

VISALA'S MODERNITY

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This is a response to Jagath Neelammahara's review of the cassette *Visala* containing songs written by Rohana Weerasingha and performed by Sunila Abeysekera.

Though I have no special qualification to review music, I do feel impelled to respond to Neelammahara's review in *Yukthiya* (January 17th), because some of the assumptions underlying it are, I think, highly problematic.

The editorial comment which prefaced the review spoke of the need for a "broad based sensitivity" in criticism and mentioned that in order not to violate the current laws against defamation, the editors had to delete sections of it.

I am entirely in sympathy with the idea of the need for a broad based critical practice, sensitive to the specificities of the medium being analysed. Purely ideological and therefore doctrinaire criticism insensitive to such considerations is arid because it is too reductive and one dimensional. Also, criticism should not simply function as an expression of the critics's tastes. It may of course begin there, but to say "I like it" or "I don't" and then to either praise or damn it for those reasons is clearly not enough. As the French critic Roland Barthes said, to do this is to reduce the function of criticism to that of a referendum. Even if one does not like a particular work, I think a critic is obliged to analyse and read the object under scrutiny. My model of how a critic should function is based on the practice of an exemplary Australian critic, Meaghan Morris who, in her career as a film reviewer, would get rid of the obligation to say whether she liked a film or not rather quickly. Even if she did not like it, she would go on to analyse a given film in such a way that one felt like seeing it and got some thing out of it as to how popular culture operates in a given genre. Her reviews were analytical, inventive and a pleasure to read. It was she who formulated the idea that reviewers are part of a "thought police" policing the limits of what is sayable and imaginable in any given context.

Neelammahara's review sees the function of criticism very differently. It is full of adjectives, culinary metaphors used pejoratively. It is criticism as verbal mud slinging. Responsible criticism should at least make clear the assumptions on which it is based so that others can then critically engage with them. With verbal abuse or simply one's personal taste there can be no debate, but only a retaliatory gesture. I will resist this temptation and try to draw out the assumptions underlying

Neelammahara's criticism because these assumptions are not simply convulsions of his subjectivity but are quite widespread in Sri Lankan cultural criticism.

I remember an essay by Professor E.R.Sarachchandra in the *Lanka Guardian*, which expressed a similar critical position in the early 80s. This position is marked by a certain attitude to mass popular culture and the commodification that it entails. This attitude is one of derision or shock horror at the commercialisation (commodification) of culture as a whole under the forces of consumer capitalism. This "critical" attitude is a simple response to the complex cultural changes wrought by the policies of the 'open economy' of the last decade and a half. Commodification of cultural objects as well as human emotions etc., is a process so complex that we need to get out of a moralistic position of denunciation and try to understand the changes created by it. This discourse is denunciatory because, according to it, commerce and commodification are inherently evil. I suspect that Marx would have had a far more ambivalent relationship to this reality than such critics. If commodification is indeed irreversible, then the question for cultural producers is to work out how to operate that logic, how to intervene in that process. The moralistic condemnatory attitude precludes the possibility that popular culture can in fact produce something new, interesting and challenging.

I want to argue that there is something very interesting happening in *Visala* which I would call its modernity. I haven't followed closely the recent developments in Sinhalese music; therefore, what I hear as *Visala*'s particular structural components may in fact derive from an already existing trend or tradition. If this were so, it would not however detract from my argument. One of the strengths of the cassette is its 'hybrid' nature; it is a mixture of several quite divergent musical elements and traditions both western and eastern. 'Hybrid' is a critically useful term in a way in which 'Achchaaru' is not. It is useful because through it one can perhaps understand processes of cultural change better. Something hybrid is a cross between two (or more) entities which produces something different, a third term. It enables a theorisation of cultural miscegenation and works against a notion of cultural purity and the sanctity of 'the Tradition.' I can hear in *Visala* a western pop influence, Sinhalese movie music¹ *raban pada*, *kavi*, Brecht etc., etc.—it sounds like a collage of these and many other elements of our sound culture.

I read Neelammahara's review of *Visala* before I heard the music and feared the worst. I thought that given its subject of recent disappearances, massacres and terror, it would inevitably fall into the familiar lyrical tone of

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sweet-sadness which seems to me to be the dominant style of Sinhalese songs. I feared that it would, alas, be in the somewhat sentimental mode of 'Anne puthe, Anne thatthe' genre that Neelammahara says it is in.

