

A reply to a comment on the obituary of Sri Lankan filmmaker Lester James Peries

Pani Wijesiriwardane, Gamini Karunatileka
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The following is a comment on the May 23, 2018 World Socialist Web Site obituary of Sri Lankan filmmaker Lester James Peries. A reply by the authors of the obituary, Pani Wijesiriwardane and Gamini Karunatileka, is posted below.

Letter from Pandula Godawatta

There are several significant limitations and misrepresentations in this article.

Lester James Peris had a highly uneven film career. He made truly remarkable and significant films like ‘Delowak Athara’ (1966), ‘Nidhanaya’ (1972) and ‘Ahasin Polowata’ (1978) where he deeply probed the social, cultural and moral decomposition of the Sri Lankan urban and landowning bourgeoisie in the colonial and post war neo colonial eras. But, in between, Lester also produced quite shallow, mediocre and conformist films like ‘Sandesaya’ (1960), ‘Ran Salu’ (1967), ‘Akkara Paha’ (1969) and ‘Desa Nisa’ (1972) wherein he endorsed and in some cases celebrated feudalistic and religious backwardness, political reaction and various middle class conservatisms prevailing in a backward country undergoing a belated capitalist development. Why?

The main task of a Marxist art critic is to deal with this question historically and Materialistically. The writers of this article have failed miserably in this regard.

In ‘Rekhawa’ (1956) Lester Peiris portrayed the rural Ceylon (Sri Lanka) as an idyllic, politically isolated arena inhabited by fundamentally foolish and unconscious villagers who could suddenly turn violent when their ‘myths’ are challenged. The reality was somewhat different. By the mid 1950’s, the wet zone rural Ceylon had gone through decades of recurring food shortages, famines, epidemics and other social disasters created by the 1930’s economic depression, the constraints caused by the second world war, the post war depression and the economic dilemmas arose at the end of the Korean war in 1953. In large areas of rural Ceylon the influence of socialist politics of the LSSP (Lanka Equal Society Party) and the Trotskyist BSP (Bolshevik Equal Society Party), and later the Stalinist reformism of the CP was gradually growing since the early 1930’s. In the late 1940’s the capitalist government initiated huge farmer relocation programs from the wet zone to the hostile dry zone in order to diffuse and breakup rural social discontent and LSSP leaning radicalization. The LSSP lead 1953 country wide ‘Hartal’ mass agitation ignited determined, rebellious protests among farmers and workers in rural and plantation areas.

All this social history and current conditions were ‘alien’ to Lester James Peries when he made ‘Rekhawa’ in 1956. Chiefly because Lester, since his return to Ceylon in 1952, was heavily involved in the ultra right

capitalist government propaganda of the ‘Government Film Unit’ (GFU). The so called GFU documentaries – Ralph Keene’s ‘Nelungama’ (1953) and Lester James Peiris’s ‘Conquest in the Dry Zone’ (1954) reeks with political reaction and social ignorance. The films were produced as blunt propaganda tools for the reactionary and oppressive government rural social schemes.

Unlike Satyajith Ray of India Lester James Peiris was not influenced by Italian Neo Realism. He never stated either. Lester was chiefly inspired by the British Documentary Movement, British New Cinema and by the classical symbolist cinema of Jean Renoir, Carl Dreyer etc.

Funny these writers talk about Neo Realism, because in 1952 the Sri Lankan right wing prime minister D.S. Senanayake expelled Gulio Petroni and Federico Serra—the two Neo Realist leaning Italian documentary filmmakers who instigated the work of the GFU in 1949—due to their connections with the Italian Communist Party.

Lester Peiris might have gained crucial inspiration and energy from the cultural ideas, social insights and artistic work of painters like Ivan Pieris and Harry Pieris and from the pioneering photographic work of Lionel Wendt. I think the most important event in Lester’s formative years was the teaming up of all these Ceylonese modern artists in to the 43’ Group led by Lionel Wendt in 1943.

Lester was at his best when he portrayed the cultural hypocrisy, social turmoil and moral dilemma of the unwittingly transforming urban - suburban Sinhala higher middle class. But he did not trace the trajectory of this class through the whole course of contemporary Sri Lanka’s socioeconomic development. He sort of stopped himself at the stage when neo liberalism was introduced to Sri Lanka in the late 1970’s after the breakdown of the post war capitalist settlement. Perhaps the subsequent events—the prolonged communal civil war, rapidly rising living costs, ever increasing inequality, crushing of the working class mass movement, the diminishing socialist popular consciousness, mass rural killings, the growing consumerist-racial chauvinist-pragmatist trend within the relatively backward Sinhala middle class cultural milieu and the unrelenting state repression—all this harshness and trauma might have dissuaded this acutely sensitive, lone, free-thinking higher middle class artist from probing and analyzing further. The arrested development in the Sri Lankan Realist Descriptive Novel and the severely impeded progress in historical and sociological academic research in Sri Lanka might have also played their part.

