

# No substitute for thoughtful character development

This is My Moon, written and directed by Asoka Handagama

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*This is My Moon*, Sri Lankan director Asoka Handagama's third feature film, explores the impact of the free market economy and the 19-year civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on village life. Released in 2000, it won India's Cinefan Award for best film of the year, "special mention" prizes at the Singapore and Tokyo film festivals last year and been favourably received at other international festivals.

Serious filmmakers in Sri Lanka confront numerous financial barriers in order to practise their art. Commenting on the production and distributions costs for *Lunar Mermaid*, his first film, Handagama told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "To satisfy our objectives, at least to a certain extent in the prevailing system, Sri Lankan filmmakers have to spend at least 2 million rupees in post-production costs. We found it very difficult to locate a financier prepared to spend this amount and simply could not afford it ourselves."

To make *This is My Moon* the director had to take out a personal loan and raised funds from friends. This was not enough, however, to finance production of multiple cinema copies of the film and so Handagama decided to produce only one screening copy and to organise individual showings where he personally appeared. This approach, he said, was a "fine experience" because it meant he could answer questions and discuss the movie in detail with audiences.

To appreciate Handagama's film it helps to understand some of the changes in Sri Lankan village life over the past two decades. Small-scale agricultural production, already in crisis, was plunged into the abyss in the 1980s following the introduction of the "open economy" and the abolition of government subsidies to small farmers. The chief victims were the rural masses who were driven into abject poverty. Unemployment reached record levels and thousands of farmers abandoned the land, many committing suicide.

Lacking alternative employment, many rural youth joined the army following the outbreak of fighting between the

government and the LTTE in 1983. At the same time, local and international capital, particularly garment manufacturers, began investing in rural and urban areas to take advantage of cheap labour. Many young women found jobs in the new garment factories; others fell victim to criminal elements and became involved in prostitution and drug abuse. These developments, which began to break apart traditional social relations in Sri Lankan villages, form the backdrop to *This is My Moon*.

The film opens with the sudden appearance of a Tamil girl (Dilhani Asokamala) in a small Sri Lankan army bunker caught in a fierce night battle with the LTTE. The only soldier (Saumya Liyanage) in the bunker points his gun at the terrified young woman who raises her skirt to her face in fear. Sexually aroused, the soldier rapes her. After two nights with her, he throws away his gun and returns to his poverty-stricken village. The girl follows him, some distance behind.

While the appearance of the Tamil girl does not visibly shock the soldier's parents, his fiancé (Anoma Janadari) is jealous and concerned about her now uncertain future. The girl's presence also threatens to disrupt other relations within the village and so the sole local Buddhist cleric suggests that she be placed in a refugee camp. While the soldier, his brother (Linton Semage) and their parents agree, the girl vehemently protests and runs away. When the brother gives chase and corners her, she responds by lifting her dress. He rapes the young woman and abandons plans to place her in a refugee settlement. Later the army, acting on a tip-off from the fiancé, captures the deserting soldier and returns him to the barracks.

In another scene, the Tamil girl is harassed by a drunken local youth and seeks refuge in the local temple. She is raped again, this time by the Buddhist priest, who flees the scene. The soldier's brother, who is also the village race bookie, is ordained into the clergy and takes over the temple.

Eventually, the now pregnant Tamil girl is accepted by the

soldier's family and has the baby. Returning to the village for the funeral of another local soldier, the original deserter sees the Tamil woman holding an infant girl—his own daughter—and is smitten. His face blooms with pleasure at the blissful giggle of the child. The words *This is My Moon* splash across the screen and the film ends.

Not surprisingly, Sinhala-Buddhist moralists have denounced Handagama, who is well known for his frank explorations of the changing sexual relations in Sri Lanka and the cultural poverty of village life. These critics claim he denigrates the “real” moral values of Sri Lankan rural life.

A *Sunday Island* writer, under the pen name Nan, for example, was outraged by the film's portrayal of the local cleric. “He looked evil, overbearing and never led his villagers or morally supported them as we know monks in the threatened villages did and do.” Handagama, according to this writer, was falsely “tar brushing all Buddhist monks” and that was “blasphemy”.

Other reviewers have rejected this narrow-minded approach, claiming the film heralds a new dawn. Tissa Abeseykara, chairman of Sri Lanka's National Film Corporation, declared that *This is My Moon* would “take Sinhala cinema into the new millennium”. This sort of overblown praise, however, is not helpful and eschews an objective critique of the film's artistic truth.

At first glance, *This is My Moon* has a new air. It deals with complex and controversial subject matter and Handagama has created some potent visual imagery. Unfortunately the director seems preoccupied almost exclusively with these visual forms to the detriment of thoughtful character and plot development. Events depicted are not convincing and the characters make almost no emotional impact. Handagama has assembled a talented cast but their performances are limited by the narrow scope and static nature of the film itself.

Handagama is no doubt looking for new cinematic methods, but superficial impressions and rather self-conscious image making have disrupted the artistic balance between form and content. True, there is no idyllic village life as claimed by Sinhala-Buddhist moralists, but this has to be depicted accurately and in a way that allows real life to make itself felt.

The main male character, the soldier, is not credible. Despite his poor village origins, he is cold and indifferent to the problems confronting his family and friends. Nor is there any indication that he cares about the thousands who have lost their lives on the battlefield or are suffering from the war. At one point he directly addresses the camera: “What is this war for?” “For the sake of it,” he says, and then asks, “Why do we kill?” Again he replies, “For the sake of it.”

These cynical answers do not ring true.

There are numerous sexual liaisons but none of these illuminate the inner lives of those involved. Countless issues are raised but not explored. Take, for example, the Tamil girl's behaviour in front of her adversaries. Why does she raise her skirt? Does she want to show her naked figure and survive through the violation of her sexual feelings? Does she hide her face out of fear? No real answers are provided.

One of the secondary characters in the film, a young village woman whose husband has been killed on the frontline, could have been an important component in the story. Still in her youth, she needs love and physical intimacy, but is dependent on an army pension to survive. If she remarries she will lose the allowance. Condemned to remain a widow under the law in order to maintain a steady income, her soul is empty. None of this is explored artistically. The terrible conflict in her life is consigned to one scene where she embraces and kisses the deserter in an uncontrollable sexual urge.

Despite these weaknesses, *This is My Moon* demonstrates that Handagama has positive qualities as an artist. Most contemporary filmmakers ignore critical social developments or show little concern with the human problems created by them. Handagama, by contrast, has a genuine interest in these issues and gives voice to his dissatisfaction with prevailing dramatic techniques by searching for new cinematic forms. One feels that Handagama, whether consciously or unconsciously, recognises the need for more humane social relations.

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