Caring for the Environment: Resistance in the Plantationocene[1]

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Introduction

In this study, I used a feminist ethnographic methodology focused on a single case study of the Monaragala District in the Uva Province of Sri Lanka in the Plantationocene. It is informed by my long-term engagement with women farmers and activists in the district. The farming communities in this study represented the majority ethnicity, the Sinhalese rural community in the three villages, Wellawaya, Pelwatte, and Okkampitiya. The research site was not completely unfamiliar to me. The villages were Sinhala Buddhists from the same ethnic and religious backgrounds as me, we spoke the same language and identified as part of the same nation-state. However, there were differences in our socioeconomic status. While the Monaragala women embraced the idea of sisterhood and included me in their care networks, they identified me as an outsider from the urban capital.

I argue that caring for the environment is foregrounded as a priority in women's livelihood activities in rural agrarian communities in Sri Lanka affected by the spread of agro-industry following economic liberalisation in 1977, under the neoliberal economic reforms. I examine how women resist the impacts of the neoliberal market economy through care for the environment, which is demonstrated mainly through their agroecological farming practices.

Care for the Environment: The approaches

I define the concept of Care as a range of relationships and purposes between citizens and their environments, taking into account 'the concerns and the needs of others' (Tronto 103). Inspired by the work of Puig de la Bellacasa (4) and Tronto (105–108), I identify 'care' as a range of relationships and purposes that involve several interconnected phases of caring about, taking care of, caregiving, and care-receiving.

The concept of care is also associated with the ethics of care in women's everyday practices, economic activities, and other areas. This article also defines care as an everyday practice, a protective approach to the environment and a form of building solidarity among women in their activism in Monaragala. The 'moral and political value of care work' and the various forms of labour involved in care broaden the traditional understanding of women's care work by expanding and challenging that notion (Puig de la Bellacasa 2). The everyday acts of care undertaken by the women have contributed to their individual and community development and well-being (Barbagallo and Federici 4-6). The ethics of care, connected with the concept of 'care', is defined in this article as the mutuality and respect that

characterise care relationships based on connectedness or interdependence (Gilligan 173-174; Warren 613).

'Care' and 'ethics of care' are not just human matters but also applicable to human-non-human relations (Puig de la Bellacasa 2; Haraway 161-162; Chao 12, 208). This article also builds on Tronto and Fischer's definition of care as:

> a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Tronto 103)

The Environmental Impacts of the Sugar Industry

The implementation of neoliberal development policies in the 1970s and 1980s, coinciding with the green revolution, led to agrarian change worldwide. This change was characterised by the mechanisation of production processes and the promotion of foreign direct investment and competition. In Sri Lanka, this new wave of agricultural modernisation was introduced in the early 1980s after the liberalisation of the economy in 1977 (Shanmugaratnam 72-73).

Agriculture Processing Zones (APZs) were established in 1982 as part of this development drive to facilitate export-oriented agri-businesses (Shanmugaratnam 73-75; Karunan 124). With the government's endorsement, the private sector and multinational companies were granted incentives to invest in agriculture, attracting foreign funding to the country (Dunham and Abeyasekera 5-6; Shanmugaratnam 73).

Foreign Direct Investment was introduced to Monaragala in 1982 with Booker International (UK) cultivating sugar cane in Pelwatte and investing in the Pelwatte Sugar Company (PSC). This was followed by Metha International's (India) acquisition of land for the same industry (Abeyesekera 6; Karunan 134). Thus, PSC, which was initially a foreign-run multinational company, has, over time, become state-owned in 2011(Ministry of Finance 9).

While acknowledging the colonial history of the introduction of a plantation economy in Sri Lanka during the British rule from 1815-1948, this paper identifies the spread of the sugar industry, using the green revolution technologies and agro-estates run by agro-companies in the Monaragala district in the post-liberalised era as in the Plantationocene. Plantationocene refers to the current era with unprecedented impacts by the expanding agro-industries (Chao 228). Haraway uses the Plantationocene, a term collectively generated by anthropologists, to refer to the devastating impacts of transforming human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into enclosed plantations that are extractive and labour-exploitative (162).

