

Canadian Media and Refugees: The Representation of Tamil Plight

Bissy Waariyo

Fourth Year Paper

APA Style Citation

The mass media has been credited as being an agent of political socialization among the Canadian public. Representations of varying cultural identities in the media allow us to understand how the nation perceives selected ethnic groups as well as the perception of its own national image. Messages produced by the media construct and inform the public imagination and influence the lives of those that fall under the umbrella term ethnic minority. Canadian mass media has stereotypically represented racialized groups as deviant or problem citizens (Jiwani, 2010). Since the media can be viewed as a public sphere where citizens discuss current issues, if particular groups are consistently represented as criminals and problem minorities they can effectively feel a sense of isolation and a curtailing of their rights (Jiwani, 2010). This paper examines how Canadian mass media has represented Tamil-Canadian identity, particularly during the infamous 2009 Tamil protests. Protests were rooted in demands from the Tamil community for the Canadian government to put pressure on the Sri Lankan government to end state sponsored violence against Tamils. These protests included the blockade of the Gardiner Expressway in Toronto as well as human chain demonstrations around various consulates in Toronto and Ottawa (Godwin 2012). An argument will be made that Tamils were represented negatively in the media due to the perceived relationship between many Tamils and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam organization (LTTE), which was deemed a terrorist group by the Conservative government in 2006 (Godwin, 2012). As such, Tamil identity became synonymous with terrorism which portrayed Tamil-Canadians as not only unworthy and troublesome citizens, but as a national security issue and a threat to Canadian nationhood. Therefore their protest claims were deemed illegitimate by much of the Canadian public.

Tamil identity has become marginalized within the Canadian multicultural framework. This is due to the prevailing post-9/11 security discourse which has constructed Tamils as

terrorists or terrorist supporters and has restricted their sense of belonging as citizens. This discourse has also been normalized within the mass media, which has provided limited context of the Tamil struggles in Sri Lanka, as well as the rationale for Tamil-Canadian protests (George, 2011). It is important to examine the Tamil-Canadian dilemma because outside of Sri Lanka, Canada – specifically Toronto – is home to the largest Tamil diaspora. However, refugee claims of Tamils trying to enter Canada are now structured within a ‘national security’ discourse which has negatively impacted immigration policies towards Tamils (George, 2011). Media representation has further influenced the public perception of the worthiness of Tamil refugees and has informed the politics of belonging for Tamil-Canadians.

This paper will first provide an historical background of the Sri Lankan civil war and mass exodus of Tamils and subsequent influx of Tamil refugees to Canada. Following there will be a discussion of Canadian news coverage of the Tamil/Sri Lankan problem from a foreign news angle during 2008-2009. Next, there will be an analysis of media coverage of the 2009 Tamil demonstrations in Toronto, which will be supported by excerpts from various newspaper sources. There will then be an analysis of how media discourse throughout the demonstrations influenced the inclusiveness of Tamils within a multicultural framework. Finally, there will be a discussion of how Tamil refugees are recognized due to popular and national discourse. Comparative examples of media depictions regarding Tamil refugees arriving to Canada will be provided. Those who arrived in Newfoundland in 1986 were viewed as legitimate refugee claims, as opposed to the 2009 Tamil refugee claims of those who arrived in British Columbia, which was viewed as illegitimate.

Though Tamil migration to Canada started as early as the 1950s, the breakout of a civil war in Sri Lanka in 1983 between Tamil and Sinhalese citizens resulted in a rise of Tamil migration to Canada (Wayland, 2003). Historically, Tamils have been concentrated in northern Sri Lanka and are typically the educated, upper class members of society. This was due to British colonial presence in the region that gave Tamils access to colonial missionary schools before independence in 1948 (Wayland, 2003). As such, Tamils held almost all professional and civil service jobs in the country until a change of government dominated by the Sinhalese ethnic group led the government to resolve Tamil hierarchy within Sri Lankan society. Unfortunately, this was enacted through mass genocide and exodus of Tamil Sri Lankans, notably during the infamous ‘Black July’ incident when anti-Tamil riots in the capital of Colombo destroyed Tamil

