

WOMEN, SEXUALITY, THE CITY AND THE VILLAGE

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This article sets out to examine the attitudes towards the city, the village and sexuality as represented in the contemporary Sinhala cinema and the depiction of these attitudes in cinematic form, by engaging in a critical analysis of three Sinhala films - Mee Haraka (The Buffalo, 1994), Seilama (The City, 1993) and Maruthaya (The Storm, 1995) - which met with a wide range of responses both from critics and mainstream cinema audiences. Looking at some of the images and value systems being reproduced in all three films, I was reminded of certain images and value systems embedded in the early Sinhala cinema of the 50s and 60s.

As Laleen Jayamanne* has pointed out in great detail in her work on the Sinhala cinema, it was in the 50s that Sinhala cinema first began to attach a conceptual significance to the physical manifestations of human social organization that we call the village and the city. In the early phase, the definition of these two geographical locations was defined on celluloid in very simple terms. The village then symbolized all that was 'good' in the human persona, while the city was a symbol for all that was 'bad'. The village was honest and principled, while the city was sly and dishonest. At the same time, under the influence of contemporary political forces, the village became the epitome of all that was patriotic and national, while the city was the hide-out of the 'lackeys of the West'.

Woman played a key role in this reconstruction of ideals. The village woman was virtuous; the city woman was a vamp. The village woman was faithful and devoted while the city woman was fickle and faithless. Short hair and western dress were the physical/visual manifestations of all that was alien and non-national about the city woman, while the village woman symbolized the nascent nationhood of that time, tying her hair back in the traditional *Kondey* and wearing *saree* or half-*saree* (that peculiarly Sinhala dress invented for young women by their Sinhala leaders).

In behavior and attitudes towards sexuality too, the dichotomy between the village and the city was quite pronounced, and in keeping with the other differences set out above. The village was asexual; whatever sexual behavior was visible was reduced to lust, of necessity negatively portrayed. The city, on the other hand, was a hotbed of passion; city folk were ruled by lust; again negatively valued. The village woman was a devoted wife, the city woman a temptress. The village woman was a sexual non-being; she was only the object of male passion, submitting mindlessly to male desire. The city woman, at least some of the time, was seen as a sexually active person who would even take the initiative on occasion. I suppose one could say that these characteristics are quite crudely set out and are broad generalizations. However, when one looks at the act of filmmaking from the point of view of the role it plays in the construction of ideology, writings on the cinema all over the world point to the fact that the presentation and representation of the twin

phenomena of city and village in much the same way as I have outlined above is a significant feature of a still evolving cinema.

In the Sinhala cinema of the past half century, one can also discern the political subtext of the categorization of village and city as good vs bad. At a historical moment when the major political contradiction was defined in terms of national and non-national, the village comes to the forefront as the form of social organization that is the embodiment of the 'national' identity.

If one looks at films made during a period of transition, one can clearly see the way the value system set out above is reproduced. We can recognize this as a tendency which is shaped by political as well as social needs of the age.

The Buffalo is a film by I N Hewawasam. The buffalo referred to in the title could be the young man who is the protagonist in the film. Whether he is mentally retarded or simply the typical village buffoon remains unclear throughout the film. If he is the second, this too would be an indicator of the attitude towards a village mentality. The narrative of the film tells us about this young man's attempts to deal with his emerging sexual desires, which predictably end in disaster.

Interestingly, the asexual character of this film village is challenged not only from outside - from the city men who mislead the young man with liquor, pornography and drugs - but from within, by the father who abandons his family in order to take a new wife and by the schoolmaster whose speech is littered with sexual innuendo. The fact that it is two symbolic patriarchs - father and teacher - who display these breaches of 'acceptable behavior needs to be taken into consideration as well. Both older men are able to exercise a great deal of control over the young man, Gunapala. Faced with their authority and power, he is debilitated; all he has left is the sexual desire which consumes him from within.

It is the city which shows Gunapala how his sexual desires may be satisfied. And it is the conductor of a bus that regularly crosses their village who becomes the conduit through which Gunapala can sell his wares (of course, at a very exploitative and cheap rate). Through it he receives pornographic literature which inflames his senses, later liquor and finally heroin. (A further interesting point to explore would be the role played by motor vehicles in both The Buffalo and The City in bringing the city to the village, and the powers ascribed to the men who drive such vehicles.)

The obviously town-bred female schoolteacher who comes to teach in the village school is a further extension of the illusion of city life as perceived by the buffalo. She walks, dresses, smiles, smells just as he always imagined the women in the porn magazines did. She

becomes a mirage, something to pursue relentlessly, only to find it vanish in front of his eyes. The young man spies on her as she blatantly flirts with her boyfriend who visits her and his desire for her knows no bounds. Yet, when he finally tries to sexually assault her, he is unable to consummate the act. The broken sexual dream signals the beginning of the end of Gunapala.

