

Asoka Handagama's *Let Her Cry*: A Cry for a Radical Feminist Cinema

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Ege Esa Aga (Let Her Cry) 2016, motion picture, Silumina Films, Colombo. Produced by Jagath Wijenayaka; directed by Asoka Handagama.

This year, the veteran Sri Lankan filmmaker Asoka Handagama returned with *Ege Esa Aga* (titled as, *Let Her Cry* in English¹), a film about an ageing man who is haunted by a young woman's sexual advances and his wife who struggles to find a way to accommodate his sexual attraction within the conventional monogamous and heterosexual family. The film featured the equally veteran actors Dhritiman Chatterjee and Swarna Mallawarachchi, the former a towering presence in Bengali cinema, acting in groundbreaking art films such as Mrinal Sen's *Padatik*. Widely hailed as one of Sri Lanka's most radical female actors, Mallawarachchi was known in the 1970s and 80s for her sensual portrayals of characters that challenged the conventional code of morality that generally tends to pervade Sri Lankan culture and Sinhalese cinema. The film also featured novice actors such as Rithika Kodituwakku who performs as the inviting young woman who seduces the older man, and is driven by her own insatiable desire for him. Although she does much justice to her role, her acting is restricted by the stereotypical nature of her character. Sandali Ash, the other budding actor, too, does much justice to her character, although one often feels that she, like her character, would have benefited from a more nuanced reading of human sexuality and desires. It would not be unfair to say that within the script, it is only the two older actors who have the opportunity to explore and experiment with their characters and their subtleties in any substantial way. The filmography did contain some stunning moments, particularly in the film's metacinematic instances, but failed, ultimately, to break away from the largely narrative-driven structure of the film.

The plot of the film revolves around the drama of an urban upper class family, whose monotonous routine is shattered when the young woman, a university student, reveals the affair she is having with the ageing professor to his wife. The film was quickly praised by Sri Lanka's critical establishment that hailed it as a film about sexual fantasies and sexually permissive women who disrupt men's authoritative social roles through their sexuality. Handagama invited this reading, in some ways, by subtitling the film as "*Kedella Rakina Gehenuw Wenuwen*" ("For women who preserve their nest"). The

unmistakable bird metaphor turned the once radical figure of Swarna Mallawarachchi into the preserver of the corrupt and oppressive middle class family, and the young university student into the *femme fatale* who threatens it with her sexual prowess. It was an ironic twist to Sinhalese cinema's alternative cinema tradition that had once experimented with politically and sexually daring themes and scenes. In this, and its subtle praise of the subdued response of the wife to her husband's affair, the film contains a conservative core that was barely noted by its critics. In this review I want to examine this core more seriously, and to tease out other possible themes, both about ageing and about class narratives that are culturally defined.

The Punitive Gaze

Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1999) was one of the first essays to identify the way the male gaze in cinema frames women. She argued that the cinematic apparatus relies primarily on the scopophilic drive to derive pleasure out of looking and the narcissistic desire to constitute the self through that act of looking (Mulvey 1999, pp.835-836). Cut along lines of gender, the desire to look that is mobilized by conventional (particularly Hollywood) cinema situates the viewer as a male in an active position, and the female body in the position of a passive object that is looked at. The protagonist, who becomes a proxy of the viewer, occupies the active position in the narrative, encoding the gendered nature of the cinematic apparatus within the narrative. For Mulvey, the cinematic apparatus is saturated by patriarchal ideology that situates the ideal/typical viewer in the male position, enacting a primordial drama of fantasy as he occupies the spectator's seat in the darkened cinema hall. She argued that the male gaze operates along the active/passive, scopophilic/narcissistic lines.

Mulvey introduced a second tier to her argument by pointing to two other forms of pleasure that could be derived from cinema: voyeurism and fetishism (1999, p.840). This second argument drew on the psychoanalytical idea that the female body signifies the threat of castration, which causes anxiety. Confronted by the lacking image, the viewer desires

to subdue the female body that bears the threat of castration. Mulvey argued that the narrative and the camera try to subdue this threat represented by the female body by punishing the woman, or, alternatively, fetishizing it. She gives Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* as an example where the voyeuristic desire to watch Judy/ Madeline ends in her sadistic punishment: "Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end" (1999, p.842). Another path available to allay the unpleasure evoked by the castration threat is to forgive and save the woman by turning her into a fetishized object: something to be valorized, fragmented, and overvalued as object (Mulvey 1999, pp.841-843).

