

In the classical realist tradition

Sisila Gini Gani, directed by Prasanna Vithanage, script Sanath Gunathilaka and music by Premasiri Kemadasa

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1 February 2003

Sri Lankan audiences recently had the rare opportunity to view *Sisila Gini Gani* (Ice on Fire), the 1992 prize-winning first feature by Prasanna Vithanage, which had a short season at Colombo's Regal Theatre.

Vithanage's film is a tragic love story involving Harris Makalanda (Sanath Gunathilake), a wealthy married man and successful lawyer aspiring to become the town mayor, and Annette (Sabitha Perera), a beautiful young woman of Sinhalese and Burgher (Dutch descent) parentage. The movie, which begins with a mountain search party attempting to find Makalanda's mentally retarded young son, unfolds through a series of flashbacks tracing the first contact between Annette and Harris and the evolution of their passionate and complex relationship.

Harris first sees Annette dancing at a party and a few days later, in pouring rain, offers her a lift in his car. He takes her to one of his bungalows where, he says, she can change out of her wet clothes. Annette has sex with Harris telling him that she does not believe in marriage, mainly because of her experiences with other married men. "Marriage," she declares, "is like imprisonment."

But Annette's relationship with Harris begins to flower and she permanently moves into the bungalow. She also begins to change her opinion about matrimony and tries to persuade Harris to divorce his wife. Harris tells Annette that his marriage is one of convenience, which he cannot dissolve it because of their mentally retarded young son. Annette decides, however, that if she can win the love and confidence of the little boy she will be able to remove the main obstacle to their marriage.

She visits the boy's nursery school and secretly takes

him to a children's park. But the child, far from being won over to Annette, is terrified of the young woman and he is clearly relieved when he is returned to the nursery. Harris finds out about Annette's actions, scolds her and a nasty quarrel erupts, in which he makes some insulting remarks about her previous sexual liaisons.

Angry and disappointed over Harris' response, Annette decides to return to her mother's home. But her attempts to win the child's affection continue and she follows him on a school picnic to "World's End", a misty mountainous area named after the steep cliff on one side of the mountain.

While the children are having a picnic lunch the mist suddenly comes down and the nuns hasten to get the kids on the bus. In the rush the mentally retarded little boy is forgotten. He suddenly hears Annette call from the mist and sits still, as if confused. Annette comes out of the haze, grasps the child's hand and tries to help him to get to the bus, but the frightened boy frees himself and runs towards the steep edge of the mountain and his death.

As the search for the child continues over several days, journalists following Harris' mayoral election campaign uncover the relationship between Annette and the lawyer and whip up a scandal about the affair. The film ends with the young woman in remand prison on suspicion of causing the child's death.

Precise in content and compact in structure *Sisila Gini Gani* is a surprisingly mature work for a first time director. It contains all the features recognisable in Vithanage's subsequent films— *Anantha Rathriya* (Dark Night of the Soul) [1996], *Pavuru Valalu* (Walls Within) and *Purahanda Kaluwara* (Death on a Full

Moon Day) [1997]—which have won critical praise at a number of international film festivals in the last decade.

Vithanage, who adheres to the best traditions of social realist cinema, began his career in theatre. His creative hallmark is a simple narrative style, borne out of a deep social sensitivity, and skilful mastery of cinematic craft. It is clear, however, that he is also inspired by the realist tradition in literature, which, in one form or another, captures the struggle of individuals against hostile institutions or social relations.

The roots of this tradition lay in the struggle of the emerging bourgeoisie against the feudal aristocracy and other repressive institutions and social values that maintained the *status quo*. In this battle, the capitalist class secured support from other oppressed layers by promising them freedom, equality and fraternity. These principles, however, could only be realised in a world where the productive forces were not privately owned but controlled by society as a whole.

While the new ruling power was unable to fulfil its promises, artists were among those sections of society who sought to understand and reveal the sources of social bondage, inequality and alienation. The best social realist writers—Zola, Dickens, Balzac and Chekhov—illuminate the inner psychology of their characters and how they interact and were shaped by the society and institutions of which they were a part.

In line with this approach, *Sisila Gini Gani* thoughtfully dramatises Annette's battle against a range of restrictive social customs. And, like many of the heroines in classical bourgeois literature, her rebellion ends in disaster and disillusionment.

While she initially regards marriage as a form of enslavement for women, Annette is eventually drawn towards it, naively ignorant of the underlying selfish factors animating Harris. The main reason he does not want a divorce is because his wife's family connections provide an opportunity to fulfil his immediate political aims, in particular, his bid to become mayor. Annette's limited understanding of these aspirations and other social forces play a significant part in her misfortune.

Vithanage's film also subtly points to the workings of other social institutions: the media, which covers the disappearance of the child, but is only interested in manipulating public opinion in order to expand its sales; the church, which attempts to fish in troubled

waters, making the tragedy an occasion to instil the fear of god into the hearts of men; and the police, which enforces the law and its claim to know the truth.

Sisila Gini Gani could easily have degenerated into an all-to-common account of a husband's betrayal, if not for the director's sensitive examination of Annette's plight and the restrictive social relations and customs that lead to her downfall. The actors—especially Sabitha Perera and Sanath Gunathilaka—perform well, Suminda Weerasingha's black-and-white cinematography is particularly striking and Sanath Gunathilaka's script is direct and powerful. Vithanage's movie reconfirms the fact that intelligent depictions of social life have lost none of their attraction for the modern lover of art.



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