



The Reluctant Wife: *Ginnen Upan Seethala* and Gendering Revolution

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Abstract

This paper sets out to examine the politics of representation of the biographical film, *Ginnen Upan Seethala* (2018), which focuses on the life and times of Rohana Wijeweera, a rebel leader who led two failed insurrections in post-independence Sri Lanka. It argues that while the film seemingly exonerates the leader and the movement, through a discourse of domesticity, it simultaneously engages in a nuanced representation of Chithrangani Wijeweera, the wife of Rohana Wijeweera, a woman who has been positioned at the margins of the masculinized historical record of the JVP party. While such records have largely ignored testimony in which Chithrangani constructs herself as a reluctant wife who is subordinated to the dominant ideology of the party and its leader, the film provides her a more expansive and empathetic role and thereby bears witness to her tale of victimhood and survival, unraveling how patriarchal political conquest coopts women as strategic sites of political domination.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, Gender, Film, Revolution

The JVP (*Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*) or *People's Liberation Front* launched two youth insurrections in post-independence Sri Lanka: the first in 1971, an abortive attempt which was ill planned and executed, yet nevertheless costly, killing many, which was followed by the insurrection of 1987-1989, with greater human cost and societal consequences. Though the latter insurrection was better organized and executed than the first, it too failed in arresting state power from the United National Party-led government of the time. It was destroyed, with the elimination of the top leadership, including its founder and Chairman Rohana Wijeweera, who had gone underground since 1983. After Wijeweera was arrested and allegedly killed by the government whilst in police custody, the JVP was decimated as its organizational network was destroyed, and the party subsequently transitioned from a guerilla group to a mainstream political party in 1994. Wijeweera's wife, Chithrangani, along with her children, received scant media attention following their surrender to the military, which was followed by a carefully constructed media campaign to suggest the legitimacy of the actions of the government. Thus, she slipped into obscurity and did not reemerge until 2015, to present herself as victim of her husband and his party, a reluctant participant who was forced into marriage and having lived a life of isolation, rendered voiceless.

Against such a backdrop, Anuruddha Jayasinghe's *Ginnen Upan Seethala* (2018), or *The Frozen Fire*, a cinematic political biography of Wijeweera, is interesting. While it mainly depicts Wijeweera and his cadres at revolution against a hostile government, it does not hesitate to create a significant space for the persona of Chithrangani Wijeweera. Historically dismissed from the larger – masculinized and fraternal – discourse of the JVP, and her own testimony ignored and/or discredited, she nevertheless is intriguingly granted visibility on screen. She is provided an expansive role in the biopic, which thus becomes a more melancholic but empathetic reimagining of a revolutionary's wife. While she seems to provide an innocuous means of garnering sympathy for the movement, whereby the revolutionary male is brought into a domestic space, and thereby any potential threat is muted, the film helps make visible the gendered politics of the construction of the rebel's wife. The film unravels how patriarchal political conquest coopts women as strategic sites of political domination. While images of Sri Lankan womanhood underpin the film's attempt at political and cultural legitimation of the JVP and its leader, *Ginnen Upan Seethala* testifies to Chithrangani's tale of victimhood and survival.

It would be pertinent, in this instance, to provide a general overview of the historical and political context of the JVP in Sri Lanka. Although Sri Lanka achieved independence in 1948, its constitution consolidated political power in the hands of the

