



Reading the 'Silent' Space: Background Setting of the Post-1990 Sri Lankan Art Cinema as an Expression of Socio-Cultural Silence¹

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the distinctive silence seen in the background spaces of selected Sri Lankan films, produced in the post-1990 era, namely: Asoka Handagama's *This is My Moon* (2000), Prasanna Vithanage's *Death on a Full Moon Day* (1997), Vimukthi Jayasundara's *Forsaken Land* (2005), Sanjeeva Pushpakumara's *Flying Fish* (2011), and Prasanna Vithanage's *August Sun* (2003). The article observes the phenomenon of silence in relation to Sri Lanka's social, political and cultural history and contemporary leanings in national cinema. The selected film-backgrounds echo the forces of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism that prompt the civil war, youth uprisings, and the systemic inequities prevalent in the socio-political landscape of Sri Lanka. This article suggests that the alteration of the dynamic, melodious and breathing village into a static, silent and non-living one is not simply limited to the occurrences of the films but also has deep socio-cultural connections.

Keywords: Sri Lankan cinema, national cinema, silence, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism

¹ This article is largely based on the author's MPhil thesis submitted to the University of Sydney, Australia, in 2014, titled '*Silence in Sri Lankan Cinema from 1990-2010*'. The author discussed the theory on silence thoroughly in that thesis and argued that the silence (in given cinematic texts) is used as 'a weapon and a shield' of the oppressor against the hegemonic power of the authorities.

*"You know what a keti kirilli (a female bird) is? It is exactly like 'Batti'.
One day, giving the keti kirilli the last measure of rice remaining,
her parents told her, Child, We are unable to find dowries or a husband for you.
You must go somewhere to find a matching one.
So she walked through villages to search for a man who would like to marry her.
But no one was willing to marry her. Yet she continued to walk.
As she proceeded, she met a group of farmers tilling in a field."*

*Piyasiri to Batti
(Forsaken Land, 2005)*

Introduction

The expression of silence in the Sri Lankan art cinema after 1990 takes a multiplicity of forms². Apart from the characters who contribute towards the expansion of episodes, the background settings of the films contribute as an active, essential cinematic feature in exploring the theme of silence. In many films made after 1990, where the characters based in the city and the village contribute to the progress of the plot of the film, the external (city/village) scopes are marked by direct and indirect signs of silence. Nearly all these scopes, with the minimum use of sound – i.e. music and dialogues and figurative use, as well as bright colours and substances filling the space - contribute to the making of ideas generated by 'silent' composition.

This article reads the background scopes in the films of the discussed stream, which deal with silence. However, instead of examining the background scopes of the said films, this article attempts to analyze systems of scopes in general in the art film stream. For that, attention will be drawn first to the open rural environment and its dilapidated buildings; and second to the urban environment and its spaces. The first was examined in Asoka Handagama's *This is My Moon* (2000), Prasanna Vithanage's *Death on a Full Moon Day* (1997), Vimukthi Jayasundara's *Forsaken Land* (2005) and Sanjeewa Pushpakumara's *Flying Fish* (2011); and the second in Prasanna Vithanage's *August Sun* (2003).

This is My Moon is a surrealistic film based on the country's civil war and the story is located mainly in a 'border village'. The main characters of the film, the soldier

² According to Athukorala Senevirathne's PhD thesis titled 'Re-contextualization of the Paradigm Shift in the Post-globalized Cinema in Sri Lanka: A Study of Cinema of Prasanna Vithanage and Asoka Handagama', the early 1990s was a significant period in Sri Lankan Cinema that led its artistic scope to another paradigm.

and the Tamil girl, have no names. The other characters - such as the soldier's family members, his girlfriend and her family members and other villagers as well as the monk in the temple - remain anonymous; the village too remains unnamed. In the disconnected fragmentary narrative, the soldier tries to cultivate the parched land in an unforgiving war with nature, during which he is arrested by the army and taken away. The Tamil girl speaks to nobody except to the middle-aged monk to whom she says a few words in Tamil once in a way. The soldier's girlfriend's brother joins the army. As the film ends, on one journey back to his village on leave as usual the soldier sees the cremation of his girlfriend's brother. In *Death on a Full Moon Day*, the main character called Wannihamy goes through an identity crisis as a father when faced with his son's premature death but sees no corpse to prove his death. He is unable to make sense of the world around him as his son dies before accomplishing the cultural duty that a father entrusts to his progeny in the Sinhala-Buddhist male-centric society and because the occurrences around him are events beyond his control or understanding.