The village in *The Buffalo* is by no means the traditional village. Rather than rural innocence, what unfolds before the viewer is a people oppressed by the vagaries of life; mutual hostility, and not peaceful collective living is what emerges as the dominant form of human social intercourse. The city is in the traditional frame. One never sees *The Buffalo* city; one only encounters the destructive elements that emerge from it.

Sexual expression in the film is dependent on male action. Gunapala, his father and the teacher - all three village males - express their sexual feelings quite openly. But in reproducing the female figure that stimulates male desire, the film falls into the old mould and depicts woman's body in a very sexually objectified way. Hewawasam uses a tactic in order to do this. (It is not clear whether this is because there is no female in the film whose body could be displayed other than the school teacher, or whether in fact, the director's objective was indeed to show us the objectification of the female form.) The camera becomes a secondary lens, showing us, sometimes in close-up, what another cameraman shooting nudes for pornographic magazines has photographed earlier. Thus, the visual comes to us third-hand, as it were, with camera acting as intermediary.

What is clear is that the filmmaker attempts to break down some of the traditions relating to the portrayal of human sexuality in the Sinhala cinema. The way he focuses on three village men, who all openly display their sexual feelings and practices, poses a challenge to the old stereo-types of the village as pastoral paradise. The film shows us the young man masturbating, representing this act in a way that allows the viewer to sense the tensions created in him because of his burgeoning sexual desire. It portrays the conflict between his desire and his inability to force himself on the object of his desire. It exposes the tragedy of the youthful libido.

The film also speaks to us about the difficulties of engaging in any kind of sexual exploration or experimentation in a village setting; it presents a sharp image of what would be considered a typically 'attractive' woman (she is like someone in a soap or shampoo advertisement) and addresses the issue of the crude expressions of sexual desire in a setting in which the issue of sex and sexuality is down played, silenced, ignored. However, trying to touch on new faces of the representation of village, city and sexuality, Hewawasam fails to be consistent in his approach. True, the village in *The Buffalo* is not traditionally a 'pure' village. It is the epitome of underdevelopment, dominated by poverty and ignorance. The city turns up in order to resolve these problems - to the city's advantage, of course. But only that which is negative and destructive comes from the city. He is burned to death, along with his collection of pornographic literature. We are left with a final image of everything going up in flames, as if Gunapala was consumed by the flames of his sexual desire.

H.D. Premaratne, director of *The City*, has also focused on the complexities of male-female relationships in our society. The film shows how a rural marriage is ripped apart under the city's influence. A couple, poor but reasonably happy, live in an underprivileged dry zone village. Their relationship is affectionate and lively. The family succumbs to the advice of a lorry driver who comes to the village from the city looking for timber. His proposals on how they could improve their life by setting up a small shop in their home create tension and dissension within the family and the village. The frequent visits of the lorry driver and his friends bring liquor and drugs to the village; the woman is sexually harassed by some of the city men. Ultimately, the man immolates himself in the shop. Faced with the destruction of everything significant in her life except for her son, the woman has no choice but to accept the lorry driver's offer of help. She goes to the city. The village is introduced to city life and is finally destroyed by it.

The village in *The City* is as unreal as the one in *The Buffalo*. We never see any 'normal' village activity. It is only through conversations between the husband and wife that we get any impression of what life in that village is like. However, in terms of attitude towards sex and sexuality *The City* takes some innovative steps. For example, Premaratne introduces a scene in which the husband and wife make love in the jungle, hinting at some degree of openness with regard to sex within the village community. However here too the woman is merely the object of male passion; there is no mutuality about the sexual expression. The second expression of sexual behavior represents the conflict between the city and the village, when the village woman becomes a victim of the lust of city men. Here, the woman falls into the time-honored role of 'victim'. The third episode comes after the village woman has come to the city; the lorry driver has no inhibitions about making love to her in cramped quarters, with the neighbors able to listen in, while she is plagued by taboos that form a part of her rural baggage. In this instance too she submits to the male desire. The fourth instance is the only one in which she takes the initiative. Faced with growing despair with the situation in the slums in which she lives, the woman decides to take to the streets as a prostitute herself, in an attempt to finely fit in with her new husband's world. Of course, to the uninitiated this is the surest path to disaster. *The City* ends with her lament at falling prey to a gang of men who illtreat her mercilessly. Throughout the film, male desire for the female can be seen as a strong motivating factor in all that takes place; yet this female sexuality is framed as essentially one of subordination, in which the female does not have an opportunity to express herself free of compulsion.

A refreshing feature of *The City* is the way in which it attempts to show us slum life and slum dwellers with a 'human face.' The characters Premaratne brings to life on screen are real people; however here too the women are depicted mainly as dependents of male sexual desire.