English-educated, anglicized, upper class elite. Thereby, it continued the colonial system of governance, with little reform to the economic and educational systems in place. The successive elected governments failed to address the aspirations of the Sinhala-speaking rural masses, such as the urgent need for eradicating poverty and unemployment and creating economic and social equality. The established Left, though vocal on class inequality, was ineffective in addressing student unrest and curbing their growing dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the parliamentary democratic system of government in Sri Lanka. In this context, the JVP, formed in 1965, under the leadership of Rohana Wijeweera, 'provided a nucleus round which several sections of the youth gathered.'¹ An ultra-left, non-elite, nationalist organization, the JVP called for a complete and radical overhaul of the country's economic and social structure through the establishment of a socialist form of government. It advocated the revolutionary overthrow of the right-wing parties in power. The struggle took a militant turn in the early seventies with the outbreak of the first insurrection, which was ruthlessly suppressed by the state. It was followed by a second, more bloody insurgent armed uprising from 1987 to 1989, which again was put down with equal savagery by counter insurgency forces consisting of state security forces and pro-state armed groups. By then, the JVP had lost its credibility due to executions of their own – of alleged sympathizers of the government who did not subscribe to their narrow ideology, many of them innocent. As Rajesh Venugopal notes, 'the JVP was responsible for killing some 6,000 people in 1987-1989 in what was ultimately a vast campaign of assassination, strikes and public intimidation.'² During this period, Sri Lanka was reeling under another, far more lethal insurgency which overlapped with the JVP insurgency. As K. M. de Silva notes with reference to the JVP insurrection of 1971, '[a]lthough the attempt was a dismal failure, the example they set won them imitators among the radicalized youth in the Tamil separatist parties in later years, including most notably the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE),'³ which launched a 26-year military campaign against the Sri Lankan government to create an independent Tamil state. W.A.W. Warnapala notes that such use of violence against the Sri Lankan State resulted disturbingly in 'accelerating the process of militarization' of the country, which paved the way for 'militarized authoritarianism.'⁴ As the mastermind behind both of the JVP insurrections, Wijeweera is emblematic of the political culture during the last third of the twentieth century and remains a key revolutionary figure in the Sri Lankan political scene, both revered and reviled.

Chithrangani's unwritten history of her life as a rebel's wife is captured in her verbal testimony given immediately after her arrest and detention on 21 November 1989 at the Sri Lanka Army Women's Corps Headquarters in Colombo, in the presence

of two male police officers. According to the recorded testimony, she was questioned by Senior Superintendent of Police, Kanakarathnam, and her testimony was recorded by Inspector of Police, G. Ariyasena. Documented in forty-six pages and delivered in the course of five full days, it is a factual, chronological, and sober account, interjected with two questions, which narrates specific times, places, movements and events in Chithrangani's life as wife. Devoid of emotional texture, she recollects her relationship with Wijeweera beginning with her marriage in 1980. Pushed into an arranged marriage negotiated by a brother, who was a friend and admirer of the leader, but objected to by her mother, Chithrangani explicitly records her own objections to the marriage in which she became a transactional commodity between men. She cites the significant difference in age and notes her disinterest in politics as another, in addition to her fear of future imprisonment. Yet, forced by her brother through emotional blackmail and threats of disownment, she entered marriage. In the report, she details her docile existence as wife, invisible and silenced. She repeatedly testifies to her complete domination by Wijeweera, who insisted on the separation of the private and the public. Barring his wife from meetings, he also discourages party members from visiting the house and conducts party meetings outside. When he did have party meetings at home, he went to the length of demanding his wife remain in her room. Chithrangani documents instances when she was disallowed to leave her room and had her meals brought inside. Physically and culturally policed, she was deliberately excluded from the political realm of her husband, separated from the public, and denied the shared experience of other male and female members of the party. With Wijeweera never confiding anything in his wife, Chithrangani was forced to lead a life of relative isolation, taking on fictive identities to avoid capture. She notes a handful of instances when she used to accompany Wijeweera as his wife to attend the island-wide commemoration ceremonies in April 1980. Eventually, prohibited from even socialising with her own relatives, including her brothers, she is overpowered and pushed into the role of a stereotyped caregiver, confined to childbirth and mothering. She notes further restriction in her movements after the proscription of the JVP in 1983, only stepping out for routine medical checkups related to pregnancy and childbirth. She clearly suggests that certain requests, however trivial, such as entertaining a visit from her brother, were turned down by Wijeweera in consultation with his fellow party members. As such, her confinement becomes emblematic of the functioning of a patriarchal marriage, a microcosm of the particular patriarchy which operates in the party.