The introduction of the sugar industry in the 1980s had significant impacts on the local agrarian community in general in the Monaragala district, with particular repercussions on women's livelihoods, the environment and the ecosystem (Gunawardena 222-223; Abeyesekara 6). These included land dispossessions, access to livelihoods, the proletarianisation of labour, environmental degradation, an increase in the chronic kidney disease of an unknown aetiology (CKDu) and the human-elephant conflict in the district. Commercial sugar production also led to undermining women's role and agency, both within the household and society, resulting from the loss of land and livelihoods (Gunawardena 241). When PSC was established, similar to other land resettlement programmes in Sri Lanka at that time, primary agricultural activities and ownership of resources were allocated to men (Gunawardena 376). Hence, it is mostly men who identify as sugar cane farmers. Although the focus of this paper is on women's care work, I have used data from two male sugar cane farmers who were there since the 1980s to examine the temporal environmental impact of the industry.

Fig 1: Sugar plantations in Pelwatte under the PSC

The environment was a prime casualty in this agrarian modernisation project; an instance being when Mehta International cleared the prime forest land known as *Haddawa* for sugar cane cultivation in 1984. With the destruction to *Haddawa*, the region's ecological balance was threatened as it was a main source of groundwater (Abeyesekera 6; Karunan 135). Women also depended on the forests for their subsistence needs, such as access to chena (slash-and-burn cultivation) and wood for fuel. Further, the changes in the ecology led to the

destruction of fruit and vegetable trees such as coconut, lime, banana, mango, papaya, breadfruit and jackfruit trees, which in turn had negative impacts on women's subsistence agriculture and the subsistence economy (Abeysekera 6). These reasons led to protests against the sugar industry in the 1980s (Abeyesekera 6; Karunan 135).

Forests such as *Haddawa* are biophysical commons, a property shared by the community. The community economies scholars[2] identify an intimate interconnection between the community and the commons and that the 'loss of a commons is a loss of a community' (Cameron et al. 130-131). They further note that the *care and responsibility* for the commons rests with the community (Cameron et al. 132), and that Commoning, which is the process of 'production and reproduction of commons', is also a key responsibility of community economics (Cameron et al. 138).

Federici (3) identifies the new forms of enclosure, such as the expropriation of land in the global south, as the 'backbone of the globalisation of capital' which had led to the 'emergence of the politics of the commons.' She further notes that these types of enclosures are new forms of primitive accumulation and contribute to privatisation and commodification of property, especially Indigenous lands, which were important to human sustenance (14-15), and that in the present day 'the principle of the commons' plays the role of guaranteeing people's economic survival, social agency and solidarity (14).

Maintaining a forest includes an ethic of care, protecting 'what nourishes and sustains people and the planet both now and into the future' (Cameron et al. 138). Sugar cane cultivation was a new form of enclosure for the villagers. In my discussions with them, which took place years after the introduction of the sugar industry to the district, they complained that water scarcity in the area was attributable to the land clearing undertaken by the sugar industry and bulldozing of 100 small water tanks (*wewas*) to make the land available for sugar cultivation in the 1980s.

> In '85, '86, '87, '88 and '89, there was water in the ground... *At that time, we used to dig small holes and wash our knives.* Water was available in abundance, but now it is not the same. We cannot grow any green leaves…or anything anymore... Because there is no water and rain due to the lack of trees... People cut down trees, and when Pelwatte started, they [bull]dozed the land. It is like a desert beyond this area. (Sujatha, a sugar cane cultivator, 16.07.2019, Pelwatte)

Wewas are a unique ancient human made irrigation infrastructure to collect water. These are reservoirs referred to as tanks in Sri Lanka. Small tanks were part of a cascade of tanks and were used in the distribution of water for agriculture and subsistence (Geekiyanage & Pushpakumara 93).

