

SUSANTHIKA AND THE DOPING OF POPULAR CULTURE

The past eight months of Susanthika Jayasinghe's public life is a useful case study in the politics of popular culture in Sri Lanka, and to expose its reactionary, conservative, and authoritarian posture. The one time "sprint-queen" of Asia, 2nd in the world at the 1997 world Athletic Championships, has struggled with the backlash of a sexual harassment protest and then been accused of using banned substances.

On the most recent doping controversy, a three-member committee has decided that there is no conclusive proof for the allegation, primarily due to procedural 'mishaps'. (Failed missions of violence are also labelled mishaps). And, it is interesting how popular culture and popular media directs its attention only to certain things for a particular length of time, similar to a channel hopping remote control that thrives on and promote a collective attention deficit of the audience.

Behind the fanfare of popular culture and populist politics, are deeply entrenched hierarchical structures that control the labour process (or the working-class) and women. The glorification and the abdication of Susanthika are all effects of the phenomenon of popular culture that has vested interest in perpetuating the status quo. In the guise of pure, unadulterated pleasure or counter culture, spectator sport is a pretentious "drug" to veil the morbid reality of sport, where its mode of governance has an intrinsic soft-spot for fascism.

In the case of Susanthika, her labour value was gradually depreciated in order to maintain the status quo of the authoritarian patriarchy of the local sports. In effect, by dismissing an athlete of her stature, the bureaucracy depicted its modes of discipline and punishment, so that all other producers of sport entertainment remain a class of disorganized surplus creating bonded labour. This surplus, a production of cultural capital, is mostly created at the moment of representing and defending the nation. And for a popular culture which lacks a more stimulating localized sport entertainment industry, the nation is a potent marketable brand-name.

Even the respectable middle-class women, along with the freedom-seeking mainstream press, who came to defend Susanthika gradually faded in to the woodwork, similar to most things in 'pop' culture. Bourgeois guilt was not enough to form a solid reason for resistance against the consent-forming hegemony of patriarchy and authoritarianism in sport. The dominating power hierarchy, the 'boys club' nepotism and its irrationality, have failed to enter the debates of sports in popular culture. The local media, essentially de-linked the series of events, and de-stratified the entrenched structures of power, to neutralize a female athletes' struggle to speak-out.

For those who are uncritically basking in the spontaneous pleasures of spectator sports and discussing the embodied nation, Susanthika is a more immediate reminder of the increasingly reactionary practices of popular culture and spectator sport in Sri Lanka. Popular culture will soon produce yet another celebrity, more in the mold of the needs of the status quo. The reactionary elements within the sport bureaucracy, the popular media, and its built-in (loyal) opposition will gloss over the issues of advocating athlete rights, womens' rights and democracy in local sport. In effect, after the "doping" of Susanthika, we should all be concerned with the collective self-doping of popular culture that continue to rationalize the growing trend of irrationality in governance and practice of local sport. ■

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