A notable element in her narrative is her measured distancing from the movement and husband. She stresses that she was forced to submit to her husband and his party

and that she was never aware of their work. Interestingly, she emphatically disassociates herself from the women's wing of the JVP. She identifies and names a female activist who visited her home, but who did so only to assist her with the delivery of her first child. In an extremely turbulent period in the political history of Sri Lanka, she denies bearing witness to any political violence. Chithrangani claims absolute unawareness of the goals and work of the movement and asserts having never witnessed the carnage that unfolded around her in the cities and villages. She claims that she was not privy to even the most basic of information such as source of income, details of vehicles used, and Wijeweera's movements. As such, she denies being a witness and participant of the political activities of the JVP and its leader. She does not project herself as being a devoted wife to her husband nor disciple and admirer of the movement. However, she does not over-emphasize her lack of agency with references to loss, emptiness, or suffering either. Chithrangani's dispassionate and sober biographical construction in her testimony as reluctant wife who is uninformed perhaps indicates a desire for self-differentiation, to foreshadow that her situation and needs are distinct from those of her husband and the party. It also suggests her unwillingness to take responsibility for her husband's actions. Perhaps therein lies the primary reason for her testimony to be unacknowledged and under-interpreted. This is evident when her testimony was first published nearly a quarter-century after its delivery, in 2013, in Sinhala, by Ravaya publishers, a leftist-leaning publishing group. It was titled *Wijeweerage Birinida Kiyana Kathawa*, which when translated reads, *the story purportedly told by Wijeweera's wife*. Hence, she is thrice negated when the title not only questions the truthfulness of her testimony and assigns her merely the role of wife, but also declares the very act of testifying as a potential fiction.

To discuss the authenticity and legitimacy of her testimony is redundant considering the fact that such testimony given under extreme duress will necessarily be inflected by the subject's vulnerability as well as performativity. As Silvia Rodríguez Maeso notes on testimonies in the context of human rights violations, 'the narrative itself of the testimony is produced within the conditions of possibility for negotiation between the state and the victims and their families.'⁵ This is certainly applicable to Chithrangani, who is at the mercy of the State upon arrest. Her testimonial discourse is a means of appeal to ensure her own survival as well as her children's. Nicholas Chare notes that testimony is 'as much a restoration of self as a record of the event.'⁶ If so, Chithrangani is compelled as witness to prioritize her experiences and decide which aspects need embellishment and which do not. Therefore, to what extent she trades in the truth for personal security is questionable.

Similarly, to what extent the recorded testimony itself retains the evidentiary integrity of the verbal testimony is problematic as it is mediated through the state. Whether it is a distorted record, fabricated and manipulated by the state to their own purposes where Chithranagani is a pawn that the state can utilize to promote specific political agendas, is a cause of concern. It is also doubtful to what extent her narrative can function as testimony in the first place, considering her position of limited power and ability to witness the events of the JVP as wife. Regardless of any criticisms the testimony incurs, the fact is that her testimonial self-portrait allows the reader to gauge not only how she positions herself within the movement but how she also repositions herself in her own terms, apart from the movement and her husband after capture.

She suggests in her testimony that the central role assigned to her is that of mothering, having six children in her nine years of marriage. Although she does not say so in her testimony, in her 2015 interview, she refers to Wijeweera's desire for a large family. She states, 'He wanted to have 12 children. I didn't disagree as I felt I was voiceless. He loved children and would do anything for children. Rohana wanted to separate family life from politics. He never discussed politics with me.'⁷ As such, the impetus to have many children is clearly not her own. While Wijeweera's blending of revolutionary ideals and conservative personal practices is vastly complex and problematic, and not within the purview of this paper, the implicit contradictions inherent in politics and society where women's bodies become the terrain upon which the revolutionary male inscribes paternalistic ideology is of concern. It is hardly surprising that there has been very little attempt to fill in the blanks regarding Chithrangani, her only claim to fame being her status as Wijeweera's wife. In 1989 her military custody began, which has lasted to this day, with Chithrangani and her children living under navy protection. Not only has Chithrangani thus been excluded from social life for decades, but she has also been conveniently written out of history and public memory.

The persona of Chithrangani has received scant attention in most accounts of the JVP that have been produced since. Be it in academic texts detailing the history and the emergence of the JVP, or in popular discourse romanticizing or demonizing the party, she has not figured in such hegemonising narratives except as Wijeweera's wife. Unacknowledged, only Chithrangani herself breaks the silence. In 2015, in a letter addressed to the President of Sri Lanka requesting asylum in the UK as a reaction to her near eviction from the naval base in which she and her family have since resided, she breaks 26 years of silence and laments her family's victimization and denial. Accusing the JVP of neglect and disregard of the family's wellbeing, which is soon

after contradicted by the JVP, she voices her disdain. However, she chooses to focus solely on her children and their persecution, leaving aside her own. She firmly states that her children, now adults, should not be held accountable for the actions of the father and must not be condemned. While mobilising the cultural symbolism of her role as mother is perhaps her only mode of acceptable access to the public, thus exempting her from criticism, her life of endurance and survival has mostly been a matter of indifference. To evoke Gayatri Spivak, as a subaltern, she speaks but is not heard.