The latter meant that the female body's resplendent glamour that one often finds in mainstream cinema or the overvaluation of certain parts of the female body embeds the fetishistic desire within the male look, stripping her of her subjectivity and turning her into "a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous" which "builds up the physical beauty object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself" (Mulvey 1999, p.842). The value of Mulvey's theory lies in the way she links the pleasure of the act of looking to the narrative and visual impetus to situate the woman within this circuit of pleasure, anxiety, and guilt. Mulvey calls for a cinema that disrupts this patriarchal and ideological thrust, particularly in mainstream Hollywood cinema (1999, pp.834-835).

In this light, *Ege Esa Aga* and its visual grammar tends to typify this patriarchal operation within the cinematic apparatus. The young university student, sexually active insofar as she masochistically enacts the desires of the ageing male professor, is situated in a passive position within the looking-looked at dichotomy. The protagonist, typically slow-moving and passively watching her more than actively engaging her sexually, functions as the proxy of a typically male viewer who derives pleasure out of watching the young woman's hyper-sexualized body. She becomes the object of this male gaze that is actively looking, whereas the woman becomes the object that is looked at.

The scopophilic desire is often embedded within the camera's movements and point-of-view shots that frame the young woman from the professor's point-of-view. The filmmaker's subtle use of pornographic grammar to construct the sexual scenes between the young woman and the older man within the film accentuates this desire. For example, Handagama uses typical pornographic shots when he enacts the professor's masochistic sexual fantasy, both in relation to the clothing of the woman as well as the visual structure of the way the woman is looked at in this scene. Similarly, we often find the fetishization of the woman's underwear that the male protagonist lovingly kisses, evoking the pleasures derived from a strip-tease. Moreover, the film also references phone-sex, when the young woman describes sex with the man to his wife, describing his burning desire to seek something

he cannot locate in her body. The visually suggestive sexual pleasure is supplemented by the auditory pleasure of hearing a woman describing sex for the viewer, as much as for the wife. The active-passive dichotomy of pleasure within the film, however, is transposed into the sadistic and fetishistic level that Mulvey describes when we come to realize that his fantasy of her is a fetishistic one, as noted before, underscored by his marked passivity before her sexual invitations. The underwear and the perfume take the place of actual corporeal engagement between the man and the woman, displacing sexual activity into the fetishistic overvaluation of these objects, and her body in general.

More tellingly, however, the film's narrative strategy increasingly resorts to the sadistic pleasure sought by a typically male viewer. The first indication of this desire is enacted, not on the professor's lover, but on the professor's daughter, who nearly dies in a train accident when she runs away angrily from her father after he rebukes her for hitting his girlfriend. This punitive gaze returns much more violently in the temple scene, where another family's drama is enacted for us (I discuss this scene in greater detail below). It is an appropriate culmination to the male desire to punish the castrating image of the hitherto sexualized woman. Like many of Alfred Hitchcock's female protagonists who suffer bodily injury at the end of the film (particularly *The Birds*), the professor's lover is morally and physically subdued by the punitive gaze of the camera. Like an acquiescent son of the patriarchal power that wishes to subdue women's sexuality at any cost, Handagama's camera finally shows the moral wounding of the woman by clothing her in white and showing her worshipping at the temple minutes before she would be corporeally attacked by another "legitimate" wife. It only remains, then, for the suddenly valiant professor to save her and shuttle the entire family back into the safety of their car. Handagama's radical cinema seems to have come full circle, from his courageous depiction of the crisis of a lower middle class man culminating in a semi-male nude in *Channakinnari* and the depiction of the full female nude body of a transsexual in *Thani Thatuwen Piyambanna* to this conservative film that attempts to restore a modicum of respectability to a bourgeois, patriarchal, monogamous family.

The Erotics of the Ageing Body

Several sophisticated critiques of Mulvey's theory have emerged from within psychoanalysis itself. The looker-looked at dichotomy, which Mulvey theorized by using the term "gaze," in fact revealed a deeper visual and subjective problematic. As Joan Copjec (1989) has argued, the viewing subject does not simply occupy a position of mastery with regard to the image: "In film theory the subject identifies with the gaze as the signified of the image and comes into existence as the realization of a possibility. In Lacan, the subject identifies with the gaze as the signifier of the lack that causes the image to languish" (Copjec 1989, p.70). That is, the viewing subject does not simply identify with the image making it

his own; rather, the gaze is perceived as “the signifier of lack” (Copjec 1989, p.70). In this reading, the gaze is not a point from which a subject can identify with the image, producing a narcissistic mastery over it. Instead, it unsettles that imaginary identification, positing a beyond of the image, evoking a lack – something missing – in the image. The image gives the impression that something is concealed behind it, which unsettles the subject’s certainty that it knows the image and can own the image as one’s own. This other dimension of desire prevents the subject from identifying fully with the image, believing, instead, that the image, in fact, conceals something.

