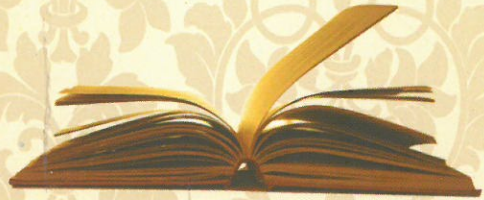


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Edited by
HARSHANA RAMBUKWELLA

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called 'foreignizing' – a form of translation where the strangeness of what is being translated is left intact, compelling the reader towards an uncanny and unsettling experience. In a culturally conservative society influences from outside are assimilated and domesticated – their strangeness is not allowed to survive or flourish. However, as many of the essays in this collection suggest, the true potential of translation lies in our ability to be open and alive to this strangeness. The strange and the uncanny is good – it allows us to step outside our familiar reality and look at ourselves critically. It is only through such experiences that we can be daring, push boundaries and renew and rework our culture so that it is a living and breathing entity, rather than one weighed down by the old, the conventional and the unimaginative.

To talk about culture then is to be open to all that this term implies. Culture is not just about demarcating what is familiar and attempting to safely inhabit it. It is at the boundaries where our culture (whatever that maybe) meets others – a zone of unstable contact – that we may experience newness. We should welcome this newness because it renews us and replenishes us. It is my hope that this modest collection of essays will contribute in some minute way to the broadening of cultural discourse in Sri Lanka. While this volume is produced as part of the State Literary Festival – by its very nature a statist venture – I hope that in future we have a situation where culture is produced, consumed and curated by artists and citizens in a democratic cultural space where the state supports culture but does not necessarily seek to regulate it.

Harshana Rambukwella
 Editor – Sahitya 2016
 August 2016

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**QUEERING SINHALA
CINEMA'S SEXUAL GEOGRAPHIES:
GENDER NON-CONFORMITY
AND SAME-SEX SEXUALITY
IMAGINED THROUGH URBAN-
RURAL TROPES IN *Frangipani***

Shermal Wijewardene

The city and the village—what do they have to do with Sinhala cinema's representation of gender and sexuality? Quite a lot when it comes to the depiction of women, as feminist critiques by Laleen Jayamanne and Sunila Abeysekera have demonstrated. Jayamanne's work (1981, 2001) and Abeysekera's (1989, 1998) work which builds on and expands Jayamanne's arguments shows that there was some co-creation of moral meanings about femininity and female sexuality on the one hand and about geography on the other in early Sinhala cinema of the 1950s and 1960s. They suggest that, in this post-independence cinema, geographies designated as 'urban' and 'rural' were assigned moral worth which, in no small way, corresponded with how they were seen as symbolically representative of national identity. Abeysekera (1998) notes that "the village became the epitome of all that was patriotic and national, while the city was the hide-out of the lackeys of the West" (p. 39).

The politics of sexual morality, especially in the coding of what was appropriately or inappropriately gendered behaviour in

women, participated in this moral-political framing of space.¹ Just as the 'good' village appeared as "asexual", the 'good' village woman "was a sexual non-being"; and while the 'bad' city was imaged as a "hotbed of passion", the 'bad' "city woman" was depicted as "a sexually active person" (Abeysekera, 1998, p. 39). Jayamanne (2001) argues that in the "family melodrama", her delineation of a central genre of Sinhala cinema from 1947 to 1979, ideologies of who is a "good woman/bad woman" are cued by a further set of binary oppositions which are geographic ("City vs Village"), moral ("Bad vs Good"), economic ("Rich vs Poor"), and pertain to worldview ("Westernised vs Traditional") (p. 94). Abeysekera (1989) contends that while images of men are similarly made meaningful through their links to the "first three categories (urban/rural, rich/poor, Western/traditional), they are never defined as being either "good" or "bad" purely in terms of their sexuality in the way that women are" (p. 52).