The limited numbers of characters in the 'Forsaken Land' space are a soldier in the Civil Defence Force during the ceasefire in 2002 named Anura, his wife Latha, the wife's elder sister Soma, a soldier-friend Palitha, an old soldier of the Civil Defence Force Piyasiri, and a girl in the village Batti. It is more a series of incidents taking place during a ceasefire than a clear narrative with a beginning, middle and an end. There are incidents which are not directly related to each other such as Anura being bullied by Army soldiers and his depression, Latha's illicit affair with Palitha, Soma's sexual restlessness and loneliness, Piyasiri's loneliness, Batti's lingering around the loneliness of Soma and of Piyasiri and her fear, Anura being asked to kill a man tied inside a sack.

All the happenings in the film '*Flying Fish*' are centered round the few families that inhabit a village situated to the east of the war zone. The narrative that runs parallel reveals one episode where we meet Wasana, a young woman and her soldier-lover who comes to her village on duty, a recently widowed Sinhalese woman lives with her eight children in the same village and her eldest son who is in his first year of high school, and a young Tamil girl who experiences her first period on a bus and her father and mother as unable to pay the ransom money demanded by the LTTE.

'*August Sun*' is also an anthology film. In the first story, Chamari is searching for her husband, a Sinhalese Sri Lankan Air Force pilot shot down in flight, whom she believes has been taken hostage by the LTTE. Meanwhile in the second segment, eleven-year-old Tamil Muslim Arfath is struggling to keep with him his companion and friend, a dog, while the family together with the entire village is forced to evacuate by a rebel army. The third narrative follows Duminda, a young soldier who walks into a brothel to find his sister among the working girls.

In analyzing the background scopes of the above films, this paper suggests that the transformation of the active, melodious, live village and city spaces into the inactive, silent, inanimate ones is not limited to the episodes of the films but also has socio-cultural connections as well. The internal monologues of the characters met in the episodes are seen as general to the social system to which each character belongs and the paper examines how the 'weapon of silence' becomes a common instrument of the social system.

The Theoretical Background on the Use of Silence

The various shades of the meaning of the word silence can be condensed thus: 'the moment that arises when 'communication', 'speech', 'sound' or 'voice' ceases to be. However, one could turn in many directions when an attempt is made to define what silence is. Silence, as a concept, has its origins in the religious discourse associated with 'the divine', which in turn has become a device in literature and poetry, before being taken up for scrutiny by twentieth century philosophical investigations and psychoanalysis.

Discussion of the key hypotheses of this study presupposes the embeddedness of silence in cultural and aesthetic silences. Later contributions to the theoretical approaches to silence, by Cheryl Glenn (2004, 2011) and *Kennan Ferguson* (2011) provide the larger theoretical foundation for the present study. Glenn's fine observations show how silence works, when it becomes the language of the weak. Her useful preliminary observations are given form and articulation by Kennan Ferguson's powerful paper in *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts* in the book *Silence: The Politics* (2011) edited by Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe. Ferguson's point of departure questions the hegemonic power that speech has in socio-political space. The technique of cinematic silence, used by movie makers like Bergman onwards, explores human feelings and sets the aesthetic mood and nuances of the films. The silences they produce are not pure or absolute silences, but discursive ones, which embody a communicative purpose. Susan Sontag's work '*The Aesthetics of Silence*' (1968), which is a key text in setting the theoretical framework for understanding silence as an aesthetic device, which is incapable of solitary existence says:

A genuine emptiness, a pure silence, are not feasible — either conceptually or in fact. If only because the art-work exists in a world furnished with many other things, the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence. Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech (in many instances, of complaint or indictment) and an element in a dialogue. (Sontag 1968)

Sontag makes some strong suggestions. Most prominent among them is that silence should produce something. In that sense, silence is socio-cultural content expressed in aesthetic forms.

A Reading of the 'Silent' Village

Displaced from the 'active' village of early times, villages which are extremely silent and inactive zones can be identified in films made after 1990. Both the village in which Wannihamy lives in the film *Death on Full Moon Day* and the Sinhala soldier's village to which the Tamil girl enters in the film *This is My Moon* are silent vacated villages with a dry tank, barren land undergoing a drought, decayed huts and houses halfway built. The villages in which the characters act upon in the films *Forsaken Land* by Vimukthi Jayasundara and *Flying Fish* by Sanjeeva Pushpakumara resemble the villages mentioned above except for the slight difference where some scopes like temples are not seen. In contrast Duminda's house in the village in *August Sun* by Prasanna Vithanage, carries the common feature of silent and vacated nature despite geo-physical differences. The village is depicted fairly differently in the film *Dark Night of the Soul* (1996) by Vithanage. But many scenes depicting the village in this film are in retrospection and in his present world the village is depicted but with the same silent and vacated nature.

