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Male Gaze, Female Body, and Gender Representation in Sri Lankan Antiwar Films: An Audience Analysis

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Abstract

This research article explores how viewers make sense of the gender roles depicted in three selected anti-war films: *This is My Moon, Shades of Ash,* and *The Forsaken Land*. Despite criticisms regarding the objectification of women in these films, this analysis reveals a complex interplay between gendered experience, educational background, socio-political, and cultural contexts influencing audience perceptions. Through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with film industry stakeholders and diverse audience members, the findings indicate that female viewers articulate a more nuanced understanding of stereotypical representations than their male counterparts. The study highlights the influence of patriarchal constructs on audience readings, suggesting that cultural norms and educational backgrounds significantly shape interpretations of gender roles. This research contributes to the discourse on gender representation in postcolonial cinema, emphasising the need for critical engagement with media portrayals of women in war-torn societies.

1. Introduction

Antiwar films made in Sri Lanka were constantly subjected to public discourse on their representations of war, politics, and Sri Lankan culture. One of the emergent themes of these discourses was how anti-war films represented gender identities in Sri Lankan culture, especially those of women. While some critics claim that these films represent the subordination and objectification of women in war-torn areas, others argue that they portray their subjugation. According to Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding theory, the audience plays a vital role in meaning-making at the reception stage of media messages. Thus, this article reveals how film viewers interpret the representations of women's image and gender roles in Sri Lankan-produced anti-war films.

Postcolonial feminists claim that gender intersects with race, ethnicity and nationality, ultimately deciding women's experiences (Barker, 2003) [1]. According to them, women in the postcolonial context experience subordination both from colonial and native men. Thus, this article reveals how the postcolonial context in Sri Lanka affects audiences' interpretations of gender representations in the three purposively selected antiwar films. The films are This is My Moon (*Me Mage Sandai*), directed by Asoka Handagama in 2001; Shades of Ash (*Sudu Kalu Saha Alu*), directed by Sudath Mahaadiwulwewa in 2005; The Forsaken Land (*Sulanga Enu Pinisa*), directed by Vimukthi Jayasundara in 2005. These films were released during a period of severe restrictions on media freedom due to the country's war situation, and they faced indirect censorship and state suppression. These films were also subjected to praise and criticism, opening a space for public debate of cultural identities and political ideologies. In this article, I argue that cultural constructs of gender roles and norms significantly influence how audiences read gender representations in films. The only factor that can dilute this influence, at least to some extent, is education and awareness of gender inequalities.

The paradigm of audience research has evolved from viewing audiences as passive recipients to recognising them as active participants who engage in the meaning-making of media messages (Srinivas, 1998) [12]. This shift is encapsulated in the definition of active audiences, which suggests that "audiences are not cultural dopes but are active producers of meaning from within their cultural context" (Barker, 2003, p. 269) [1]. Research on television audiences has shown that viewers actively construct meanings based on their cultural competencies and personal experiences, indicating that cultural texts, such as films

and television productions, possess polysemic qualities and do not hold fixed meanings (Barker, 2003; Grusauskaite *et al*., 2022; Li *et al*., 2023) [1,6, 10]. Hall (1991) [7] further supports this notion by asserting that media messages convey multiple interpretations that vary among individuals. In this research, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with stakeholders from the Sri Lankan film industry and audiences enabled a comparative analysis of diverse interpretations, revealing the multifaceted messages in selected anti-war films. Previous audience analysis frameworks affirm that "the audience is conceived of as active and knowledgeable producers of meaning – not products of a structured text" (Barker, 2008, p. 512) [2]. However, Barker (2008) [2] also identifies four determinants in the audience's meaning-making process: the creators' text structure, the viewing context, the audience's ability to distinguish between fiction and reality, and the diverse cultural backgrounds, genders, and social positions influencing interpretations (Barker, 2008, p. 512) [2].

2. Materials and Methods
The study used volunteer and snowball sampling to select the participants. The audience members interviewed were film reviewers, academics and focus group participants. Five academics and three film reviewers were interviewed using depth interviews, and 36 participants engaged in six focus group discussions. Three academics and 18 focus group members (a total of 21) were female, and two academics, three film reviewers and 18 focus group members (a total of 23) were male. This article compares the opinions of male and female participants because, according to Kellner (1995) [9], participants' gender may affect their interpretations.