Fig 2: sugarcane cultivations: a partially harvested cultivation (left), and bulldozing land (right) for new cultivation

The sugar industry in Sri Lanka is highly dependent on agrochemicals. In recent years, chronic kidney disease of unknown aetiology (CKDu) has spread in the district, and even though the causes are unknown, agrochemicals are one of the many causes associated with CKDu, and it is prevalent in agrarian communities where agrochemicals, including pesticides, are commonly used (Jayatilake et al. 11; Pett et al. 242). Women activists associate this with the unregulated use of agrochemicals in sugar and paddy cultivation in the area (Padmasiri 30). Studies suggest various factors that could contribute to CKDu, including agrichemicals, groundwater contamination, heavy metal exposure, fungal and bacterial toxins, and dehydration (Senanayake1970). Ajith, a sugar cane cultivator, explained the connection between agrochemicals and kidney disease:

> Some people use chemical-based fertilisers, such as urea and glyphosate. All that gets accumulated in the water…They are added even for intercrops, such as snake gourd and chillies. Sugarcane farmers spray a specific type of oil every other day…I think it is because of that people tend to develop kidney-related diseases…Around 10 to 12 people die annually from kidney disease. (16.07.2019 Pelwatte)

Commons are not just consumed by people but are maintained alongside other species (Cameron et al. 137). The loss of land and food sources also led to elephants attacking the crops and entering villages, which increased over time and which the villagers associated with the introduction of the sugar industry.

The human-elephant conflict has worsened due to forest clearing and water scarcity. When I visited in 2023, there were more elephant attacks than in 2022, and every night, firecrackers were lit elsewhere in the village to chase them away. On two occasions, the elephants came to my host's garden while I was there. In her interview, Sujatha noted:

> At that time [in the early 1980s], not much harm came from the elephants. When you lit the torch, they left. However, now, if you light the torch, they will end up

> trampling your body. Because they have got used to it, they are no longer afraid. If we throw a cracker (*batta*), they will step on it before it explodes. (16.07.2019 in Pelwatte)

Sampath, a first-generation sugar cane farmer from Wellawaya, reflected on the temporal impacts of the sugarcane industry on the environment and people's lives. In explaining the environmental impacts caused by the sugar industry, Sampath shared, 'Everything that was there to happen happened. There was no rain. Trees and plants wilted and died… Then, there was no water, and next numerous elephant threats started' (15.07.2019, Wellawaya).

Sampath also confirmed the consequences of the sugar industry on the animals, explaining that the human-elephant conflict has increased since the sugar industry was introduced. He shared that they, too, are suffering, saying:

> Even those animals [elephants] have nothing to eat or drink, so they come here looking for food…These lands belong to them... Dole Lanka [an agri-company] has entirely bulldozed sections from the *Yala* [a national park and reserve land] and planted Banana trees… (15.07.2019 Wellawaya)

Today, forty years since the introduction of the sugar industry, the Monaragala economy is complex and contradictory, with the addition of newer monocultural agrarian producers such as the foreign-owned Dole Lanka (Pvt) Ltd[3] and local companies such as Nelna, CIC, KST Evergreen, Five Star and Fortune existing alongside the PSC (a Government Officer, 16.08.2022, Monaragala). Besides these, villagers are engaged in paddy cultivation, commercial sugar cane, fruit, and vegetable cultivation, and they predominantly depend on agrochemicals. Women, however, engage mainly in subsistence agriculture in home gardens and chena cultivation, which are organic.

Fig. 3: Large-scale Mango and Banana Plantations in the Monaragala District

Why do women react and respond?

In 2019, I interviewed a woman, a single mother with two kids, who had lost both her parents and sister to kidney disease. It had only been three months since her mother's passing. Both parents had worked at the Pelwatte sugar company and sprayed agrochemicals on sugarcane plants. I still remember her demeanour: a sombre voice throughout the conversation, and she continued rubbing her thumbs. After the interview, she just got up and walked away. In her interview, she said, "I am alone", reflecting how isolated she feels without her family.