The Storm, by Vasantha Obeysekera, is the only one of the three being discussed that focuses on a middle class family. The narrative takes us through a period in history in which the scion of a feudal family takes to politics, is victorious at first and then destroyed, financially and personally, because of electoral defeat. Faced with

the collapse of their world, the mother and two daughters of the family take to dispensing sexual favours for money. The film is an indictment of bourgeois hypocrisy in every sphere of life - economic, political, social and sexual - and criticizes the tendency to live for the sake of appearances and the double standards of bourgeois morality.

Structuring itself around the subtext of the narrative which is about attitudes towards female sexuality in contemporary Sri Lankan society, *The Storm* sets out to explore the many ways in which women are exploited sexually and socially. The village in the film is one riven by class and caste divisions. The middle-class people in this social stratum give primacy to doing what is socially acceptable, maintaining a facade of normalcy which is false and dishonest. After the death of the politico, his widow and daughters are left with nothing with which they can negotiate life except their bodies. Much of the criticism of the film was on this point: that the film makes it seem as if women have *no* option but to sell their bodies. In the film, these women have no skills except their social graces and because of class-based constraints cannot find employment in a factory or in service.

The transition of the three women from 'normal' bourgeois females to street-wise hustlers is skillfully handled. The mother first agrees to barter her sexual favours for money when she discovers that other avenues of employment are closed to her: her decision is based on her desire to maintain a standard of living for her daughters close to what they were used to. She is shown as 'choosing' this path in circumstances in which she really had no choice. The rationale on which both daughters enter the profession is more complicated. They are ostracized because of their mother's actions; adapting to city life more easily than their mother does, they affirm their marginalisation by choosing to engage in prostitution at a different level. They are high-class 'call girls,' while the mother is seen to be soliciting on the streets and at bus stops. The daughters' act is one of defiance of their background - their social circle - and they too go their different ways. The younger one decides to quit and marries a foreigner; the elder one stays on, becoming a 'madam,' owning and running a call-girl service. In the conversations between the two sisters, a whole range of moral issues are raised about what they do and why they do it, and these conversations too constitute a part of the film's critique of the double standards of bourgeois morality.

The village and the city in *The Storm* (a film about the complexities of sexual exploitation in contemporary society) are equally hypocritical. The villagers react to the women with hostility. Although the response in the city is not so overtly depicted, it is clear that the women are not socially 'acceptable' and have to face harassment, including from the police and the law. However, pointing to the way in which prostitution continues to be a part of life in this society, and also highlighting the ways and means in which it is accommodated at every level in society, the film clearly expresses distaste for the double standards that discriminate against women who engage in commercial sex. *The Storm* is a strong argument for a sympathetic understanding of commercial sex work and its workers, framing its arguments against a context in which the commodification of the

female body is an accepted thing and in which men buy sexual favours and let the women who provide them with the service be punished. Many of the critics who described *The Storm* as a justification for prostitution fell into the trap of hypocrisy themselves.

The portrayal of the village, the city and female sexuality in these three films makes it clear that the modern Sinhala cinema has been unable to shake off some of the prejudices and stereotypes which were obvious in Sinhala films of 50 years ago. Although shots of pastoral bliss, of harvesting and of picking flowers in reservoirs and so on are perhaps missing today, 'the village' continues to exist as a symbol of all that is good in life. 'The city' remains, at a symbolic level, the root of all evil.

The attitude towards female sexuality is also largely unchanged. The village woman is virtuous, while the city woman demonstrates a little more independence in her behavior. However, in the final analysis, they are both subject to male domination and female sexuality can only be played out against male desire.

Part of the motivation in writing this piece was to reflect on the ways in which social, economic and political changes that have taken place in Sri Lanka over the past ten or fifteen years are - or, as the case may be, are not - reproduced in the popular Sinhala cinema. The pastoral idyll is history in contemporary Sri Lanka. Instead, what we have to confront in the rural region is a society riven by demands of modernization and the world market, a society in which more and more farmers are losing their land, and are being transformed into agricultural labour. In the same way, while the city is no doubt full of destructive forces and corruption, it also remains the central point from which leadership in political, spiritual and ideological spheres flows to the rest of the country.

In the changing world, the old standards about female behavior, in particular female sexual behavior, cannot remain unchallenged. Many women travel outside their homes, their villages, even the country, to seek employment. They are free to explore their sexuality in ways which would otherwise have remained closed to them. There are thousands of young women who have been widowed due to political violence. They pose a tremendous challenge to tradition. The rapid spread of AIDS, more than any other phenomenon, is pushing people to be more honest and open about their sexual behavior and practices. When one considers all these factors, I strongly feel that filmmakers in contemporary Sinhala cinema have not yet grasped the range of the process of transformation taking place in all spheres of our society - social, economic and political; nor have they been able to reflect on this process creatively and cinematically. This is the challenge that faces them today.

*. Laleen Jayamanne, "The Role of Women in Sri Lankan Cinema 1974-1979". Unpublished Ph. D. thesis presented to New South Wales University, 1982.