While a backlash against the rebel's wife has been perhaps unavoidable, considering that the insurgency remains a traumatic reference point for many, the denial of the public to acknowledge her viewpoint has further silenced Chithrangani. Public indifference could also be understood through the patriarchal nature of the Sri Lankan political culture. Representations of political parties have largely focused on male leaders. In fact, attention paid to the role of women in the JVP movement has been sadly inadequate. Dharman Wickremaratne, in his study of the JVP insurrection titled *Satanin Satana* (2019), details the extensive and varied participation of women in the movement. The majority of the women were from low socio-economic backgrounds with varying levels of education and an awareness of the unjust social structures in place. They assisted not merely in supportive roles such as helping in the communications networks of the party, but also took on more decisive, militant roles such as attacking military camps to seize arms and explosives. Wickramaratne reports nearly 6,000 women insurgents in full and part-time capacity who were mobilized for collective action in support of the social and political reforms of the JVP between 1986-1990.⁸ Yet women did not reach the upper levels of the organization, which exposes the gender contradictions of the party despite the JVP's projected image of gender equality. As Kelly Senanayake has observed first-hand, being a female activist in the 1971 insurrection, the women's wing of the JVP did not focus on women's issues because of the JVP's view that 'the existing women's movement was destroying the culture of the country.'⁹ As Neloufer de Mel notes, with reference to the first phase of the JVP, 'the JVP failed to foster and enlist large scale female participation for its cause because of its patriarchal bent.'¹⁰ She adds, '[d]uring the 1970's, the JVP had only five or six women at the action committee level. There were no women on the district committees or the decision-making politburo.'¹¹ According to Sudha Ramachandran, the second phase in the late eighties proved no different. She notes 'the absence of women in decision-making positions during the second uprising' as well.¹² What is ironic is that women insurgents were indiscriminately arrested, detained, or assassinated regardless of gender. Wickramaratne notes nearly 2,000 such women

victims who were either killed or reported missing in the period. However, female political activism has been largely undervalued in the memory and historiography of the movement and co-opted to align with male interests of the party, which highlights the contradictions of the political culture of Sri Lanka.

Within such a context, it is hardly surprising that Chithrangani's role in the party has gone unnoticed. Her supposed marginalization within the party is also reflective of the deeply entrenched gender roles in Sri Lankan society. While Sri Lanka boasts of a high literacy rate and a better gender balance in education than other countries of the region, sexism, stereotyping, and gender inequality in employment and especially political participation prevail. Patriarchal social structures have kept women dominated and subservient through a complex system of conventions and norms, visible especially in the institution of marriage. Swarna Jayaweera notes 'obscurantist practices and rituals that perpetuate the subordination of women in the family through marriage practices and acceptance of patriarchy in household decision making.'¹³ Idealizing discourses of motherhood have further relegated women to traditional constraints of mothering and domestic responsibility. Hence, Chithranagni as wife who has no public role to play has become an afterthought. Shared silences have omitted her from the dominant historical narratives and rendered her invisible.

A film that straddles the line between biography and documentary, *Ginnen Upan Seethala* enters a not so large array of biographical films in Sri Lanka. The biographical film is not a new genre in Sri Lankan cinema. From the late sixties onwards, biographical films appeared such as Gamini Fonseka's *Parasathu Mal* (1966), Neil Rupasinghe's *Yakadaya* (1977), Amarnath Jayatilaka's *Siripala Saha Ranmanika* (1977), Titus Thotawatte's *Maruwa Samaga Wase* (1977), Gamini Fonseka's *Sagarayak Meda* (1981), Anton Gregory's *Sura Saradiel* (1986), Nishantha De Alwis's *Podi Wije* (1987), Vasantha Obeysekera's *Maruthaya* (1995), Jackson Anthony's *Aba* (2008), and Chandran Rutnam's *According to Mathew* (2018), one of the most recent being Suneth Malinga Lokuhewa's *Nidahase Piya DS* (2018). The penchant of the Western biopic for the lives of noteworthy men, as noticed by Dennis Bingham,¹⁴ can also be detected in Sri Lankan film. Sri Lankan biopics, too, have largely focused on a central male figure, although they have taken on a range of male subjects, from celebrated and controversial political figures to ancient kings to murderous Anglican priests to bandits. They have focused on both the famous and the infamous, often romanticizing the figure of the endearing rogue. However, these films have engaged with incidents or issues more than with personalities of the subjects.