Finally, I like to specially point out one early paragraph in the article.

“In 1947, and during the first decade of Sri Lanka cinema, most films screened in the island-nation were produced in South India and heavily influenced by that culture. Many of the directors, in fact, were from India. These films were partially stylized stage plays or dramas and often included singing and dancing, which tended to overshadow or constrain the cinematic potential of the art form.”

The third sentence of this paragraph is absolutely true. But the first and second sentences, I must say with a heavy heart, sharply departs from the

political standpoint and cultural perspective of Socialist Internationalism and ventures close to nationalism and racial chauvinism.

Sinhala cinema was born out of the South Indian Tamil studio based commercial filmmaking system due to the enormous and inexorable cultural similarities and connections between South India and its neighbouring small island, which the British colonials later reorganized into a separate nation state. Sri Lankan film artists—actors, writers, directors, cameramen, editors, designers, musicians were trained by their more technically and artistically advanced South Indian counterparts. Especially the technically masterful South Indian directors, cameraman, editors and designers played the most crucial role in developing a highly skilled Sri Lankan filmmaking artistic and technical cohort. Lester Peiris and the two others who courageously resigned from the GFU to make independent films couldn't have done so for a long time if the above artistic and cultural developments had not taken place. Lester made an artistic breakthrough. At the same time, commercial film industry and the film studios constantly supported and supplemented his efforts. The studio money and its key technical/artistic talent made possible his masterpiece 'Nidhanaya' and notable films like 'Golu Hadawatha' (1968).

Instead of analyzing this complex cultural dialectic, WWSW writers comrade Pani Wijesiriwardane and Gamini Karunatileka quite ignorantly utilizes the age old, worn out Sinhala chauvinist denunciations used by rival Sinhala film producers and small studio owners to drive their bigger Tamil competitors out of the business in the 1970's. This process culminated with the violent burning down of 'Vijaya' film studios, one of the biggest and most technically advanced in South Asia, in the anti Tamil pogrom of 1983. The studio belonged to the 'Cinemas' film company who produced Lester's 'Nidhanaya'.

As a long term reader of the WWSW and a supporter of the ICFI, I think WWSW Arts Editor comrade David Walsh should closely scrutinize this article and guide the necessary revisions.

Pandula Godawatta

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Dear Pandula Godawatta,

Thank you for your comment on our article "Sri Lankan filmmaker Lester James Peries dies at 99," published on the *World Socialist Web Site* on May 23, 2018. Your letter provides an opportunity to discuss several important artistic and political issues.

You argue that Peries created "shallow, mediocre and conformist" films and that his creative life was "uneven." You then claim that we have failed "miserably" to examine his cinematic work "historically and materialistically."

If you carefully re-read the obituary you would realise that our basic objective was to examine Peries's general contribution to Sri Lankan cinema—or how he came to be known as its father—not to present a detailed assessment of his entire cinematic output.

This, however, does not mean that a full examination of Peries's cinematic work should not be a subject of study. Such an undertaking would be very important, but could not, of course, be adequately explored in a single article.

We stated in our obituary that the films made in the first decade of Ceylonese cinema, which began in 1947, retained techniques and conventions of stage drama. This approach tended to overshadow or constrain the cinematic potential of the art form. We also observed that Peries' first feature *Rekava* (1956) marked a significant break from these limiting stylistic conventions.

Without referring to the significant aesthetic change made by Peries, you write at length about his supposed alienation from Ceylon's rural life that formed the background to *Rekava*. To prove your "alienation" argument, you assert that the rural masses actively participated in the 1953 *hartal* [mass strike] called by Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) against

the United National Party (UNP) government's economic austerity measures and, contrary to *Rekava's* plot, such people do not become violent when their religious-mythical beliefs are challenged. Your argument is mechanical and false.

It is true that the attacks on the masses by the UNP government, in response to the economic crisis that developed following the end of the Korean War, provoked a semi-rebellious movement of the working class. The LSSP provided leadership to this movement and in August 1953 called a one-day general strike of the working class that attracted support from the rural masses. Contrary to the original plans of the LSSP leadership, the *hartal* continued for three days.

While the LSSP hoped to use the *hartal* as a pressure tactic in its parliamentary calculations, the ruling class drew more far-reaching conclusions. It responded by promoting the alternative bourgeois party of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and its Sinhala-Buddhist program in order to divide the working class and the rural masses along religious and ethnic lines.

