

The migration question in *For a son*: sociocultural representations of Sri Lankan migration in a minimalist film

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I received an opportunity to watch Suranga Katugampala's *For a son* (2016) at a screening in Colombo in February 2017. The film in all its sense, as Katugampala has captioned in its synopsis, 'a minimalist film, simple and close as possible to the reality' (forason.com). The most intriguing aspect of *For a son* to me, a migration media scholar, entailed in a four-year PhD project on Sinhalese diasporic women audiences of Sri Lankan soap operas (teledramas) in Melbourne, Australia, is the migration question in the film. While throughout, the film also engages with a powerful psychoanalytic examination of the strained relationship between a mother and an adolescent son, drawing on Freudian psychosexual theories, the migration question in *For a son* enables us to read this film from a sociocultural vantage.

In this paper, my objective is to examine the sociocultural meanings of migrant lives in the Sri Lankan context, as constructed in *For a son*, and to point out the significance of the film's minimalist approach to the migration question in examining diasporic lives. I pay attention to conceptualisations offered in scholarly literature on diasporas. My own ethnographic work with Sinhalese migrant women in Melbourne, Australia, help me to situate *For a son* within a broader sociocultural diasporic continuum of identity, hybridity, belonging, and globalisation. I reject the devalued notions that emerged during the post-screening discussion about the 'backwardness' and 'absurdity' of migrants' engagements with their home country culture. Questions were raised why they were not assimilating to a more Western, developed culture offered to them in their host countries. This, to me, is a simple definition of their complex selves. Such a reading of migrant selves does not do justice to the multifaceted cultural meanings of their everyday lives that are represented in Katugampala's film. In this article, I discuss how migrant lives need to be read and understood within the realities of their hybrid selves and that, as a country with an expanding migrant base, the significance of being attuned to their everyday cultural struggles.

Questions of migration and identity are nothing new and the scholarly literature on the subject is vast. For instance, we find cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall's (1990) writing on Caribbean cinema and diaspora, conceptualising identity as a discontinued experience, as something that does not exist in a static position but

undergoing 'constant transformation'. Post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1994: 3) conducted extensive work for theorising hybridity many years ago, emphasising that 'social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformations'. Sociologist and cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy (1993) wrote in his essays on African diasporic culture in Britain that diasporic cultures need to be examined not merely as an 'intrusion' or a 'collision' with the authentic life in the West but as an 'intermixture of a variety of distinct cultural forms'. Gilroy argued that the way in which default notions of ethnicity have been mobilised in cultural studies needed to undergo a critical evaluation, deviating from the 'assumption that cultures always flow into patterns congruent with the borders of essentially homogenous nation-states'. Marie Gillespie's (1995) ethnographic study analysed second-generation Punjabi Londoners, consuming Australian soap operas, and her work positioned diasporic culture within the context of everyday life. *For a son*, gives us an opportunity to observe these theoretical aspects of migration and identity from a closer-to-life constructed vantage and in particular, within a Sinhalese diasporic context.

Today, it had become increasingly important to examine the diversity and contextualities of migrant experiences. Migration has become a particularly difficult phenomenon to theorise, as mass migration incidents that recently unfolded in Europe and Euro-American nationalist political forces growing stronger in immigrant nations, spreading discriminatory views against migration and immigrants, have shown. In particular, a growing body of scholarly work, more relevantly to my field of inquiry - diasporic consumption of media and popular cultures - has examined the migration question in challenging ways, rethinking and problematising traditional conceptualisations of migration, as a phenomenon merely linked to displacement, economic conditions, and refuge.

It became a necessity for media research to expand the 'three-step process' of the media research tradition that concerned production, texts, and consumption, as a result of the complex role media played specifically in diasporas (Georgiou 2007: 22). In particular, the community role media plays among migrant groups have contributed significantly to the development of local and transnational communication spaces that are uniquely diasporic (ibid.). The prominent place news from the homeland has in diasporic communities draws on what cultural studies and diaspora scholar Hamid Naficy (1993: 107) calls an 'epistephilic' desire or a longing

rather than a desire for facts or updates. Therefore, diasporic cultures and expression need to undergo a particular type of problematising, differentiating from traditional conceptualisations and convenient generalisations.

