



A Feminist Reading on the Exploration of Female Identity and Sexuality in Sri Lankan Cinema: A Case Study of Asoka Handagama's Selected Works

N.K.H.T. Sankalpani¹ and H.A.M.A. Hapugoda²

Abstract

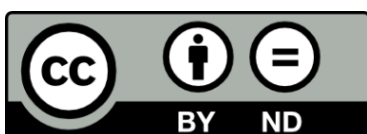
Since the emergence of the feminist movement, the distortion of feminine identity and sexuality is profoundly discoursed in relation to literature and other genres of art. This research has endeavoured to articulate how female identity and sexuality is portrayed in Sri Lankan cinema with reference to selected work of veteran filmmaker, Asoka Handagama. The sample comprises of the award-winning movies, "Thani Thatuwen Piyambanna" (Flying with One Wing, 2002), "Aksharaya" (A Letter of Fire, 2005) and "Aege Aesa Aga" (Let Her Cry, 2016) which features three significant female characters and their plight in patriarchal society. The researcher has deployed Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze Theory which examines the voyeuristic and scopophilic representation of women in media along with the Lacanian and Freudian concepts of gaze as the theoretical approach of the study. The research was predominantly conducted utilizing the qualitative approach while textual analysis and interviews focusing on the director of the selected films, critics and academics were the major tools of primary data collection. The secondary data was collected through research publications, newspaper articles, the internet and magazines. The hermeneutic approach was deployed in interpreting the sample and the collected data focusing on the connection between the selected sample and the broader discourses. Even though Laura Mulvey exemplifies that women are always being projected as passive objects in cinema, the findings of the study reveal that the selected sample represents the female figure as a more assertive and emphatic entity regardless of the persistent patriarchal norms.

Keywords: Feminine Identity, Sexuality, Male Gaze Theory, Gaze, Scopophilia

Sabaragamuwa
University of Sri Lanka

¹hashinisankalpani@gmail.com

²hapugoda@gmail.com



This article is published under the Creative Commons CC-BY-ND License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/>). This license permits to use, distribute, and reproduce the contents of the publication for commercial and non-commercial purposes, provided that the original work is properly cited and is not changed anyway.



Original Article

INTRODUCTION

The woman or the female figure stands as one of the most significant phenomena in each and every genre of literature and the portrayal of the woman in all these genres has evoked many dialogues in society. Cinema is one such genre which is rich in the capability of influencing the social and psychological aspects through its projection of societal realities. The female figure plays a major role in this visual form of media which has led the way for feminists to come up with different significant approaches in analyzing the projection of the woman in cinema and feminist film theory was one such approach.

Feminist film theory was basically connected with the second wave of the feminist movement which happened during the early 1970s and emphasized the stereotypical and distorted representation of women in cinema. Many feminist film theorists emphasized the fact that women are projected as passive objects in cinema in order to preserve the patriarchal dominance and they are portrayed on screen from a sexist perspective. According to them, the woman is depicted as a device which caters to the fantasies of male spectators. Even though this concept was brought up several decades ago, this is applicable to the modern times as well due to the prevalent stereotypical representation of femininity cinema. Although many have researched about the above concept with regard to Hollywood

cinema, very slight literature is available on the projection of woman in Sri Lankan cinema.

Western filmmakers such as Lars von Trier who directed the movies such as "Melancholia" (2011), "Antichrist" (2009), "Breaking the waves" (1996) and "A Clockwork Orange", Michael Haneke who directed the movies "The Piano Teacher" (2001) and "Funny Games" (2007) and Eastern movies such as "In the Realm of the Senses" (1976) manifest the woman from being within a significant pedestal. This inexplicable projection of the feminine figure has led to many dialogues among critics. Amidst the stereotypical projection of the woman by many filmmakers in Sri Lankan cinema, Asoka Handagama stands as a director who projects the woman from a different angle slightly showcasing the features and techniques of the above mentioned world recognized filmmakers.

Thus, the researcher expects to investigate the above phenomenon with reference to the selected works of the veteran Sri Lankan filmmaker Asoka Handagama.