property and killed nearly three thousand Tamils (Wayland 2003). Between 1984 and 1992 alone an estimated twenty-five thousand Tamil migrants came to Canada, many of whom settled in Toronto (La, 2004). Tamils in Canada have supported various political organizations abroad such as the LTTE and the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam since the 1980s. The more highly publicized LTTE is a Tamil insurgency organization that actively fights for the autonomy and separation of northern Sri Lanka as a Tamil state (La, 2004). In Toronto, there have been various rallies mobilized by Tamils such as the pro-LTTE rally in June of 1995 which became the third largest demonstration by a visible minority group in Torontonian history. During the fiftieth anniversary of Sri Lankan independence in February 1st 1998, nearly twenty thousand Tamils rallied around Queen's Park to protest Tamil state sponsored violence against Tamils by the Sri Lankan government (Wayland, 2003). Tamil-Canadians finance many of these organizations which they stress are for the purpose of relief of those suffering in Sri Lanka. For many Tamils the LTTE and its sister organizations are nationalist movements that fight for the interests of Tamil peoples. However, many Canadian political figures have tried to link the Tamil diaspora to funding the LTTE to purchase weapons. Other public officials have argued that members of the Tamil diaspora feel forced and are even blackmailed into sending money to the LTTE (La 2004). Indeed, there have been reports of the group enlisting tactics such as suicide bombings, political assassination and the use of child soldiers to fight for their cause (La 2004). Yet the wrongful association of Tamil Tigers as terrorists, and Tamils as Tigers, has created issues for Tamil-Canadians.

Canadian foreign news coverage of the third world places minorities within the framework of "negativity as criteria for newsworthiness" (Fleras & Kunz, 2001, p.65). Mainstream media regularly depicts the third world as embodied by crisis, genocide and dictatorships. In the case of the Tamil, media coverage of the civil war in Sri Lanka portrayed the Tamil genocide as a result of the inherently violent nature of the Sinhalese and Tamil people, which reinforced the stereotype of the ethnically deviant 'other' (George, 2011). During the 2008-2009 periods various global news services, including Canadian ones, reported on the ongoing tensions between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. However, much of the content was geared towards those living in LTTE territory with flashing images of malnourished, wounded and murdered Tamils (George, 2011). Reporters made claims that the LTTE was inflicting violence on not only Sinhalese but Tamil citizens, with accusations that the

organization prevented people from leaving LTTE territory and used innocent Tamil civilians as human shields (George, 2011). These reports placed the LTTE, and hence those that were seen as supporters, as dangerous criminals. This informed global reactions towards Sri Lankan conflict, which placed the LTTE as the responsible party for the devastation of the war. It also puts into context how Canadians access knowledge and perceives circumstances of minorities in Canada as well as in the developing world as mainstream media provides a substantial amount of knowledge (Fleras & Kunz, 2001). Rather than educate the public of the context behind foreign news coverage, the goal is to provide news content that will thrill audiences with sensational images of misery and overall destitute societies around the world because this is newsworthy and therefore profitable (Fleras & Kunz, 2001).

The intensification of the war mobilized Tamils in the diaspora to raise awareness of the violence against Tamils by the Sri Lankan government. The Tamil-Canadian community organized protests in Toronto and Ottawa which included the illegal blockade of the Gardiner Expressway as well as coordinated human chain demonstrations around the Canadian, American and Sri Lankan consulates (Godwin, 2012). Tamil demonstrators had various demands, which included that the Canadian government put pressure on the Sri Lankan government to call for a ceasefire against Tamils and for the trial of the Sri Lankan government and military under the International Coordinating Committee of National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (Godwin, 2012). They also wanted an independent Tamil state and for the Canadian government to reverse its decision to declare the LTTE a terrorist organization. Although there was some sympathy for the plight of Tamils, public perceptions of the demonstrations was met with distress, particularly due to the Gardiner blockade, which discredited the perception of Tamils as victims worthy of Canadian support (Godwin, 2012).

Coverage of Tamil demonstrations in Canada in the Toronto Star, Globe and Mail and the National Post from January to June of 2009 was characterized by two prevailing discourses. First was the correlation between Tamil identity and terrorism, and second the cultural norms of Canadian identity and belonging (Sriskandarajah, 2010). The National Post and the Globe and Mail were mostly unsympathetic towards Tamil plight and provided little explanation of the rationale of Tamil protestors. The Toronto Star was at first sympathetic towards the protestors, providing some such context. However, towards the end, Toronto Star's coverage of the protests was backed with minimal background of the issues and ultimately reflected negative anti-

terrorist discourse (Sriskandarajah, 2010). In an editorial piece published by the Globe and Mail on May 1st, 2009 it was noted that:

