

“Artists have the capacity to expose the reality of war”

Sri Lankan filmmaker Prasanna Vithanage speaks with the World Socialist Web Site

Wasantha Rupasinghe
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Sri Lankan filmmaker Prasanna Vithanage recently spoke with the WSWs about *With You, Without You* (*Oba Nethuwa Oba Ekka*). The 90-minute feature is the final instalment of his war trilogy, which deals with the human cost of the Sri Lankan government’s 30-year civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). *Death on a Full Moon Day* (*Purahanda Kaluwara* [1997]) and *August Sun* (*Ira Mediyama* [2003]) were the first two films in the series.

Although *With You, Without You* was released internationally in early 2013 and won several awards, public screenings of the movie were banned in Sri Lanka. The Public Performances Board (PPB) claimed Vithanage’s movie could internationally “discredit” the armed forces.

The film is based on *The Good Woman*, an 1876 novella by Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky, and transposed to contemporary Sri Lanka. It centres on the relationship between Sarathsiri, a Sinhalese pawnbroker, and Selvi, a Tamil girl sent by her parents from the island’s northern war zones to the safer central highlands region. The two fall in love and marry, but their relationship is poisoned by memories of the horrors perpetrated during the war.

With You, Without You was reviewed by the WSWs in June 2014 and a statement condemning the ban issued by the Socialist Equality Party’s presidential candidate, Pani Wijesiriwardane, on December 25.

Last month the film was released and screened in Sri Lankan cinemas, after the Sirisena-Wickremasinghe government appointed a new PPB. The repressive censorship regime, however, still remains. In March, director Nilendra Deshapriya was informed that he would be stopped from making a film about the life of Sri Lankan journalist Richard de Zoysa, who was tortured and murdered by Sri Lankan death squads in 1990.

Wasantha Rupasingha: Dramatising the reality of war is a challenge for any filmmaker, but in Sri Lanka it is particularly difficult. Why did you make *With You, Without You*?

Prasanna Vithanage: Internationally, there have only been a few films dealing with war that have been made during the conflict itself. The first was *Rome Open City* by Roberto Rossellini, which sensitively revealed how various groups fought Italian fascism. This initiated a trend that impacted on world cinema and opened audiences’ eyes to their lives and surroundings.

In Sri Lanka, there has been a 30-year war and, as we know, the government attempted to censor my film *Purahanda Kaluwara* (*Death on a Full Moon Day*). It was eventually screened after legal action and protests against the censorship.

War is an operation of capital, based on profits, and so the media always presents the opinions of the ruling class on this subject. Artists, however, have the capacity to tear away these dominant views and expose the reality of military conflict.

Purahanda Kaluwara I attempted to examine the fate of Sinhala youth, from the impoverished north-western and north-central provinces, who, because of unemployment and the breakdown of the rural economy, had joined the army. I also tried to show how the war impacted on social ethics and the older generation—the parents of these youth.

Following this film, filmmakers Ashoka Handagama explored the subject of war in *Me Mage Sandai* (*This is my moon*) and Vimukthi Jayasundara, in *Sulanga Enu Pinisa* (*The Forsaken Land*). The authorities responded by banning both films. Military officials branded the filmmakers as “terrorists” and even threatened them.

While the war has come to an end, the situation for filmmakers has worsened, with Sri Lankan authorities deliberately encouraging war-mongering movies. Once such films began appearing, newspaper editors and film critics claimed that production of realist movies about the civil war had stopped.

We had held up a mirror to the war but were denounced by the media, which argued that it was no longer possible to make these sorts of films. I disagreed with this defeatist mentality and decided to challenge it by making *Oba Nethuwa Oba Ekka* (*With You, Without You*). Fortunately I was able to find three people—Mohammad Adam Ali, Lasantha Nawaratne and Rahul Roy—who agreed to produce the film because they liked my earlier work.

WR: What is the significance of the film’s title?

PV: This can be seen from several angles. On the one hand, it’s an attack on consumerism and male chauvinism, and on the other hand, it’s an emotional love story.

It is not uncommon for people who live together to not understand each other—it can be a fiancée, a woman, a friend or a person of another nationality or race. Instead, they live on their memories of the other, even after they have been abandoned or separated. In this situation one can neither go forward, nor backward—one is forced to live with the other in an imaginary world. So the title has two meanings: “When you were present I was with you, without you, but after you left I’m still with you, without you.”

WR: What attracted you to Dostoevsky’s novella and what did you want to emphasise?

PV: Rahul Roy is an Indian documentary filmmaker, and he asked me to make a film on male chauvinism. I considered several stories. After reading Dostoevsky’s novella I realised that there was no better work exploring the foolishness of male chauvinism. What is male chauvinism? It’s men treating women as second-class citizens. Trotsky once said that one of the basic characteristics of a good artist was his kindness towards the oppressed masses and to women, whom society treats as second-class people.

The novella compelled me to ask whether we use our own maleness to

suppress other people because they might have certain contrary ideas. This domination, of course, is not limited to sex. There is state domination, which we see in Sri Lanka with Sinhala chauvinism against Tamils and Muslims.

So I wanted to use Dostoevsky's novella to compel the audience to see the national question as a metaphor for the post-war conditions that have developed, while trying to discuss the theme of love. This is what I mean by saying that the novella can be seen from several angles.

WR: The film powerfully reveals the plight of Tamil tea estate workers. But why did you set it in that part of the country?