In a period when nobody attempted to step out of the conventional frame of Sri Lankan cinema, Handagama broke the rules of the tradition by exploring the social realities which paved the way to earn accolades along with harsh criticisms. Handagama has been able to draw the attention of the society as a radical filmmaker through his movies

**Original Article**

starting from “Chanda Kinnari”(Moon Lady, 1992), “Me Mage Sandai” (This is My Moon, 2000), “Thani Thatuwen Piyambanna”(Flying with One Wing, 2002), “Aksharaya” (A Letter of Fire, 2005), “Vidu” (2010), “Ini Avan (2012), “Aege Aesa Aga”(Let Her Cry, 2016), “Asandhimitta” (2019) and “Alborada” (2021). Through cinema, Handagama expresses his vision and perception on the society creating a public dialogue. According to him, it is sometimes a game in which you play. His conflict regarding the existing social order, conventional and traditional upholding and political system is discussed through his works. Handagama’s attempt to create a subtle social awareness regarding the human condition in the modern world and the depiction of woman and gender identity along with sexuality can be considered as successful. He questions the people who blindly follow the social order and conventional norms of the society even without attempting to understand the meaning of it.

Sri Lanka, being a country with significant cultural values and traditions, always attempts to uphold those values. Even though media can shape the social values or question it, Sri Lankan cinema was entangled for years with the same convention and most filmmakers seemed not courageous enough to step out of it. Most of these conventional work kept the audience in a fantasy world. Yet, Asoka Handagama and other few filmmakers such as Prasanna Jayakody

and Prasanna Vithanage have attempted to explore the social issues by stepping out of the conventional frame.

Therefore, as elaborated above, the representation of female identity and sexuality are tackled in a more conventional manner by the Sri Lankan filmmakers and sometimes even by the international cinema. Cinema can shape the way we see our society, including women, sexuality and identity. The perceptions given by the cinema, theatre and media have an effect on the destiny of society as well. Filmmakers should at least make a debate in the society whether to accept the socially built up norms or to transgress the boundaries.

Sexuality and identity are recurring themes of Handagama’s works which also portray another condition of the society. In almost all of his films, Handagama questions female identity by letting the audience feel whether they have their own identity or else whether they make their identity to please males. The formation of female identity is always connected with the male desire and the societal norms. Thus, by addressing such issues, Handagama is attempting to create a social debate among the public in order to question whether this social order is correct.

Although much literature is available on sexuality and female identity, very few have researched it in relation to Asoka Handagama’s works: Hiniduma



Original Article

Sunil Senevi has published the book “Lankeya Cinamawe Susamadarsha Maruwa” which discusses the social, economic, political and cultural aspects of Sri Lankan cinema in relation to Prasanna Vithanage and Asoka Handagama and Mahesh Hapugoda’s criticism “Contradictory Discourse about Three Discourses, Three Subjects” on “Let Her Cry” along with Prabha Manuratne’s publication, “Let Her Cry: A Cry for Feminist Cinema” and “Silence in Sri Lankan Cinema from 1990 to 2010” by Fonseka (2014) are among those.

Since no research is conducted focusing both feminine identity and sexuality in Sri Lankan cinema, the researcher will focus on three films of Asoka Handagama discussing his depiction of sexuality and identity from a feminist perspective by addressing the question how does he address the issues of sexuality and identity in the selected works.

In order to achieve the above, the researcher aims to do an in-depth analysis of the text of the selected movies “Flying with one Wing” (2002), “A Letter of Fire” (2005) and “Let Her Cry” (2016). The researcher will examine how the director has explored sexuality and identity in the selected works by adopting a feminist view in order to answer the research problem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The researcher’s major intention of this dissertation is to explore the portrayal of feminine identity and sexuality in Sri Lankan cinema with reference to the veteran filmmaker, Asoka Handagama. Prior to the research, a review of the existing literature related to the selected field was done in order to identify what has and what has not been investigated by other researchers and at the same time, to reveal any gaps that exist in the literature.

Numerous research has been conducted on female identity and sexuality by various scholars around the world about the portrayal of woman and sexuality in Sri Lanka which proves the fact that female identity and sexuality is not a phenomenon specific to a certain region. The general notion is that women are being objectified mostly in the Asian region; yet, the research implies that even European countries portray women as the victims of injustices in male dominated societies.

When exploring the term female objectification in media, Laura Mulvey stands as a prominent figure that has made a distinctive contribution to the feminist film theory by showing how feminist issues are still important in films. In her essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), she emphasizes how women are being considered as sex objects in cinema. “In narrative cinema, woman plays a ‘traditional exhibitionistic role’ – her



Original Article

body is held up as a passive erotic object for the male spectators, so that they can project their fantasies on to her. She connotes 'to-be-looked-at-ness'" (Mulvey, 1989). According to Mulvey, woman is usually displayed in the screen by two different levels; as an erotic object for the spectator who is watching the film and as an erotic object for the characters within the film. She refers to scopophilia or pleasure in looking which derives from Sigmund Freud's "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality". In her essay, Mulvey has referred to the theories of some great philosophers such as Freud, Lacan and Foucault.