We also find the topic of Sri Lankan migration addressed in films and popular culture. Local and international films, such as *Saharawe Sihinaya* (1990), *Mille Soya* (2004), *Machan* (2008), and *Dheepan* (2015) to name a few, had tackled the topic of Sri Lankan migration before. Even the first locally broadcast Sinhalese teledrama (soap opera) *Dimuthu Muthu* (1983) inquired about the phenomenon of returning migrant workers in rural communities. Another teledrama, *Rata Giya Aththo* examined the migrant lives of a Sri Lankan family in UK in the 1980s. However, Katugampala's own history as the son of Sri Lankan migrant parents, living in Verona, provides an intriguing point to ponder the migration question in *For a son*. I am tempted to call *For a son* a story about migration from a migrant filmmaker. The filmmaker's own deterritorialisation and itinerancy as well as his insider-status within the Sri Lankan migrant community in Italy leaves a prominent imprint within the film. And the migration question in *For a son*, therefore, becomes both personal and political.

The film constructs the story of Sunita, a Sri Lankan single migrant mother, living with her adolescent son in an Italian city. At the beginning, through an informative card, the film gives us a concise contextual reference for the mass migration of Sri Lankans that took place during the civil war in Sri Lanka. The film alerts us to the plight of many children who were left behind when their parents, in particular mothers, migrated during the war, as refugees and economic migrants. Italy – was an ideal economic fantasy and a gateway to a prosperous life in Europe for many Sri Lankan migrants at the time, mainly through the 1990s. Large numbers migrated to Italy from coastal areas in Sri Lanka, such as Negambo, Puttalam, and Wennapuwa, many entering Italy as illegal migrants and then going on to obtain valid visas. Experienced fishermen, naval routes, human traffickers, illegal job agents had provided passage to Italy for people in the coastal areas (Perera 2017). Wennappuwa, once a fishing village in Sri Lanka's west-coast, has today transformed into a middle-class suburban town containing palatial residences with booming land prices, as a result of remittances from Italy, earning the colloquial name of 'Little Italy' (ibid.).

To Sri Lankans, Australia is today what Italy was during the 1990s – a Utopia. We see, in particular during the latter stages of the civil conflict, Sri Lankan

migration increasing to Australia (ABS 2013). Sri Lankan asylum seekers, migrating unauthorised to Australia by boats via maritime routes, is a central debate in Australian border protection policies and federal politics. This aspect of risky, life-threatening Sri Lankan migration to Italy in the 1990s is well represented in Boodee Keerthisena's film *Mille Soya*. Like Australia, Italy, too, is an exception to the 'sharp segregation' that exists in the migration patterns of Sinhalese, Tamils, Burghers, and Muslims with both Sinhalese and Tamil Sri Lankans living in large numbers in Italy (Pathirage and Collyer 2011: 317). The majority, however, living in Italy is estimated to be Sinhalese (IPS 2013: 28), the community also in question in *For a son* through the characters of Sunita and her son.

For Sri Lankan migrants, Italy was a destination that could be easily accessed and it was believed that there were vast employment opportunities in Italy, hence becoming a popular choice for migration (Henayaka-Lochbihler and Lambusta 2004: 3). While Italy was also used as a temporary entrance point to Europe, many Sri Lankan migrants opted to remain in Italy (ibid.). Policies, such as Australia's Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 (commonly known as the white-Australia policy)¹, which provided measures for preventing the settlement of people of 'colour' in Australia (Jupp 2002: 6-10), were not prevalent in Italy. Indeed, the white-Australia policy provided a migration pathway to the European-decent Burgher community in Sri Lanka, mainly because they were able to meet the migration criteria set by the policy - European ancestry, white skin tones, English-language proficiency, and Christian faith (Ferdinands 1995; Weerasooria 1988: 30-41). Sri Lanka's Sinhala language policy enacted through the Language Act of 1956 resulted in the discrimination of Burghers who's main language was English and Ferdinands (1995: 4) in his book on Sri Lankan Burghers notes that it is possible that over 38,000 Burghers may no longer live in Sri Lanka, as a result of migration, with most of them now living in Australia.

However, in Italy, between 1986 and 1990, a series of Admission Acts provided opportunities for Sri Lankan migrants and in particular, in 1996, the Dini Decree 'simplified the bureaucratic procedures for the family reunifications', allowing Sri Lankans to join relatives in Italy (Henayaka-Lochbihler and Lambusta 2004: 3-4). Sunita, the migrant mother in Katugampala's *For a son*, too, had been later reunited with her son, as she reveals in a conversation with the Italian woman for whom Sunita works, as a caregiver, in the film. It can be estimated that there are

¹ Abolished by the Migration Act 1966

close to 80,000 Sri Lankan migrants in Italy (Gattinara 2016: 85). Milan houses around 15,000 Sri Lankan migrants, becoming the city with one of the highest concentrations of Sri Lankans (around six percent of the city's population) (ibid.).