During my fieldwork amid the economic crisis, I met Sadeesha, a subsistence farmer who described her struggle in sourcing filtered water for her sick child during the economic crisis. She shared:

> We use water from the well, but for my son, I have to get filtered water…We bring about 40-45 litres each week… However, now, with the fuel crisis, I cannot even buy water, as there is no fuel for the bike [for transportation] … So, every day, I go from house to house asking for filtered water and collecting it into bottles… There are two houses nearby with filters, and I get around 5L of filtered water from them... but this is not enough… He needs a lot of water daily… A filter is around LKR 45,000-50,000, and we cannot afford that...also, I could not take him to the clinic last time because we did not have money…as there is no clinic here for him. I have to take him to the Teaching Hospital in Peradeniya [around 200km from where they live]… It cost around LKR 5000 for a trip those days, but now, even if we take the public transport bus, it is much more expensive… (17.7.2022, Wellawaya)

The above incidents made me realise why women are challenging the use of agrochemicals through agroecological cultivation to fight against the spread of CKDu. In instances where the family members fall ill, an additional responsibility of care falls on the women to nurse the ill, in addition to meeting the family's financial and health needs.

Agroecological Farming

As elsewhere, the Sri Lankan people's connection with the environment is multidimensional. Today, women who engage in subsistence agriculture try to mitigate the negative impacts of living in the Plantationocene by engaging in diverse forms of agroecological farming. While conducting my in-person research in Monaragala in 2022 and 2023, I witnessed women building a new connection with the environment through agroecological farming.

Agroecological farming is a conscious decision made by the women of Monaragala. These are diverse economic activities and socially responsible ways of commodity production

through non-capitalist means, as identified by Gibson-Graham, who further identify the economy as 'a site of ethical action' (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 1-2). When I asked why they engaged in organic farming, the Monaragala women shared several reasons, including providing their families with nutritious food free of chemicals 2and pesticides, protecting the environment and fighting CKDu.

> There were food safety concerns due to the use of chemical fertilisers. We started to notice so many harmful effects due to that. There was an increased number of kidney patients. So, we encourage them [women] to grow their crops so they will not spray poisonous fertilisers onto their garden. Instead, we make compost, vitamins, etc. (Priyani, an activist, 4.09.2022, Okkampitiya)

For these women, agriculture extends beyond mere food production to include the protection of the environment and ecology, which is evident in their practices of pest control, seed preservation, land clearing, and careful water consumption. For example, my host collected the water after washing dishes and used it to water her vegetable patch and fruit trees. I witnessed women use *kem krama* (*kem* practices), an Indigenous system of healing and protection (Welenegoda 01), and Indigenous knowledge in their agriculture, targeted at pest control and obtaining a good harvest. *Kem* practices are used in treating illnesses and in agriculture and at some points, there is a connection with auspicious times and religious practices. This knowledge is not readily available and instead is passed from generation to generation (Abeysekara et al. 07; Abeywardana et al. 910; Welenegoda 01). These *kem* practices align with the permaculture practices envisioned by Puig de la Bellacasa as 'everyday ecological doings with a feminist notion of care,' which 'displaces bio-political moralities,' contributing to envisioning *alterbiopolitics* (22). Puig de la Bellacasa (22) uses the concept of *alterbiopolitics* to propose an approach to a natural-cultural ethics of care in permaculture practices.

Fig. 4: Women's agroecological cultivations, mixed crops, okra and peanuts

Every morning during my fieldwork, Rupa collected the leaves that had fallen under the trees and piled them up for mulching. She later laid a layer of these leaves on her vegetable patch, covering the ground to retain the moisture (field notes, 22.07.2022). Monaragala has a dry

climate, and such practices are important to ensure a good cultivation. This practice enables a healthy environment for the microbes to grow, and the leaves eventually become compost, fertilising the soil. Rupa's actions reflect the ethics embedded in her nurturing actions of treating the soil and plants, and her engagement with the environment, avoiding outside agrochemicals for this function.