A scarcity of female biopics is very evident in Sri Lankan cinema. Vasantha Obeysekera's *Dadayama* (1984), or *The Hunt*, is perhaps the only exception. The lack of

woman-centric biographical films in Sri Lankan cinema can perhaps be attributed to the dearth of women filmmakers in the country due to women's difficulties in breaking into the ranks of a male-dominated cinema. As Wimal Dissanayake and Ashley Ratnavibhushana suggest, Sri Lankan cinema has largely been 'a male preserve, in the sense that apart from actresses and playback singers, direction, photography, editing, music, sound effects, art direction and so on were decidedly in the hands of men.'¹⁵ Only a handful of women, including Sumitra Peries, Inoka Sathyangani and Anoma Rajakaruna, have emerged in the field since its inception in 1947.

Ginnen Upan Seethala is a biopic of the political renegade Wijeweera in keeping with the Sri Lankan biographical focus on individuals outside mainstream culture: a portrayal of the romantic outlaw who is persecuted for being a champion of the people. It is one of the first films to broach the life of Wijeweera and the days leading up to the second JVP insurrection. Its focus is less political and ideological, and more biographical as it attempts to memorialize and re-mythologize Wijeweera through a gradual unfolding of his life. Casting becomes critical in this instance for the leading male role. The character of Rohana Wijeweera is played by Kamal Addaraarachchi, a versatile and charismatic actor with a career spanning over 35 years. Addaraarachchi has attained celebrity status and was enshrined as a popular hero in the eighties, and he is indeed a staple of Sinhala cinema. As Marta Minier and Maddalena Pennacchia point out, 'biographees are not necessarily the only figures of fame, of course, to consider when it comes to biopics: often actors of significant fame lend their faces to historical or contemporary celebrities; it is often stars playing stars.'¹⁶ As such, Addaraarachchi's popularity and bankability not only helps ensure a broader, more mainstream audience not limited to JVP sympathizers, but also assists in the film's seemingly revisionist attempt to render the portrait of the JVP leader as enticing. The JVP has remained a party that is often reviled by the general populace due to its role in political violence unleashed on the public in the eighties, regardless of its larger objective of eliminating inequality. Therefore, the film needs to appear less propagandist and negotiate its moral and aesthetic objectives with the sentiments of a disenchanted public skeptical of the party's unresolved past. But what is also interesting is that, despite his fame, Addaraarachchi has simultaneously been an outsider, a controversial actor who has been accused of rape and murder and imprisoned, though he was later acquitted. As such, Addaraarachchi as a film maverick is well suited to play Wijeweera, who is an anti-hero in the larger Sri Lankan imagination.

In fact, the JVP has been largely off the radar of Sinhala cinema. If it has been taken up, it has been mostly to condemn the JVP by focusing only on their atrocities. Such depictions have mostly ignored the brutal suppression of the insurrection by the state, which is not surprising given that films are subject to state restrictions and censorship before release. In essence *Ginnen Upan Seethala* details Wijeweera's life against the backdrop of the leftist Marxist politics of the JVP in the eighties. It is an attempt to retell events of the eighties through the perspective of the JVP. It begins with Wijeweera's release from jail in 1977 and ends with his arrest in 1989, focusing on the twelve turbulent years in between. Building on historical facts and suggesting factual accuracy through its documentary-like style, *Ginnen Upan Seethala* looks into the political legacy of the JVP during the period, moving away from the dominant perception of Wijeweera as a shrewd politician and manipulator. Although screened nearly thirty years after the period described, the film is cautious in its depiction of the movement so as not to offend an audience perhaps brutalized by the actions of the JVP. Graphic visual representations of violence are absent. Except for the occasional outbursts of revolutionary fervor such as political meetings and protests, the film largely focuses on smaller scale activities such as pocket and politburo meetings and presents a largely sanitized depiction of the struggle. Belén Vidal, referring to Martin Barnier's view of the biopic as a mode of reinvention, notes that 'the biopic deals not with the stability, but rather with the transformation of an image.'¹⁷ (7). Likewise, somewhat apologetic, relating both emotions and select historical incidents, *Ginnen Upan Seethala* seems to attempt to resurrect a positive public image through a mode of reenactment of both man and movement. The film engages in a subtle reappraisal of revolutionary masculinity through its protagonist's display of fragility and emotion.

