist causes while in medical school. Her husband was a Sinhalese radical who could not bring himself to support the Tigers. This ultimately tore their marriage apart.

[...]

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### A human face on Tiger tragedy

**The provocative NFB documentary *No More Tears Sister* looks at how Rajani Thiranagama became caught up in the explosive world of Sri Lankan politics, writes GUY DIXON**

In 1989, a young professor, Rajani Thiranagama, head of the anatomy department at the University of Jaffna in Sri Lanka, was killed while riding her bike home after grading exams.

Once a supporter of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the LTTE or more popularly known as the Tamil Tigers), she left the movement and, under extreme risk, began collecting evidence of human-rights tragedies suffered by Tamils at the hands of both Tamil insurgents and government-aligned forces. Her murder has made her the face of the underground human-rights movement in the region.

Now, nearly 16 years later, in the National Film Board of Canada documentary *No More Tears Sister*, her older sister alleges that LTTE insiders told her privately that Thiranagama was killed because she was undermining their independence struggle. Local protests condemning her death were crushed and their organizers threatened and killed, according to the film. Human-rights reporting in the region, as in so many conflicts worldwide, became an increasingly clandestine act.



"I think this film and the story of Rajani [touches on] many generic issues about human rights, about justice, about armed violence. They are not exclusive to Sri Lanka," said the older sister, Nirmala Rajasingam, in a telephone interview.

Both she and the documentary's director emphasized that blame for human-rights abuses should be placed on all sides of the conflict, including the Sri Lankan army and the years of repression by the Sinhalese-dominated government which helped to spark the Tamil fighting (to say nothing of the initial tensions between Sinhalese and Tamils caused by British colonial policies which were perceived as favouring certain Tamil groups).

Rajasingam, who was also once a pivotal figure in the LTTE movement, has so far accused the Tigers of killing her sister only at small gatherings. This is the first time she has come out so publicly. The Tigers have never claimed responsibility for the murder and no one has been charged, she noted.

Because of her accusations, the NFB has taken a number of precautions, such as keeping the project quiet during its two years in production and not giving out information about where Thiranagama's family currently lives. In fact, the Film Board is becoming somewhat expert in maintaining security surrounding controversial documentaries, particularly after last year's premiere of *What Remains of Us*, a documentary that directly puts some Tibetans at risk of imprisonment.

Security concerns are nothing new to Thiranagama's family. Rajasingam, for instance, can no longer return to Jaffna because of worries about her safety. "I'm not underground, but I'm being very cautious about where I go, what I say, who I meet, that sort of thing. Once the film is shown, I'll have to take greater precautions," she said. She won't be attending today's premiere at the Hot Docs festival in Toronto, which has a thriving Tamil community with varying views on the nationalist struggle.

"We as a family and myself personally, we made a very conscious decision to go public about the killing of Rajani. We thought long and hard about it. It was our decision. We were ready to tell the story, because really the whole discussion about Rajani's murder wasn't a closed chapter," Rajasingam said.

There has been at least one other film about Thiranagama made in Sri Lanka, but without the family's involvement. The family hated it, said Helene Klodawsky, the director of *No More Tears Sister*. The NFB film was shot with the full co-operation of the family, although family members did not have the final say in its content, Klodawsky emphasized. The documentary has been endorsed by a host of notables including former Ontario premier Bob Rae and former United Nations special rapporteur on violence against women, Radhika Coomaraswamy. It is narrated by Michael Ondaatje.

Rajasingam, who talks at one point in the film about how she feels responsible in some ways for what happened to Thiranagama, is careful to add that *she* is the one making the film's main accusations, not the other family members.



But what unfolds in the documentary is not just a story of how a family got caught up in armed rebellion. It's a far more complicated story of how Rajasingam, the older sister, was buoyed by 1970s leftist radicalism and early insurrections in the country. She wound up becoming involved with the Tigers and was imprisoned by the state. Thiranagama had also become a strong supporter of leftist causes while in medical school. Her husband was a Sinhalese radical who could not bring himself to support the Tigers. This ultimately tore their marriage apart.

While studying in Britain, Thiranagama made her sister's imprisonment into an international cause, which in turn provided an important boost for the LTTE movement.

But the more the sisters were drawn into the Tigers, the more they began to question the armed struggle, particularly as fighting between nationalists and Indian peacekeeping forces escalated in the late 1980s. By then, the sisters had quit the LTTE. After another stint in Britain, Thiranagama returned to Jaffna to reopen the anatomy department at the university, while also working to document human-rights abuses perpetrated by all sides of the fighting. She was then murdered.

As the film shows, those who are left behind to brave the fighting, most often women and children, change armed struggles into multifaceted, humanitarian crises. What often lingers is a fearful silence, which perhaps only a foreign documentary can help pierce: At least that's what some from the Sri Lankan community have said after attending early screenings of the documentary, according to Klodawsky, the film's director.