In 1956, one wing of the *hartal* leadership, headed by Philip Gunawardena of the Viplavakari Lanka Sama Samaja Party, joined forces with Bandaranaike to help establish the chauvinist Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) and contest the general election. The LSSP entered into a no-contest pact with the MEP and Bandaranaike won the election and became the prime minister.

You ignore these basic historical and political facts and their impact on the social, political and cultural development of the masses, both rural and urban. This leads to your false and rather formal assumption that because the rural masses participated in a short-lived rebellion, they must have shed all their archaic notions overnight.

The ideologically oppressed character of the rural peasantry, however, cannot be overcome without replacing the old forms of social life, which include production relations, by new ones. In Russia, as Leon Trotsky explained, rural conservative habits prevailed for years even after the revolution of 1917. "Meaningless ritual, which lies on the consciousness like an inert burden, cannot be destroyed by criticism alone; it can be supplanted by new forms of life, new amusements, new and more cultured theaters" (Leon Trotsky, "Vodka, the Church and the Cinema" [1923], in *Problems of Everyday Life*).

You are correct to say that the Government Film Unit, where Peries was initially employed, played a reactionary role in producing propaganda for the then government's colonisation program. What else could one expect from a government film unit in class society?

Peries may well have contributed to some of these films as part of his work, but his resignation from the Government Film Unit within four years in order to develop his own independent cinematic work is to his credit. As we pointed out in the obituary, his decision opened the way for the development of his career and benefitted Sri Lankan cinema as a whole. In any event, if the criteria according to which you would apparently find a given artist "acceptable," including an entirely spotless and uncontradictory political record, were applied to bourgeois artists as a body, how many would escape unscathed? Again, this is formalism.

You then go on to say that Peries was not influenced by Italian neo-realism—as the great Indian director Satyajit Ray had been. But your claim is false from two standpoints.

First, Peries openly declared that he was influenced by Italian neo-realism: "I would say that the two greatest influences on my work could be traced back to British documentary and Italian neo-realism" (A. J. Gunawardene, *Lester James Peries: Life and Work*, Asian Film Centre Publishers, 2005, p. 79).

Second, serious critics base their assessment of the influences on artists and art work through an objective analysis of the subject matter itself and not just on the opinions or intentions of the artist. Contrary to your assertion, many of the characteristics of Italian neo-realist cinema, i.e.,

stories based on the economic and moral difficulties facing workers and the poor in the aftermath of World War II, on-location shooting and the use of non-professional actors, are clearly present in *Rekava*. In any case, these characteristics and features of international cinema were prevalent at the time and did not appear in Peries's films from out of the blue.

Finally, you single out a particular paragraph in our article for harsh criticism. That paragraph reads: "In 1947, and during the first decade of Sri Lanka cinema, most films screened in the island-nation were produced in South India and heavily influenced by that culture. Many of the directors, in fact, were from India. These films were partially stylised stage plays or dramas and often included singing and dancing, which tended to overshadow or constrain the cinematic potential of the art form."

You state: "The third sentence of this paragraph is absolutely true. But the first and second sentences, I must say with a heavy heart, sharply depart from the political standpoint and cultural perspective of Socialist Internationalism and venture close to nationalism and racial chauvinism."

You declare that the third sentence of that paragraph is "absolutely true," but where did these characteristics that limited the artistic quality of Sri Lankan films come from and why?

Do you reject the idea that it was a result of the influence of South Indian cinema? You don't appear to reject this assessment. How can you therefore claim that we have turned away from internationalism and veered toward nationalism and chauvinism when all we have done is state an obvious truth?

The task of Marxist critics is to tell the working class the truth under all conditions. We do not hesitate to explain that the cultural and economic backwardness in countries like Sri Lanka and India has political and historical causes, colonial oppression and the inability of the national bourgeoisie to complete the bourgeois-democratic revolution in the epoch of imperialism.

Contrary to your allegations, what we pointed out is that Peries raised the level of Sri Lankan cinema and was able to do so because he had the advantage of being exposed to international cinema. In that respect, our axis was completely internationalist.

Your claim that Sri Lanka's Vijaya Studio, one of South Asia's most technologically developed studios, was burnt down in 1983 because of the chauvinist attitude of Sinhalese people toward South Indian cinema is false.

It is well-established that the Vijaya Studio was set on fire as part of the communalist carnage unleashed by the anti-Tamil racists, organised under the patronage of Cyril Mathew, a cabinet minister in the UNP government of President J. R. Jayewardene, during Black July 1983.

That you omit this truth, and then accuse us without any proof of Sinhala chauvinism, is a wrongheaded smear and one that contributes nothing to a serious examination of Lester James Peries's work and his important contribution to Sri Lankan cinema.

Yours sincerely,

Pani Wijesiriwardane and Gamini Karunatileka



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