In the history of Sri Lankan cinema, the village is the exemplary space signalling and embodying Sinhala-Buddhist nationality as used in the central nationalist discourse. This exemplary symbolism figure for the country is used for the village which is a part of it, as well. See this newspaper extract appearing after three months at the end of the 'Black July'.

This island has once been an island where peace reigned and the kindness overflowed. It was a country which was blessed with the touch of the saffron robe and flourished under the comfortable shade of the Sthupa. The land was fertile. The nature was generous. It sufficiently gifted its treasures for the flourishing of the people who suffered. But they were not greedy and they were simple, contented and ascetic like... (*Editorial* 1983)

This ideal village was created in studios well before *Rekhawa* was made in 1956, by taking the equipment out of the studio into the natural light and space of the island. In search of the ideal village that background, physically encountered, is brought into Sinhala film. This rural background was full of temples with devotees engaging in religious rites, tanks filled with water and green fields. The sound track with the dialogue of the active villagers and scenes with fertile nature constantly depicted the village space as an active background/backdrop. The idealism of the setting was materialized by the characters themselves including

the calm village girls and many films ended with the defeat of the antagonist who broke the harmony of the ideal village.

However, when we come to the films of the post-1990's, we notice the breach of the ideal model village. Tanks in the background of the villages we see in these films have dried up. The land is arid. The paddy fields and the vegetation were not fertile. In temples, in place of devotees performing religious rites there are relatives invoking blessings through *Bodhi Pooja* on their loved ones who have gone to the battle field. These are the signs of death in place of life, darkness in place of light, under the reign of a deep silence.

The Open Environment of the Village: Silence as a 'Backdrop' Expression

The main components of all of the above art forms are proof of the fact that the Lankan village is a geographical boundary safeguarding the stereotypes and norms proposed by the eminent authoritative vision, and nourished by Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. In the Lankan community which evolved post-independence by giving prominence to the language and religion of the race of the majority and marginalizing the minority races and by building itself on elements including caste and religion, it is not possible for a majority of villages which are uniform in one way or other to exist. However, the above works of art attempted to purport that such a thing did exist. However, the irony was that in the ideal village extraneous features to the Sinhala-Buddhist image which helped elevate the latter did not exist. Instead, it only seemed to glorify the agricultural life style and traditions based on Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.

Since the early kingdoms and settlements were established in areas close to tanks and stupas, it made some sense to use the integrated term 'tank-stupa-village-temple' to refer to the system. However, after the fall of the ancient kingdoms, villages were re-created with characteristics unique to each area through settlements during political eras, after colonization and independence. But the initially glorified concept of the village gained momentum with the post-independence nationalistic ideology. Rather than projecting the village as a smallest geographical unit which had social strata based on caste, where land rights were hereditary and which protected the prevailing hegemonic authority, it was projected as a geographical unit integrated with the environment, full of tanks and paddy fields, where the temple and the Buddhist monk were given prominence. It was supposed to be the ideal, but did not exist in reality. It remained a myth reinforced by cinema.

In *Death on a Full Moon Day*, Vithanage films the converse of this. The reality of this village is further projected in his own *August Sun*. In addition, the villages

established with the final results of the post-independent era are implied on screen by Asoka Handagama in *This is My Moon*, by Vimukthi Jayasundara in *Forsaken Land*, and by Sanjeewa Pushpakumara in *Flying Fish*. The villages seen in these films depict geographical spaces and their population tormented by the agonies brought about by the political crisis of the post-independent era.

The long scene at the beginning of *Death on a Full Moon Day* deserves discussion at length for the establishment of the analysis of this silent village. Before the scene starts, a shot of a hawk soaring in the sky is shown from a distance. Its scream is also heard. Immediately afterwards, the scene in which Wannihamy walks up to the tank to fetch water begins with a semi close-upshot showing his walking stick hitting the cracked soil of the dried-up tank basin. The slow-moving walking stick and his feet walking forward can be seen in the unfolding shot. After a long time, a shot is shown from a distance where he is walking to the water margin of the tank, turning his back to the frame. The basin of the dried tank and water, dead trees with sparse greenery form only a brown picture with a touch of green. The ambience is silent; the only sound which can be heard is the sound coming from Wannihamy's walking stick hitting dry ground.

