Life is not the problem, but the conditions under which it is offered

Review of Pavuru Valalu (Walls Within)

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Pavuru Valalu (Walls Within), *directed by Prasanna Vithanage, screenplay by Tony Ranasingha.*

The Sinhala film *Pavuru Valalu* (*Walls Within*), now being screened at the Regal Cinema in Colombo, Sri Lanka, is one of the best cinematic works created in this country and it is no exaggeration to say that the film in some ways establishes new standards of artistic perfection for cinematic creation here.

The film has won many international awards. It won for best film, the Prix de la Ville d'Amiens (1998), in France. It also won the Jury NATPAC (1998) and Jury du GPCI (1998) awards. Nita Fernando received the award for best actress at the Singapore International Film Festival for her portrayal of the female lead in the film. Ten of the eleven awards presented by the Film Critics' Association of Sri Lanka for 1997 went to *Pavuru Valalu*.

Though the director of the film is a relative newcomer to the film scene in Sri Lanka, and also rather young, the film *Pavuru Valalu* is a rewarding cinematic and artistic experience and in a way Chekhovian in its meaningfulness, artistic poignancy and brevity.

The story revolves around a man and a woman, Victor (a navy man) and Violet, who had been lovers and then separated from each other due to the outbreak of the Second World War. They meet each other again after the passage of nearly 20 years. Though Victor is still unmarried, Violet is married and he tells her that he came to know of her marriage from a Sri Lankan he had met in Cairo. Violet is the mother of two grown daughters. The elder daughter is already married and the other still living with the mother awaiting marriage. Violet, who had been deserted by her husband a few years after marriage, had brought up her children with money earned by sewing clothes for families in the neighbourhood.

Violet, with the consent of her younger daughter, invites Victor, who is suffering from severe pains in his knees, to stay with them at their house to receive the necessary strenuous nursing that accompanies local medical treatment. Victor is introduced to the daughters and relations as a distant relative of the family. Only Maggie, the household help who had been with the family for a long time, knows of the relationship that had previously existed between Victor and Violet.

Violet, with the help of her younger daughter and Maggie, manages to nurse Victor back to the robust health usually found in sailors. The troubles begin brewing when the younger daughter senses the real nature of the relationship between her mother and the stranger, and resents it. It is clear that the girl is apprehensive of the effect Victor's presence in the house and his relationship with her mother might have on her intended marriage, especially because her fiancé's parents clearly would prefer that their son make a "better match." To make matters worse, Violet's husband too now enters the scene to threaten Violet over the relationship she is having with Victor, reminding her of the legal bond that still exists between husband and wife. The relationship between the mother and daughters becomes strained, and the situation becomes almost unbearable for Violet when she unexpectedly finds that she is with child. Victor and Violet unwillingly decide that Violet should have an abortion to prevent a possible disruption of the younger daughter's marriage plans. But the abortion does not help matters and the daughter's plans for marriage collapse due to malicious gossip about the mother.

As a result of the emotional upheaval Violet has been experiencing, she has a nervous breakdown. It is clear that her suffering is most acute because she is unable to come to terms with the fact that she's had an abortion. Being a Roman Catholic, Violet fears "divine wrath" falling upon her. It is also clear that she is deeply unhappy because she had been harbouring tender feelings towards the child she had been carrying. The conventional attitude that everyone around her holds, and that she shares--that it is undignified for a woman who has grown daughters of a marriageable age (incidentally, Violet is prettier and much more youthful than her elder daughter) to have feelings of love and sex--tortures her, and in her hallucinatory mental state she imagines people stoning her.

The film ends with Violet being taken away from the house by Victor for psychiatric treatment. Violet hallucinates she is amidst the festivities of her wedding to Victor and looks extremely happy and contented. She merrily waves her hand at the crowd gathered to see her being taken away in a car by Victor.

Pavuru Valalu reveals the mental agony wrought on men and women alike in capitalist society generally, and particularly in backward capitalist countries, by the existing social and family system. The farce of the existing form of marriage and the social havoc resulting from it are brought out not only by the mother's marriage, but also by the second daughter's intended marriage, which breaks down simply as a result of the vicious rumours about

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the mother.