Yet, in some instances, the woman evokes castration anxiety of males as explained by Shohini Chaudhuri in her book "Feminist Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa De Lauretis, Barbara Creed" (2006)

In contrast to Mulvey's argument Anna E. Kaplan, in her essay "Is the Gaze Male?" (1983) states that the gaze is not always males' and it could be adopted by females as well.

"...to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the masculine position" (Kaplan, 1983)

According to Kaplan, woman herself identifies herself as an object of desire and she is inclined to develop a male gaze on herself. She states that male gaze carries power and possession

whereas female gaze does not necessitate power.

Saadia Dinia, in her research "Women in Contemporary Moroccan Cinema" (2016) explores the feminism and gender roles as depicted in the selected Moroccan films. The researcher has analyzed the data by a textual analysis of the language and imagery deployed in the selected sample. As many other researchers who have explored on female objectification in cinema, Dinia too has found that in the Moroccan cinema, women are being projected as the victims of the dominant patriarchal society.

Elizabeth Moore Siano in her thesis "Feminist Politics and Film Criticism in Women and Film" (1975) gives a detailed description about the importance of film and the stereotypical representation of women. Even though the research was done several decades ago, it is applicable and significant to the current context as well. She states that even though the purpose of an art form is to increase the understanding of people regarding the society and life, cinema fails because it promotes patriarchal ideology over women.

In "Behind the Curtain: Women's Representations in Contemporary Hollywood" (2014), Reema Dutt projects how Hollywood represent women on screen by referring to the movies *The Avengers* (2012), *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2* (2011) and *Toy Story 3* (2010) which are



Original Article

considered as the top grossing Hollywood movies of the recent years. Dutt emphasizes the fact that despite the transformation of women as strong as men throughout the past years, except for few instances, women are still being portrayed as the 'weaker' and the 'fragile' sex.

As mentioned above, a considerable number of studies have been conducted worldwide on the representation of women in media. Yet, very few have discussed about the patriarchal ideology and its effect on the representation of female identity and sexuality in Sri Lankan cinema which paved the way for the researcher to study more in to that topic.

Prabha Manuratne in her research paper "Asoka Handagama's *Let Her Cry: A Cry for a Radical Feminist Cinema*" explores how Handagama has radically discussed the themes of extra marital affairs and sexuality through his camera lens. The researcher points out that even though most of the critics view "*Let Her Cry*" (2016) as a male fantasy on women and as a "masculinist rejection of the seductive power of female sexuality" (Manuratne, 2016), the movie's major focus is the decaying relationship of the older couple acted out by the veteran actress Swarna Mallawarachchi and Dhritiman Chatterjee.

Mahesh Hapugoda, in his article, "Contradictory Discourse about Three Discourses, Three Subjects: 'Let Her Cry'..." (2016) state that Handagama

would not be able to mark his name in the international cinema as a Sri Lankan film maker despite the female souls such as Anoma Janadare and Rithika Kodithuwakku.

From the above mentioned literature which is on the portrayal of woman and sexuality in cinema, the researcher found that most of the studies prove that woman is objectified in cinema. Very few scholars have explored how both female identity and sexuality is projected in media and no researches have been conducted on the portrayal of female identity and sexuality in Sri Lankan cinema with reference to Asoka Handagama's cinematic works.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to conduct the study, a qualitative approach is employed in consort with an in-depth feminist reading of the selected cinematic narratives of Asoka Handagama. Besides the textual analysis of the selected films, interviews are conducted as a primary data collection tool. Laura Mulvey's Feminist Film Theory is deployed as the theoretical approach to the study in analyzing the collected data.

Prior to the selection of the research sample, a pilot survey was done in order to find out the portrayal of feminine identity and sexuality in Sri Lankan cinema and the results made the researcher to choose Asoka Handagama's cinematic narratives



Original Article

which are highly criticized by the critics and the public due to the extraordinary portrayal of woman and sexuality as discussed in the introduction.

Primary data is basically collected through the textual analysis of the selected works and the interviews conducted with academics, critics and the public audience. Research publications, newspaper articles, information collected via internet and magazines are used as secondary data which make the data analysis more credible and reliable.

Interviews are conducted as one of the major tools of primary data collection which leads the way for more reliable, credible and effective information and evidence. The researcher expects to conduct semi structured interviews in which a series of open ended questions based on the research phenomenon is given to the interviewee.

Since the research sample is selected from the radical filmmaker Asoka Handagama's works, the researcher's major intention is to interview Handagama in order to get his perspective regarding his own works. The selected movies are written and directed by Handagama himself. Thus, the director's own perception shapes the message given by the movie up to a considerable extent.

