

Of Rural Heroines and Urbanized *femme fatales*

by Malathi de Alwis

Along with the Sri Lankan state's 'celebration' of International Women's Day in Matara, we were also treated to quite a creditable teledrama courtesy of the Women's Bureau to mark this special day. This hour-long single episode teledrama was titled - *Yaso Hamine* - and documented the heroic struggles of a rural woman of the same name. The sudden death of Yaso Hamine's mason husband leaves her destitute with one son and three daughters. In order to support her family she becomes a wage labourer. The fact that she is doing *pirimi wada* (men's work) horrifies her fellow villagers while she becomes the butt of her brother-in-law's (husband's brother) drunken rantings on how she has ruined their *pavule nambuwe* (family honour). The suggestion is that she should get herself another man to support her and she has to constantly fend off the propositions of the boutique mudalali who wants to keep her as his mistress.

Yaso Hamine's daily struggles are ably shared by her elder daughter who though a keen student has now left school in order to attend to the housework and their vegetable garden. Juxtaposed against this heroic mother and daughter is the counter example of Yaso Hamine's sister-in-law and niece. While Yaso Hamine is so busy that she does not even have time to stop by the wayside boutique for a quick gossip, her sister-in-law's entire day seems to be taken up with snooping on Yaso Hamine's family and gossiping about them. Her husband is a drunkard and a rogue and when he is arrested by the police it is Yaso Hamine

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who comes along to help her and her child.

Yaso Hamine's elder daughter who is hardworking and 'good' is always decorously clothed in simple dresses or with a cloth tied over her dress. Though she is in love with the wealthy school teacher's son and it is her dream to marry him one day she is resigned to the fact that the wretched life she is leading is her *laba upankama* (fate) and that it may never change. Her suitor too is a hardworking, upstanding man who does not want to partake of his parents' wealth and takes a teaching post in a *dura palatha* (remote area) so that he can earn his own money. Despite the stigma attached to Yaso Hamine's form of employment and her lower class position, he defies his parents and the rest of the village by marrying Yaso Hamine's daughter.

Yaso Hamine's niece on the other hand, is the epitome of the village lass gone 'bad'. She is 'cheeky' and argues with her parents and has been 'spoilt' by her mother who has done all the work for her. She spends much of her time combing her hair, putting on make up and gadding about in 'western' clothing and high heels. Finally she elopes with a friend from the village whose form of employment and attire is negatively coded in opposition to Yaso Hamine's daughter's suitor. The niece's suitor who has started a small 'business' in Kandy rides a motor bike and wears trousers, a leather jacket and sunglasses while the daughter's suitor who is a school teacher, wears a sarong and shirt and drives a tractor!

Though it all ends happily for Yaso Hamine's daughter this is not the case for her mother which made the teledrama much more credible for me. The characterization and the struggles of Yaso

Hamine reminded me of Swarna Mallawarachchi's portrayal in *Sagara Jalaya* and more recently Malini Fonseka's role in *Sthree*. While it is quite standard now to portray the single mother/widowed rural woman in heroic terms, it is the urban, 'westernized' woman that continues to be positioned as her degenerate 'other'.

This is especially highlighted in an advertisement for male cologne that is being telecast in Sri Lanka. The opening shot is that of a dark alleyway where an Elton John look-alike is spotlighted strumming a guitar. In the shadows a few yards away stands another man nonchalantly smoking a cigarette. Suddenly, a woman in a black dress and high heels 'swings' through the alley her black mane of hair swirling around her face. The man in the shadows makes a grab at her, she glares at him, tosses her head dismissively and continues on her way. Next shot, the 'spurned' man sprays cologne on himself. The concluding shot is a replay of the first one but with a major development. The guitar plays on and through the shadows once again appears the 'desirable object', the woman. The man grabs at her again and SURPRISE she turns towards him and her yielding to him is signified by her painted finger nails curling around his shoulders and her high heeled feet arching upwards, on tiptoe.

The message here was clear, direct, and horrifying. If you wear the correct cologne even sexual assault can be alluring to women. The cologne being advertised here was thus 'appropriately' titled *Avenger*. A recent news blurb about this product continued this metaphor of macho aggression with the header '*Avenger hits the market*' (emphasis mine, *Sunday Times* 11/24/91).

