

EYA DAN BANDALA [SHE'S NOW MARRIED]: SINHALA TELEDRAMA: VIEWER SUCCUMBS TO THE MALE GAZE

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Abstract

This position paper intends to examine the Sinhala teledrama Eya Dan Bandala [She's now married] (2023) primarily through the lens of Male Gaze theorised by Laura Mulvey (1975): the teledrama was directed by Prasanna Jayakody and telecasted through the Independent Television Network (ITN), Sri Lanka. While contributing to the process of depicting a female sex worker's post-prostitution life, the teledrama provides material for a close examination of Male Gaze – a feminist theory which posits that women are depicted as objects in narratives and visuals to satisfy the 'male' viewers' desires. Nevertheless, the teledrama is scarcely read through Male Gaze. In this respect, we argue in this paper that despite the Director's intention as revealed in his interviews (e.g. City FM, 2023), the viewer – both the audience as well as characters within the teledrama – succumbs to Male Gaze and objectifies the female. This is justified in this paper through the (i) character portrayal and plot, (ii) cinematography and visual symbols and (iii) the concept of absence. This analysis adds new vocabulary to the teledrama and contributes to the understanding of the nuances of Male Gaze.

Keywords: Characterization, Cinematography, Male Gaze, Prassana Jayakody, sex-worker

Introduction

The 27-part teledrama directed by Prasanna Jayakody, *Eya Dan Bandala* [She's now married] (2023) which was telecasted on Independent Television Network (ITN), Sri Lanka, unfolds the aftermath of the marriage of Suddi, a character who was formerly a female sex-worker. The plot of the teledrama centres around Suddi, who attempts to lead a married life with Siri, a man who has been denied affection throughout his life, who falls for Suddi, in an all-male household consisting of his lecherous father, Peter, and Mani, a young rickshaw driver who is related by being the son of Peter and his step-daughter from his third marriage. The

teledrama boasts a cast of characters comprising actors Mahendra Perera playing Siri, Semini Iddamalgoda as Suddi, Sarath Kothalawala as Peter, and Lahiru Prasad as Mani, whose performance earned him accolades, including that of the Sumathi Award for the best upcoming actor.

Additionally, actress Semini Iddamalgoda cinched the Best Actress award at Sumathi Teledrama Awards 2023 while Director Prasanna Jayakody won the award for the Best Teledrama Script at the same awards (Sumathi Awards, 2024).

The series has sparked discussions, with viewers expressing both positive and negative comments about the story (Sirivardhana, 2023; Jayasundara, 2023), with some critics even labelling the series as controversial and thought-provoking, as a novel production that is foreign to the country’s television field (Jayasundara, 2023). Social media discussions with regard to the teledrama have resulted in many commending the series, while some critics have requested Sri Lankan audiences to give the teledrama a chance despite the possibility of the teledrama being termed as obscene or nonsense (කුණුහරුපයක්) (Siriwardhana, 2023).

While discussions surrounding the TV series *Eya Dan Bandala* have largely focused on themes related to prostitution, camera angles, and the Director's skills in blending scenes with nature, there has been a notable omission in addressing the ‘male’ gaze on women's bodies, by viewers within the drama (characters) as well as viewers outside the drama (audience). Therefore, the intent of this paper is to explore the gaze on the women’s bodies, as represented in the teledrama through the former-sex worker Suddi.

Literature Review

According to the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, the term, “Male Gaze” refers to “the frequent framing of objects of visual art so that the viewer is situated in a ‘masculine’ position of appreciation” (Korsmeyer, 2017). According to this definition, the Male Gaze has been theorised as the frequent framing of objects of visual art so that the viewer is placed in a ‘masculine’ position of appreciation. This gaze usually places women as the centre of attraction, assigning them the passive status of being looked-upon, rather than being the active person who gazes (gazer).

Laura Mulvey’s 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is a seminal work written regarding the concept of Male Gaze. Mulvey’s

analysis on Male Gaze has incorporated psychoanalysis and feminist theories of Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud and the article also aligns with Juliet Mitchell’s (2000) “Psychoanalysis and Feminism” (where she condemns phallogocentrism as opposed to Freud’s theory). In her analysis, Mulvey argues that traditional Hollywood cinema typically presents the world from a heterosexual male perspective, objectifying women as passive objects of desire for the male viewer, a deeply rooted ideology in patriarchy and discourses related to patriarchy (Mulvey, 1975). She contends that the camera’s gaze aligns with the perspective of the male protagonist or implied male viewer, reinforcing power dynamics and gender roles within society. Mulvey's concept of the Male Gaze has been widely discussed and critiqued in film studies, gender studies, and media studies, shaping subsequent analyses of representation, spectatorship, and power in visual culture.