In the *Death on a Full Moon Day* film, the tank does not serve its main purpose of irrigating the soil or nurturing the lives of villagers who earn their living through agriculture. The silent backdrop associated with the dried-up tank, without merely being silent, contradicts the village created by the authority of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist discourse. As the film progresses, it generates 'polyphonic' meanings by making use of silent shots not only of the tank, but also of abandoned paddy fields, barren land, temples, roads, grave yards, etc.

The youth, including *Some*, take muddy water from the puddles in the tank basin shown in *Death on Full Moon Day* in order to make bricks. Tank water does not irrigate cultivation any longer. It is more economically viable to assume the role of a soldier fighting the war created by the authority than to farm with water from the tank filled by scarce rainfall. Through this occupation, the village youth who serves in the army (in *Death on Full Moon Day* it is Bandara) hopes to be able to build a house out of bricks, which is stronger than the small hut thatched with coconut leaves which is shown in the film. The youth that remain in the village can only make bricks for those houses and sell them. The ground which was previously used for agriculture by the villagers is now being used to obtain clay for bricks.

"*Brick layer boy ... how long would you take to finish it?*" asks Wannihamy from the brick layer, about the house that Bandara was building. Next, is a shot in which he is weeding in the front yard of the half-built house, standing silent at one end of the village. However, even though Wannihamy does not accept it, everybody

including the audience knows that Bandara has been killed at the warfront. The village ground which was first dug up in order to make bricks for Bandara's house financed by his soldier's salary is now being dug up to bury his coffin. The silent funeral procession carrying his coffin proceeds along the edge of the tank basin casting reflections on the water. The rain falling after a few days fills up Bandara's grave which awaits his coffin. In the second turn of the film, where Wannihamy enters into a total silence, he is seen lying unconscious on the barren land near the tank basin.

Just like the characters of a single grand narrative evolving in many cinematic narratives, the basic backdrop shots including this tank, land and ambience are quietly repeated in most of the 'war related' art films of this period. Even though the roles of human characters change, the role of this lifeless, silent backdrop is a constant in definite forms.

The backdrop footage of the anonymous village in *This is My Moon* is another example. There too, the tank is associated with war, not with agriculture. That is where the corpses of the soldiers from the village killed in the war are cremated. The quiet backdrop of the tank intensifies the meaning of the short dialogues in the foreground. Following is a dialogue between the moaning widow and the father, which takes place while a dead soldier is being cremated:

*"Uncle, why are you crying?
Why are you crying?
I am crying because he is dead...
I am crying because he was born!"*

Life has lost its meaning. Fathers are often made to experience the death of their sons, before their own. The tank basin is a repository of memories of death because that is where cremation takes place. At another location of the same tank basin where the corpse of the soldier is being cremated, a village youth says to another: *"Had bread for breakfast ... 18 years old ... training ... can go to the Army!"*

As the agricultural economy based on paddy farming fades in the backdrop of war, bread replaced rice and warfare replaced farming. Announcing his decision, *'I can join the Army'* says a character, while walking on the same meadow of the lake in which we see his corpse being cremated at the end of the film. As the cremation ground of his body, the lake's meadow transforms into a storehouse of memories of death instead of symbolising abundance and fertility. The imagery of silence embodies a new symbolism of loss and despair.

The village carrying newer symbols in *This is My Moon*, is not a definite village like *'Siriya'* re-created by Lester James Pieris in *'Rekhaba'*, which was released in

1956. It is a template. Its backdrop shots begin in '*Death on Full Moon Day*' and evolve across each film because of its nature as a template. All village backdrop shots, including the tank, are parts of that template.

... Apart from the village monk, the bucket-shop owner, and the two families in the film, there is nobody else. Perhaps this may not be the actual village. But this village could exist somewhere in somebody's mind (Handagama 2001, p.15).

What does 'somewhere' mean? A place where a particular template exists cannot be a definite place; therefore, it should be 'somewhere'. As Darshana Liyanage records its features, he confirms what its space is and also confirms that it can continue to move across a grand narrative as silent characters.

In fact in the film 'This is My Moon' ... he mercilessly attacks the so-called metaphysics like Sinhala-Buddhist thinking, patriotism, war heroes, innocent village life, decorum, and virtue. His film is not a re-creation of village (near war front) ... He produces us a common component of 'human relationships', 'social value system' and 'life style' of the Lankan village (Liyanage 2001, p. 46).

