
DHARMASENA PATHIRAJA'S *MATHU YAM DAWASA*: SOME REFLECTIONS

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They accidentally run into each other at the railway station. Together they both dream of travel, adventure, romance and prosperity. They do not wait too long for that dream to turn into seeming reality. As they wait in the ramshackle makeshift room belonging to Lionel, one of the two male protagonists, in the slums of Colombo, the lackey of a political big wig comes with a mission. From being marginal underworld figures, they quickly move centre stage, as political violence rapidly engulfs the entire country. They perform the task of eliminating the political opponents of powerful politicians. But in turn they become part of the hunted. They become part of a tale of intrigue, suspense and corruption. They are scapegoated like the women around them, like the Tamil lodger from the north, awaiting his passport to arrive. They move on from house to house, place to place, woman to woman seeking refuge, escape on one side and power and prosperity on the other. But wherever they go they are confronted with the violence of their own making. Lionel tries to transcend this condition by dreaming of power, through masculinity, by claiming the woman on the road, by desiring beautiful and wealthy women. Dhammika returns to the village longing for the past. The story unfolds in a rapid succession of events, where their personal story of desire and longing is acted out in the backdrop of a culture roller coasting toward disaster and tragedy.

Cinematic Idiom

The basic structure of the story is that of cops and robbers, but with one crucial difference. There are no victors or victims here. The film is evocative of the political violence that has engulfed Sri Lankan societies from the mid '80s onwards. The popular and the avant-garde are mixed together in this film, resulting in a thriller, comedy and tragedy at one and the same time. The deceptively simple narrative dynamically describes the land of violence, its national boundaries and international aspirations. It forges a cinematic idiom that intersects with the multicultural, the idyllic, the popular, the urban and a global cultural economy.

This review is an initial battling with rather undeveloped thoughts on the film. As a practitioner of the Performing Arts, theatre in particular, my interest in film is largely that of the politics of the semiotic, its praxis. But theorizing within the space of the review is not easy. I may be writing rather difficultly while I try to theorize and dwell on the semiotic possibilities of *Mathu Yam Dawasa*. This is also complicated by my own positioning within the larger narrativity of the text-audience space and its multiple possibilities.

I have seen *Mathu Yam Dawasa* several times in the past few months. I also occupy, in my view, the advantageous position of not understanding Sinhala too well. Thus, my gaze is uncluttered by having to make sense of the dominant linguistic paradigm—the language frame, although the aural is very much part of the film and its visuality. My gaze is rather indulgent of the visual, enabling a particular consciousness of the semiotic. Also, my relatively marginal position enables me to enter the film through the marginal rather than through the central narrative mode. Given the difficult layering of my own position and the different directions it pulls me in, what I am going to say may sound unduly abstract and theoretical. Yet, I find the very diffusion of thought important and engaging and hope that it will lead us into a productive dialogue, not only on *Mathu Yam Dawasa*, but also on semiotics, politics and ideologies in general.

On Marginality

Pathiraja is one of the most controversial Sri Lankan filmmakers today. The controversy arises not so much from what he says as how he says it. He has attempted in film after film to look for the new and the unfamiliar. He also has a knack for taking on marginality, the unusual, and turning it into an event of the everyday. This has firmly placed him within the tradition of the avant-garde. In this film, he does something which he has rarely done before and thereby breaks with his own tradition and cinematic conventions. In *Mathu Yam Dawasa*, he draws upon the popular narrative of the road/buddy movie, the thriller and action film, the conventional male idiom of violence, heroism and bravura. He takes on the popular and even the populist here. Instead of turning all of these on their head as the modernist narrative should typically do, he teases out these elements of the popular; not to dislodge them from their privileged position, but to place them on a political terrain and to infuse into the popular a politics of engagement. This he does through a narrative and idiom of the gaze.