In a discussion conducted by City FM (2023), the Director of *Eya Dan Bandala* clearly mentions that one of his intentions is to instil a different perspective in the audience, regarding topics such as prostitution and voyeurism that could encourage them to be a different but better version of themselves (City FM, 2023). While explaining normality as “a matter of personal opinion,” Wilson posits that societal norms dictate ‘Normal Behaviour’: she also classifies inappropriate behaviour: “asocial behaviours which are embarrassing or offensive but not violent” (1995,143-160). In her list of inappropriate behaviours, she included voyeurism and purchasing the services of sexual workers as well. Therefore, it is evident that prostitution and voyeurism are viewed as deviant. However, the Sri Lankan audiences’ reception of an improved and unique perspective suggested by the Director remains contested which will be explored in this position paper,

acknowledging reviews, interviews, and social media posts.

Critics (e.g. Sirivardhana, 2023; Jayasundara, 2023) have appealed to the audiences not to deal with the subject matter as a taboo, but in an artistic sense, with appreciation for the craft of the Director. Social media posts and reviews have considered the same opinion as well, however, not without apprehension regarding the reception of the teledrama by the majority of Sri Lankan audiences, which would subvert the Director’s intentions of making the audiences aware with regard to their own framing of mind of the Male Gaze, by reverting the audience to their status as consumers of the object of desire from the “masculine” position of appreciation. Hence, as noted previously, the intention of this paper is to highlight the attempts of the Director to create awareness regarding the Male Gaze in the audience, and subsequent failure as the attempts push the audience further into succumbing to the Male Gaze. We argue in this paper that despite the Director’s intention as revealed (City FM, 2023) the viewer, which includes both the audience as well as characters within the teledrama, succumbs to Male Gaze and objectifies the female.

Methodology

Adopting a qualitative approach, this study employed textual and reception analysis to achieve the intent of the project: the audience succumbs to the Male Gaze, despite the Director’s attempt to portray it otherwise. As such, our argument entails two main directions: the Director’s intention and the audience’s reception. The Director’s intention – as revealed through his interviews – and the audience’s perception – as unveiled through four review articles on the teledrama and two blogs – were used as secondary sources of information while the primary data was gathered through the dialogues, narratives, and visual symbols used in

the teledrama. It should be noted that most of the secondary sources cited in the paper were originally published in the Sinhala language, and have been translated, while certain idiomatic expressions have been transliterated by incorporating the original Sinhala language quotations as well. To support and rationalise our argument, and to engage in the analysis, the theoretical framework of Male Gaze as conceptualised by Laura Mulvey (1975) was primarily employed: the interpretations utilised for the paper are structured in accordance with that provided by Laura Mulvey’s 1975 essay. Moreover, the concept of absence, introduced by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1967) is also employed in the analysis.

Discussion

Character Portrayal and Plot

The portrayal of characters has assisted the Director to create a consciousness of the Male Gaze among the spectators. Suddi remains as the only female character who is involved in the central plot. All the other female characters (such as the friends of Suddi, the maternal health nurse, and village women) bear a very marginal presence in the series. Furthermore, the characterization of the male characters who will eventually act as gazers is also intriguing as they lack diversity in terms of socio-political and economic scales, signifying the ‘village’, the immediate surrounding environment that is relative to the characters. In fact, the main plot only concerns the characters who share the same house. These decisions have allowed the Director to put the Male Gaze in the limelight, allowing the audience to perceive Suddi through the eyes of the immediate society around them.

Through the gaze of Siri after he asks Suddi to marry him, the audience begins to reconstruct the identity of Suddi as a woman outside the implications of her being a sex worker. It helps the audience to think of the possibility of a sex

worker being a married woman. However, as the story unfolds, despite the attempts of Jayakody to make the viewer aware of their voyeuristic Male Gaze on Suddi, who was a sex worker, the viewer unconsciously makes Suddi a passive object of desire.