These feminist critiques are nearly twenty five years old.² Abeysekera has acknowledged that such framings risk making broad generalisations, and Jayamanne's published work has shown how the later Sinhala cinema dislocates these binaries. Yet it was to these critiques that I turned when I approached writing this essay on Visakesa Chandrasekaram's film, *Frangipani* (2013). Perhaps this is also because there was little (if any) comparable literature on Sinhala cinema which looked at the co-creation of symbolism around urban/rural oppositions and gender non-conformity and same-sex sexuality—basically how "questions of sex and desire infuse all manner of spaces" and how "assumptions about normal sexuality are spatially produced and maintained", as the 'geographies of sexuality' literature maintains (Hubbard, 2008, p. 3, 7). Not only did the feminist critiques offer ways of thinking about how space is gendered and sexualised, just as gender and sexuality are spatially located and constructed in Sinhala cinema, but they also resonate with my interest in exploring how dissonance enters attempts to

1. See also Dissanayake (2003).

2. Abeysekera's 1989 essay, "Women in Sri Lankan Cinema", draws on Laleen Jayamanne's unpublished doctoral thesis, *The Position of Women in Sri Lankan Cinema 1947-1979*.

re-work traditional sexual geographies. A prime example of this is Abeysekera's (1998) insight that a film which tries to subvert binary depictions of urban-rural sexual geographies can nevertheless end up partially subscribing to them, for instance incorporating non-traditional images of the village with traditional images of the city.³ I was also interested in how these critiques which mostly speak to the cinematic representation of two binary gender categories, 'men' and 'women', and which acknowledge that "heterosexual desire" is central in the films they analyse, could inform my approach to what has been called a contemporary Sri Lankan 'queer film'.

Frangipani had its international premiere at the Bangalore Queer Film Fest in February 2014 and its national premiere the same year at the Colombo International Film Festival. The film follows the changing relationship dynamics between two young men and a woman, Chamath, Sarasi, and Nalin. It would be easy to read their interactions as a cheesy love triangle—Sarasi in love with her best friend Chamath who is deeply fond of her but is attracted to Nalin with whom he has a brief but intense relationship until Nalin opts for normalcy, financial security and family life and marries Sarasi. However, the film is unafraid to risk that reading and, to its credit, attempts to show unfixed and unfinished negotiations between the three. It is difficult to ignore geography in *Frangipani*, perhaps as much as it is difficult to overlook themes of men's gender non-conformity and same-sex sexuality. Most of the reviews on this film mention its visually pleasurable backdrop, but is there more to the serenely green village landscape than just good cinematography? What are the politics connecting urban/rural geography with gender non-conformity and same-sex sexuality?

Geography is very much a part of the film's interests in moving beyond binary notions of gender and sexuality, and even binary notions of relationship possibilities, but the film also relies on some conventional troping of gender-sexuality-geography to do that, and this is where my interest lies. The rural setting is projected as a place of playfulness, where it is possible to some extent to not conform to

3. See Abeysekera's (1989) analysis of I.M. Hewawasam's *The Buffalo*.

gender norms and to move back and forth on the many points from being friends to being sexual, relatively unconcerned by platonic-erotic binaries and fixed homo/hetero/bi/trans definitions. We see Sarasi and Chamath chase each other playfully over an estate, pause to touch, grow confused, laugh without articulating its significance, and then resume their play. Rural space is also constructed in terms of its incommensurability. For instance, Chamath is accepted as the only man in the village bridal dressing shop, and Sarasi both paints his fingernails and playfully-sterly chastises him, saying 'Men do not wear nail polish'. Using beautifully shot pastoral aesthetics, the film shows that their three-person relationship is negotiated. They bathe in a river and relax on the grass, contemplating a frangipani flower with a symbolic extra petal, and they fight and make up in another scene, squeezing together on a motorcycle heading down a sunlit village road. Yet the codes which construct the sexual geographies of the village in this film are also not fixed; they are open to multiple interpretations. What codes of the rural are exploited to move beyond homo-hetero categorisations and binary male-female representations? Could we read Chamath and Sarasi's initial playful and inarticulate eroticism as rural caricature? Is it a patronising fantasy of two charmingly undeveloped rural adults, where nature is allegorically used to capture a fluid and ineffable village sensibility towards sexuality? In short, does the film slide into exploiting rural stereotypes to depict inappropriate gender and sexuality, and does this construct the sexual geographies of the village?

Of course, a further layer is added by the fact that, in the Chamath-Sarasi scenes, there is no necessary correspondence between space, gender and sexuality which aids their mutual meaning construction. To clarify, in the feminist critiques I reference above, Abeysekera interrogates the specific rural and gendered signifiers (in addition to signifiers of class, socio-economic status, sexual agency and so on) that filmmakers choose to bring up and splice in order to represent the character of the 'village woman'. The tenuous semantic connections between tropes of 'the rural' and tropes of gender are clearly unpacked, and the essentialisms that structure those tropes are questioned. Although Abeysekera also mainly speaks in terms

of the representation of 'men' and 'women', she still critiques normativisation—of notions of 'men', 'women', the 'city' and the 'village', as well as their conjunctions.