Let me explain: in *Ege Esa Aga*, we hear a voice-over in which the young woman describes the way the man has sex with her to his wife. What we actually see is the wife holding her cellular phone, listening in distressed awe to the description. She lies back on the bed, and at that moment, we see a photograph of a younger Swarna Mallawarachchi set beside the bed. An uncanny and unsettling image, we suddenly become aware of the difference between the two bodies we have just seen on the screen. This is the point from which the image stops signifying the possibility of a totally exposed, totally meaningful sexual relation captured in the image. The camera posits Mallawarachchi’s now significantly older body as something impenetrable, something that cannot produce meaning for us. At this point, the image becomes the signifier of a lack, an impossibility: the impossibility of the sexual relation, now transposed beyond the prying camera’s capacity to see and show the older female body. The looker-looked at dyad is unsettled, and the subject becomes aware of its own inadequacy to “master” the image. This is why, for psychoanalysis, the cinematic screen both mirrors and veils, but what it veils is nothing (Copjec 70). This other dimension of the gaze constitutes the viewing subject as such, through “the part of our image which eludes the mirror-like symmetrical relationship,” which, in psychoanalytical terms is the “gaze as *objet petit a*” (Žižek 2010, p.xi). The photograph of the youthful Mallawarachchi traps the gaze, but in the rest of the film this object of love will remain concealed, distant, and de-erotized. The subject, proper, is constituted by this signifier of something missing in the image, inciting desire, which will be frustrated and displaced throughout the film. We seek Mallawarachchi, but what we constantly find is Rithika Kodituwakku, whose body is framed through a very different set of signifying codes, posited as a fragmented, fetishized body, taking the place of the missing sexual relation.

This subsequent theorization complicates our reading of the film as well as its better known readings in subtle ways. Reviewers have tended to read *Let Her Cry* as a film discussing a man’s fantasy about a young woman, and the woman’s enacting of the man’s fantasy to him. To these reviewers, this film seems to espouse, quite self-consciously, a masculinist rejection of the seductive power of female sexuality. However, the film’s subtle sexual core does not, in my view, lie in the relation between the young woman and the older man, but between the older couple, who are haunted by their own

lacking relation to each other. The young woman is merely a prop in an otherwise difficult drama about the impossibility of the sexual relation, explored through the ageing bodies of the two iconic actors. As discussed above, Handagama places a photograph of Mallawarachchi’s younger self in the bedroom, reminding us that this is, after all, the indomitably beautiful Swarna Mallawarachchi, the heroine of radical sexual portrayals in Sinhalese cinema. This photograph, looking back at us from a point in the past, stands in for Mallawarachchi, but in a different time, in a very different incarnation. A less conspicuous, but a no less haunting memory of Dhritiman Chatterjee as Sumit in Mrinal Sen’s *Padatik* (a Bengali revolutionary who falls in love with an upper middle-class woman who shelters him) now transformed into a television pundit further exacerbates the sexual passivity they both express in the film. In this light, I argue that the spectator’s subjective identification with the protagonist, the university professor, and with his fantasmatic attraction to the young woman, is unsettled by the memory of these other images of the past, of these actors and the more radical roles they had once played.

Chatterjee’s towering presence in the film, his fetishization of the young woman and the general avoidance of sex with her, is complemented by bedroom scenes with his wife. These scenes are marked by ennui, bodily and emotional separation, and ultimately violent confrontation in the face of that impossibility. Whereas the aggressive camera seeks out the truth beneath the sheets in the sex-scene between the professor and the student (which in turn, is in fact a fantasy), the camera moves back respectfully in the sex-scene between the older couple. Respect and distance characterize the camera in the adults’ bedroom, which constantly attempts to place Mallawarachchi’s character as a sanitized, asexual character. This is where, I feel, both Handagama and the viewer avert their eyes in embarrassment, as the camera refuses to examine the adult sexuality of the two characters in a nuanced and complex way, and instead displaces that impossibility into a fetishized pornographic fantasy between the older man and a younger and more visually palatable young woman. In this, I see the film’s ultimate betrayal of Swarna Mallawarachchi’s character: the refusal to engage the sexuality of older, ageing bodies, cruelly punctuated by the presence of the younger bodies, and even more ironically, the image of Mallawarachchi’s own youthful profile. Instead, the film and the larger discussion about it focuses on the young woman’s sexual prowess and whether and how much she is a fantasy. As a result, the film turns Mallawarachchi into a puritan, maternal figure, desperate before her husband’s more youthful choice. The libidinal economy of the upper-middle class home that is increasingly regulated through religion, the punishment of the young woman, the pornographic visual grammar of sex scenes, and the refusal to engage with the erotics of ageing bodies all undermine the once radical tradition of portraying extra-marital affairs as expressions of free and open sexuality as well as expressions of women’s sexuality in Sinhalese cinema.