Five academics who teach and research on the Sri Lankan film industry were selected purposively and representatively based on gender, ethnicity, seniority and university. The academics were chosen by reviewing relevant university academic profiles and using snowball sampling. The academics represented the five national universities in Sri Lanka that offer degree programs in film studies. Three film reviewers who write for print and electronic newspapers and websites were selected using snowball sampling. The film reviewers' contact details were obtained from the academics and film reviewers who were already interviewed.

To gather qualitative data, six focus group discussions were conducted, each with six participants. Recruitment was facilitated through advertisements displayed on notice boards across various public and private institutions, such as higher education institutes and community centres. The focus group participants were aged between 18 and 55 years. Individuals under the age of 18 were excluded due to the classification of the selected films as 'most appropriate for adults' by the Public Performance Board. Participants who had experienced direct and traumatic encounters related to war and pregnant individuals were also excluded from the study due to the presence of violent scenes in the films.

The interviews and focus group discussions were analysed to identify common themes and discourses present within them, utilising the Grounded Theory method as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1994) [13]. Grounded Theory, initially introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) [5] and further refined by Strauss and Corbin in 1990 (Weerakkody, 2015) [14], is an inductive research approach that enables scholars to create theoretical frameworks grounded in empirical data.

As noted by Strauss and Corbin (1994) [13], this method involves a systematic process for coding data into defined categories. It allows researchers to uncover patterns within and across these categories. The interpretations and comparisons of these categories serve to enhance understanding of the studied phenomena, facilitate theory development, and propose strategies for intervention to exert some control over the phenomenon (Weerakkody, 2015) [14].

3. Results and Discussion
There are both similarities and differences in the interpretations of the films among audience members. These similarities and differences are based on social and cultural backgrounds, gendered experiences and the exposure to stereotypical media representations of gender identities.

3.1 Interpretations of the film reviewers and university academics of the representations of gender in the selected films
The opinions of interviewees were classified into two primary categories: "stereotypical gender representations" and "representations of the impact of war on women and children." Within the category of stereotypical gender representations, interviewees articulated that such representations are predominantly shaped by the male gaze, which tends to objectify women's bodies by depicting them as mere 'phantasy' objects, thereby positioning women as passive recipients of sexual attention. The interviewees also identified the tragic fates of female characters as another prevalent stereotype. The findings further indicated that female interviewees provided more detailed descriptions of these stereotypical gender-role representations than their male counterparts, even among an intellectual audience. This disparity in perspectives implies that, although male academics and film critics acknowledged the existence of stereotypical gender representations, their focus was often diverted to other issues (e.g., the effects of war on women) rather than the gender stereotypes themselves, which have been normalised as a natural condition.

Female scholars have identified the male gaze as a significant mechanism employed by films to depict women as phantasmatic objects, thereby reinforcing patriarchal gender identities. Cooper (2000) [3] asserts that the male gaze "is typical in mainstream Hollywood cinema" (p. 277). Mulvey (1975) [11] elaborates on this concept, indicating that the male gaze positions women as phantasmatic objects intended to fulfil men's unconscious desires. She delineates three modes through which women's objectification occurs: via the camera, through the character, and from the spectator's perspective. Mulvey posits that the voyeuristic male gaze, manifested through both the cinematic lens and male characters, ultimately converges with the spectator's gaze. She also argues that the prevalence of male dominance in cinema perpetuates the male gaze. Given that Sri Lankan cinema is predominantly male-dominated, with the selected three films produced by male directors, the female academic interviewees may have observed the male gaze manifesting in these works.

One male film reviewer, one male academic and one female academic expressed that these films represent the impact of war on women and children. In contrast, another male academic stated that these films represent the typical gender violence that women and children face in Sri Lankan society. These responses indicate that these films

acknowledge gender-based violence and gender discrimination in society, and specifically in a war setting. According to the interviewees, in any country, war affects women and children, and these films portray the vulnerability and pressure they face. As they stated, these films portray women connected to soldier families.

As they explained, these films depict the difficulties that the wives/girlfriends and children of soldiers (who fight on the front lines) face at home. For instance, in *This Is My Moon*, the dead soldier's wife has to prove that she is married to the soldier to avoid social pressure of being called a 'bad woman' because she is pregnant and to avoid economic pressure by obtaining the compensation given by the government to war widows. In *Shades of Ash*, Komala engages in a sexual relationship with Pema outside of her marriage to avoid sexual pressure while her husband is on the battlefield. Later, she becomes a prostitute to earn money to look after her family when her soldier husband becomes disabled. In the same film, Heen Eki also becomes a prostitute after her soldier brother's death because she does not have any other economic means of survival.

