

REPRESENTING CONFLICT: THE RURAL IN FOUR SRI LANKAN FILMS

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The paper is an attempt to locate and interrogate the representation of the “rural” in recent films of Sri Lanka. In the postcolonial context the rural has come to embody the impulse of nation-building, postcolonial nation building, in which the most marginal spaces, the periphery, have to be integrated into the nation.

Within the hegemonic process of nation building the rural has to be defined in relation to the nation and in turn to the ideologies underpinning the idea. The “rural” has become a strategy pointing to an ontology within the epistemology of the modern nation. The cinematic medium has enlarged its possibilities and deployed its own narrative and technological strategies in the task of nation building in which the “rural” takes on other signifying possibilities, namely a psychomachic imaginary that carries within the sign immense possibilities for mobilizing a great number of people from different locations.

The imaginary within popular cinema in Sri Lanka has its own postcolonial trajectory, and draws upon the signs of the Madras-Bombay film industries and the avant garde in South Asia. Sri Lankan cinema borrows from the “Bollywood” mode and constructs a signifying structure that partakes in the melodrama. In turn, where the content is concerned, this melodramatic signifying structure produces a centre-periphery framework for the nation in which the rural figures as a central motif. This is the paradox of the sign of the rural in the cinematic construction of the nation.

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has accentuated the imprint of the paradox pushing the nation onto a political and epistemological crisis. The civil war and counter nationalisms have intensified the ideological contest between the nation and the nation’s periphery. This in turn gives rise to renewed efforts to reinvent the nation in different and alternative ways. The rural as the archetypal periphery of the nation has to be meaningfully negotiated with if the crisis has to be apprehended and contained. The strategies employed here deal with this renegotiation with the terms of the nation and with the contest within the imaginary and the sign of the cinematic medium. The representation of the rural goes through a contest of hegemony and counter hegemony as the term itself becomes appropriated not by the different camps of the contest but by the contest itself. Thus it becomes the site of the battle. My paper will specifically deal with recent films that have represented the “rural” within the politics of the nation. In this respect I propose to look at four films that have sought to grapple with the epistemology of the “rural” namely *Saroja* by Somaratne Dissanayake 2000, *Purahanda Kaluwara (Death on a full moon day)* by Prasanna Vithanage 2000, *Me Mage Sandhai* (2001, *This is my moon*) by Asoka Handagama and *Mathu Yam Dawasa* (2001, *Some day in the future*) by Dharmasena Pathiraja .