The village woman was virtuous; the city woman was a vamp. The village woman was faithful and devoted while the city woman was fickle and faithless. Short hair and western dress were the physical/visual manifestations of all that was alien and non-national about the city woman, while the village woman symbolized the nascent nationhood of that time, tying her hair back in the traditional *Kondey* and wearing saree or half-saree....

In behaviour and attitudes towards sexuality too, the dichotomy between the village and the city was quite pronounced, and in keeping with the other differences set out above. The village was asexual...city folk were ruled by lust; again negatively valued. The village woman was a devoted wife, the city woman a temptress. The village woman... was only the object of male passion, submitting mindlessly to male desire. (Abeysekera, 1998, p. 39).

I propose that we can follow through with her logic to examine the meaning construction around the rural and around a character in *Frangipani* that raises questions about being appropriately gendered as either male or female.

If the connection between 'village' and 'woman' is unstable as Abeysekera and Jayamanne assert, but if somehow the male/female binary is still the dominant (even only) logic through which to make sense of gender and, by extension, the relationships amongst tropes of gender, sexuality and geography, we should explore how Abeysekera's and Jayamanne's critiques of patriarchal representations of village women and city women in early Sinhala cinema are useful to critique heteronormativity and can work as points of departure for a 'queer' critique of sexual geographies in *Frangipani*.

In contemporary research and activism, 'queer' is a contested term, in that it has multiple and competing meanings. It has been

used as a term of abuse “whose purpose has been the shaming of the person it names or, rather, the producing of a subject *through* that shaming interpellation” (Butler, 1993, p. 18). To some, it serves as an umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI), while others argue that ‘queer’ is not to be deployed as an identity category because it aims “less to normalize gay identities than to free all sexualities from normalizing regulation”, including LGBTI identities (Seidman, 2001, p. 321). A useful elaboration of the latter understanding is offered by Indian scholars and activists Narrain and Bhan (2005) who observe that,

[R]ather than simply speaking for the right to make different choices, or remain a ‘minority’ within a larger heterosexual ‘majority’, the queer movement tries to challenge the idea of a ‘normal’ and ‘different’ sexuality in itself. It argues that while hierarchies of desire are certainly not acceptable, neither are ‘us-and-them’ or ‘separate/different but equal’ assertions valid. The point is to object to all hierarchies and power structures, not just the ones that we happen to be on the wrong end of. (p. 6)

My own stance is to qualify what I mean when I use ‘LGBTI’ and ‘queer’ *each time, in the specific contexts in which I use them*, and to never assume that the rationale and politics for using this language (even my own) have been established once and for all. In this instance, my use of queer is influenced by Jagose’s (1996) understanding of it as a critical move disruptive of the presumption that ‘biological’ sex, ‘socially constructed’ gender, and sexual desire are co-constitutive and ‘naturally’ line up together. A ‘queer’ critique, according to Jagose (1996) is one which highlights “mismatches between sex, gender and desire”, which are “the three terms which stabilise heterosexuality” (p. 3).

Frangipani invites us to recognize that gender and sexuality are not stable propositions in the Chamath-Sarasi pairing—certainly not for Chamath who explores wearing makeup and dresses, and also not for Sarasi whose heterosexual desires for Chamath are somewhat queer, as I point out above. Then how do gender non-

conformity and queer articulations of heterosexuality correspond with the construction of meaning about the village and the city? If a heteronormative logic dominates meaning creation about sexual geographies and stabilises those meanings, what position is available for a character like Chamath who is not always already identified as either male or female?

Taking the scene where Chamath and Sarasi are briefly intimate after a playful chase through an estate, I suggest that this scene is open to being read as ‘queering’ a ‘straight’ formula. This action between a man and a woman in a forest setting is a set piece we have seen many times onscreen; the generic heteronormality is its DNA, the thing that we always already expect from the scene when it begins, and it is what makes the scene conventionally meaningful. The scene with Chamath and Sarasi both raises those expectations and disrupts them: what we are seeing *appears* to be an opposite sex pairing and an instance of heteronormal sexual desire, but it is also not, and it is this ambiguity that ‘queers’ the film’s sexual geographies. Then there is also a parallel between the way that Chamath touched Sarasi and the way he touches the mannequin in his room. The latter scene could signify Chamath’s desire to see a reflection of himself in female form or a wish to see himself in similar clothes—either way, it disrupts and queers the stability and continuities amongst sex, gender and sexuality which would have made the previous scene meaningful.