3.2 Interpretations of the focus group members of the representations of gender in the selected films

The focus group members' interpretations of gender roles and sexual relationships could be grouped into eight categories of opinions. They are: negative representations of women (30%), neutral representations of men and women (19%), negative representations of men (10%), positive representations of women (6%), positive representations of men (6%), exaggerated sexual behaviour (24%), and representations of homosexuality (3%).

3.2.1 Negative representations of women

Focus group participants (30%) of all three films interpreted these films as representing women in negative roles. The majority (63%) of the participants who held this opinion were females. The participants' responses establish that their gendered social experiences, and educational, social and cultural backgrounds influence their interpretations. Female participants for *Shades of Ash* expressed the opinion that the film portrays patriarchal gender stereotypes, such as women as nurturers, caregivers and sex workers who are weak and helpless and men as breadwinners. For instance, the village men work as army soldiers, entrepreneurs, government officers and religious leaders, while the women engage in household activities or sex work. Komala and Heen Eki work as prostitutes. According to female participants, the film also promotes the conservative patriarchal view that women should take responsibility for relationship failures; for example, Ajith blames Komala for infidelity in the *Shades of Ash* film.

Unlike female participants, male participants do not see these portrayals as stereotypes. Instead, they normalise women as caregivers and nurturers, and men as breadwinners, as a cultural factor and the existing social reality. They have also taken women sacrificing their lives for the well-being of the family for granted. Men are the dominant and privileged group or superiors within the patriarchal social system. Therefore, male participants may think these stereotypical roles are a naturalised and acceptable way of life. In contrast, women, being the subordinated and marginalised group or inferiors within the same system, may see such roles as constructions of that social system. Further, the existing social norms or beliefs of the gender roles backed by patriarchal ideologies have significantly influenced the male participants' interpretations.

Female participants for *This Is My Moon* discussed that the film represents women in negative gender roles in three ways. First, the film portrays women as indecent by showing them revealing their sexual feelings openly. Second, the film depicts women as sex objects to be used and abused by men. Third, the film represents women as helpless victims and dependents who need to be protected by someone else, primarily men. Women openly expressing their sexual feelings is perceived as unacceptable and indecent behaviour within the Sri Lankan cultural context (Hewamanne, 2016) [8], even within less conservative settings. For instance, the soldier's sister is friendly with two boys and ultimately chooses one of them as her life partner, and she flirts with military police soldiers; the widowed soldier's wife kisses the army deserter, and she invites the bookie to have sex with her. The female participants interpreted these behaviours as indecent.

Objectification of women is another criticism expressed by a female participant. According to her, the film illustrates men using women to fulfil their sexual needs, and women are always ready to cater to them. For instance, the Tamil woman is abused by several men in the village; the soldier's girlfriend, even after knowing the soldier has a physical connection with the Tamil woman, sleeps with the soldier; and the film exposes the nudity of the Tamil woman and the soldier's girlfriend to the audience.

According to female participants, these films depict women as helpless dependents who need someone's protection, primarily men. However, they believe that women being powerless is a social reality more than a media construction. The patriarchal social norms have inculcated in women's minds that they are weak and helpless and therefore need to live under the protection of men throughout their lives. These responses indicate that the female participants' cultural backgrounds and their gendered experiences have influenced their interpretations of gender representations in this film.

Under the negative representations of women, participants expressed that the film *The Forsaken Land* misrepresents the Sri Lankan woman by depicting female characters not engaging in any household activity. Furthermore, they stated that the director had given a tragic ending to women without giving the audience any hope. According to some female participants, the film portrays women who spend their time doing nothing – no household work or other labour. They thought it was a misrepresentation of Sri Lankan women, who are constantly engaged in productive activity.

These participants' claims apply only to Latha's character because the other main female character in the film, Anura's sister, is portrayed as employed. Female participants' responses indicate that their everyday experiences might have compelled them to think that way. In patriarchal societies, women are expected to do household activities such as cleaning, cooking and child-caring, which this film does not portray. In that sense, the film also challenges the stereotypical patriarchal gender roles by depicting a woman who exists outside of that frame.

The second opinion some male and female participants expressed under negative representations of women is the depiction of tragic endings for female characters. This interpretation might be based on the participants' education

level, as they are undergraduates. According to them, the characters of Anura's sister and the pregnant lady are negative representations of women. They thought these two characters give audiences the feeling that women always fail in their fight against the conservative patriarchal society. Rather than fight and live, they choose death – sometimes even without a fight. Thus, this depiction discourages women and prevents them from fighting back.