The film, though not emotionally charged, still affects the spectator in a poignant manner through its genuine and artistic presentation of social reality and human relationships. The spectator cannot but be pleased by the young director's talented and unaffected manner of depicting human relationships.

Some of the relationships depicted in the film, though bending under the oppressive and painful pressures of the family and social system, succeed in not yielding to those pressures completely and become sources of social and spiritual strength to the relevant characters. The relationship existing between Victor and Violet, as well as the relationship between Violet and Maggie (who is a close and dear friend to Violet, rather than a household servant), and the relationship between the mother and her daughters succeed in upholding and strengthening the spectator's faith in mankind. Violet, in her hallucinatory mental state imagining that she is amidst the wedding festivities, clearly indicates her deeply felt need for Victor and her desire to be with him.

Tony Ranasingha's subdued portrayal of Victor's character conveys to the spectator a gentle and humane nature and also the romantic streak present in it.

Some scenes of family life depicted in the film also have their particular kind of appeal for the spectator: The sailor, returned from his travels, trying to impress the women at home with his culinary prowess, and the women enjoying it immensely while poking fun at him; Victor showing off his sailor's tricks to the women; the three women (the younger daughter, Maggie and Violet) united as one in trying to nurse the sailor back to health--all these are memorable scenes full of human warmth. Violet seated at her old fashioned sewing machine with reels of coloured thread, ribbons and laces spread on the table arouses in the spectator memories of the way of life that existed in the 1950s, the time period in which the film's social and family drama is depicted.

The background for the drama enacted in the film is the residential area within the old Dutch fort in Galle, a southern seaside city in Sri Lanka. The Dutch fort is also used by the director of the film to symbolise the "prison house" of the existing family and social system as is indicated by the title given to the film, *Pavuru Valalu* (*Walls Within*). At the same time, the fort with its ramparts, old clock tower, gateways and lighthouse, the inner fort where at night dark and ominous looking streets are lit up by old fashioned street lamps, the old Dutch churches and buildings, the house where the family itself lives--comfortable and homely but old, with the plaster peeling off the walls in places--are all brought together artistically and therefore meaningfully in the film by the director with the help of his talented cameraman, Suminda Weerasingha. The sea and the sky, with the varying of their colours and aspects, are used effectively to suggest the changing moods and feelings of the characters.

The sleepy, melancholy and occasionally ominous rhythm of middle class social and family life in the 1950s, when it was not disturbed by social explosions as it today, is powerfully conveyed by the film. Its romantic undertones, too, are brought out by Harsha Makalanda's musical score.

Special mention must be made of the editing and art direction of the film, both remarkably well done. It is also necessary to mention that the director has been successful in selecting an appropriate and talented cast and directing it well.

The final frames of the film show the car carrying Violet and Victor leaving the old fort through its main gateway and heading towards the open spaces of Galle town. It is a defect of the film that room has been left for a spectator to think that this image--the couple leaving the fort through its main gateway--was intended by the director to mean they are leaving behind them bondage and misery, and are heading towards a life of freedom and happiness. This defect arises from the director's attempt to overuse the fort enclosure as a symbol for the present social and family system.

The film is saved from appearing to be projecting a superficial and naive solution to social problems that have their roots in the private property system by the forceful and realistic depiction of social reality within the film itself. The spectator is made aware that the couple travelling in the car are carrying with them the destruction caused in their lives by capitalism and that there is no escape or haven for them as long as the existing system lasts. The film succeeds in bringing home to the spectator the realisation that it is necessary to do away completely with this system for mankind to be able to explore and utilise the immense resources for happiness that nature and life offers. Here one inevitably is reminded of the final lines in Trotsky's last testament (1940):

"Natasha has just come up to the window from the courtyard and opened it wider so that the air may enter more freely into my room. I can see the bright green strip of grass beneath the wall, and the clear blue sky above the wall, and sunlight everywhere. Life is beautiful. Let the future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression and violence, and enjoy it to the full."

The pattern of separation, union, birth, baptism, marriage and death as it appears in the film makes one realise the futility and barrenness of life as it is lived by men and women in class society. *Walls Within* is the kind of artistic work that has the ability to make a Marxist feel glad that he or she is fighting for the overthrow of the outmoded, destructive capitalistic system, to pave the way for the socialist transformation of society.

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