Perhaps because I was born and bred a Catholic and am therefore incurably 'western,' (at least according to the cultural code most familiar to me—the Sinhala cinema), I have often longed for something on a harsher register, something more sinewy in our songs. Or perhaps it is because 'my roots' (such as they are) may be found close to that part of Sri Lanka where "*kuliyata handeema*" (which Neelammahara accuses Visala of doing) is not unknown as a response to death. I find even what critics consider the best in Sinhalese music limited in mood and tone to one of sweet-sadness, sometimes verging on schmaltz², somewhat intolerable. If we had several other modes available as well, then this sweet-sadness would however not be quite so cloying.

To my surprise and pleasure, Visala operates both within and outside this familiar frame of reference. Quite often a line or a phrase that is sweetly sad is rendered in such a way that the sweet-sad effect is displaced and we are plunged into a register of irony that is very rare in our lyrics and use of voice. This refreshing shift in register is due to the lyrics, the instrumentation and Abeyesekera's voice (its tone and timbre). Is it the quality of the voice or the lyrics or both which strikes Neelammahara as "false" and "simple"? This is difficult to determine because there is hardly any detailed analysis of these specific components of the work. Neelammahara does say that Abeyesekera has a good voice which has in the past been used well in rendering Khemadasa's songs for example. But given the supposed trashy (*thorombol*) nature of Weerasingha's work, not even a good voice can redeem it, so Neelammahara asserts.

An Act of Maternal Mourning

As an Asian culture, we in Sri Lanka know the value of mourning, its absolute necessity for the living. In the West, people are now beginning to relearn how to mourn especially because of AIDS and the number of young lives it is claiming. In post war Germany, for example, certain cultural work, especially films, were made as "mourning works"—a term derived from Freud's work, *Mourning & Melancholia*. I am reminded here of the collective film, *Germany in Autumn*, made by several film makers including R.W. Fassbinder and Alexander Kluge, as a response to the autumn of extreme violence in Germany of the Bader-Meinhoff group and state terror. German sociologists have written work on the incapacity of Germans to mourn their catastrophic Fascist history and has called for the need for such an act.

Visala is an act of mourning especially from a maternal point of view and as such is important for us. Its anger, its generous vision of what life in Sri Lanka might be and its sardonic condemnation of the reign of terror introduce a range of feelings, tones and shadings to an expression of the maternal. It creates a maternal 'imaginary'³ that we sorely need. It is a fact of patriarchal culture that the

maternal has been powerfully and imaginatively drawn to fulfill its needs and desires. In this scheme of things, there is no maternal imaginary separate from that of male desires. Now that women and mothers have become articulate in the public domain as both women and mothers, there is the possibility of bringing the maternal into a new kind of symbolisation. Visala does just that. The entry of a male voice in a few of the songs adds another seductive, sensual dimension to the multiple registers in which the female voice operates. This collaboration between the sexes, in the interest of a maternal protest against our recent violent history, is exhilarating for these reasons. The maternal in the Sinhala cinema, for instance, is often a figure who supports tradition, the status quo. The maternal voice of Visala breaks with this and creates hope in a place and in a time where it is most difficult to sustain it. An essential means by which this feeling is created is via Abeyesekera's voice. It is a Sinhalese voice using a method of singing that I think of as being more Western—i. e., it uses several registers of the voice, both high and low and places in between (places I didn't think existed), so that the voice has a richer timbre, a greater density of texture than the traditional Sinhalese voice.

This technical skill enables several things to happen. It can rapidly shift gear so to speak, and thereby change speed, tempo and rhythm, it can in fact say something different to what the lyrics are saying. This is a complex operation that creates a dramatic effect and because of this the criticism of Visala as being simply populist is inadequate. The lyrics about '*Lakmavage Ekaye*' for example are populist sentiments, but how they are sung can and does effect a transformation.

Visala's modernity lies not only in its hybrid nature, but also in the fact that it invites us to listen attentively to its strategies, however tasteless it may sound to well-tuned ears. It also creates an auditory image of the maternal that is both historical and timely. Thus we are no longer in the time honoured space of the Eternal Mother. The title Visala referring to the famous ancient city on the point of collapse and the image of Patachara, the bereaved maternal woman of Buddhist scripture, are used as historical/mythical reference points so as to reclaim and redefine both our contemporary history and the myth of the maternal in a register of mourning.

Notes:

1. Musac - programmed music such as one hears in airports, shopping centres etc.
2. Schmaltz - sickly sentimental.
3. This is a psychoanalytic concept theorised by the French psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan. It means both a realm of images but also refers to an unconscious dimension of image registration. The term is being used in cultural studies as a way of thinking about how the mass-media creates our "natural" environment of images (for us) today (imaginary). Also the idea of a "social imaginary" is very suggestive for thinking about contemporary culture formed by audio/visual means. Suggestive because it taps into a realm of desire in a way that a torch-like "ideology" does not as well, it has a utopian dimension.