In fact, the film invites the audience to Wijeweera's home, to view him as a concerned father to a young family, somewhat detaching him from the homosocial environment of his party. As such, the film creates a hospitable space of male domesticity where violence of the JVP does not spill into the role of the leader. This is not to disregard the fact that the film depicts a male world, focusing on the JVP politburo, men in continuous discussion, debate, and movement. Yet, the figure of Wijeweera is softened and humanized, and at times made saintly, creating a man worthy of the audience's empathy instead of disdain, quite different to Chithranagani's presentation of him as paternalistic, rigid, and unchallengeable. Repeatedly in the film, we are shown Wijeweera as a family man invested in his home and in the upbringing of his children. He is pictured celebrating children's birthdays, cutting cakes and feeding his children in a seemingly egalitarian household. The film conveniently locates Wijeweera in relationship to women, children, and the home,

suggesting, by extension, a benign view of the JVP. It would not be unfair to say that such a depiction is a veiled attempt to exonerate him as a leader of a party responsible for abduction, torture, and killings. In fact, the film seemingly suggests that Wijeweera's decision to go underground may have led the JVP to adopt tactics of violence and intimidation merely because he was compelled to relinquish control of the party and instead allow certain politburo members, who acted against Wijeweera's intentions, to be in charge. The film establishes the image of Wijeweera as the principal theoretician of the party – literate, well read, and conversant in many languages, yet gradually losing control of its workings. It is ironic that Wijeweera is somewhat emasculated in the process of domestication. Slow and faltering in step, he is mostly portrayed as sad-eyed, diffident, distracted, and self-preoccupied, in contrast to the traditional expectations of a male rebel leader. There is an attempt to restore his virility and attractiveness through a series of intriguing scenes in which sexual tension between Wijeweera and the wife of a doctor who provides shelter and is initially unaware of his identity is thinly built up but not developed enough. Vibrant, attractive, and played by a star actor, the doctor's wife is shown in a few scenes which suggest seduction and eroticism, perhaps alluding to Wijeweera's ability to draw potential lovers. A scene that particularly stands out is one, where Wijeweera is shown playing cards with her, his charm more than apparent to the audience.

There is also a covert attempt in the film to project the party and its men as liberal in their attitude to women. Karuna, a female activist of the JVP and now the wife of the second in command, details to Chithrangani how she met her husband, Gamanayake and suggests that the men of the JVP champion the rights of women. She insinuates torture and rape whilst in police custody and gratefully acknowledges the moral superiority of Gamanayake who regardless of her violation chose her as partner in a culture where female chastity and virginity are at a high premium before marriage. Such an exchange between Chithrangani and Karuna is not referenced in Chithrangani's testimony, although Karuna's arrest and detention are referred to in Dharman Wickramaratne's work. While it is strategic that the supposed female liberality of the party is voiced through a woman, providing further legitimacy to the party's claim of gender inclusive ideology, the film predictably fails to explore to what extent this is a reworking of traditional male attitudes cloaked in the guise of women's emancipation. However, the filmmaker's inclusion of the incident is, indeed, significant. As Neloufer de Mel notes, 'none of the JVP women who suffered sexual abuse while in police custody or prison ever talked about those violations, and the JVP male leaders were at pains to deny the incidents.'¹⁸ The fact that the film makes visible, even tangentially, the anguish and pain that marks the lives of women insurgents and

thereby does not subscribe to the silencing of the women who experienced state-sponsored sexual violence, complicates a reading of the film as unreflectively propagandist.