Common components such as 'human relationships', 'social value system' and 'life style' could be considered one single unit, which is the socio-cultural body. The template of the village containing this socio-cultural body evolves across *Death on a Full Moon Day* and *This is My Moon*.

Though Wannihamy and the Tamil girl walked away at the end of each of their narratives, the image of the village backdrop continues to evolve from one film to another, suggesting that our discussion on socio-cultural silence is applicable not only to the silent characters, but also to silent backdrop spaces.

Space surrounding village environs is again used in Vimukthi Jayasundara's *Forsaken Land*. This village too is anonymous, just like the village in *This is My Moon*. As usual, backdrop spaces play their silent roles in this film too. Scrublands, woods, tanks, lanes continuing all the way to the horizon develop their narration together through a few human characters acting in front of them. War tanks and vehicles, which look as if they are part of the environs, which move back and forth, render meaning to the image of the deserted, quiet village.

Jayasundara uses long, static shots and a visual composition that places particular emphasis on the deserted landscape in which tanks, army trucks and school buses emerge as the only sites of communal gathering; armed men, schoolchildren and women are rare human figures in motion. The shots are dominated by the slow rhythms of everyday routines, and diegetic sound and

silence echo the despair of abandoned women, children's fears and the neuroses of traumatised soldiers, as well as a sense of unease that reveals that, in spite of the armistice, life has not and will not return to normal. (Trbic 2011, p. 57)

The extra-long, silent footage depicting these incidents are common in *Forsaken Land*. The single shot in the middle of the film, showing a group of soldiers taking Anura from his security post in an army truck, stripping him naked and throwing him into a stream, is 2.23 minutes long. It seems that Anura symbolizes the guardian of the village, who is defenceless in front of Army soldiers, who occupies the lowest rank in the hierarchy of the Army, often recruited from the village itself. Stripping him naked and throwing him into the water is not just fun; it shows the oppression directed towards the lower ranks of the Army. As the soldiers take off in the truck after throwing a stripped Anura in the water, all noises heard up to that point fade away and only the cawing of a crow remains. The faded noises belong to the Army. It is coming from the soldiers and the truck. Then the silent, long shot captures Anura from a distance emerging from the water fearful, taking his fire arm and hurrying out of the frame, still naked. The shot is cut into a silent mid shot of Anura at the bottom of the frame on the right, face averted, holding his fire arm, naked. It lasts 27 seconds on screen. There is a trunk of a tree to his right. There are green shrubs behind, on to his left and in front.

Anura's silent, naked shot which is divided only by a single cut which lasts nearly 3 minutes between two long and middle distance shots depicts his loss of power in the backdrop of the sky, the earth, the stream, and the wood. The outer space overpowers his character. In the *Forsaken Land*, in most instances where the supporting characters are introduced, the power is only drawn towards the 'silent' external space. Soma comes back home after work in a distant shot giving prominence to a sprawling, lonely meadow. When Latha runs through the woods after seeing a man having sex with a pregnant woman, prominence is given to the woods. While Piyasiri relates the folk tale of the cuckoo bird (the story which is quoted at the beginning of the paper) to Batti, Soma aimlessly walks across the barren land, losing herself in the space. The external space equally overpowers the characters of Batti, Piyasiri, and Palitha in the shots in which these characters are seen.

Immense, silent backdrop spaces are a cinematic imagery of the psyche of the characters submerging in these spaces. Loneliness, anxiety, fears, and insecurity are hidden in these shots. It is not irrational to consider these backdrops as a common space of the internal monologue of the characters because they depict all reflections of the dissatisfied, empty lives of those characters. In *Flying Fish* too, similar common backdrop spaces are again seen.

I spent my childhood and my life in a village, which was controlled by the government security forces during the day and, by the LTTE during the night. So, under these circumstances I noticed how the lives of the ordinary people, who were not involved with the army, were becoming militarized. As a little child, I understood how this 'militarization' led towards creating insecurity and vulnerability in the society we were living in. I understand that the impressions I created on screen (based on my personal experiences and the reality I had lived) may not agree with the images of the war and the military that the government has constructed and want to create. (Pushpakumara, 2013)

The village is described in the light of Pushpakumara's personal experiences at a time when he saw the direct effects of the war. The characters in *Flying Fish* travel about the space of the film. All of their narratives are bonded together in and through the silence of the village that constitutes its setting.