Similarly, I witnessed farmers lay perches for birds, using dried coconut fronds or a coconut husk attached to a stick in the paddy fields. The birds perch on them and eat the worms, flies and other pests on the ground, thus managing the ecosystem. In *chena* cultivation, the farmers would first chase away the animals before setting fire to the land. For example, I once witnessed farmers chanting a mantra requesting the animals to leave before they set the fire. Rupa, a *kem* practitioner and a trainer in ecological farming, shared some practices with me on increasing the yield of a mango tree and producing healthy fruit. A specific farmer's almanac provides auspicious times and dates for engaging in agrarian activities with the belief that it will provide a good harvest. It includes times associated with *kem* practices calculated to avoid crop and harvest damage. Rupa always referred to this almanac to avoid inauspicious times for cultivation (referred to as *karana*). She avoided times associated with prey animals, such as that of the monkey in the almanac. Instead, she selected times identified with predators, such as leopards and lions, so pests would not attack the cultivation. In her garden, Leela avoided planting the same type of plants close to one another to confuse any flies attracted to the plants, and avoid damage to the crops. Although the land may look underutilised, according to *kem* practices, the space between plants protects them from pests.

Traditional Indigenous knowledge was also used to preserve seeds in both Wellawaya and Okkampitiya villages. The women's organisation in Wellawaya had established a seed bank at one of their societies where they dried and stored the seeds in pots and bottle gourds at auspicious times. This process involves drying the seeds and treating the vessels—applying neem paste, clay and cow dung to protect the seeds from insects (Rupa, 6.09.2022). These practices are connected with *kem* practices and again, were conducted by referring to the farmer's almanac. Rupa also shared that she stores the seeds on the day of a new moon (*masa* p*oya dawasak*). When I asked why, she said '…maybe with the belief that animals cannot see properly with no light and so the seeds will be protected' (Rupa, 3.04.2022 in Wellawaya). Currently, they also use plastic bottles instead of traditional pots and vessels made of bottle gourds. Women maintained seed banks to share their seeds with others in their community and preserved them for the following seasons. In the seed bank system, this preservative method reduces the necessity to buy seeds produced by agro-companies. The seed banks were also promoted by agroecological farmers in Sri Lanka against the draft *Seed and Planting Material Act* in 2014.

Fig. 5: Seed bank maintained by women in Okkampitiya and Wellawaya (top), and a photo of seed sharing among women in Wellawaya (bottom)

Producing organic fertiliser was part of agroecological farming, and the women did this either collectively or on their own. Organic fertiliser was made in several ways: compost and liquid fertilisers, which women referred to as 'tonics', using fruit, fish bone, and compost.

> One of our members is getting black-eyed peas and chickpeas in kilos. She does not use chemicals. The fruit tonic is to get more flowers. Some people think you cannot do anything without chemicals. We must change those attitudes. (Priyani)

Likewise, Lakmini, a subsistence farmer, shared the following on organic fertiliser use:

> Yes, it was good that there were no chemical fertilisers (*beheth*), only compost. We made it ourselves. They were pleased with our fertilisers. Even for Yala [annual second season of cultivation], it was really good. We do not use Urea, only compost… I can make liquid fertilisers… (4.09.2022, Okkampitiya)

In July 2023, I witnessed Rupa collecting rotten papaya from vendors and friends and making what she called the fruit tonic. For this, they avoided using citrus and fruits with a sour element. During Christmas break in 2023, when I visited her, she showed me her cultivation, explaining how she planted these crops at the auspicious time associated with the Leopard and how she nurtured and cared for the plants.

Fig. 6: Rupa's cultivation and the Farmers' Almanac 2023, which she referred to for planting the seeds

The women chose to protect the environment, keeping nutrition and the well-being of the people at heart. They were resisting the easy and common practice of using agrochemicals, which is continued in paddy cultivation and commercial agriculture in the same area and by men in their own families.

As demonstrated above, women's practices are examples of caring as they intend the least harm to the environment, preserving and protecting it. 'Care' was the crux of their farming. The environmentally sound way of cultivation is a form of connecting women with the environment. Initially, women protested the introduction of the sugar industry as it threatened the environment and livelihoods (Abeyesekera 6; Karunan 135). After the industry was established, women continued their cultivation, not by the terms of capitalism but with an ethic of care, resisting the mainstream neoliberal practices established since the green revolution.

Dealing with the Loss of Cultivation

Another instance where I witnessed women's connection with the environment was in how they expressed the loss of their cultivation due to crop damage. For a plant to fruit, it takes much care and nurturing, which includes watering, fertilising, pruning, and protection from weather and pests.