“[I]s the U.S. likely to alter its foreign policy because Tamils in Toronto protest outside their consulate? Not likely-especially since many waved the flags of the Tigers, a listed terrorist organization. It appears to have escaped the notice of demonstration organizers, but the U.S. does not look kindly on terrorist sympathizers” (p. 16)

In the National Post on May 15th, 2009 John Mraz wrote:

“The Tamil protests around the globe demanding international intervention in Sri Lanka have been a compelling sight. The Tigers’ red flags have symbolized the movement. That flag is potent semiotic, with crossed rifles and ammunition behind a big striped carnivore. Not symbols of peace, no matter how peaceful some of the protests have been” (p. 12).

The Toronto Star took a somewhat compassionate stance on the issue; however, Tamils were still misrepresented in the published piece. Martin Regg Cohn on May 26th 2009 wrote:

“There’s nothing wrong with lending our ear, and our empathy, to the estimated 200,000 Tamils who have settled in Canada and are overwhelmed by the plight of loved ones still in Sri Lanka. But that doesn’t make it right for Tamils to impose roadblocks and wave Tiger flags as a way of pressuring Canadians to support Tamil independence, any more than one would tolerate Sikh separatists blocking University Ave” (p.23)

Tamil identity and Tiger identity became synonymous throughout these newspapers. Tamils were automatically assumed to be Tigers, and therefore terrorists or terrorist supporters. Each of the newspapers presented Tamils as having no genuine reason to protest, having no respect for Canadian laws, and as destructive mobs rather than peaceful protestors. Thus, their rights to use public space for their political desires became contested (Sriskandarajah, 2010). Each of the newspapers also portrayed symbols such as the Tamil Eelam flag as synonymous with the Tamil Tigers. The Tamil Eelam flag represents Tamil nationality and the desire for a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka. Yet in the media the flag is a symbol of the LTTE and therefore terrorism

(Srisjandarajah, 2010). None of the newspapers provided much indication of what the flag meant to Tamils or if it was exclusively an LTTE flag. Also, the views of Tamil-Canadian's on the flag were missing from news reports. While all Tamils view the flag as a representation of Tamil identity, only some equate it as a symbol of the Tamil Tigers. These people do so not because they view the LTTE as a terrorist organization, but because they feel they are the only group that voices their opinion (Srisjandarajah 2010).

In relation to the second discourse of how Canadian national identity is constructed in mass media, "national identity is produced through processes in which an 'other' is created in which to define the national identity against" (Sriskandarajah, 2010, p.39). Tamils become 'othered' by association with terrorism. Consequently, Tamils are unsuited to be integrated into Canadian national belonging. The actions of Tamil protestors were deemed as lacking Canadian social values, as if they were resorting to un-Canadian behaviour. It was noted in an editorial piece in the National Post "while staging non-violent protest marches is well within the Canadian political tradition, convening a mob to praise an illegal terrorist organization is not" (Editorial, 2009, p.16). There was also limited reference to whether the Tamils themselves thought of the LTTE as a terrorist group or as freedom fighters; instead, the protests were framed in a way to characterize Tamils as illegitimate and adverse to Canadian values. Thus, the media effectively influences the representation of Tamil identity as a betrayal of Canadian identity (Sriskandarajah, 2010). Further, Tamil voices were consistently marginalized in relation to 'Canadian' voices. Tamils were for the most part indirectly quoted throughout each of the newspapers while non-Tamil Canadians were quoted directly by reporters. The views of Tamils were set by the reporters, while the thoughts of 'Canadians' were validated through direct investigative reporting and quotation (Sriskandarajah, 2010).

Given that Tamil identity has been constructed as a threat to Canadian values, there is an inconsistency in the relationship between Tamil-Canadians and the national multicultural framework. Accusations of terrorism have created issues for immigrants in Canada, especially post-9/11. Many people who have migrated from countries that have been placed under terrorist watch have had their political identity and national loyalty questioned (Thurairajah, 2011). Mainstream media has further influenced the restrictions of inclusiveness for immigrants. Despite Canada's multicultural agenda, the way the media presents news about Tamils creates cultural anxiety among Canadians, which limits the ability of Tamils to exercise their cultural