3.2.2 Neutral representations of gender identities

Both male and female participants (19%) interpreted the films as portraying gender identities neutrally. The majority (83%) of them were male participants. The responses demonstrate that their gendered social experiences and education levels influenced their interpretations. One male participant thought that the film *Shades of Ash* depicts difficulties people face in war-torn areas, without any gender differences. According to him, the filmmaker represents the power relations within society. In *Shades of Ash*, men are depicted as having more power than women, but women with money possess more power than poor men in the same setting. For instance, village women such as Komala, Heen Eki, and Ungi play inferior gender roles compared to men in the setting. Still, the film portrays the NGO lady who represents the urban upper-middle class as superior to the village men. The participant sees this as something often observed in society when gender interacts with class, education, power, and social or professional position.

Two male participants and a female participant explained that the film *The Forsaken Land* portrays the pressure that Sri Lankan culture and society place on women, using the characters of Anura's sister and the pregnant lady. It is also important to note that both male and female participants interpreted the film's repressive cultural elements. Their educational level must have influenced their interpretations, as they are either graduates or undergraduates. In a patriarchal society, women are trained to feel guilty for violating cultural norms. Anura's sister feels frustrated for not getting married at the right age and guilty about being a burden to her brother, even though she is financially independent. When she encountered her sister-in-law engaged in an extramarital affair with another man, she (correctly or incorrectly) feels guilty for being the cause of her brother's unsuccessful married life (thinking of herself as being a burden and not allowing them privacy for intimacy) and commits suicide. Hence, the participants saw society's pressure placed only on women. However, the same can be seen with men as well. For instance, Anura may think it is his responsibility to arrange a marriage for her sister. His guilt may lead him not to have an active sex life with his wife, Latha. However, one has to question if he is gay, as a female participant had observed that Anura's relationship with the soldier is more intimate than a friendship, which could have led to his wife's affair.

Some participants have observed that the folk tale of *Katikirilli* reflects the life of Anura's sister, who is frustrated for not being married or having a life partner. According to the folk story, "*Katikirilli*" is a mature lady seeking a partner of her own because her parents cannot find her one. At the end of the story, *Katikirilli* gets killed by her partner because he gets angry with the neighbours (society) for insulting him. *Katikirilli* gets killed for someone else's (society's) fault, and similarly, Anura's sister kills herself due to society's fault.

The society is generally at fault for strictly enforced traditions, rules and norms that are difficult for underprivileged and marginalised people to follow. Men in power often create such rules within a given society and setting and enforce them on older women and other family members, who see it as their duty to maintain the social order. For instance, within the Sri Lankan context, the basic rule is that a woman or man must get married to a member of the opposite sex at a particular age (women before 30s while men do not have an age limit) to have sex or to have their own household and women do not generally live alone, even if they may own a house or can afford to rent one for themselves.

A man or a woman is only expected to have sex with their married partner of the opposite sex. This norm often means a person who is gay (usually a man) will be pressured to marry someone of the opposite sex, which could create problems for both parties. In a conservative, traditional society, most people do not have the freedom to seek partners themselves freely. Even if they do so, these partners must meet social criteria that align with each other's socio-economic group memberships, such as class, caste, region, religion, social status, education, income, and family background, thereby limiting the pool of suitable partners for a given person.

A woman who violates societal rules or norms will face openly expressed insults, marginalisation and penalties (such as ostracisation from society), and the social pressure put on her can provoke her to commit suicide or become mentally ill. However, the situation of a man is quite different, as he might be insulted but may not have to face a problematic situation like a woman because his wealth or income would still make him eligible for marriage, unlike a woman who will end up as 'someone with a past' or 'damaged goods'. Comparatively, the situation of a man (who is unmarried or gay) within a patriarchal society who belongs to a marginalised group is better compared to that of a woman in a privileged group. Thus, the character of Anura's sister, the pregnant woman, and the incidents they face explain the second factor that the male participants cited: the film depicts that society places less value on women's lives.

The third neutral representation some male and female participants observed was that the film depicts it as natural for both men and women to have basic needs and feelings and fulfil them. In *Forsaken Land*, Latha is engaging in a relationship with the soldier, Anura's sister is secretly enjoying being abused on the bus, and the pregnant lady is engaging in sex with her lover in the woods, indicating that fact. According to one of the participants, a naked lady's sketch drawn on the ruined house wall in the woods also shows someone's sexual desire and how they tried to fulfil that. The difference between the responses of male and female participants indicates that the male participants do not interpret issues portrayed in these films as issues specific to women living in war-affected areas. Their gendered social experiences might have influenced the interpretations.