In most home gardens I visited, old saris or mosquito nets were draped around the plants to protect them from peacocks. Some women had vegetable patches with wired frames, making a protective cage around the plants.

Fig. 7: Covering crops to protect them from animal attacks

When animals or rain damaged these plants, the women showed multiple emotions. Amidst anger and frustration, there was also mourning for the lost plants. I often witnessed women just leaving the crops as they were, without clearing them after the elephant had trampled the plants. I felt this was because they needed to come to terms with their loss; the plants they nurtured, and the harvest. The following vignettes are from my field notes, where I experienced this connection between a farmer and her lost crops in Wellawaya.

> We went to Karuna's place to drop her off. We parked the car on the road and got out near the pond full of lilies. While I was enjoying the view, Karuna came and said, 'It was through here; they [*eyala*] came.' I looked at her and asked, 'They?' She said yes, the elephants…When we were about to leave her place, she asked, 'Will you not see what *they* did?'

The choice of the word used was interesting. *Eyala [eja:la:] (they)* is used normally in reference to humans instead of *Un [u:n] (it)*, which is used in reference to animals.

> Elephants destroyed her cultivation two days back, but she had not cleared the damaged area. The uprooted coconut trees and the banana plants were left as they were on the ground. There were some banana trees with bunches of fruit,

> and one with mature fruit that would ripen soon. She had not even cut it… Instead, she walked around the plants, explaining how she cared for them, showing what the elephants had done and mourning her loss. She wanted us to see the damage. While leaving her place, Leela shouted aloud from the road, asking her to cut the mature bunch of bananas and take them in before bats got to it.
>
> When Karuna spoke, I felt the sadness in her voice. She always gave me a comb of bananas to take home, but this time, she had nothing to offer. When I returned home two days later, Leela called in a sombre voice and said, '*Nangi* (younger sister) elephants came and ate all the mangoes.' She was mourning the loss of her harvest. However, on previous occasions, I saw Leela mourning the loss of trees, the lime tree that fell after a storm and a *Kundira* (a miniature coconut species) tree that was destroyed by bugs. (Compilation of field notes 8.01.2024)

In a later conversation, Karuna said that elephants come to the village because they do not have places to go, as people have invaded their land. As mentioned above, the increase in the human elephant conflict was also connected with the introduction of the agro-industry. However, in her contemplation, Karuna also considered the elephant's plight and vulnerability.

After witnessing these events, I reflected on the connection between women and their nurturing of plants, land and the relationships with animals using the ideas about making "kin" from Donna Haraway's work, where she encourages us to think about kin relationships more broadly, expanding across species lines beyond ancestry or genealogy (161-162). Similarly, it was as if the Monaragala women had extended their kinship relations beyond humans in how they engaged with their cultivation, nurturing and grieving their loss.

Conclusion

The idea behind the practices executed by women in Monaragala has much to do with protecting the harvest and the environment, underscored by practices such as seed preservation and organic fertiliser use. These are aimed at mitigating the negative impacts of living in the Plantationocene. I identify these acts—countering the predominant agrochemical-based cultivation promoted by the government since the 1960s, being influenced by the green revolution, and administering agroecological practices which involve using organic seeds, fertiliser and kem practices, and caring for the environment, including crops and animals—as a means of resistance. These acts are the resilient ways women adapt to change and survive in the Plantationocene. These women resist the neo-liberal market economy by going against the predominant practices promoted by the state and market

economies, looking instead to the health and well-being of their families and the environment. For the women, agroecological farming is a non-capitalist way of dealing with nature and the environment. Their connection with their cultivation includes caring for the environment and extends beyond their human kin relationships.

NOTES

1. The insights in this paper are derived from field research in Wellawaya and Pelwatte in the Monaragala District in July 2019, and from my PhD field research in 2022 and 2023 in the Wellawaya and Okkampitiya areas. To protect the anonymity of my interlocutors, I am using pseudonyms in this paper.
2. A collective of researchers inspired by the work of Gibson-Graham and is interested in studying new ways of conducting economies and economic activities.
3. Dole Lanka is a part of Dole Asia Holdings (Pvt) Ltd in Singapore (Economynext).

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