

A sympathetic examination of the problems facing Sri Lankan youth

Mille Soya (In Search of Wealth), written and directed by Boodee Keerthisena

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When *Mille Soya*, the latest feature by Sri Lankan writer/director Boodee Keerthisena, was released in local cinemas last year it attracted significant audiences. Last month the movie, also known as *Buongiorno Italia*, won several Presidential Film Awards, Sri Lanka's most prestigious cinema prizes, including for best feature, best direction and editing.

While contemporary box office success and awards are not a reliable measure of a film's artistic quality and depth, the praise for Keerthisena's movie is deserved. *Mille Soya* is an intelligent and at times poignant exploration of the social difficulties confronting a group of youth from a poor village on Sri Lanka's west coast and their determined and at times tragic struggle for a better life.

Unlike the escapist Bollywood musicals that largely dominate Sri Lankan cinemas, *Mille Soya* is an innovative work and one that challenges its audiences to think more deeply about the difficulties facing Sri Lankan youth who decide to risk life and limb and "illegally" migrate to Europe.

As the film demonstrates, conditions for most village Sri Lankan youth are brutal and dangerous with chronic unemployment and few opportunities to rise above a hand-to-mouth existence. Traditional employment in the area where *Mille Soya* is set is toddy-tapping—dangerous work that involves collecting coconut flower nectar, which is then used to manufacture toddy, an alcoholic drink. The tappers work high above the ground, moving from tree to tree via thin handmade coconut-husk ropes.

Low pay and a downturn in the toddy-tapping industry have seen the younger generation turn away from this perilous subsistence work. The alternative for many, apart from joining the Sri Lankan army and becoming cannon fodder, is moonshine liquor smuggling or other shady activities, occupations that ultimately lead to a cycle of

violent gang warfare.

As the opening credits suggest, *Mille Soya* is set sometime in the late 1980s or early 90s. Its central figures are Pradeep (Mahendra Perera) and his close friends, who are all unemployed. Pradeep is a fan of Bob Marley and reggae music and dresses like a Rastafarian, but with little understanding of the mystical religion. He heads a local amateur rock group, which he hopes will become Sri Lanka's number one band.

Samson (Jackson Anthony), who is older than Pradeep and had illegally immigrated to Italy, returns to the village for a vacation. Inspired by his stories, Pradeep, who has been attempting to collect money for more modern musical instruments, decides that he is going to seek a better life in Italy. The only way to do this is through a people smuggler, at the cost of 300,000 rupees per passenger (\$US3,000)—or the equivalent of five years of continuous toddy tapping.

Pradeep and his friends pool their limited resources and borrow heavily to pay the people smuggler. Their difficult and dangerous journey passes through Bulgaria, where the smuggler absconds with their money, passports and visas. The young men, who cannot speak a word of Bulgarian, locate another human trafficker and after untold hardship eventually reach Milan in northern Italy.

Rather than the rosy picture of Italian life painted by Samson, Pradeep and his friends are forced to rough it in an overcrowded and run-down apartment building located in one of Milan's poor working class districts. Pradeep falls in love with Prinsy (Sangeetha Weeraratne) who traveled with him, and who happens to be Samson's sister.

Having risked his life to reach Italy—the most popular destination for Sri Lankans attempting to illegally enter Europe—Pradeep returns home after only 18 months to attend the funeral of his brother who was killed in local political clashes during an election.

Unable to return to Italy because he was an illegal migrant, Pradeep tries to renew old village friendships, but finds that he has little in common with his old acquaintances and keeps coming into conflict with them. They are either caught up in bitter gangland rivalry or the dead-end of local politics—victims one way or another of the dehumanising poverty and want afflicting the area.

While mulling over this dilemma, Pradeep suddenly receives a visa, which a friend in Italy has obtained and posted to him. Jubilant, he visits the local beach and lies down under a tree with the visa in his hand.

Reflecting on all the trials and tribulations he has endured to realise his “Italian dream”, Pradeep falls asleep and imagines a romantic date on the beach with Prinsy. But as he sleeps a strong gust of wind blows the visa from his hand and it flutters away along the seashore. The film ends after he suddenly awakes, startled by a nightmare in which one of his friends is killed by the Italian police in an argument over his visa.

Director Keerthisena has a genuine understanding of his characters and sensitively portrays the complexity of the problems they confront. A member of the same generation that the film depicts, he draws on the experiences of his own friends, including some who migrated to Italy from Maravila, his native village.

The film’s dialogue is minimal and often earthy but it accurately captures the rebellious mood of the youth. Several scenes are particularly memorable.

Early in the film Pradeep is beaten up by an elder brother, who denounces him for being too preoccupied with his rock band and not contributing any money to the family. Pradeep’s mother (Veena Jayakody) keeps the family alive by making and selling moonshine.

Pradeep cries in agony but does not raise his hands in defence, shouting instead: “Ma, I’m a musician. I don’t know anything about business or how to earn money, but I need equipment. That’s why I want to go abroad.” These words, which still echo in this writer’s mind, indict the profit system. Here is a talented young man trying to develop artistically but cruelly blocked by economic circumstances and genuinely worried about the terrible problems that he and his family confront.

The movie intelligently uses newspaper reports on the arrests or death by drowning or suffocation of hundreds of “illegal” migrants.

Transported like animals and hidden in vehicles, Pradeep and his companions suffer freezing cold and oxygen deprivation. When the youth are finally released from a secret compartment in one vehicle, one of them is on the brink of death. As illegal immigrants, his friends have to keep moving and so cannot remain and care for him. At the

same time they are caught in deep snow and unable to carry him for any distance. The people smuggler’s response to their dilemma is swift and brutal.

Mille Soya sensitively explores other social problems facing the young immigrants—their harassment at the hands of European fascist thugs and a tendency to cling onto ingrained religious prejudices.

In one striking scene, a gang of Italian youth bully Samson as he returns from a grocery store, surrounding him with their motorbikes and ripping the parcels from his hands. Alone, Samson is helpless in the face of this racist attack.

Straight after this incident he returns home to find his sister Prinsy necking with Pradeep and is furious. Samson, who is from a Catholic family, scolds Pradeep and orders him to terminate the love affair because he is a Buddhist. Contrasting these two incidents, Keerthisena effectively highlights how ignorance and chauvinism, whether religious or ethnic, is used to divide society’s most oppressed layers.

Keerthisena, who spent eight years in the US where he studied film and video at New York’s School of Visual Arts, cites John Cassavetes as a major influence. An early American pioneer of cinema vérité, Cassavetes’ work is characterised by its intimate and passionate studies of personal relations and its semi-documentary approach. There are strong echoes of this style in Keerthisena’s film.

While *Mille Soya* thoughtfully dramatises the poverty facing Sri Lankan youth—whether in the rural villages or struggling to survive in low-paid unskilled jobs in Italy—it is not a pessimistic work. The film’s final scenes, when Pradeep receives the Italian visa, are particularly moving. He runs towards the road with great joy, shouting: “I am going, I am going, I am going...”

These moments are transposed against scenes of a toddy-tapper crossing from one coconut tree to another, high above the ground. The difficult balancing act is an unmistakable symbol of the precarious existence for ordinary Sri Lankan youth. As Keerthisena’s film makes clear, illegal immigration to Europe is not some easy alternative.

Hopefully *Mille Soya*’s local success will further encourage its wider distribution in South Asia and other parts of the world—beyond the handful of international film festivals that screen Sri Lankan movies.



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