Frangipani is provocative in “queering heteronormality” (Hubbard, 2008, p. 10)—it shows how stultifying a particular model of the heteronorm is for everyone, including heterosexual people. The room that Sarasi has to manoeuvre, when it comes to making autonomous choices in marriage, is limited from the start; ultimately, it is that, and not the fact that Nalin continues to pursue men after marriage to her, which is trapping for her. Nalin’s hollow romanticising of heteronormality is represented as deeply ironic on many levels. But the film’s queering tactics are also quite conventional in another sense, in terms of how they construct a queer “sexual imaginary” in relation to stereotypical notions of the urban and the rural (Binnie & Valentine, 1999, p. 178). Binnie and Valentine

(1999) and Weston (1995) are among many scholars who have identified that a rural/urban split is a central hook in narratives of LGBT/queer experience, and that a common strand is of flight from the rural in search of emancipation, self-realisation and community in the city. What Binnie and Valentine (1999) describe as “the ambivalence of the rural in the sexual imaginary as simultaneously utopian and dystopian - a place of escape or becoming, as well as a place to escape from” (p. 178) can be seen in *Frangipani*. The film suggests that it is possible to act on same-sex desire in the village, under cover of male homosocial bonds; but it has to be done furtively, and is always in danger of being found out, as in the scene when Chamath’s macho brother glowers at Nalin over dinner while Chamath’s mother appears oblivious. The village appears to cramp sexual exploration to the point where queer residence in it appears impossible. In one of the film’s more melodramatic turns, Chamath attempts suicide dressed in a bridal outfit, at the same time as Nalin and Sarasi pass on their way to be married. Escape to the city seems inevitable, with family members and others telling Chamath that there is nothing left for him in the village. Like many other Western coming out stories, Chamath’s story becomes that of someone who has “been brought up in a rural environment who migrate[s] to the city to escape the oppressive moral landscape of the rural” (Binnie & Valentine, 1999, p 178).

Within the sexual imaginary of the city, Chamath’s character is represented as having the freedom to wear a dress, put on makeup, and work as a singer in a nightclub. Interestingly, there is a more than superficial parallel between the representation of that link between gender non-conformity and urban geography on the one hand, and the representation of the link between the ‘bad woman’ and the city on the other, in how drag mimics the city-vamp-in-the-night-club trope (Abeysekera, 1989). Yet despite queering the “symbolics of urban-rural relations” (Weston, 1995, p. 255) in the construction of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women in Sinhala cinema, the film subscribes quite tamely to how those symbolics have conventionally operated, in Western constructions, in constituting the queer subject. The urban-gender-sexuality nexus is signified in terms of

an emancipating ‘queer’ public visibility which rural folk can only watch incredulously and somewhat enviously. Chamath appears on TV on a bridal programme and is watched by Sarasi, almost as if he were a minor celebrity, while Nalin, who has chosen to remain in the rural setting, can only mutely embrace a limited number of abject choices. Modern technology literally beams modern and progressive urban sexualities to the rural backwoods. Locating the Western metropolis as the site of sexual emancipation and progressive attitudes, and placing rural life on a trajectory to catch up with the city is part of a familiar sexual imaginary which, critics claim, underlies a hierarchical structuring of the West-non-West and the urban-rural (Bacchetta, 2002). But *Frangipani* does not seem to be too interested in this critique.

Frangipani is unique in its attempt to cinematically depict sexual geographies of gender non-conforming people and same-sex desiring men. As I have tried to show, it does so in ways that intervenes in and attempts to queer how cinematic codes have represented heteronormal sexual geographies in Sinhala cinema. But it also replicates some of the stereotypical ways in which queer urban/rural sexual geographies have been rendered—representations that are mostly associated with Western constructions, although they are not exclusive to the West. It may be argued that the metaphorical sexual-spatial associations of the urban versus the rural, where the urban is associated with freedom, openness, progressiveness and modernity, all qualities which constitute a self-actualising urban queer subject; and the rural is associated with isolation and the archaic heteronormal is part of a globalised repertoire. *Frangipani*’s drawing on it gives the illusion that this is a universal story, rather than one that has its own politics (and geopolitics) of space, gender and sexuality. Ironically, for a film that has been branded “authentically Sri Lankan”⁴ and tries to locate its queer subjects in the interstices of Sinhala cinema’s heteronormal sexual geographies, *Frangipani* is ultimately not sufficiently self-reflexive about its own relationship to thematics of sexuality and space.

4. See Greyson Cooke, “Frangipani: Interview with Sri Lankan Director”, <http://www.fridae.asia/lifestyle/2014/10/23/12725.frangipani-interview-with-sri-lankan-director>. Accessed 20 August 2016.

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