3.2.3 Positive representations of women

Only 6% of participants interpreted the films as portraying some female characters positively. The majority of participants were male. The participants' cultural backgrounds seem to influence their interpretations. Unlike female participants, one male participant noticed that the *This Is My Moon* challenges one of the stereotypical

behaviours of women towards other women regarding men's attention. That is, women depicted in this film do not fight or compete with each other for men. They see the man in question as their opponent, not other women. The film shows them fighting with the soldier. Patriarchal society trains women to fight for the violator (men) against each other or the other violated (women); however, this film shows the opposite – the violated fight with the violator, not with each other. Women fighting each other for men might be a male fantasy depicted in mainstream media products. When an alternative media text challenges that fantasy, it might stand out to the audience.

Two male participants who discussed *Shades of Ash* interpreted Komala engaging in prostitution to look after her family as a positive trait of that character. According to them, mothers sacrifice their lives for the family. A similar response came from a female participant for *The Forsaken Land* regarding the portrayal of Anura's sister. The participant stated that Anura's sister demonstrates the qualities of a good woman by caring for the family and the young child, Batti. These responses reflect the patriarchal society's expectations of women. That is, to sacrifice their lives for the well-being of the family and children and take care of them, which is not necessarily expected from men. Thus, this interpretation seems influenced by the participants' cultural background.

3.2.4 Negative representations of men
Only the participants who watched *This Is My Moon* (10%) interpreted the film as negatively representing male characters. One male participant stated that the film depicts men as opportunists who use women in intimate relationships. However, he blames the environment for converting men into opportunists rather than seeing it as a personal construct of the man within the patriarchal social system.

Similarly, a female participant saw men using women forcefully to fulfil their sexual needs as a natural phenomenon that they have no control over. In her comment, the female participant does not blame the man for abusing the woman. As she meant, the man abuses the woman to fulfil his basic need of sex, and he had to do so because he is in a bunker and the woman is the only option available for him. In this situation, the woman, her feelings, and her consent are given no value. She is treated as an object available to please men, which is a dominant ideology of the patriarchal system (Mulvey, 1975) [11]. As members of such a system, both the male and female participants may not place responsibility for the act on the man. Instead, they may see it as an unavoidable circumstance created by the situation.

3.2.5 Positive representations of men
According to some female and male participants (6%), the film represents men as powerholders and active people who exercise force on the women, especially regarding sexual behaviour. The participants' patriarchal cultural backgrounds and their personal experiences seem to influence their interpretations of gender roles and sexual relationships represented in the film. It is important to note that the participants saw the open expression of sexual feelings or initiation of sexual activities by women as indecency, while men do the same as their active engagement in sexual relationships. Participant opinions reflect the hypocritical patriarchal ideologies that restrict female sexual freedom while assuring it in men (Ghanim, 2015) [4].

4. Conclusions
This study demonstrates that cultural constructs of gender roles and norms significantly influence how audiences read gender representations in films. The only factor that can dilute this influence, at least to some extent, is education and awareness of gender inequalities. Findings reveal that the viewers' interpretations of the selected films are shaped by their gendered experiences, educational backgrounds, and societal norms. Some of those interpretations highlight the objectification and subordination of women in these films. In contrast, others acknowledge the complexities of their roles in the context of war and Sri Lankan culture. The findings confirm that despite their educational backgrounds, the female participants often provide more detailed criticism of stereotypical representations than their male counterparts. This difference highlights the need for a deeper understanding of how patriarchal ideologies are internalised and normalised within society. The study also highlights the importance of education and awareness in challenging deep-rooted gender inequalities. Audiences can interpret the multi-layered messages about gender in Sri Lankan cinema through critical engagement with media texts. This may contribute to a broader dialogue on gender, culture, and politics in postcolonial contexts.

5. Recommendations
In this study, films were screened only for Sinhalese audiences. Since the anti-war films are about the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, in which all ethnic communities were affected, and those effects remain, it is recommended to include a sample of the Tamil and Muslim ethnic communities in future studies. This extended sample will allow us to understand how different ethnic communities interpret those films and what influences their interpretations. Further, audiences from other countries could also be included in the sample to learn how they interpret the exact text as outsiders.

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