This is the radical positioning of the film. It locates politics firmly within cultural politics, ideologies of nation and land, of class and sexuality. Eschewing deliberate irony, the film attempts to politicize what we normally take to be issues of the everyday. From taking on the centres of power and political maneuvering, it effortlessly moves to the periphery, overturning our expectations about the centre/periphery dichotomy. Alas, politics is too often understood as the arena of politicians. But *Mathu Yam Dawasa* does its utmost

to question that. In bringing matters of what we have taken to be the politics of the politicians and that of the ordinary and the everyday together, the film becomes searingly political about the everyday, about ourselves and our locations.

While the ideological positions that the film adopts and spreads out warrant extended analysis, it is the form of the film (which in actuality cannot be divorced from content at all) that I find most intriguing. The film does not attempt to disengage from the popular at any time, but remains self-conscious of its narrativity throughout. It is self-conscious of its inter-textuality. This is where a formal tension breaks through the monolith of the populist idiom, the signification of popular melodrama. We get at least a partial meaning of the film through this sense of inter-textuality. We have in the film the language of the unauthorized, the non-author. Yet undercutting the operations of the popular, the film moves toward the language of the "auteur"—the authority of the director. In that sense, *Mathu Yam Dawasa* is an "auteur" film. It is an "auteur" film made in the language of the unauthored and the unauthorized, the language of the apparatus, mediated through certain operations of technology.

Does he trick us then? The film is saved from self-absorption and indulgent deception by continually pushing the envelope of "form," by stretching itself outward into the open, crossing boundaries between genres, moving between different ideological constructs. Ultimately, the film's commitment to breaking down the walls not only formally but also politically makes the form of the film dynamic. It is a form of *emergence* and not of boundedness that the film uses. It is this emergence that makes one leave the theatre in a state of shock and silence, pondering issues that were not necessarily unfamiliar to us before or have been made unfamiliar (the formalist endeavour) by formal innovation, but extra-ordinary issues that have been remade as the ordinary, the everyday and the personal.

Desire

Desire is the driving force of the film. Its resonance is everywhere in the film. The film's meanings are mediated through an erotic idiom of desire. Desire activates the two protagonists to go in search of literally greener pastures. But at the same time, the film's textuality too activates a trajectory of desire in the viewer. This desire is both violent and loving. It is also sensuous in drawing us to contemplate the visual. For instance, when the slums of Colombo come into view with sudden force, it is shockingly contrasted with the sterile polish of the shopping Mall. But here too desire mediates the shift; the desire to intimidate a female body of obvious upper-class belongingness. Sunila Abeyasekara points this out in her analysis of the film in *Cinesith*, about the intersection of class, gender and sexuality. I shall build up on this. In the film, sexuality and desire have a linguistic force that extends into the way the cinematic narrative itself is constructed. When the two underworld characters plunge into their adventure, the entire political world attains a socio-erotic and sexual

dimension that is carried through to its logical end in the many liaisons the two men have with the women in the film. Class and sexuality are mediating factors of desire as land and space get described and desired in ways that are deeply ideological. Within all of this, meaning-making becomes a political act.

The film is inexorably of land. It describes the contours of land; the film's probing investigative narrative traverses land episodically and in leaps and bounds that not only describes its contours but also 'deconstructs' the linearity of the investigative model. This formal tension and oxymoronic ambience is an underpinning force in the film. If desire is a linear, imperialist and masculine force, then its continual deferral and destruction results not in the binary opposite of the former, but in a visceral sense of dislocation: the dislocation of the protagonists and of the viewer.

I look at *Mathu Yam Dawasa* in new ways, ways that perhaps many will not even identify as possibilities. This may have to do with where I am positioned, as a Tamil woman engaged in theorizing the ethnic conflict. The film is generally looked at in terms of the violence, the stark realistic content that many people are interested in looking at. In Sri Lanka the predominant approach to film is one negotiated through content analysis. What one may call in semiotic terms, the referential register. The referential register in this case is that of the violence of the late '80s, the period of terror, as it has been widely labeled. While the war, the ethnic war, has taken centre stage as subject for films of the purportedly alternative (*Saroja*, *Purahanda Kaluwara*, *Me Maghe Sandhai* come to mind), the period of terror has only been scantily dealt with.