Moreover, the character Mani, who has a sexual encounter with Suddi before Siri, fails to see Suddi as his half-brother/uncle’s (Siri’s) wife in the first few episodes of the drama. His continuous gaze on Suddi and forceful invitation which he imposes on Suddi, mirrors the lack of respect Suddi receives from the male members of the house, due to her past as a sex worker. Though Mani, eventually, grows out of his voyeuristic gaze towards Suddi and views her as a motherly figure, this level of character development cannot be seen in other characters such as Peter who never ceases to sexualize and subjugates her through his gaze.

Additionally, Jayakody’s conscious decision to create an intimate environment by centralising the plot to one or two locations has served a dual purpose: in assisting him in problematizing the Male Gaze while fostering familiarity with the audience. According to Jayasundara, the intimacy and minimality conveyed through the plot has given Jayakody the ability to make the audience a part of the tele drama, allowing for the audience to exist as another character within the same domestic, intimate space as the other characters [මෙහිලා ඔහු අපේක්ෂා කරන්නට ඇත්තේ ප්‍රේක්ෂකයාද මෙලී නාටකයේ චරිතයක් බවට පත්කරලීමට යි.] (Jayasundara, 2023). This phenomenon, in fact, provides immense potential for the Director to build awareness among the audience as it taps their subconscious. As Maathalan (2023) explains in his blog, the portrayal of lovemaking to a sex worker, which is both a taboo and a fantasy to many, has provided the ability to tap into the consciousness of the audience and consequently problematizes

the Male Gaze. Therefore, according to the above instances, one can state that although the Director has attempted to create awareness of the destructive nature of the Male Gaze among the audience through characterization, the audience fails to recognize the direction of the Director.

Cinematography and Visual Symbols

Cinematographic techniques serve as a major device incorporated by the Director to problematize the Male Gaze. Objectification, power dynamics, and stereotyping are three of the major aspects that are related to the Male Gaze. Although these aspects can be identified in almost all the places where the Male Gaze is present, in media, the creative producers tend to handle these matters subtly. Therefore, the Male Gaze and its consequent aftermath are often normalised. Yet, in *Eya Dan Bandala*, the Male Gaze and its aftermath are made present consciously.

The audience is always provided with a visual of the gazer (often male) alongside the gaze. This contributes to creating a sense of guilt in the spectator unconsciously and the spectator is made aware of the objectification, power dynamics, and stereotyping that they also subconsciously take part with the character who acts as the gazer or the agent. In episode 11 of the tele series, Peter’s (the father) act of peeping through the window of the washroom is an instance of this phenomenon. After Peter gets up from his seat to watch Suddi bathing, the camera directs the viewer to the game of *kabaddi* on the TV screen that Peter was watching, creating a parallel between the game of *kabaddi* and Peter being a peeping tom, where both should play the game without getting caught. (*Kabaddi* is a sport played by teams of seven on a circular sand court. (“Adolescent diet and physical activity in the context of economic ...”) The players attempt to tag or capture opponents and must hold their breath while running playing.) However, Peter

loses the game as he gets caught in Suddi’s trap, where she pretends to shower in order to confront his pervasive peeping, which can possibly be an attempt of the Director to make the viewer guilty who through the point of view of Peter unconsciously anticipates peeping through the window to see Suddi bathing.

Mulvey in her essay discusses the scopophilic instinct where the image of woman is constructed as a passive object for the active Male Gaze which at its extreme can influence into being obsessive voyeurs and peeping toms (Mulvey, 1975, p. 6) like Peter, and through Peter, the viewer. Nevertheless, the high rate of replaying of Suddi’s bathing scene alone on YouTube confirms that the viewer still perceives Suddi merely as a passive object of Male Gaze, just like how Peter responds in episode 11, as “Tell your *great beloved* Siri that I peeped” (උමඹි බුදු සිරියට කියන මං බැලුව කියල) with not an ounce of guilt (*Eya Dan Bandala*, 2020). Further, as Jayasundara also states, the harmony between close-ups and wide shots and the utilisation of mobile videography have also allowed the audience to connect with the characters on a deeper level as they cumulatively produce a humane gaze artificially, making the spectator another character in the story (2023).