The researcher aims to interview the academics who have interpreted Handagama's movies which will enable the researcher to widen her

scope regarding the subject matter. Their insights regarding Handagama will add more essence to the study.

The research will be predominantly in the form of an interpretation of the text of the selected cinematic narrations and the researcher intends to apply Laura Mulvey's concept of Feminist Film Theory as the major interpretation tool.

Mulvey, in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" portrays how women are objectified in the media from a masculine, heterosexual perspective and she uses the term "male gaze" which is conceptually contrasted with the female gaze by stating that male gaze is a social construct resultant from the ideologies of patriarchy. According to Mulvey, the male gaze has three standpoints,

- I. the man behind the camera
- II. the male characters within the cinematic narration
- III. the spectator gazing at the image

The selected sample will be critically interpreted in accordance with the above mentioned viewpoints.

The researcher will utilize the hermeneutic approach in analyzing the data collected through the above mentioned methods. Hermeneutics is a data interpretive method which focuses on the structures of deep meaning and subjective worldviews reflected by them. A close reading and an in-depth analysis of the selected sample is done by employing the

**Original Article**

hermeneutic approach in order to answer the research problem.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

As explained in the introduction, the researcher has selected the award-winning movies of the filmmaker Asoka Handagama; “Thani Thatuwen Piyambanna”(Flying with One Wing, 2002), “Aksharaya” (A Letter of Fire, 2005), and “Aege Aesa Aga”(Let Her Cry, 2016) as the sample of the study which specifically reveal the untouched aspects of female identity and sexuality as depicted in Sri Lankan cinema. For instance, “Flying With One Wing” (Handagama, Thani Thatuwen Piyambanna, 2002) illustrates the plight of a woman who is disguised as a man due to the traumatic experiences she had to face in the patriarchal society. Handagama projects a slice of the male dominated society through the usage of male characters in the movie. He drastically portrays the contrast between the men and women and even between the traditional patriarchal family and the modern family in the society which ironically imply the fact that regardless whether conventional or not, the woman suffers in both scenarios. The characters of the disguised woman (Anoma Janadare), her wife (Gayani Liyanaarachchi), the doctor (W. Jayasiri), garage owner (Wilson Gunarathne), gay mechanic (Mahendra Perera) along with the father, mother and the three children of the traditional family and the women who come to the doctor for abortions

elaborates the plight of the ‘subordinates’ of the 21st century society.

The contradictory movie “A Letter of Fire” (Handagama, Aksharaya, 2005), explores a different phase of the society which is addressed as ‘taboo’ by the convention upholders. Through the movie, Handagama portrays an aristocratic family afflicted by oedipal aspects. The movie is an amalgam of Sri Lankan history, politics, society and culture woven along with an astonishing plot. The filmmaker has touched the unspoken aspects of sexuality through his cinematic narration which unfortunately resulted in banning of the work. The son (Isham Samzudeem) of a retired lawyer (Ravindra Randeniya) and a magistrate (Piumi Samaraweera) accidentally kills a woman (Gayani Liyanaarachchi) and fled away to the National Museum where he meets the security officer of the museum (Saumya Liyanage) and his daughter. The mother and the son have an extra-ordinary relationship: the lack of father’s interference has made the child ‘uncultured’. The mysterious story of the magistrate is unfolded to the spectator which reveals that her husband is not only her son’s father, but her own father as well. This entangled plot is brought out to the audience with the elaborated subjects of sexuality, female and male identity and the cultural aspects.

“Let Her Cry” (Handagama, Aege Aesa Aga, 2016) which is subtitled as “Kedella Rakina Gahanun Wenuwen”



Original Article

(for women who preserve the family unit) is a recent movie which revolves around an upper middle-class family and a young woman who enters and shatters this family unit. The film features Dhritiman Chatterjee, a Professor who has a secret affair with the young undergraduate (Rithika Kodithuwakku). The wife of the Professor (Swarna Mallawaarachchi) is depicted as a woman who attempts to protect the fragmented family of her. The middle class young undergraduate girl is projected as an authoritative character that influences the aristocratic Professor and his wife. The three women, the wife of the Professor, the young undergraduate and the daughter of the Professor (Sandali Handagama) are portrayed as three significant female identities that represent three respective generations of the society. The movie is entailed with the theme song "Aharennna" (Wake up) which is sung by Chitral Somapala. The song implies the same meaning which the filmmaker attempts to deliver through the movie that we have to wake up from our fantasies and dreams.