and political beliefs, as they are viewed as illegitimate (Thurairajah, 2011). Tamils have the dilemma of defending their Canadian identity and loyalty while facing allegations of terrorist activities. For example, as Canadian citizens, Tamils have the right to form lobbies in order to try and influence Canadian foreign policy that impact Sri Lanka. Also, Tamils in Canada had financed and supported the secessionist goals of the LTTE for years with minimal negative media attention (Thurairajah, 2011). However, once the LTTE was officially deemed a terrorist organization by the Canadian government in 2006, the media characterized Tamil lobbyists and LTTE supporters as pro-terrorist. Tamils were viewed as betraying their allegiance to Canada (Thurairajah 2011). Popular discourse of Tamils provided limited space for inclusion into Canadian multicultural discourse. The terms of belonging were positioned within the regulations of perceived national security threats (Thurairajah 2011). Inevitably, “Tamil identity became frozen, overdetermined by national security discourses and the focus of the diaspora itself on the opposing sides of the Sri Lankan civil war” (George, 2011, p.467). Canadian mass media reflected these views by questioning the legitimacy of not only the Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka, but of deeming Tamil identity as invalid in Canadian society.

Popular discourse surrounding Tamils has also influenced public perception of Tamil refugees. Historically, Canada has had a strong national tradition of granting asylum and refugee status to those who meet the conditions outlined in the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 (Mann, 2009). Part of Canada’s goal was the commitment to provide asylum for persons fleeing wrongful persecution in their home country. In 2009, the notion of the Tamil refugee was replaced with the image of an illegal immigrant. Immigrants that are accused of illegally landing in Canada are perceived as threats and unworthy of Canadian asylum. Refugees that arrive by boat as opposed to other means of transportations have typically attracted immense public response. Mann (2009) notes, “refugees that arrive by boat gain a disproportionate amount of media attention, considering that they represent only a small percentage of asylum seekers who enter Canada by illegal means” (p.192). Two incidents of Tamils arriving to Canada by boat will be described to display the prevailing public opinion surrounding Tamil refugees from two different points in Canadian history.

On August 11th 1986, 155 Tamil women, men, and children were rescued off the coast of Newfoundland. Immediately after arriving to Canada, the refugees were issued one-year permits as asylum seekers, which allowed them to work and live in Canada with the right to apply for

refugee protection, or renew the permit at the end of the year (Mann 2009). Seeing as Canada had recently become a signatory of the Refugee Convention and was awarded the Nansen medal for its efforts in protecting refugees by the United Nations in 1986, discourse surrounding refugee policies was placed within a context of humanitarian commitment (Mann 2009). During this time period, the public and politicians viewed the Tamil asylum seekers as worthy of Canadian assistance. The arrival of Tamil refugees was placed within the legal and moral commitment to protect refugees. This is not to say that there was not a security investigation to determine whether any of the refugees could be related to a terrorist organization, but Tamils were assumed innocent until proven guilty (Mann 2009). Tamils were prioritized as refugees rather than as potential terrorists.

In 2009, when the *Ocean Lady* arrived off the coast of British Columbia with 76 Tamil men, the passengers were taken into custody for routine interviews and medical examinations before being placed in a detention facility in Vancouver. Many of the men indicated that they intended to claim refugee status but were taken into custody due to the lack of documentation that deemed them as flight risks (Krishnamurti 2012). The men were held in custody longer than the forty-eight hours without a detention review as outlined by the s.57(1) Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. Fifty of the men were not released until December 2009 and even later for the remaining twenty-six (Krishnamurti 2012). In contrast to the 1986 arrival of Tamil refugees, the men who arrived on the *Ocean Lady* were characterized as criminals who were a threat to national security within media discourse. Even though the *Ocean Lady* passengers held the legal right to claim refugee status, they were publicly deemed as illegitimate refugees (Krishnamurti 2012). The shift towards stronger security discourse in light of 9/11 was no longer second to humanitarian protection and the belief of innocence until proven guilty diminished. In the media, Tamils were automatically a “threat until established they were not” (Mann, 2009, p.202).