PV: It's true that there was no war in this area. On the surface, it was a very calm region. But as we know, there is another side to that calmness. While tea is one of Sri Lanka's main exports, the living conditions of the workers who sweat for this product are very poor. Superficially, the area is enchanting, but underneath there are enormous oppressive pressures and complex social relations.

In the final stages of the war, Tamil parents from the north brought their young daughters to the plantation areas in order to prevent them from being forcibly recruited by the LTTE. Some of the parents returned to the north after leaving their girls in the care of Tamil tea plantation workers.

The film shows how poverty forces some parents to marry their daughters to older men, and I also wanted to show the humanity of Sarathsiri's servant. In fact, she is the only person who understands Selvi, and there's a compassionate relationship between them. Sarathsiri never directly looks at the servant's face when he speaks to her.

Those who come to Sarathsiri's pawn shop are deeply oppressed and I wanted to reveal this in their facial expressions. Sarathsiri never speaks to these people in Tamil. He conducts his business in Sinhala and he thinks that they should understand his language. Ultimately, when he is forced to visit his servant's home, he observes the difficult socio-economic conditions and the dark life she faces. I introduced this as a counterpoint—dark lives in an enchanting environment.

WR: The film shatters communalist claims that Tamils and Sinhalese cannot live in peace. Race and religion are transcended when people fall in love.

PV: *With You, Without You* is generally considered a love story—a journey for love—but some critics also regard it as a dark film. Yes, it is dark, because this basic relationship—the strong humane bond between man and woman, man and man, or the oppressed people of one race with another—cannot be achieved because of the social and political conditions confronting Sarathsiri and Selvi.

WR: The government originally banned the film. How did they justify this?

PV: The PPB originally wanted me to remove scenes in the film that related to Sarathsiri having retained his military pistol, even after having left the army. In Dostoevsky's novella, the main character was also a soldier. In my film, the soldier never handles it [the pistol] and it was the same in the novella. Both stories deal with the psychological impact of the sight of that pistol on the girl. Without that episode, the audience can't understand the film.

The PPB also declared that Selvi's reference to the "Sinhala army" was "problematic." It is true that the army is officially called the Sri Lankan army, but my film's characters are not mouthpieces for my views.

My film's rhythm flows from the struggle and heartbeat between the two main characters. In this case, a Tamil girl, especially a girl from an LTTE-controlled area, would refer to the Sri Lankan military as the Sinhala army. That's the word I used and if I didn't do so, I would not be an honest artist.

The PPB said Selvi's allegation that the army had stolen gold jewellery was not appropriate. But she was repeating what she'd heard. The then PPB chairman Gamini Sumanasekera phoned me, wanting to know why this girl hadn't spoken about the things the LTTE had done.

Many people now talk about reconciliation and say that after the war, there should be peace and unity between Sinhala and Tamil people. But for peace to be attained you have to look at things from the point of view of the other.

WR: The tragic end to Selvi's life is clearly a product of the war.

PV: That's true. But an artist can see the roots of these situations only if she or he is honest. If you are honest you'll see it in the society surrounding you. I'm a fan of Russian literature. According to Chekhov, the biggest crimes are not just shootings and killings, but to deny the fulfilment of life. This happens daily to so many in our country.

War is a crime because it destroys people's expectations and aspirations quicker than any other. We know that the existing social system and its basis, capitalism, are responsible for war. We have experienced this here for thirty years and seen how the lives of the Sinhala and Tamil oppressed are affected.

WR: How have Sri Lankan audiences reacted to the film?

PV: The film is being screened at twenty theatres and I'm very satisfied with the response, particularly from young people.

At the same time, this film has been a challenge to some people's beliefs. Some social media networks have made comments such as, "A Sinhala youth has been made to kneel before a tiger [terrorist] woman." Some cannot bear the challenge of the humane touch that I point to in the film.

In my opinion, there are nationalist forces on both sides that disagree with this human touch and are subtly campaigning against the film. Amidst all this, however, the younger generation—an educated generation with a vision—has responded positively.

WR: You supported the campaign to elect Maithripala Sirisena as Sri Lanka's president in January. Looking back nine months on, what do you think of your decision to join a movement that brought Sirisena and Ranil Wickremasinghe into government?

PV: At that time several groups emerged that were disillusioned with former President Mahinda Rajapakse's regime. Among them were truly oppressed layers and there were others disgusted with the vicious manner in which art and culture were being used as tools of the government. I joined this group. I personally thought that Rajapakse had to be defeated and so I joined the platform of Citizens' Power and called for a vote against him, knowing that the advantage would go to Sirisena. I now realise that, as an artist, my vision had been clouded.

Only the Socialist Equality Party warned about the actual political meaning of the line-up behind the campaign for Sirisena. I have to admit that I was only looking at the surface of the problem, and the immediate issues. I personally do not believe that Sirisena's bourgeois alliance has any answers for the problems faced by the people of Sri Lanka.

The political change after the removal of Mahinda has been very slight. We have only been given a very small space. My film has been publicly released and if Mahinda were in power it would not have been. The government appointed a new PPB, but as artists we demanded the abolition of these PPBs and the removal of all state restrictions on art. Nothing of the sort is taking place at present.

Every government since independence has worked either to regulate art and artists, or to subject art to the travesty of supply and demand in the market. This has led to artistic degeneration and paves the way for its destruction. Although my film is being released, I do not believe that this government can take any positive measures towards the development of art.



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