As elaborated in the literature review, most of the research conducted on the portrayal of feminine identity and sexuality prove that 'woman' is manipulated by the filmmakers as an erotic object which caters to the desires of male fantasy, emphasizing the effect of 'male gaze'. The researcher will interpret the sample of this study in order to prove the fact whether

Handagama deploys male gaze theory or whether he unmasks the male gaze.

Many psycho-analysts such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Zizek have researched about the 'gaze' which has influenced many other psychoanalysts in the development of their theories. Gaze is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "to look at something for a long time, either because you are interested or surprised"; how could this simple term become a research ground for many psychoanalysts? Gaze functions as a key aspect in understanding art which has made the modern psychoanalysts to concern it as a vehicle for communication. It is always connected with the social and cultural implications of the relevant context which connect a piece of art work with the broader discourses. This 'gaze' can be connected to many broader discourses such as power, politics, media, gender etc.

Michel Foucault, in his book "The Order of Things" (2002) inspects the function of gaze by referring to the painting "Las Meninas" in which he states that when the spectator keeps on gazing at the painting, he himself becomes the subject of the painting.

"...observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange. No gaze is stable... subject and object, spectator and model reverse their roles into infinity" (Foucault, Order of Things, 2002)



Original Article

According to Foucault, gaze always imposes power or domination over someone or something. He discusses this concept first in his book "The Birth of the Clinic" (Foucault, The Birth of the Clinic, 1973) as the 'medical gaze' where each and every patient becomes an object in the gaze of the medical practitioner. His book, "Discipline and Punish", (Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, 1977) further explains the way as to how gaze functions as a medium of power. By referring to Bentham's Panopticon; an architectural design which is utilized to modify one's behavior, Foucault expresses how institutions control the society. He uses this concept of the Panopticon as a metaphor for the gaze.

Lacan emphasizes the fact that one who is being watched loses a certain degree of autonomy when he or she recognizes that some gaze is fallen upon him or her. This can be discussed in relation to his theory of mirror stage where he explores how a child encounters and misrecognizes his own image through a mirror and how that same image becomes the object desire of the child which makes him a part of the symbolic order. This narcissistic relationship is built up through a gaze which can be applicable to the media as well. When a spectator is in front of a screen experiencing a work of art, he or she gradually gets rid of the idea that he or she is a different entity; rather, the spectator gets dissolved in what's on the screen just as the child who encounters himself in the mirror.

Mulvey refers to this as an echo of the child's misrecognition of itself as the other in the mirror. (Mulvey, 1989)

Laura Mulvey, in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) states, "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/ male and passive/ female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1975)

She illustrates the fact that in cinema, women are always being projected as passive objects for the spectators of the patriarchal society. According to Mulvey, woman is used merely as a device to attract the spectators instead of participating in the development of the plot. Thus, this 'male gaze' acts as a media of domination over women. She claimed that woman is presented as a 'sign' signifying the myths of patriarchal discourse and she influentially diagnosed that woman remains as the unspoken absence of patriarchal culture. (Mulvey, 1989) Mulvey further illustrates how cinema and the male gaze have connections with scopophilia, voyeurism and narcissism.

Asoka Handagama, the filmmaker of the samples of the study states that



Original Article

objectification of woman is prevailing since the beginning of cinema. He states,

“... that has been the case since the early days of cinema. Treating a person as an object is a painful thing to do and to experience. But in cinema, this exercise has been continued amidst many criticisms.” (Handagama, 2019)

In almost all of his works, woman plays a significant role. The movie “*Thani Thatuwen Piyambanna*” (Flying with One Wing, 2002) stands as a remarkable work due to its projection of contemporary socio- political issues in consort with the gender discrimination and gender identity concerns. The movie “*Flying with One Wing*” is a realistic portrayal of the patriarchal society. Each and every character symbolically represents the society we live in along with the social and cultural preconceptions. The filmmaker depicts how the character of the crossdresser attempts to live the life of a ‘socially accepted man’. In any society, there is a set of predefined prejudices for both males and females and the filmmaker depicts males as a set of people who are smoking cigarettes, using slang and filthy words, stubborn acting and showing their power by discriminating women who are recognized by the society as the ‘weaker sex’. That representation itself makes the spectator question the role of men while giving a realistic portrayal of males in the patriarchal society.

Chaudhuri, in her book “*Feminist Film Theorists*” (2006) explains this notion,

“These are the vehicles for myths, created by men and constructed from their viewpoint, which are then mistaken for ‘absolute truth’. Through the ages, male thinkers have sort to explain rather than question the notion of women’s inferiority, by recourse to theology, religion, biology and other ‘scientific dis-courses. They have used the patriarchal myth of the ‘eternal feminine’ to justify women’s oppression” (Chaudhuri, 2006).