Ethnic Conflict

The ethnic conflict has been around for a long time, from even the turn of the century, one may say, in slightly different forms. The militant (military) version of the conflict has been slowly growing in momentum from the mid-'70s. Today there is a full-scale war on. This war over territory leading to civil war, and guerrilla warfare, has been a very crucial part of the everyday for a long time now. From checkpoints in Colombo to bunkers and total ruination in the north and east, displaced people caught in-between, the war has become one of the most crucial existential signifiers of belonging, location and dislocation. The ethnic conflict has unleashed violence all around, giving rise to terrorism and counter-terrorism, a long drawn-out period of terror. Terror for the Tamils and Muslims all over, terror for those engaged in combat, those in the borderland of all communities, including the Sinhallas. There is also the terror of the bomb, the suicide bomber and others. The country has been engulfed in this kind of terror for many years. In '88-'89, in southern Sri Lanka, the large region outside of the north, terror was unleashed by insurgents contesting the state and by the state in countering that terror. This is part of the memory of the Southern Sinhala youth specifically and of the people generally. In many accounts, this period of terror, of death squads and knocks on the door in the wee hours of the morning, is bracketed out of

the ethnic conflict, although the triggering cause of the violence itself was the signing of the Indo-Lanka Accord. The war and this particular period of terror have been kept apart. Again in a similar turn, the politics of the ethnic conflict and the war are kept apart in many accounts.

Both at the popular and theoretical levels, the ethnic conflict and the war have been seen by most as revolving around the nation and its viability on the one hand, and on the other, the period of terror as a subversion that has arisen from within the nation. The rhetoric of the JVP and the state has contributed to this view not a little. As I sat back in my chair, watching the tracing of violence in *Mathu Yam Dawasa*, I was slowly drawn into a realization of the significance of how violence is drawn in terms of questioning 'land' as an essential feature of belonging and rootedness. When the film moves from the late '80s to the late '90s or so, one is stirred by the collapsing of different time spans into an overarching spatiality. Within this space traversed by the film, rootedness, location and displacement become signifiers of what the nation means today. This quest and questioning, which turn time into space, show up essence as a construct and underscore the displacement and dislocation that has been brought about by violence. This violence is not only that of the politicians. It is a violence of our very being.

Is the film then about the ethnic conflict as much as about the violence in the South? It is not. In fact the film does not dwell deeply enough on that area of violence. It skirts the issue only. But the cinematic inscription of violence in the body of the text has far-reaching possibilities. This is why I see the film as a text about the new millennium as much as about the late '80s. This is also why the film signifies on the nation as much as on land. By destroying the stability of land, the film questions the stability of the nation too. And all of this is done through a certain cinematic

identification with the marginal protagonists who are slightly but brilliantly drawn. They are dislocated too and find rest only in their violent deaths. But death touches many and stalks the whole land. Death here is violently drawn. Death in the film becomes closely identified with the visual; a stark and relentless search for life discovers only death in the visual narrative. One finds disruption throughout. It is a feeling of uncertainty about everything, even about the film.

Non-Literary Narrative

Pathiraja's forte is his non-literary grasp of the visual medium. He is a non-philosophical film-maker. The break with literary forms of narrative is underlined in this grasp. At the same time, he tries to break free of the avant-garde as well and tries to develop a narrativity that is free of 'gimmicks.' The cinematography of *Mathu Yam Dawasa* largely rests on an outmoded classical Hollywood style, mixed with neo-realist/avant-garde forms. The film avoids the romantic in composition, even when it plays with it, flirts with the genre of the romance. It subverts the dramatic too by insisting on that basic distance between camera and object. It avoids both social and psychological realism by emphasizing a drama of surface realism that derives its visual pleasures from a movement through a surface space of action. I say pleasure decidedly. The pleasures of the visual and the gaze are ingrained in the surface of the film. But again, this surface space constructs reality. But this reality is manufactured and mediated by all of the technological apparatus available to the medium and to our apprehension of the world itself. The film's self-consciousness about this construction lies at the heart of its double-edged verve. It finally displaces our knowledge-base and our structures of thought into an inability to comprehend and embrace reality. Eventually, we recognize ourselves and others in the inevitable conclusion that violence leads us into.

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