A bus leaving the village without a driver moves along into eternity. Wasana, who has taken her revenge from the soldier-lover, the adolescent, who stabs his mother, and the Tamil girl who sees the murder of her parents and runs away are the only people on the bus. In a way, this trio can be seen as trying to run away from the overpowering village background. However, in the final silent image what we see is the driverless bus with the three passengers disappearing from sight. All that is left in the frame is the brown road and the surrounding environment. The three passengers leaving the village on a bus without a driver engaged in inner monologues are shown as a single image space, while in the far distance is the open space of the village.

Internal Space of the Village: Decayed Houses and Deteriorated Buildings

The three main characters of Pushpakumara's debut film *Flying Fish* try to escape from their village in a driver-less bus. However, there is one person who is successful in evading the symbolic and physical authority that controls him. That is Wasana's father. He shoots himself with the gun he receives upon enlisting as a home guard, upon witnessing his wife and daughter having sex with the same Army soldier on different occasions. His traumatic experiences make him run away from life.

It is in the same ruined building that both Wasana and her mother have sex with the soldier – a roofless, decaying, dark-walled old factory hall now overrun by the jungle. The late middle-aged man had to witness himself losing his pride as a husband and a father through the walls of a building wrecked by war, from which the soldier was supposed to protect the village. It is a dreadful and a shocking moment for a father to see his daughter having pre-marital sex with a soldier. The

couple having sex is shown in long and medium shots with sounds of their grins and fast breathing forming the background, while the father watching the scene is always shown in an extreme long shot. The man looks like a tiny object beneath the tall weathered walls, when he witnesses her daughter having pre-marital sex. It is the gigantic and wrecked building's presence that dominates the scene.

The roofless building has neither internal nor external space demarcated by it. Its walls separate the inside from the outside, but the bushes and shrubs are fast invading that inner space. Symbolically, the inner living space, where once human life must have been flourishing, is now being swallowed by the outer space. Now, in this space, probably the most controlled basic human activity, sexual intercourse, takes place freely, breaking all social norms. Ironically, the destroyer of those Sinhalese-Buddhist values is the same soldier who has been entrusted with the duty of protecting them from another 'enemy'.

The internal space of the village becomes an important but silent foil in setting the mood in many post-1990 films, including *Flying Fish*. The village house becomes as prominent as a character in many films, where the 'traditional village house' gets submerged in the outer spaces. The village house in the post 1990 trend, can take two forms: the grass or coconut-leaf thatched, wattle and daub house, or brick house with tile roof. Neither of these seem to be complete or well maintained. Wannihamy's little house in *Death on Full Moon Day* is decayed, and its roof is leaking. His son Bandara's house is not complete; so are the houses of soldier Duminda in *August Sun* and that of the soldier in *This is my Moon*: none of them are fully built and in various stages of incompleteness, dark inside and bare-bricked outside.

Civil war and youth insurrections undermine the notions of security and unity. The house ceased to be a safe place after so many killings, looting and rape have taken place within these spaces by perpetrators of violence whom nobody had the power to resist. A household in the North in the war time was described thus: 'They have robbed what was in our rooms, cloths are all over. Our dresses were stained with boot marks of the blood of those killed downstairs' (Hoole et al 1993, p.73).

When the killing in the homes was over after a few years of brutal violence, the shock of death continued to haunt the people with the arrival of coffins of soldiers draped with the flag, with all its nationalistic symbolism, as did Bandara's sealed coffin in *Death on a Full Moon Day*. In fact, the coffin is too large for the little house so that it bangs against the door frame several times. When taken inside with difficulty, it has to be shifted a few times to avoid getting wet from the water leaking from the roof.

The poverty of the family and the smallness of their house are made clear to the viewer even before the actual size of the large coffin squeezed into the small house is before us. (Abeysekare 2001, p. 09).

Wannihamy's house is a small quiet place. Its doors are low and the rain squeezes in from the roof to wet its mud floor. Not even a radio or a human voice is heard inside it. Its mud-coloured walls are plain, free of decorative images or calendars. To ward off the pressure that comes from outside to accept the death of his son's death, Wannihamy sits on the empty veranda's floor or the dingy rear of the house. It is to this house that his elder daughter would come to ask for his finger print signature, to claim compensation for her brother's demise. With this act, the house turns into a place associated with death rather than life and safety. Just like the lake basin acquires a symbolism of death, the house becomes a place reminding us of death.

The coconut-leaf thatched, dilapidated house depicts the poverty of Wannihamy's family and how caste, religion and other authoritative powers have humbled them. The house is a symbol of their pitiable conditions, which Bandara attempts to overcome by trying to build a tile-roofed house by the war-generated money he earns as a soldier in the Army.