Class Narratives and Sexuality

The final temple scene in the film provokes a generalized class narrative, actively sought by the film. The voice-over dialogues at the beginning of the film, which we retroactively learn are spoken by the university professor, his wife, his student-lover, and his daughter, and which constitute the English title of the film *Let Her Cry* also makes a brief reference to the kind of place where “such” problems should be sorted out. In hindsight, at the end of the film, we begin to realize that this scene provides a stark contrast to the measured, quaint response of the professor’s household towards the extra-marital affair. The difference between the two families are cast as a class difference. On the one hand, the *nouveau riche* impression of the second family is emphasized, suggesting that this family belongs to the new political elite. In contrast, the first family is clearly from a more traditional upper-class background, most tellingly conveyed through the bilingual home of the professor. In this, we see the film’s cinematic gaze adopting the jealousy and antipathy towards these newly emerging classes that we often find in those who identify with the culturally sophisticated and bilingual upper-class elite that once wielded political power in urban Sri Lanka. But this identification with an already oppressive and elite class must be acknowledged for what it is: the film does not provide a nuanced critique of this elite; nor does it interrogate its own enunciatory identification with this class. The scene that best brings out this identification and performs the punitive gesture of the cinematic gaze towards the woman is the temple scene. I would like to dwell briefly on this culminating scene.

The scene opens with a medium close-up of Mallawarachchi, worshipping with her eyes closed. When she opens her eyes, we see her eyes seeking out the people in the temple. The camera then alights on several people in the temple including a young woman, whom we will later identify as the politician’s girlfriend. The camera cuts back to a now quite distracted character of Mallawarachchi looking interestedly at those in the temple, thereby instituting the previous view of the camera as hers. A sudden change of expression on her face signals that she has seen something extraordinary, at which point the camera cuts to the professor’s girlfriend (Rithika Kodituwakku), now fully dressed in white and laying flowers for worship graciously. A reverse shot cuts back to Mallawarachchi, this time recognizing the full extent to which her family drama is now unfolding in the public space. Instinctively, she turns around and sees her daughter and husband arrive at the temple, and begins to construct her own narrative of what might have transpired. The camera, then, suddenly and inexplicably leaves all three, and focuses on the priest who had been in the background. Since we know that the priest was standing behind Mallawarachchi, we know that this is not her point of view. The narrative simply dislodges from the impending drama and turns the diegetic space, perhaps for the first time in the film, into the outside world, the society at large. While the camera focuses on the priest, a luxury jeep enters the diegetic space, and

the camera cuts to several other people in the temple whose attention is obviously diverted to the new visitors. A man and a woman get off the jeep and their sartorial markers and a couple of bodyguards signify that it is a politician. All of this action takes place behind the wife, and there is no indication that she is aware, or that she pays attention to this new presence in the diegetic space. As in real life, in the grammar of these shots too, she is cut-off from social reality. The politician’s wife, played by Hashinika Karaliyedda, walks towards the camera, presumably towards Mallawarachchi. But before she reaches Mallawarachchi, she now enters the screen from the side, passing the professor and his daughter, and stands beside the professor’s wife when she stops as she notices something. The camera then cuts to the image of the politician’s illicit lover, who is worshipping, unaware of the arrival of the politician and his wife. At this point, the camera cuts rapidly to a shot of the politician’s wife who drops the flowers in her hand, a shot of the flowers fallen on the ground, and from there we see Mallawarachchi looking at the second woman with surprise. The stage is now clearly set for the confrontation that would ensue between the politician’s wife and his illicit lover ending in a violent fight. The professor’s girlfriend, in contrast to all the other characters in the scene, runs to help the girl, and is attacked and falls on the ground. The professor runs to her rescue and all four return to the safety of the car as a downpour engulfs the still brawling crowd.