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Avenger which is marketed by International Cosmetics (Private) Ltd, a subsidiary of The Maharajah Organisation was launched at 'My Kind of Place' on November 16th 1991. The positioning of 'My Kind of Place' which is widely accepted to be a hang out of Colombo's upper class teenagers, in this ad campaign, reflects the marketer's focus on the urban youth of Sri Lanka as this product's primary consumers. In this context, the urban setting of the advertisement seems appropriate. Yet, I would also suggest that the assault and subsequent conquest of an urban, 'westernized' young woman makes the 'event' doubly alluring and exciting as it feeds into all the negative stereotyping within Sinhala Buddhist nationalist discourses (from Anagarika Dharmapala to the Jathika Chintanayists), which pose the sexually loose, urbanized/'westernized', Christian (often Burgher) woman as the 'other' of the chaste, domesticated, Sinhala Buddhist woman¹.

This is a theme that gets played out once again in *Sisila Gini Ganie* recently screened at the Regal. Sanath Gunatilake's script centres around the passionate love affair between a married, lawyer turned politician from a reputable Kandyan Sinhala family (played by Sanath Gunatilake) and a 'half breed' Sinhalese/Burgher Christian woman (played by Sabitha Perera) who until she falls in love with the politician, ridicules marriage and its incumbent imprisoning familial ties and merrily flits from one relationship to another.

While we are informed that the politician's name is Harris Makalande from the inception at the film, his mistress Annette is rarely mentioned by name.² Rather she is primarily defined in terms of her (sexual) practices and attire. When Harris first sees her on the dance floor and inquires who she is, his friend smirkingly replies "Oh, she will grab onto anyone who will dance with her...everybody around here knows her..." As the plot thickens, she becomes known as the 'woman in the white dress'³.

This sexually loose half breed's 'other' is Harris' wife Kumari, who like him is from a well established Kandyan Sinhala family. While Kumari is always impeccably groomed in rich Kandyan sarees or a decorous housecoat, Harris mistress Annette is always in dresses and in one scene, in just a sheet. Kumari is also the perfect wife and mother while Annette becomes too demanding of Harris' time and though she now longs to get married to him and have his babies she fails miserably in this task. While Harris sets his mistress up in a beautiful house and garden in which she happily plays the devoted housewife — decorating, cooking, gardening and serving tea, she lacks the final binding link to Harris which is the bearing of a child. We are treated to a rather extended shot of Annette lovingly hanging a painting of a mother and child in her sitting room and various scenes of her vain attempts to befriend Harris' son.

In all fairness to Sanath Gunatilake, the characterization of the half breed *femme fatale* is done quite sympathetically. Harris' mistress has much more spirit and personality than his wife. While Kumari rather despairingly accepts the fact that Harris has a mistress, Annette refuses to be sequestered in Harris' beautiful house for days on end without seeing him in order that his political campaign can continue smoothly. When a furious Harris hits her for 'abducting' his son she hits back and fells him to the ground.

However, once in police custody she becomes the victim of various forms of abuse. Her private diary is 'edited' and used to the advantage of the Police Inspector who now derives great pleasure in taunting Annette from his position of power. The media in turn uses her as the pivot of a massive sex scandal. One of the most insightful moments of the film for me was the conversation between the journalist and his newspaper editor, towards the beginning of the film. The journalist is having a hard time collecting 'facts' about the disappearance of Harris' son until he begins to realise that a woman is involved in this case. When

he reports this suspicion to his editor, the immediate reaction is "excellent, this will add to the mystery...let us headline the story 'beautiful woman..." at which point the journalist interjects that he has no details of the woman and is not sure whether she is beautiful or not. This leads the editor to launch into a very perceptive exposition on how people's curiosity is better captured by a reference to a beautiful woman irrespective of the fact of how she actually looks.

Though some critics of *Sisila Gini Ganie* have described it as a nihilistic film which ends with the question 'What is the truth?' I felt that there was a calculated attempt to establish the innocence of Harris mistress⁴ and thus a certain 'truth', for the viewer, despite the fact that the accused may not receive a similar judgement from the law or the media in the context of the film. However, I was disappointed that the only way the viewer's sympathy for this spirited and passionate woman was enlisted was by reducing her to that of a victim of patriarchy. From a carefree woman who cogently criticizes the patriarchal institutions of marriage and the family, she is reduced almost overnight to being a frustrated housewife who longs for the gilded cage that she had evaded for so long. When confronted by the highly fanciful deductions of the Police Inspector she can only weep and call upon God as her witness.