A lens into a voyeuristic fantasy as presented by the Mulvey in her essay (1975) is portrayed in the first episode of the tele drama through the gaze of Kurulla who quite impatiently gazes into the cabin where Suddi provides her sex services to Mani. According to Mulvey, the woman becomes an object of male voyeurism, and the audience can be absorbed into the Male Gaze through the subjective use of the camera to present the point of view of the male (Mulvey, 1975, p. 6). This is clearly seen in the gaze of Kurulla into the cabin where his intense gaze alone fuels the viewer to create an objectified visual of Suddi as a sex worker. Mulvey further

points out that the controlling Male Gaze in the scene is the most salient absence, leaving the most impact (Mulvey, 1975, p. 17). This too can be experienced in Kurulla’s controlling gaze, almost controlling the strain of thoughts of the viewer which happens in the absence of Suddi and Mani in action, portraying how inadvertently the audience’s gaze on the objectified other, which in this case is Suddi, is constructed through the gaze of a male character, despite the Director’s attempt to make the viewer aware of their Male Gaze through Kurulla’s gaze into the cabin.

The Concept of Absence

The act of surrendering to the Male Gaze can also be supported through the concept of absence, introduced by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1967). This concept, titled as the ‘lack,’ underlines the importance of what is absent, and the definition of the presence, or the known reality, as the antithesis to the absence, which is usually discarded and othered (Derrida, 1967). According to Derrida, traces of incompleteness can always be discerned in the erasures from what is present, and thus, what is present, depends upon what is made absent (*ibid*). The audience’s response to the teledrama (presented in published reviews and articles), when perceived through the concept of absence, confirms the viewer’s acts of succumbing to the Male Gaze.

This can be illustrated in the drama by the very construction of the characters, especially of Suddi, by the audience. The many instances where Suddi is present off-screen, either in terms of being the object of voyeurism or having subjected herself to the sexual desires of another man, are not showcased on screen, allowing and inviting for the viewer to construct her presence by speculating about her absence; in her absence, her identity is created. As Jayakody himself mentioned in an interview, he intends to

demonstrate the destructive nature of the male gaze; he explains that he is trying to create harmony [ඊද්මයක්] between scenes and the absence of it to tap into the consciousness of the audience (කනිඳා කරළිය එයා දැන් බැඳලා, 2023). The characters are made to embrace both their dark and light sides, as Jayawardhna explains, these intricacies can both win the hearts of the audience while creating awareness.

Absence as a whole, scenes, gaps in the plotline, and silences and pauses are other aspects that have assisted the director in problematizing the Male Gaze. The Director has utilised carefully constructed dialogues, their repetitions, silences, pauses, gestures, and expressions to portray these gaps in an explicit manner. Through these, the Director has been able to make the audience aware of the image of Suddi they are constructing and the angle which they construct Suddi with, while problematizing the Male Gaze without appearing to be artificial or constructed. One of the examples for absence is the scene in episode 1: Suddi and Mani enter the guardhouse to engage in sex (as promised by Suddi to compensate Mani for saving her from trouble. After they reach the guard room, the scene shifts to the windy meadow and the character Kururlla (Mani’s friend who tags along to receive the service of Suddi) is waiting outside the room while music is played loud. Though viewers are not exposed to the scene within the room, they are given enough implication (such as Mani appearing shirtless and fixing his trouser afterwards) that Mani and Suddi were inside the room and Suddi has provided her service to Mani.

Moreover, Siri’s mother is also another example of absence, which allows the audience to construct the character, through Siri’s narration as someone who suffered in the hands of her husband and later turned into a sex worker, thereby presenting a contradictory parallel between the construction of the two sex-workers

in the teledrama through their absences; one through the male gaze, and the other, not. Siri’s mother’s presence remains strong in the plot as Siri’s intention of marrying Suddi stems from his memory of her being reawakened by Suddi’s presence.

In the instance where Suddi is struggling to find money to fill the gas tank of the three-wheeler in episode 6, the Director has intentionally cut off her from the scene for a while and she reappears. This scene is a pivotal place to discuss the significance of the absence or the gaps in the plot line that is left to the viewer to make sense of, which could be taken as an instance for the Director to point out the destructive and exploitative nature of the Male Gaze.