Red brick un-plastered houses come as a motif in the films *Death on Full Moon Day*, *August Sun* and *This is My Moon*. All these houses belong to soldiers engaged in military operations. None of them are complete. Therefore, it is quite dark inside them and aggravates/intensifies the silences within them. These houses interact with their backgrounds in each film to intensify the tones and moods.

The house and the landscape of the soldier in the film 'This is My Moon' could not be found anywhere. So, we had to build the house in the right landscape. In fact, we had to break and alter an existing house to match the image. This house should depict the emptiness, uncertainty and the risk of a family whose aim of life was awaiting death. The house appears only squarely or parallel to the camera generating various moods when human images appear in its foreground. (Senavirathna 2013).

It appears at times that no human activity takes place inside the house other than the soldier's sister and the young Tamil woman sleeping inside it. Even the smallest everyday conversation takes place outside the house, in the yard. They bring chairs outside, when they want to sit.

The young Tamil woman would be told: "*You go inside!*" But neither she nor anyone else would go inside the house. The house was not anymore a safe zone but a dungeon filled with the 'emptiness of awaiting death'. The village house,

like the lake in the discussion above, is a silent and metaphorical place with tremendous meaning-making potential. This space signifies the post-independent Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony's myriad impacts on the outsiders to the house such as the young Tamil woman as well as inhabitants themselves like the soldiers, or Wannihamy, who are rendered hapless and incapable of resistance. The house, therefore, becomes an externalized image of the internal monologues of the silent dwellers in those houses.

The Silent City: A Space Deprived of the Hope for Life

The negative, ugly, uncultured non-Sinhala Buddhist social space was depicted as the city in the popular cinema of the early decades as against the positive, beautiful, cultured, Sinhala Buddhist village that existed. The inhabitants of the city, including the complex city girls, appeared for the characters witnessing that typical nature. Until the presence of the change of format brought about mainly by the creations of Dharmasena Pathiraja in the artistic cinema of the 1970's, direct readings on the city were seldom found. Since the art cinema came with this change of format decreased after the beginning of the decade of 1980, the city, seen and depicted with the inquiry of broad spatial system did not continue to take place. In short, it was not discussed that both the city and the village were mystified zones of depiction for reinforcing existing spaces of social, political and cultural spheres.

Even though we cannot argue that this minimum expression of the city in the creations of the stream of film we come across within the study scope of this paper has seen an increase, we can suggest that it has displaced itself to productions with re-statements about the city. It does not increase because many films of this trend depict the village as the space of their episodes. We find a relatively a fewer number of productions deviating from the village, identifying the city as the main space of their episodes. Among them we discuss here Prasanna Vithanage's *August Sun*.

The Sri Lankan city, as in all other countries, is truly the center where political and economic power is concentrated. With the development of the transport system of Sri Lanka in the colonial period, this was developed marking Colombo the capital and cities like Kandy, Galle, Jaffna, and Anuradhapura suburbs on the political map. The city spaces consist of shops, commercial centers, hotels, ports, institutions wielding state power, main schools, hospitals, libraries, main places of religious worship and museums. A significant movement common to all regions, especially for the South Asian region, which is the idea of 'going to the capital for prosperity', is activated in the Sri Lankan context as well. Similarity with limited freedom identified as 'complexity' by the popular cinema in a nature

of single form was absorbed to the city due to the fact that in the village the multicultural elements existed in a relatively higher level and the existence of much space to be accessed by the different audiences.

However, the city that we encounter in the post 1990's art cinema, which is the subject of this article, unlike the village, does not communicate the awakened popular expectations about life. On the contrary, almost all the films fail to support the expectations of the people who inhabit the city and explore their psychological breakdown. The discussion that follows examines the situation arising from the social and political dynamics determined by Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.

The Silence of the City Street: A Path that Frustrates Life's Expectations

The expressed meanings of the city were displaced directly, due to political conflict including the civil war and insurrections of the youth, and indirectly due to the social and political factors created by Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. An anonymous writer in the journal *Race and Class*, on the 'Black July' of 1983, writing an article titled '*Sri Lanka's week of shame: an eyewitness account*', expresses these sentiments:

Thousands gathered near the cemetery and began looting and burning in every direction. Within hours, Colombo was caught up in the worst holocaust it had ever experienced. Tamil shops and houses were singled out and looted and burnt, while many Tamils were murdered 500 in the first two days it was estimated. More than 500 cars and lorries were burnt and their wreckage left on the roads. (*Sri Lanka's week of shame* 1984, p. 40)

