

**“Wild Jill”: Jill Roe and the Reshaping of Australian Women’s History’**  
**Australian Women’s History Network - Special Panel**  
**Australian Historical Association conference, University of Newcastle, 5 July 2017**

**Speaker: Niro Kandasamy, PhD candidate, University of Melbourne**

This year, I attended my first Australian Historical Association (AHA) conference. I was invited to speak at the panel session in memory of Professor Emerita Jill Roe (1940-2017). The panel took place at the end of the Australian Women’s History Network stream. It had been a long, productive day of learning about different areas of women’s history, as well as the launch of the latest edition of the feminist history journal *Lilith* and the organisation’s annual general meeting which were both squeezed into the tea and lunch breaks. By the afternoon there were some tired but determined faces, and mine was no exception. The late afternoon soon arrived and a medium sized room quickly filled with attendees for the panel session on remembering Jill Roe. There were not enough seats as people were eagerly awaiting to share their stories about a supervisor, mentor, colleague and friend, and of course listen to the panel speakers. I was the only one who did not know Jill on a personal level and, in fact, I had never met her, but as a woman of colour researching minority women’s histories, I felt that Jill would have encouraged and supported by presence on the panel. The following sections are excerpts from my presentation.

*Jill Roe commented on the importance of biography in historical research. She said that biography was about ‘the perennial fascination with character’, stressing that it must be about context as much as character, with clarity about the subject in his or her time. In writing about her seminal work on the biography of Miles Franklin she emphasised the ways in which deeply personal narratives must be situated within broader socio-cultural contexts, which can offer a special kind of knowledge that is unmatched by other approaches to understanding individuals and communities within specific periods.*

*Indeed, Jill’s work can be situated within a wider body of texts that were directed towards women of the past. These works were more than just about presenting detailed accounts of women’s lives, but actually set the foundations for what is*

*increasingly becoming the significance of projecting women's agency, in the sense that women were not subjected to anyone or social constructions of patriarchy, for instance, but rather recognised in their own terms as self-determining individuals. It is these kinds of symbiotic relationships that historians like Jill Roe presented through their research that I have come to appreciate in my own research. I take from her the concentration and an almost obsessive interest in presenting the narratives of individual lives within specific contexts that supports my interests and scholarly contributions to historical research.*

My PhD dissertation explores various aspects of the resettlement experiences of Sri Lankan Tamil forced migrants that arrived in Australia as children during the late twentieth century. The project seeks to present what remains a largely untapped piece of Australia's history. I used oral history interviews with Tamils living in Australia to explore the complex and competing ideologies that entangled their resettlement experiences. In terms of women's history, I explore key aspects of their lives such as political activism, religion and culture, that revealed memories of transformative sites for Tamil women in Australia. By focusing closely on individuals within spatial and temporal contexts, through the types of methodological and theoretical approaches encouraged by Jill Roe, I seek to better understand the experiences and critical moments in the lives of forced migrant communities that remain less researched in historical scholarship.