The reiteration of banality and everyday life of the migrant experience of Sunita, her son, and employer becomes a powerful force of expression throughout the film. Katugampala's constructions of Sunita and her son's everyday life in Italy and the references to social, cultural, linguistic, and collective diasporic identities in the film brought me many recollections of my own ethnographic work with Sri Lankan migrant women in Melbourne, in their homes and diasporic associations, although the diasporic representations of Sri Lankan migrants in Italy in *For a son* is contextually distinctive and contains different socioeconomic dynamics² to the migrants I studied in Melbourne.

In *For a son*, we see that Sunita and her son are living in an apartment that barely accommodates the two of them. The foldable dining table attached to the wall of the apartment is taken down when needed and folded back when dining concludes. The film shows us the contrast between the Utopian economic fantasy of a particular migrant's life in Italy and the reality of her living conditions. However, Katugampala shows us that Sunita and her son's lives, as migrants in Italy, can by no means be defined solely through the materiality of their economic status. And the narrative alerts us to their complex sociocultural everyday realities that extend beyond their economic selves, as migrants. Katugampala's minimalist portrayals of this banal socioeconomic-cultural struggle, I feel, refrains from romanticising migrant lives instead drawing more powerfully on the realistic representations of their everyday experiences.

As found in the conceptualisations of eminent cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2001: 4-5; 1990: 35), through the story of Sunita and her son, Katugampala brings to visualisation the 'disjuncture' of migrant landscapes through the banal cultural struggle between mother and son, of identity and belonging. While Sunita lives in a cultural continuum that is linked linguistically and religiously to her homeland in Sri Lanka, Sunita's son oscillates between the Sri Lankanness, alluded to by his mother, and his Italianness of the society in which he grows up. Instead of considering migration merely as a 'time-space' event, 'linked to issues of employment, development, population redistribution, class formation and the

²In Melbourne, the Sri Lankan migrants I observed had stronger economic backgrounds. As a result of home-loan schemes and higher minimum wages in Australia, the migrants of my study possessed 2-3 bedroom homes and vehicles. Observations and interviews revealed that they had more material autonomy in the Australian economy than of Sunita and her son in *For a son*.

creation of ethnic communities' (King and Wood 2001: 3), and by visualising the complexity of migrants' cultural selves, Katugampala presents to us a cultural narrative of migration.

As Stuart Hall (1997: 184) argues, 'ethnicity is the necessary place or space' for migrants living their lives in deterritorialised spaces, as cultural minorities; and Katugampala constructs the linguacultural nuances of the Sri Lankan Sinhalese diasporic life in Italy through the characters in his film. Sunita, in the film, is symbolic of the most common form of employment for Sri Lankan migrants in Italy. As Henayaka-Lochbihler and Lambusta (2004: 6) observe, the domestic sector in Italy does provide many employment opportunities for Sri Lankans. Katugampala weaves Sunita's narrative through her double roles as caregiver, firstly, of her employer, an elderly bedridden woman who lives alone in the woman's home, and, secondly, of Sunita's son, an adolescent youth. A few scenes into the film we find out that the relationship of Sunita and her son is a strained one. Their cultural differences begin to emerge very early on in the film. Sunita inquires her son whether he had done his school homework and when she examines his books the son remarks that she would not understand the writing 'anyway', as Sunita was not well-versed in Italian. Sunita communicates with her son in Sinhalese and the son answers Sunita in Italian, throughout the film.

A critical juncture in the film is the scene when Sunita consults a *yakadura* or a Sri Lankan devil shaman, hoping to cure her son of any evil that may have befallen him (after discovering posters of nude women at the back of his closet); her interpretation of his troubled adolescent self, suppressed feelings, and angry reactions to the mother-son estrangement. The shaman, working as a kitchen helper, meets Sunita at the back of the restaurant. The conversation takes place in Sinhalese and Sunita inquires him whether devils can impact even their lives abroad. Later, he arrives at Sunita's apartment in a scooter bike with a traditional drum on his shoulder, his assistant driving the bike. Inside the apartment, we see that the congested space is not sufficient to accommodate the two men, Sunita, and her son. The shaman states that while the drum may not be the correct one to use for the blessing ceremony, it shall do because they are abroad. In Melbourne, at least, a growing number of Sri Lankan grocery stores have become vital in supplying such goods from Sri Lanka to migrants. The significance of diasporic grocery shops has increased across the world, becoming important access points for dispersed migrants to maintain links with the homeland through a vast range of texts, images, and

commodities from their homelands (Athique 2006; Aksoy and Robins 2003; Mankekar 2002).