The media also shaped a public image of those that arrived on the *Ocean Lady* as illegal migrants. These attitudes reflect the shifts in security discourse that have influenced immigration and refugee policies (Krishnamurti 2012). Further, the relationship between news coverage, political commentary and the public indicates how Canadians responded to the *Ocean Lady*. For example, Conservative MP Monte Solberg provided a statement to a Sun Media outlet, claiming immigrants that patiently and legally wait to enter Canada have to suffer as they “now have to

wait a little bit longer while the Tamils are fed, clothed and housed. I should know. I served as Canada's minister of immigration" (cited in Krishnamurti, 2012, p.146). A political figure providing such a statement through the media legitimized the idea among Canadians that Tamils were illegal migrants, taking advantage of social services and resources that should be given to immigrants who have applied legally to enter the country. No context is provided in the reality of what Tamil refugees face once they arrive in Canada, which includes detention and social exclusion. It is not an easy process where they are handed basic social rights (Krishnamurti 2012). The reluctance to admit Sri Lankan refugees into Canada in the last few years is not the fault of the media, but it is important to note the influence of popular discourse on public perception of Tamil migration and refugee claims. Canadians do not feel guilty for wanting to turn away Tamil refugees because according to popular imagery Tamils are not legitimate victims (Krishnamurti 2012).

In conclusion, the sheer number of Tamil immigrants and refugees in Canada make it imperative to understand how the media, and broader society, perceive Tamil identity and how this ultimately influences the politics of belonging for Tamil-Canadians. The relationship between Canadian media institutions and its political functions have shaped interpretations and assumptions of Tamils in Canadian society. The alleged association between Tamils and Tigers (terrorists) has placed them outside of Canadian social norms, constructing them as undesirable citizens. Canadian foreign news coverage of the Sri Lankan civil war has inevitably influenced how Tamils are viewed by the Canadian public. In view of the fact that media coverage of the conflict stereotyped Tamils and the LTTE as inherently violent criminals, it reinforced the ideology of ethnic minorities as socially deviant others, contrasted with normalized Western cultures. The perpetuation of these biases through distorted media representation has had negative consequences for Tamil-Canadian communities and their ability to participate in domestic as well as transnational politics (George 2011). In respect to the protests of the Gardiner Expressway, although the demonstrations were illegal it is likely that if a group of white Canadian citizens used the same tactics their national loyalty would not have been contested in the same way. Furthermore, the Tamil case provides an analysis of shifting national discourse in relation to immigration and refugee policies. Canada once prided itself on being a peacekeeping nation with open arms for refugees around the world. However, since 9/11 we have seen a dramatic change in how minorities are incorporated- or excluded, in nation building.

According to Canadian media, threats to the nation are likely to originate in the developing world, and therefore from ethnic minorities. These biases inform the social consciousness of Canadian citizens.

References

- Cohn, Martin Regg, (2009, May 26). Toronto sideshow in Sri Lanka tragedy. *Toronto Star*, pp. A. 23.
- Editorial. (2009, May 1). Over-tolerant police. *The Globe and Mail*, pp. A. 16.
- Editorial. (2009, April 29). The fine line between a protest and mob. *National Post*, pp. A.16
- Fleras, A., & Kunz, J. (2001). *Media and minorities: Representing diversity in a multicultural Canada*. Toronto, ON: Thompson Educational Publishing Inc.
- George, G. (2011). The Canadian Tamil diaspora and the politics of multiculturalism. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 18 (5).
- Godwin, M. (2012). The war at home: The 2009 Toronto Tamil demonstrations. *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 18 (2).
- Jiwani, Y. (2010). Race(ing) the nation: Media and minorities. In L.R. Shade (3rd Ed.), *Mediascapes: New patterns in Canadian communication* (pp.271-286). Toronto, ON: Nelson Education Ltd
- Krishnamurti, S. (2012). Queue-jumpers, terrorists, breeders: Representations of Tamil migrants in Canadian popular media. *South Asian Diaspora* 5 (1).
- La, J. (2004). Forced remittances in Canada's Tamil enclaves. *Peace Review* 16 (3).
- Mann, A. (2009). Refugees who arrive by boat and Canada's commitment to the Refugee Convention: A discursive analysis. *Refugee* 26 (2).
- Mraz, John. (2009, May 15). How to handle the Tigers. *National Post*, pp. A.12.
- Thurairajah, K. (2011). The shadow of terrorism: Competing identities and loyalties among Tamil Canadians. *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 43 (1).
- Wayland, S. V. (2003). Immigration and transnational political ties: Croatians and Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada. *Canadian Ethnic Studies Journal* 35 (2).
- Sriskandarajah, A. (2010). Demonstrating identities: Citizenship, multiculturalism and Canadian-Tamil identities. University of Windsor: Electronic Thesis and Dissertations, Paper 57.