First, there is arson, murder and eviction and second, bomb blasts and highway robberies, and third, road blocks, check points and high security zones. The common urban space is obliterated from the common picture and the state, religious and commercial institutions that occupied such space take on another meaning, in another direction. It is this changed city that many of the characters that we meet in our study traverse and inhabit, and that forms the urban setting of most of the films. Visual artiste Chandragupta Thenuwara observes as follows:

For us living in Sri Lanka, it is visible how our living space is invaded with barrels. Barrels piled in thousands obstruct the circulation and mobility of the general public. (Thenuwara 1999, p. 82)

August Sun is the most noteworthy film in which this displaced city street is portrayed.

In the narrative connected to Duminda, it is during his search for his sister the following morning that he encounters the city street. The first view of the street in the background is of the gate to the brothel. It is not open from outside but is closed so as to conceal the goings-on inside the brothel. The gate of the garment factory in the city that he sees later, on the other hand, is closed because its workers have lost their jobs. In the empty silent city street are posters on the walls of the workers demanding their lost jobs being eaten up by stray goats.

It is not only the loss of life from the war and its horrors or the barrel laden security zones that form the city scene; there are other displacements of economic spaces in the city. The two locked gates are prominent as loud indicators of silence. They do not indicate a fulfilment of life expectations. They symbolize moral collapse that accompanies an exclusive economic advance. It reveals the identity of a brother in search of the hidden sufferings of his sister.

As in the village, the urban space and its lost identity are turned towards a background space representing a character that transcends the internal monologue of silent characters. In *August Sun*, the monument of the city street that we meet between the gates of the brothel and garment factory is silent but communicates a powerful message. It is the bus stop which is in fact a soldiers' monument or memorial which gains significance as it is the city space where Duminda waits for a bus.

There are no vehicles on the street except a tractor filled with coffins. In the city street, images are signifying death and impermanence and economic instability. There is no speech, no sound amidst these brief images that appear in the noonday Anuradhapura city space but they emphasize a sense of the total uncertainty of life. The images are mostly distant and again the character Duminda is submerged within them, who with Kamani (that we do not see again in the frame) portray their tragic condition.

With the decade of the 80's the real situation of the public space in this regard is disturbing. When a baby is born a popular question among the Sinhala community is to ask if it is a sarong or a kambaya (cloth worn by a woman)? We raise this point because that traditional question is now changed to 'Is it army or garment?' signifying not sarcasm but distress. (Seneviratne 2013, p. 367).

The street in the noonday Anuradhapura scene is the path that shatters the expectations of the 'army and garment' son and daughter. In another scene there is the Samadhi statue. The hegemony of Sinhala Buddhism, in this case the holy city, is shown to crumble as an indirect result of it. The historicity, royalty, the ambience of *seela* and symbols of the sangha embedded in the name

‘Anuradhapura’ are subject to gross revision in the holy city that is the setting of the film. (Seneviratne 2013)

The city streets constitute a communicative image of the hollow and static life that swallows up Duminda and the people who are associated with him. He remains in the silent space of his urban background, which turns into a space that sums up all the silences of the characters.

Conclusion

It is reasonable to define the dual space of both village and city that we identified in this article as refugee spaces occupied by characters whose souls have been killed by natural and man-made disasters. It is clear to the critical observer that although the tsunami was a natural disaster, the other disasters were all determined by the political direction and actions based on such direction in the country’s independence era. Extremist Sinhala Buddhism and Sinhala nationalism (Sinhala Buddhist nationalism) suppressed other social discourses and divided society along racial, religious and caste considerations, all of which resulted not only in extremism and marginalization but also oppression, which in turn led to the aforementioned crises and the closing up of social space for redemption from them.

For this reason, although the geographical scene of the dual space of village and city that we have identified so far changes, they engender similar meanings as one unit. Whether the tank is the background to the village or the street to the city, the crises faced by the characters are always based on definite facts. Merely because a background remains silent or static it is not possible to conclude that its effect on other areas and characters is not related to it.

The creator of *Forsaken Land* claims unequivocally that its environment plays the role of a character. Such “environment character” comes out of its space in *Forsaken Land* and reappears in other films and in other rural and urban open spaces and thus traverses from film to film similar to a character.

The characters in the film *Wave* use silence as a powerful mode of communication. If the environment that swallows up all the characters like micro particles, appears again as a character, and if it traverses from one film to another, then the environment performs an internal psychological monologue and silence then becomes a powerful mode of signification.

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