In migrant media scholar Myria Georgiou's (2012: 24) work with the Arab community in Europe, she provides a concept called 'banal nomadism'³ to explain the phenomenon of migrants' everyday attachments with their home countries. Arab participants in her study attempted to 'define their subjectivity through a hybrid discourse that constantly shifted between a language associated with political life (citizenship) and a language associated with culture (identity)' and for some 'this discourse emphasized an essential identity and for others a nomadic, cosmopolitan orientation'. We can locate Sunita in the latter category of banal nomadism, where her associations with her home country culture did not seem to provide an essential identity for her, as a Sri Lankan in an Italian society, but rather a nomadic, cosmopolitan identity. In the film, we do not see Sunita engaging with her home country culture for intense symbolic contestation of Italianness, in the sense that she does not seem to be using her Sri Lankanness to counter the Italian culture in which she lives and her son grows up. We do not see her participating in the collective diasporic activities of Sri Lankans in her town, across into which her son stumbles during a stroll in the streets; subtly and cleverly incorporated by Katugampala into the narrative, a collective aspect of the Sri Lankan diasporic public sphere in Italy. For Sunita, however, her engagements with the language, beliefs, and religion of her home country seemed to construct a hybrid cosmopolitan identity, as a Sri Lankan migrant living in Italy. This is a 'banal transnationalism', as Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins (2003: 95) have termed based on their work with Turkish migrants in Europe.

I relate to Katugampala's representations of the Sinhala diasporic public in *For a son*. My ethnographic work in Melbourne took place at a Sinhala cultural association, close to Dandenong. Dandenong, situated about 35 kilometres from Melbourne, has the highest concentration of Sri Lankan migrants, predominantly Sinhalese. Because my thesis examined migrant women's consumption of Sinhalese teledramas in Melbourne, my observations centred on a 'teledrama club' initiated by a group of women at the association. I, too, got the opportunity to engage with the symbolic cultural and nationalist activities of the Sinhala diasporic community in Melbourne and watching *For a son* became a reminiscent moment for me in Colombo. Indeed, my ethnic Sinhalese roots provided me access, as an insider, to the diasporic community in Melbourne but my non-immigrant status, as an international student

³ Based on Deleuze, Guattari and Braidotti's conceptualization of nomadism

and a novice in diasporic activities, made me a definite outsider during my ethnographic work among the Sinhalese Melbournians. For Katugampala, it seems that his own status, as a migrant, has provided an insider voice and a native eye to subtly yet overtly discuss and construct the everyday realities of his own society.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986: 249) explains that 'connections' are a form of capital, which accumulates at social associations of this nature that are 'based on indissolubly material and symbolic exchanges, the establishment and maintenance of which presuppose reacknowledgement of proximity', which he terms as 'social capital'. Sunita's son comes across a Sinhala diasporic event in the streets and follows the guests into what seems to be a private communal gathering, which seems to provide a space for the symbolic exchange of their home country culture. The women dressed in shimmering saris and the loud Baila music played in a discotheque-style room are highlighted at the scene. While celebrating the diasporic 'cultural origins and protect[ing]/police[ing] its boundaries by insisting on maintaining its linguistic and cultural difference from the dominant culture' of the host country, migrants have their own 'survival strategy' to negotiate hybrid identities in the dominant culture, as stated in migration scholar Ien Ang's (2005: 20) work. For many migrant communities, diasporic gatherings facilitated through diasporic associations provide moments and spaces of belonging in everyday life. These spaces provide opportunities for non-dominant migrant groups to share and belong to a common experience of language, culture, nationalism, gastronomy, fashion, music, news, religion, customs etc that are strikingly different from the dominant cultures of their host countries. The 'imagined community'⁴ (Anderson 1991: 6) of migrants' homelands and the style in which their homelands are constructed and celebrated can be well observed within diasporic associations (Skrbiš 1999: 5). Nationalist practices and ideologies find particular emphasis within the agendas, causes, events, and gatherings of diasporic groups, which Skrbiš (ibid.) termed as 'long-distance nationalism'; a 'type of nationalism which crosses neighbouring states and/or continents', in his study of Croatian and Slovenian diasporas in Australia. Indeed, for the Sinhalese the dominant ethnic position they held in their homeland, as the

⁴ According to Benedict Anderson (1991: 6), historian and political scholar, the nation is imagined because 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'.