Thus, the society is expecting the woman to live according to the myths of the patriarchy and through the practice of that viewpoint for ages, which has been absorbed even by women that they are inferior to men. This has been questioned by Handagama by his works with the contrasting application of the traditional family and the family of Manju, the crossdresser.

In “*Flying with One Wing*”, Handagama unfolds the story of a crossdresser who lives as a man. Even though she is a woman, her feminine identity is not exposed. Instead a masculine appearance and qualities are projected through her, which is considered as unacceptable for a woman according to the societal conventions. She is sometimes projected as stronger than men, both mentally and physically. Yet, the filmmaker does not intend to build up an erotic character through her role;



Original Article

rather he focuses on the tremendous struggle she takes to survive in a patriarchal society.

According to Mulvey's male gaze theory, females are projected as passive objects who are merely utilized for the benefit of the male fantasy. As she elaborates, women do not contribute to the development of the plot, they rather support men to be heroes. Yet, in this movie, "Flying with One Wing", Handagama reveals the tremendous strength of women through the characters of the crossdresser and her wife and attempts to unmask the male gaze through the active and heroic representation of female characters.

The movie "Letter of Fire" features the magistrate as one of the most significant characters of the movie who actively participates in the development of the plot. She is a woman who worked in that house as a servant but dreamed of becoming the 'queen of the castle' and she somehow makes her dream a reality. She becomes not only the queen of the castle, but also a renowned magistrate. She manipulates everyone around her.

"... it need not necessarily be the male gaze per se, that is at play here. And Handagama's female, is, by no means, passive either...."

The magistrate in 'Aksharaya', by her own account, bedded the master of the house to fulfill her ambition of becoming the 'queen' of the mansion she grew up in. Even her encounter

with the guard in the museum, though it ends in rape, has her pursuing him." (Harischandra, 2019)

As Harischandra (2019) states, the magistrate, rather than being subjected to a male gaze, establishes her own manipulation in both the domestic and work environment as a magistrate. She develops herself from the stage of a servant up to her dream position of the 'queen of the mansion'.

According to many feminists, both castration anxiety and penis envy are considered as myths developed by patriarchy for the benefit of the male dominance. In cinema, both these concepts are portrayed in different ways. Mulvey states that even though woman is used as an object of male gaze, that gaze itself evoke the castration anxiety or the threat of the castration. She further states that the female figure implies a deeper problem for the males. (Mulvey, 1975) Even though woman is considered merely as an object, she plays an integral role in the 'symbolic order' and the 'law of the father'. Even in this movie, "A Letter of Fire", regardless of the notions of Oedipus complex and penis envy, the magistrate plays a vital role in the development of the narrative. Although she faces a tragic death at the end, she was the linking thread of all the characters of the movie.

"Aege Aesa Aga" (Let Her Cry, 2016) is a movie which ironically discusses about the modern family unit and human relationships by focusing on an

**Original Article**

upper-middle class family of the Sri Lankan society. As discussed in the overview of the sample, the thread of the narrative can be considered as the undergraduate girl who has become the ultimate desire of the aged professor and gradually changes the lives of all the members of the professor's family. Regardless of the age, status or the marital life of the professor, this student becomes the fantasy or the unavoidable desire of him. Even though he attempts to get rid of the girl, his inner desire does not let it. Thus, the relationship between the girl and the professor goes far beyond than the looking- looked at dichotomy. The girl does not need his money, she just wants to be with the professor and she is not ready to give up on him. This young lower middle class girl gets the entire manipulation over the elite and aged professor.

Mulvey's conception is that females are being manipulated and objectified in cinema by the directors for the pleasure of the male spectators. Yet, according to the researcher's perspective, the university girl manipulates the professor to satisfy her own pleasure and desire.

"... And Handagama's female is, by no means, passive either. The undergraduate in Aega Aesa Aga is the opposite of 'passive'. She is the one who initiates the sexual encounters with the professor, sometimes resorting to forceful tactics." (Harischandra, 2019)

The movie features not only the university girl, but it also projects three different types of women from three different generations; the wife, young university student and the daughter of the professor, all centered on one male. All of them are correspondingly devoted in the development of the plot. The filmmaker has subtitled the movie as 'Kedella Rakina Gehanun Wenuwen' (For women who preserve their family) and has deliberately projected the strength of women who preserve the family with all means.