Therefore, to what extent the film teases out the silences that emerge in Chitrangani's testimonial exchange between individual memory and institutional documentation and thereby grants her voice is worthy of examination. Chitrangani, played by a lesser known, but well-suited actress, is certainly relegated to the background in *Ginnen Upan Seethala*. In a film that runs for two hours and twenty-five minutes, she is shown less than twenty times and speaks less than ten times, less than half a minute each on those occasions. While simplistic binaries of male oppressor and female oppressed should be avoided, it is nonetheless important to bring into relief tensions that accompany her representation in the film. From a feminist point of view, the film certainly lacks images of female rebellion and resistance, women's questioning of gendered double standards imposed upon them, and dismantling of female taboos and traditions. Although her tale is told through the trajectory of victimization, the film opens up a site for critical reflection on the gendered discourse of the rebel's wife.

The film offers a surprisingly empathetic reimagining of Chitrangani's life. While previous academic and popular literature reveals little about her personality and individual state of mind, the film acts as testimony when it bears witness to her poignant tale. Through the narrative of film, the historical and gendered reality of her life is suggested. Of course, all her scenes, except a few prior to marriage, show her in the role of mother. She is seen as either pregnant, having delivered a child, or carrying one when she does come into view, her pregnant, maternal body crossing the screen. But while the film remains true to her testimony in reducing her to her relationship with her husband, she is at times projected as complex. She is framed in a role that is less traditional than what she projects in her own testimony, highlighting what is not recorded or retrievable in the textual record of her testimony. The film depicts the constant negotiations of home and self for Chitrangani. Restrained and rarely animated, she is shown as a woman forced to adopt a strategy of survival by negotiating both the outside oppressive state apparatus and the authoritarianism inside her marriage and party. One scene captures her combativeness not visible in her testimony, when a policeman interrogates her at home as to the whereabouts of her husband. She retorts back, not meeting his eye, but visibly defiant, rigid, and unintimidated, all the while rocking one of her infants. She pronounces that she is not afraid of imprisonment, as the entirety of her marital life has been carceral. Hence, the scene acknowledges her subjectivity, depicting her as neither complicit with (and thus

a mere extension of) her husband nor as will-less and weak. Further, Chithrangani is never depicted in the film as over-emotional, except in the final scene when Wijeweera is captured. Yet again, in another scene, the only festive scene in the film where the eldest daughter's second birthday is celebrated at a friend's house, Chithrangani is captured in a melancholic and contemplative mood. She walks away from the festivities, and when inquired by her husband, she is less subservient and gently insists on a house of her own. In this scene, Chithrangani neither docile nor powerful, but silent, her disconnection from the festivities suggesting the wife as a reluctant participant who does not wish to abide by the social expectations of the JVP. A cautious wife rather than a committed wife, her apparent withdrawal from action aligns with the historical Chithrangani's testimonial self-projection as outsider.

The film certainly draws on the visual power of cinema to allude to the pain and difficulties she faces as an individual. The scene in which she is pressured into accepting the proposal of marriage from Wijeweera portrays her as strong-willed but subject to the brunt of her family. She objects, citing her need to pursue higher education instead. The camera chooses to focus on the physical manifestations of her mental and emotional abhorrence of being coerced into marriage. She paces back and forth in agitation as her brother and mother surround her and she turns her back on the camera in protest, until she turns to face the audience later when she is left alone with her sister-in-law, who embraces her in sympathy. What is significant in this instance is that a biopic which apparently attempts to neutralize Wijeweera resorts to record an event which eventually undermines him, creating sympathy for Chithrangani instead. While arranged marriages have been common in Sri Lanka and are still prevalent, preferably with the understanding that the parties involved have the freedom to accept or refuse the arrangement, Chithrangani's marriage is evidently forced. She has been pushed into the union through threat and intimidation. Her coercion creates a parodic representation of Wijeweera, seemingly questioning the contradictory relationship between Marxist ideology and patriarchal hegemony, where women's bodies are objects of patriarchal exchange. As such, the empathetic focus of the film shifts from male to female.