According to Dharmadasa, the teledrama has gained positive reviews despite its subversive subject material (SLleader & Dharmadasa, 2023) because of its subject of sex: the subject material depicting sexuality and sex itself, despite never involving a singular scene with pornographic material, neither nudity beyond the permitted amount for national television. He alleges that the series achieved success due to its discussion on sex [එයා දැන් බැඳලා සාර්ථක වෙන්නේ ඒකේ කතා කරන්නේ සෙක්ස් හින්ද] that is a forbidden topic to be discussed openly in the Sri Lankan society. Dharmadasa further states that the audience is drawn to the teledrama for the same reasons that other characters are drawn to Suddi [නාට්‍යයේ වරින් සුද්දිට පිස්සු වැටෙන හේතුවටම නාට්‍යය නරඹන්නා නාට්‍යයට පිස්සු වැටෙනවා], further cementing the impact of the Male Gaze that the audience succumbs to via drawing conclusions within the absences of the characters. This act of drawing conclusions, considering she is a prostitute, allows for the female object of desire to be viewed through the dominant gaze of the male, while stereotyping the complex character of Suddi into the mere object of desire: the prostitute.

Such connotations can be found in the review of the teledrama on a Blog, which alleges that the Male Gaze allowed for audiences, despite their gender, to relate to the teledrama, and by extension, get closer to the characters (මාකලන්, 2023). Further reviews of the teledrama also allege that Suddi does not get a chance to be “pure” (per the meaning of her name) due to outside world refusing to place her within the society as a respectable married woman, highlighting that the audience also plays the part of the society that does not let the woman break away from the rigidity of her imposed identity (Jayakody, 2023). Alawatte, too, has rightly observed about the Director’s attempt to highlight the Male Gaze as he mentions the unerasable label of “sex worker” attached to Suddi’s name even after she stops being one. Even after her marriage, Suddi is subjected to be a mere commodity within male society where she is continuously viewed through voyeuristic eyes. This, Alawatta points out as a degenerating reality in societies such as of Sri Lanka where the sickening male perspective is dominated [and normalised] which is highlighted through the drama by Jayakody [ඇය විවාහයෙන් ඉක්බිති එකී වෘත්තියේ නොයෙදුණ ද පුරුෂ සමාජයට ඇය තව දුරටත් වේ***, බඩුවකි, ගණිකාවකි. ප්‍රසන්න ජයකොඩි “එයා දැන් බැඳලා” නිර්මාණය තුළින් ප්‍රකට කරන්නට යන්න දරන්නේ මෙකී නින්දිත යථාර්ථය යි; අප්‍රසන්න පුරුෂ දෘෂ්ටිවාදය යි] (The Leader.lk & Alawatte, 2023).

Yet, as noted above, a careful analysis of the reviews and interviews by the audience portrays that the Director’s intention concerning the absences or the gaps in the plot has not been received accordingly. Instead, the audience becomes complicit (SL leader & Dharmadasa, 2023), in constructing her and viewing her through the Male Gaze; they are left to their own imaginations, much like most of the residents of the same village, to draw conclusions about her

conduct, her behaviour and her identity through what is not showcased on the screen.

Conclusion

Prasanna Jayakody’s teledrama *Eya Dan Bandala* brings out the story of a woman who attempts to live a married life after leaving her previous occupation as a prostitute. Jayakody, through his narration, portrays how Male Gaze operates within society and serves as a tool to subjugate women. The Director had gone beyond traditional concepts and topics that dominate the teledrama culture in Sri Lanka and brought out a novel perspective on depiction of women as objects of sexual desires as they are being subjected to voyeuristic and intrusive gaze of men. Through characterization and visual techniques, the Director attempts to create awareness of the Male Gaze and the consequences of Male Gaze on women.

However, despite the Director’s attempts, the audience gets drawn into the lure of the Male Gaze and perceives the teledrama through a similar lens, which problematizes and contradicts the Director’s intention of discussing the topic of perceiving women as sexual objects. The identified problem may not solely lie on the Director’s attempts but also in the established social norms and accepted voyeuristic behaviours which are difficult to break and modify while feeding the eyes that seek stimulating visuals. Therefore, despite the Director’s attempts, it can be stated that the viewer (within the drama and the audiences) have reverted to the masculine framework of mindset to stare at the object of desire, rather than being made aware of their own gaze upon the object of desire and the oppression of the female.

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