A shot by shot analysis of this last scene would alert us to the fact that there are, in fact, two looks at work here. The first is the exchange of looks between the characters, articulated through a series of shot-reverse-shots. Yet, when we first see the politician arrive at the temple, this scene clearly takes place behind the wife, who is confused by the simultaneous presence of her husband and his lover in the temple. As with the sex scenes in the film, the confrontation between the wife and husband is displaced onto another narrative and other characters who had hitherto had no presence in the film. As the diegetic space is finally expanded beyond the family and its supplemental spaces such as the professor’s office and the young woman’s boarding house, we see a now familiar narrative strategy at work within the text. The camera moves away from the close-up of the wife’s shocked face, and reaches to a place in the deep background, from which a different, but same story can be told.

The class connotations of this final scene and its subtle referencing of several previous scenes are unmistakable. As stated above, the newly emergent political class lacks the ostensible finesse of the professor’s family. The loud invectives of the wife, performed in public, are, however, vulgar exaggerations of the professor’s wife’s several outbreaks towards the professor’s girlfriend. For example, in a telling previous scene, the prying wife asks the girl about her father, and the girl nonchalantly implies that she is an illegitimate child. When the wife, in her self-respectable “wifehood” asks, “so you were conceived while sleeping around in bushes (*panduru gaane*)?” the girl opens the towel she is wearing and

says “Oh no, can't you see that this is a body that has lain on comfortable sheets (literally, mattresses).” At this point, the wife says, “come for dinner, you dirty whore (*patta wesi*).” The moral upper hand taken by the wife throughout the film, narratively aided through the film's subtle valorization of her character, barely covers over the oppressive violence within the deceptive finesse of this upper middle-class. The film seems bent on suggesting that the man, a previously respectable father figure, has lost his symbolic power through the seduction of the young woman. In effect what this does is shift the blame to the woman, and not the socio-political system that causes the masculine crisis articulated throughout the film. However, this narrative and ideological thrust is undercut by the very violence that both the punitive gaze of the cinematic text as a whole, as well as several individual characters show towards the young woman.

The double beatings that take place at the end of the film by the legitimate wife on the two illegitimate lovers are, ultimately, the articulation of the viewer's desire to see the sexually provocative woman punished in some way. The woman who acts out the male sadistic fantasy here is the politician's wife, treated with contempt by the camera, the viewer, and the other characters in the film. The ideological point of view that frames the drama at this point is clearly bourgeois and patriarchal, a sharp diversion from the radical early films by Asoka Handagama. In contrast to critical readings that tend to see the young woman as the object of the university professor's fantasy, I argue, then, that there is a more primal and fundamental sadistic fantasy at work in the film, one that seeks to destroy the woman who threatens the quaint bourgeois family and the fragile masculine identity of the university professor. A series of subjective displacements between the viewer, the professor, and the various characters in the film distort this original violence towards her. But the film rarely, if at all, addresses the true crisis of the man, emerging out of the discursive silence on adult erotic sexuality that is not shaped by the pornographic discourse, and occurring between ageing bodies – that is, between him and his wife. The film, unfortunately, adopts the class ideology of a jealous elite losing its cultural power before an emerging political class and the punitive thrust of an archaic patriarchal desire to somehow reinstate the power of the lost father by punish-

ing the woman represented as a *femme fatale*. Meanwhile, the social and the political system that, in reality, causes the crisis remains unexamined and unrecognized throughout the film except in the very brief representation of the mediatization of family space.

I have argued above that Asoka Handagama's film *Ege Esa Aga* departs from Handagama's daring previous explorations of politics and sexuality. His cinema fails to reach beyond the bourgeois and patriarchal ideology, ridden with sexual and class jealousies, that frames contemporary readings of the impact of capitalist patriarchy and its many postmodern avatars of Sri Lankan society. Despite the sensitive portrayal of the two main characters in the film by Chatterjje and Mallawarachchi, I have argued that the filmic text fails to push their sexual relation towards the difficult subject of the erotics of the ageing body. Instead, it displaces their failing relation onto the pornographic imagination of a fetishistic relation between the older man and the young woman. Whatever the value of Mulvey's original call to disrupt the pleasures that reinforce patriarchal ideologies in cinema, Handagama's movie and Mallawarachchi's much awaited return to cinema forces us to contemplate what a new feminist cinema would look like in Sri Lanka. In a society riven by the trauma of war, violence, political corruption, and the crisis of sexual identities, one could only see this film, with its unrealized potential, as a cry for a future feminist tradition that lives up to the best traditions of radical Sinhalese cinema.

Notes

1 Handagama's film can be viewed online here - <http://cinemasofsrilanka.com/movies/let-her-cry/>

References

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