Even though Mulvey states that in cinema woman is projected as a passive object on which men can project their own fantasy (Mulvey, 1975), through Handagama's "Let Her Cry" the strength and the power of women is emphasized through the characters of the young university girl, the wife of the professor and as well as through the wife of the politician. As Harischandra states, these female characters enact the opposite of the "passive female" by actively engaging in the development of the plot. The filmmaker ironically exemplifies how the 'woman', who is considered as an object which cannot exist without men, can be the femme fatale for the men who drives for their desire.

Furthermore, in most of his works, Handagama projects the males as weaker characters which ironically depicts the death of the 'symbolic father'. Even though great psychoanalysts such as Freud and Lacan emphasize the importance of the



Original Article

symbolic order and the language of the father, the above discussed movies questions the validity and reliability of that concept by referring to the characters such as the doctor and the garage owner in "Flying with One Wing", the retired judge in "A Letter of Fire" and the professor in "Let Her Cry".

Thus, through the above discussed samples, the filmmaker projects the struggle of women in the hands of the patriarchy and how they stand as strong identities regardless of the prevailing gender discriminations. Moreover, through the character of Manju, the magistrate, the undergraduate girl and the wife of the professor, he deconstructs or unmasks the notion of Laura Mulvey's male gaze which emphasizes on the objectification of women on cinema. All the characters in the selected movies can be related to the ordinary women of the male dominated society and Handagama, rather than utilizing women for the voyeuristic and scopophilic pleasures of males, projects his cinematography as a mirror for the spectators to step down from the fantasies they live in.

CONCLUSION

The research "Depiction of Female Identity and Sexuality in Sri Lankan Cinema: A Case Study of Asoka Handagama's Selected Works" was done with the general objective of examining how Handagama has

projected feminine identity and sexuality in his works and the researcher has extracted few remarkable facts on the focused subject. The selected sample, "Thani Thatuwen Piyambanna" (Flying with One Wing, 2002), "Aksharaya" (A Letter of Fire, 2005), and "Aege Aesa Aga" (Let Her Cry, 2016) features three different and significant female characters. Each female character, gives a meticulous reading of the female figure along with the fact that how gender difference in a patriarchal society forcefully attempts to influence female identity.

The major finding of this study is that regardless of the gender discriminations and socially constructed norms, the woman attempts to stand as a powerful and strong entity who struggles to preserve her own identity. The characters of Manju and her wife in "Flying with One Wing", the magistrate in "A Letter of Fire" and both the university girl and the wife of the professor never give up their spirit until they achieve their goals. In society and even in media, most of the times woman is projected as a fragile creature that always needs a masculine protection which is a conception brought out by the patriarchy to mark their dominance. Yet, rather than being subjective to male dominance, the above characters in a way impose authority over men.

In "Flying with One Wing" Manju is projected as a character that is stronger than men, both mentally and physically. She becomes strong enough



Original Article

to murder the doctor who blackmailed and attempted to seduce her which is definitely unexpected by the conventional patriarchal society. In “A Letter of Fire”, the magistrate is the one who pursues the security guard of the museum and while her husband stands as a passive role, she is the one who takes the control of everything. Even in “Let Her Cry”, both females who represent two generations are portrayed strong; the university girl becomes the fatal attraction of the aged professor and she utilizes her feminine beauty as a charm to make her only desire a reality. On the contrary, the wife of the Professor who brings the mistress of her husband to her own house is also showcased as more powerful than the Professor.

Moreover, within the conventional frame, sexuality too is considered as male oriented in which male acts as the authoritative gender and woman as the subjective one, who responds passively. However, in the selected works, the female is depicted as more active and persuasive in the encounter with the opposite sex. They are articulated as more authoritative and influential than males who get entrapped in the mystery of the female body.

Thus, Laura Mulvey’s male gaze theory which illustrates that women are being objectified in media and that they are projected as passive objects that are utilized merely for the purpose of evoking the pleasure of men is deconstructed in these selected works

of Asoka Handagama. He has attempted to dissolve the myth of masculinity by depicting the strength of women and how they can be a potential threat to the patriarchy.

Another finding of the researcher was that it is not only the females who are being discriminated by this society; men too are being entrapped in this economic and political turmoil. In these selected three movies, Handagama projects the psychological aspects of not only females but males as well. Through the characters of the doctor, garage owner and specially the homosexual mechanic in “Flying With One Wing”, The retired judge who becomes both the father and the husband of the magistrate and the security guard who is a single parent in “A Letter of Fire” and finally the Professor in “Let Her Cry” projects the gloomy sides of masculinity. Even though Mulvey exemplifies that women has become objectified in the eyes of males, the males too are objectified by the ruling powers or the economic and political concepts.