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majority, had strikingly altered in host societies, such as Italy and Australia, leading to a further need to build spaces and publics in which they could belong, as a community, in the host country.

Examining the Bollywood culture of the Fijian Indian community in Australia, Manas Ray (2003: 21) argued that 'it is the historical subjectivity of a diaspora which holds the key to its cultural life' and postcolonial diasporas, in particular, should not be seen as 'ready to articulate their identity on the lines of extraterritoriality or nomadism.' As Katugampala shows us in *For a son* in the scene of the diasporic party, dress and music seem to be providing a vital identity for the migrants at the diasporic gathering to distinguish themselves from the dominant Italian culture. In the film, we see how the diasporic space at the communal party provides and everyday, banal transnational space for the Sinhala migrants to engage with their home country culture, a minority in the dominant Italianness around them. Sunita's son sees, dancing at the event, the boy he slaps for venturing into the abandoned park, which he and his friends use, as a hang out spot as well as to spy on couples who come there to make love. We see he, too, like Sunita's son is of Sinhala diasporic origins, strategising his hybridity and deterritorialisation by participating at the event.

Sunita's son goes into the diasporic party, however, not as a participant of the event but because he follows a mother carrying a newborn child. By now we find out from a conversation between Sunita and her aged employer that she could not breastfeed her son because she had to leave him to come to Italy, which becomes a pivotal scene in the film, providing a major revelation and contextual explanation for Sunita and her son's troubled relationship. Sunita had shared the plight of many mothers who had to leave their children behind, as they migrated to Italy in search of work, as alerted, too, through the concise informative card at the beginning of the film. Indeed, Sunita represents the reality of the prominently gendered Sri Lankan economy, even today, with the main source of export income being generated by remittances from migrant women workers.

Sunita's son who follows the young mother with the infant into the diasporic party peeps at her breastfeeding the newborn, causing her annoyance. Indeed, the film provides an explanation for the strained relationship between Sunita and her son through the Freudian theory of psychosexual development. To Freud, personality development consists of a series of psychosexual stages, the first being the oral stage, or the stage of breastfeeding, which Freud explains as the child

striving to 'obtain pleasure independently of nourishment and for that reason may and should be termed sexual' (Ewen 2010: 25). In a psychoanalytic explanation of *For a son*, Sunita's son's aggressive behaviour towards his mother, his reluctance to engage in school work, hanging out with bullies, bullying a smaller child, spying on a couple who makes love in the abandoned park where he hangs out with his friends, and his fixation on women's breasts may be termed as neurosis, according to Freudian theory, resulting from not having been breastfed, as an infant. By placing the psychoanalytic question within the migration question and highlighting the cause of why Sunita did not have an opportunity to breastfeed her son, indeed, as she had to migrate to Italy, Katugampala gives us a social explanation for the psychological. Thus, a psychoanalytic explanation that does not adequately address the film's migration question may deprive an acknowledgement of the sociocultural nuances of diasporic everyday life that are embedded within the narrative.

In conclusion, *For a son* appealed mostly to my academic interest in migration and Sri Lankan diasporic culture. Nevertheless, I was deeply moved by the minimalist flow of the film, which also enthralled my cinematic senses. The film benefits greatly from the brilliant cast comprising Kaushalya Fernando, Julian Wijesekara, Nella Pozzerle, Shirantha Luise Fernando, Isabella Dilavello, and Vishan Madhuka and the cinematography of Channa Deshapriya. In *For a son*, Katugampala deals with a cultural thread that has been little discussed in Sri Lankan cinema. *For a son* is a brilliant expression of the hybrid worlds of two first and second-generation Sri Lankan migrants in Italy. Katugampala's minimalist approach is able to capture a humanistic side of their lives. He tells their story not as a critic of their migrant selves or undermining their cultural choices but with sensitivity, understanding, and great empathy to migrant culture as a 'way of life', as per cultural writer Raymond Williams's definition of culture. To Katugampala, nomadism is also a way of life; in particular, his hitchhiking road trip from Italy to Sri Lanka, to which I had the privilege of listening and reliving over dinner with friends in Colombo, seems to be appealing to this itinerant side of his migrant origins. Movement seems to be not only providing an analytical lens for him, as a filmmaker, but also as a way of life, to use his own words, 'It is a calling'. The migration question explored in the film is of significance to us from a cinematic, academic, social, and cultural sense and Katugampala's 'deep urgent need to tell a story ... to tell "here we are", "our story is also your story, a story we all can relate to"' (forason.com) is reflected in the cultural narrative of *For a son*.

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