

# Prasanna Vithanage's *With You, Without You*: The human impact of Sri Lanka's communal war

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*Written and directed by Prasanna Vithanage*

The latest feature film by Sri Lankan filmmaker Prasanna Vithanage, *With You, Without You* (*Oba Nethuwa Oba Ekka*) is a remarkable attempt to portray the emotional anguish of the Tamil and Sinhala masses produced by Sri Lanka's protracted civil war, which ended in May 2009.

In two earlier films, *Purahanda Kaluwara* (*Death on a Full Moon Day*, 1997) and *Ira Mediyama* (*August Sun*, 2003), Vithanage also explored the tragic fate inflicted on the population by the war.

The three decade-long civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was a direct result of the discrimination carried out against the island's Tamil minority by the various governments in Colombo that held power in the aftermath of so-called "independence" in 1947. The Sri Lankan regimes used the war as the main means of dividing Tamil and Sinhala workers.

As a result of the war, more than 100,000 people were killed and tens of thousands forced to flee their homes. The Sri Lankan military committed countless war crimes against the Tamil people. During the final phase of the conflict, 40,000 were killed and 300,000 incarcerated in military-controlled camps.

Only a handful of Sri Lankan artists, including Vithanage, have had the courage to expose this crime against humanity. All of them have confronted government victimisation, including censorship of their art works related to the war. Vithanage's movie *Purahanda Kaluwara* was banned for several years by former President Chandrika Kumaratunga's government, which claimed that it would adversely affect recruitment into the Sri Lankan armed forces.

Vithanage's latest effort, *With You, Without You*, has won a number of significant international awards, including the Cyclo d'Or and NETPAC (Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema) awards at the 2013 Vesoul (France) International Film Festival of Asian Cinema. The film was also chosen as an official selection at various international

film festivals, including Moscow, Vancouver and Brisbane, but has not yet been released in Sri Lanka.

*With You, Without You* is based on *A Gentle Creature* (1876), the novella by Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. The story has inspired five previous film adaptations, including a Soviet version directed by Aleksandr Borisov in 1960 and another by French filmmaker Robert Bresson in 1969.

The novella recounts the troubled relationship (based on an item in a newspaper that Dostoyevsky came across) between a pawnbroker, dominated by the need to accumulate wealth, and his young bride.

Vithanage has creatively adapted the novella's themes to the context of Sri Lanka's communal war, giving the story an added dimension.

Sarathsiri (Shyam Fernando), the central male character in *With You, Without You*, is a Sinhalese pawnbroker whose business is located in a small town in Sri Lanka's Central Hills, where Tamil tea plantation workers live. He has little sympathy for his poor clientele.

Selvi (Anjali Patil), a beautiful young Tamil girl, regularly visits the pawnbroker in order to exchange her much-loved jewellery for the resources she needs to assist her impoverished relatives. He invariably pays her special attention. Selvi is from the war-torn Northern Province, her worried parents having sent her to the Central Hills to protect her from the army's violence. Now she lives with a family of plantation workers. Sarathsiri later weds Selvi.

When the new bride learns that her husband had been a member of the Sri Lankan army, the same army responsible for so many crimes against the Tamils, she plunges into an intense state of emotional turmoil. Indeed, the knowledge of his past sets off a series of ultimately tragic events, which follow in their general outline the trajectory of Dostoyevsky's story.

The final scene provokes profound distress, as well as compassion, in the viewer. At the same time, the audience is

compelled to seriously evaluate the chain of events that has led to the drama's painful climax.

Vithanage's film argues that human passion cannot be narrowed or confined along ethnic or communal lines. Selvi is a cultured young woman looking for a fulfilling life. She represents a challenge both to Sarathsiri, who is driven by money and ethnic and patriarchal backwardness, and to the moral values of a society dominated by such reactionary conceptions.

Given an opportunity to start afresh, Selvi tries to forget her earlier sufferings and to embrace life. She lavishes Sarathsiri with love and affection, while fixing her large eyes, filled with sympathy, on him. Vithanage successfully makes the viewer feel the depth of emotion between Selvi and Sarathsiri whenever they are honest and candid with one another.

The Tamil minority experienced the harshest consequences of the war. Selvi's parents have been killed and the Sri Lankan army murdered her two brothers, just school children, calling them LTTE suspects.

Selvi says that she feels the impact of the war differently to the Sinhalese and angrily challenges Sarathsiri, "How many Tamils did you kill when you were in the army?" She continues: "How many [Tamil] girls were raped? How much gold was stolen?" Selvi directs her questions at Sarathsiri, but for the viewer, *With You, Without You* is indicting the Sri Lankan ruling elite on behalf of the suffering Tamil population.

In this way, Vithanage punctures the ongoing lies of the Rajapakse regime and the media, whose primary mission is to cover up the war crimes that were committed against hundreds of thousands of ordinary people during the bloody conflict.

The point is powerfully driven home in a scene where the young couple arrive home after their marriage. Selvi is holding her suitcase and Sarathsiri switches on the television, which is broadcasting a military parade celebrating Rajapakse's so-called war victory. The announcers savour the military triumph.

Mockingly, Sarathsiri asks Selvi, who symbolises the experiences of the Tamil masses in the war, in which he participated, "What's that precious thing you're carrying?" Selvi's brief answer, "My clothes!" brings home the reality that, in many cases, the war destroyed virtually everything that many Tamils possessed.

Conscious of the damage inflicted during the conflict, Sarathsiri is remorseful and wants to bury all memory of his misdeeds during the conflict. The former soldier hopes to somehow find relief from these horrors by telling his young wife something of his experiences during the war. The film, in fact, offers some sympathy for the rural Sinhala youth,

most of whom were dragooned into the army by unemployment and poverty.

Demonstrating his cinematic skills, Vithanage symbolically uses the upper-floor window of the pawnbroker's small home as a gateway to the existing society. While Sarathsiri and Selvi both view the world through this window, they perceive two different, even opposed, realities. Sarathsiri fails to see or hear the lush greenery, the sun's morning rays or the birds singing, but only a plot of land that he hopes to buy one day. Expanding his wealth is his sole objective. Selvi, who is profoundly traumatised by the war, stares at the horizon for hours through the same window.

As in the Dostoyevsky original, the young wife considers desperate action when she learns about her husband's activities in the military (in the novella, the pawnbroker-husband has left his regiment in a disgraceful manner). Dostoevsky spends a good deal of time explaining the husband's complex mental reaction to his wife's behaviour. For her part, the wife subsequently feels profound guilt when she learns that her husband knew of her violent plans and nonetheless treated her lovingly. Her remorse only deepens her depression.

In Vithanage's recreation of these scenes, however, the viewer is never certain whether Sarathsiri knows of Selvi's designs against him or not. If the filmmaker had presented this episode in a more concrete manner, one might have had a more complex understanding of her feelings of guilt and how they powerfully contribute to the final tragedy.

In any event, Vithanage's *With You, Without You* arouses in the viewer an overflowing compassion for the young woman and the Tamil people as a whole, as well as for the Sinhala youth forced into the military by economic circumstances. It powerfully reveals how all of them are victims of the brutal war. Without question, the film's viewers will long remember the skilled and moving performances of Anjali Patil and Shyam Fernando.

*The authors also recommend:*

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[25 September 2001]

Sri Lankan military threatens antiwar filmmakers  
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