Finally, I would like to emphasise the central point here that however sophisticatedly (*Sisila Gini Ganie*) or crudely (Avenger ad) the urban 'westernized' woman maybe portrayed, she remains the site of loose morality that invites sexual transgressions. That is, it is easier to say the 'westernized' woman "asked for it" than the rural woman. It is high time we start producing teledramas and films that attempt to shatter this good woman/bad woman dichotomy.

Notes

1 See especially Anagarika Dharmapala, *Return to Righteousness*, ed. Ananda Guruge, Govt. Press, Colombo, 1965; Richard Gombrich & Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Trans-*

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formed: *Religious Change in Sri Lanka*, Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, 1988 and Kumari Jayawardene, "Some Aspects of Religious and Cultural Identity and the Construction of Sinhala Buddhist Womanhood", paper presented at the International Conference on *Women: The State, Fundamentalism and Cultural Identity in South Asia*. March 13-17, 1992.

2 Sabitha herself draws our attention to this when after their first 'encounter' she tells Harris "What sort of woman must you take me for, you don't even know my name...."

3 Sabitha appears mainly in white dresses in this film which is a disruptive signifier in her characterization of a 'loose' woman. I am grateful to Pradeep Jeganathan for suggesting that this colour coding may be an attempt to signify her innocence in the context of the crime that is committed in the film rather than her moral/sexual innocence or purity.

4 All the flashbacks the viewer was privy to were the mistress version of the events, the conclusive one being the episode of the childrens picnic near World's End in the fast encroaching mist. ■

More on the Gordimer Critique

by S. Sumathy

Neloufer de Mel's comments on Nadine Gordimer in *Pravada* Vol 1, No 1 along with her easy dismissal of Reggie Siriwardena's response to them in *Pravada* Vol 1 No 2 throw up quite a number of thought provoking questions for the modern reader, constantly assailed by the contradictions and biases involved in interpretations. Nadine Gordimer, the South African writer of novels and short stories was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1991 - a prize fraught with contradictions. Dr. de Mel points this out quite forcefully exposing some of the ideological underpinnings of that rather questionable institution.¹ This is timely for it serves in some measure to remove the scales of reverence for prizes, awards etc., from one's eyes. But, while agreeing, by and large, with the criticism she levels at the awarding body, I wish to disagree categorically with the qualifications she makes about the value of Gordimer's works. To lend support to her views she invokes Dennis Brutus - a South African poet - which I think is unfair by Gordimer as well as Brutus. Her discriminatory selection of Brutus's comments chooses to disregard the point he makes about the challenge she (Gordimer) poses at the

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apartheid system in operation. To quote Brutus more fully;

But Gordimer too is making her protest against the system ... The principle characters (in the *Late Bourgeois World*) both black and white, at the end of the novel are on the edge of not merely an emotional but also a sexual experience. I think the whole novel is by implication a condemnation of white society in South Africa today.²

Saying this Brutus proceeds to make the qualification that occurs in the extract de Mel lifts from his writing on protest literature. His article makes more sense and possesses an internal balance in the context of the comparative analysis he makes about different writers and the political and/or subjective stances that transpire in their works. One should also note, importantly, that it's the *Late Bourgeois World* he refers to and not *July's People*. The qualifications he makes are based on subtle distinctions he draws between different writers and also on different criteria. De Mel, on the other hand, takes rather broadbased categories operative in a certain kind of intellectual discourse and attempts to schematize their (writers') works according to those patterns. I think this is what Reggie Siriwardena in his own inimitably simple style implies when he says:

However, the more important questions I wish to raise concern the way in which Dr. de Mel uses her political categories to evaluate Gordimer's work as fiction.

The crucial sentence in Dr. de Mel's critique that invalidates her approach is where she complains that Gordimer's exposure of the political ambivalence of the privileged white liberal 'falls short of what is needed as a *political programme* in South Africa'.

One can write a political programme as a theoretical construct, but for the creative writer there is no substitute for experience.³

In her reply to his (Siriwardena's) position she says thus:

Mr. Siriwardena's essentialist emphasis on individual 'experience' implies that only whites can write about whites, only blacks can represent blacks. Does this mean that only peasants can write about and speak for themselves, and that men cannot write about women and vice versa?⁴

This is a misreading bordering on carelessness. The narrative in *July's People* quite committedly progresses from 'white liberal' awareness to a consciousness