"One man described it in a very moving way, 'We're surrounded by barbed wire. Our houses are not surrounded. The barbed wire is around our minds,' " Klodawsky said. "So, on the one hand, there was a very strong desire to see this film made. On the other hand, people could not talk [on camera]."

Filming the documentary was very intense for the family, and one of Thiranagama's daughters even plays her mother in a number of re-enactments. This is a family which describes itself as very ordinary and middle class. The father had been a schoolteacher and administrator. Education was stressed. The daughters read Jane Austen and George Bernard Shaw and sang Christian spirituals (which the remaining sisters sing again in harmony in an opening scene in the film when they are reunited in Colombo). But after Thiranagama and Rajasingam's radical student days and subsequent activism, the family has had to get used to being in the political crossfire.

Sri Lanka is in "a really bad and very dark period," Rajasingam said. Atrocities continue and dissidents are increasingly being targeted, while Tamils receive little protection from the state, the film notes. It's as if they aren't considered citizens, Rajasingam added. "The state has kind of washed its hands and doesn't appear to be serious about ultimately achieving a soon-enough political solution," she insisted. "It is in this climate that this film is coming out."

The hope among those involved with *No More Tears Sister* is that it will encourage others to speak. "Now, even though killings are continuing at a very high rate, other voices are cropping up, inspired by the [human-rights movement's] long and arduous, very insistent, courageous work," Rajasingam said. "Rajani remains an inspiration. They keep her memory alive."

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Toronto Star  
April 22, 2005  
Geoff Pevere



### The facts' fascinating faces

**No More Tears, Sister (Helene Klodawsky, Canada):**

In 1989, Sri Lankan human rights activist Dr. Rajani Thiranagama was murdered. Klodawsky's film traces both Thiranagama's life and the simmering political forces that would eventually prove fatal to her. The film paints a poignant portrait of a woman who must have known what the eventual cost of her beliefs would be.

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Eye Weekly  
April 21, 2005  
Andrew Braithwaite



### Documenting the documentaries

**CANADIAN SPECTRUM**

**PREMIERE – NO MORE TEARS SISTER: ANATOMY OF HOPE AND BETRAYAL ★★★★★**

Dir Helene Klodawsky. 80 min. Apr 26, 9:45pm. Isabel Bader; Apr 28, 7:30pm. Innis Town Hall.

Director Helene Klodawsky tells the story of Dr. Rajani Thiranagama, a renowned Sri Lankan human rights activist who joined the Tamil Tigers as a young doctor and was assassinated after straying from the ideological herd. The film examines the roots of Sri Lanka's long and violent ethnic conflict as Rajani's family recounts the courage and commitment of a woman who was at once a freedom fighter, teacher, daughter, sister, wife and mother. A beautifully shot, beautifully produced film.

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# NO MORE TEARS SISTER

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## CREDITS

**Written and directed by**  
HELENE KLODAWSKY

**Editor**  
PATRICIA TASSINARI

**Director of photography**  
FRANÇOIS DAGENAIS

**In the role of Rajani Thiranagama**  
SHARIKA THIRANAGAMA

**Sound design**  
LOUIS DUPIRE

**Music composed by**  
BERTRAND CHÉNIER

**Musicians**  
BERTRAND CHÉNIER  
JULIE TRUDEAU  
CATY ELISABETH

**Tamil songs performed by**  
NIRMALA, SUMATHY, VASUKI AND SHARIKA

**Sound recording**  
SYLVAIN VARI

**Foley artist**  
CHRIS PIGGINS

**Assistant camera**  
CHRISTIAN NAVENNEC

**Producer – Development**  
YVES BISAILLON

**Production manager**  
JELENA POPOVIC

### Production team in Sri Lanka

**Associate producer in Sri Lanka:** DHARMASENA PATHIRAJA

**Assistant director:** ELMO HALLIDAY

**Art director:** LAL HARINDRANATH

**Assistant art director:** PATRICK DAVID

**Location manager:** LIONAL WICKRAMA

**Production coordinator:** WIMAL HALANGOD

**Equipment:** MACLEAR FILM PRODUCTIONS VISION WORKS

**Props**

MARY LYNN DEACHMAN

**Graphic artist**

MARGARET MANKIN

**2D Computer graphics**

BENOÎT CHAGNON

PIERRE LANDRY

LOUISE OVERY

**Digital editing technician**

OHELLE GREENIDGE

**On-line technician**

SYLVAIN DESBIENS

DENIS GATHELIER

**Marketing manager**

MOIRA KEIGHER

**Line producer**

JOHANNE BERGERON

**Producer**

PIERRE LAPOINTE

**Executive producer**

SALLY BOCHNER



[www.nfb.ca](http://www.nfb.ca)

**NO MORE TEARS SISTER**  
**ANATOMY OF HOPE AND BETRAYAL**

Quebec Centre – English Program  
NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA

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