In another scene which does not shy away from critical reflection on women's position, the film depicts Chithrangani as her hair is cropped short for disguise. She sits at a dressing table with a protruding stomach, staring at her altered self in the mirror and in turn steadily meets the viewer's gaze. A woman empathetically looks on while another cuts. The poignancy of Chithrangani's anguish and despair is evident when she remains stoic and unflinching, though her facial expression betrays her brokenness. If long hair connotes essentialist assumptions about normative

femininity in a traditional Sri Lankan context, she is thus forced to discard her allotted feminine self, signaling a loss of social identity. What is ironic is that her bobbed hair, in this instance, is not a symbol of her unwillingness to conform to gender expectations. Neloufer de Mel notes unintended socio-structural changes which the JVP generated when it provided a platform for women insurgents to occupy the role of the militant, especially through androgynous style of dress. Women insurgents used dress to blend into a masculinized environment:

Retreating to the jungles, always at the risk of personal safety, living with men, against the establishment, switching dress codes (wearing trousers where previously she would in public at least, have worn a frock or skirt and blouse as worn by young Sinhala women) was pathbreaking in its own right.¹⁹

But in this instance, camouflaging of gender is not an act of social revolt for Chithrangani. It is more an act of disciplining her female body to yet again align it with the interests of patriarchy and, in this instance, Wijeweera's need to embrace various aliases to avoid detection.

The film captures her disempowerment in a unique scene where even Wijeweera's character cannot hijack Chithrangani's centrality. He walks in while she looks at her new and unfamiliar self in the mirror. The camera catches his awkwardness, but a close-up shot of Chithrangani's face emphasizes her despair rather than his unease, thus negating his gaze. Dennis Bingham, describing the feminist biographical film, states that 'feminist interventions [...] must set out with a consciousness of the sexist conventions of the form.'²⁰ Hilary Radner identifies these sexist conventions as those 'that upheld the role of the female star as serving to attract and even arrest the gaze of the male actor as well as the viewer.'²¹ In this instance, Chithrangani is the object of the gaze of both the viewer and Wijeweera but accords no pleasure. It is a gaze of discomfort when she thwarts both the male actor and the viewers through her defiance. Hence, the film crosses the line between the male and the feminist biopic when it unravels a tension between her fleeting claim of selfhood and the cultural and political systems that determine her fate. As Minier and Pennacchia point out, the biopic 'has the means to pose questions to the viewer, to challenge received understandings of issues around their subject, even to the extent of subverting its politics.'²² In amplifying Chithrangani's role, the film's initial agenda of the positive redefinition of social and political assumptions surrounding the movement and its leader is somewhat compromised. While the incident of cropping her hair short is sparingly relayed in Chithrangani's historical testimony and is also in the

photographs inserted in the testimony's publication in 2013, where she is shown with long hair before the proscription of the JVP and with short hair afterwards, the film's capacity to invest in a scene which manifests Chithrangani's anxiety, trauma, and resilience illustrates its desire to express the intersecting social and cultural constraints within which women live and against which they struggle. At the intersections of reality and adaptation, the film mobilizes the ambiguities and complexities surrounding Chithrangani to flesh out a deeper reality about her character on screen. Though speculative, the above scene creates a plausible situation, and the film attests to the vitality and polysemy of the biopic. Chithrangani who initially functioned to personalize the narrative, can no longer be overlooked and creates a potential connection with a varied audience.

Ginnen Upan Seethala is significant because it does not uncritically reproduce the narrative silencing of Chithrangani. Despite the film's seeming exoneration of the JVP, its reconstruction of Chithrangani's hitherto untold tale is laudable, however feeble that attempt is. Such an imaginative unfolding of her perspective creates a cleavage in the dominant discourses on Wijeweera's wife and problematizes the homogenising image of her as not only an unreliable victim, but also as a subservient wife and mother. While a fuller representation of her remains unfulfilled in the film, at an ideological level, the film's refusal to be complicit in the process of a gendered forgetting of Chithrangani is itself heartening. It suggests the film's discomfort with a simplistic and uncritical celebration of oppression. The film ends with Wijeweera's subsequent capture and arrest by the government. Chithrangani's testimony suggests that his capture was perhaps due to his own delay to go into hiding, despite clear warning from fellow politburo members, and the film seemingly takes up the same position, showing Wijeweera spending time with family instead, prior to his arrest. The final scene depicts Chithrangani as she throws herself at her husband's feet crying, in keeping with patriarchal tradition, not so much as to acknowledge his superiority, but more as an indication of her impending helplessness and victimization by the state. The scene makes it quite clear that at the time of arrest, she is carrying her sixth child, which is indicated through her desperate cradling of her yet again swelling stomach. The film thus invites viewers to reflect on a more nuanced understanding of Chithrangani's story of survival and attests to the subjective truth of Chithrangani's testimony.

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Notes

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