One of the secondary objectives of this study was to examine whether Asoka Handagama portrays women by being within a conventional frame. While exploring this objective, the researcher found out that the society expects not only women to be within the predefined frame, there are preconceptions for males as well. Especially, the Asian societies expect them to take the whole responsibility of the family. While the idle female figure



Original Article

is expected to have a flawless physical beauty with qualities such as gentleness, fragility and special skills in cooking and stitching, the male figure too is expected to be strong, tough and they too are given special skills. If a man lacks those qualities, he is mocked by the society. In "Flying with One Wing", the garage owner asks Manju to whistle which is considered as a manly skill, when Manju could not do it, the garage owner looks at him sarcastically which depicts the consequences of not having 'manly' qualities.

Thus, according to the researcher's perspective, it is not only the females who are entrapped in the myth of conventional frame, the males too struggle in the same plight consciously or unconsciously.

Acknowledgements

This research would not be conceivable without the participation and assistance of many people whose names may not all be enumerated. I would like to devote my sincere gratitude to all who supported and guided me throughout this whole period.

I owe a deep sense of indebtedness to my supervisor, Mahesh Hapugoda for his immense support and guidance given throughout the completion of this study. Without his scholarly advice and meticulous scrutiny and valuable feedback, the accomplishment of this research would never be possible. His supervision paved the way for me to

comprehend the true value of a 'research'.

I extend my gratitude to Senior Lecturers Mr. Chandana Dissanayake, Mr. Saman Kariyakarawana and Ms. S.P.S.P. Weerasinghe for giving me a great inspiration along with their constructive guidance.

My obligation goes for all the interviewees including Neshantha Harischandra, Mr. Asoka Handagama and Mrs. Anoma Janadare who provided me their precious knowledge and participation amidst their busy schedules.

References

- Chaudhuri, S. (2006). *Feminist Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed*. New York: Routledge.
- Dinia, S. (2016). Women in Contemporary Moroccan Cinema. *Journal of Middle East Media*, 40-59.
- Dutt, R. (2014). *Behind the Curtain: Women's Representations in Contemporary Hollywood*. London: MediaLSE.
- Fonseka, S. L. P. (2014). *Silence in Sri Lankan cinema from 1990 to 2010* (Master's thesis, University of Sydney).
- Foucault, M. (1973). *The Birth of the Clinic*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Handagama, A. (2006, May 30). (P. Wijesiriwardene, Interviewer)
- Handagama, A. (2011). (Y. A. Television, Interviewer)
- Handagama, A. (2011). (Y. A. Television, Interviewer)
- Handagama, A. (2019, June 17). (N. Sankalpani, Interviewer)



Original Article

- Handagama, A. (Director). (2002). Thani Thatuwen Piyambanna [Motion Picture].
- Handagama, A. (Director). (2005). Aksharaya [Motion Picture].
- Hapugoda, M. (2016, May 12). Contradictory Discourse about Three Discourses, Three Subjects: 'Let Her Cry'.... Thrimana. Retrieved from 3mana.com/පන්ති-අරගලයසිනමාව-සහ-පක්ෂය/
- Hapugoda, M. (2019, March 23). අසන්ධිමිත්තා ගැන වසහකාරී විචාරයක්. Retrieved from Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HB_y-hyWtSeU
- Harischandra, N. (2019, May 8). (N. Sankalpani, Interviewer)
- Janadare, A. (2019, April 25). (N. Sankalpani, Interviewer)
- Kaplan, E. A. (1983). Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera. London: Methuen.
- Lacan, J. (1964). The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. London: Penguin.
- Lacan, J. (1978). The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. New York: Norton.
- Lacan, J. (2006). Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English. (B. Fink, Trans.) New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Ma, Y. (2015). Lacan on Gaze. International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 125137.
- Manuratne, P. (2016). Asoka Handagama's Let Her Cry : A Cry for a Radical Feminist Cinema. Social Scientists' Association.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. Screen.
- Mulvey, L. (1989). Visual and Other Pleasures. London: Macmillan.
- Mulvey, L. (1989). Visual and Other Pleasures. London: Macmillan.
- Salecl and Zizek. (1996). gaze and voice as love objects. London: Duke University Press.
- Senevi, H. S. (2015). Lankeya Cinamawe Susamadarsha Maruwa. Nugegoda: Sarasavi Publishers.
- Siano, E. M. (1975). Feminist Politics and Film Criticism in Women and Film. Iowa: Iowa State University.
- Silverman, K. (1988). The Acoustic Mirror: Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.