

cinema



* A scene from *With You, Without You*.

Love in the time of strife

Prasanna Vithanage examines the conflicted animosity that lingers in post-LTTE Sri Lanka in his film *With You, Without You*.

By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

The 26-year-old civil war in Sri Lanka between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils that began in 1983 saw 60,000 people dead and a million displaced. When the strife ended in 2009, there was very little sympathy for the Tamils.

This was primarily because the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran fought for the rights of the minority, had degenerated into an abusive force best known for child soldiers and suicide bombers.

In fact, the LTTE – which along with the Hamas was the first to have introduced the concept of human bombs – was hated even by the Tamils because of its kidnappings and forcible recruitment of children to fight the Sri Lankan Army.

It is this vitiated atmosphere of animosity that the renowned Sinhala film director, Prasanna Vithanage, captures in his beautifully crafted work, *With You, Without*

You (titled in Tamil as *Piragu/After*). If the auteur is not exactly a favourite of the Sinhala-dominated Sri Lankan government because of his anti-war movies and his belief that Tamils are still treated unfairly, he is no hero either among the Indian Tamils.

With You, Without You (narrated in Sinhala and Tamil) was not screened at the recent Chennai International Film Festival, though it was at the International Film Festival of Goa and subsequently at the Bangalore festival. I suppose the strong Tamil sentiment that runs in Chennai and other regions of southern India coupled with the fact that Vithanage is a Sinhala could have stopped the Chennai Festival from screening his movie.

Vithanage, who was my co-juror at the recent Abu Dhabi Film Festival, is not just a sensitive human being but also a moviemaker with a deep social commitment who has been trying to help heal wounds and calm a society that is still angry.

With You, Without You, set in post-war times, attempts to bridge the frighteningly

wide chasm in the Sri Lankan society by telling the love story of Sinhala man and a Tamil woman.

Vithanage, who loves Russian literature, uses Fyodor Dostoyevsky's short story, *The Meek One*, as an inspiration to plot *With You, Without You*. His second feature, *Dark Night of the Soul*, was also inspired by Russian literature – Leo Tolstoy's *Resurrection* – and it won many awards, including the Special Jury Mention at the First Pusan International Film Festival.

During a chat with me at Goa's Panaji, the acclaimed Sri Lankan helmer says "when I was reading Dostoyevsky's work over and over again, two things struck me. One, its probe into masculinity, and two, its questioning of consumerist values which tend to destroy human relationships".

Mind you the Russian literary giant saw the evils of consumerism even as early as 1876, when he penned the story, which like Vithanage's movie is about a pawn-broker and a young girl who frequents his shop. It was a news report about the

suicide of a seamstress in April 1876 that set Dostoyevsky thinking, a suicide he described as "meek", but which kept "haunting me for a long time".

But for Vithanage, it was not just a death, but thousands of deaths that pushed him to make *With You, Without You*. He says that "when adapting the Russian story into a film, I based this upon the biggest issue of our country which is the ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhala community and the minority Tamil population. We live in a society which still has unhealed wounds from a war that lasted about 26 years, killing over tens of thousands of people.

Confrontation of a Sinhalese man and a Tamil woman became the dramatic premise of my script. Their struggle with their own past for me was a metaphor for the struggles of the nation as a whole."

Easy to label the work as political, *With You, Without You* goes far deeper than the mere war which one community fought against the other in the tiny island nation of Sri Lanka.

Actually, the movie is a poetic study of humanism, of forgiveness, and, above all, the overwhelming sense of love with its power to break the mightiest of barriers.

Narrating the story of a 45-year-old Sinhala pawn-broker – who earns his livelihood by lending money against gold jewellery and leads a lonely existence, watching wrestling on television for entertainment, which probably ups his sense of masculinity, the film shows us how a young Tamil woman changes all that.

Pawn-broker Sarathsiri (played with gripping intensity by Shyam Fernando) has a dark past, while Selvi (Anjali Patil, who won the Best Actress Award at Goa) has had a torturous existence. Her two school going brothers were killed by the Sri Lankan Army, and her parents had sacrificed a lot to save her from the rapist soldiers. Brooding and sombre, Sarathsiri takes a while to win Selvi's affection, and finally when the two are just about able to push their past away, death intervenes. "The girl finds it impossible to reciprocate the man's love, and in a way that is the tragedy of our nation", the auteur adds.

With an actor like Fernando, who has sorrow and guilt writ on his face, and actress such as Patil with her utterly fragile, vulnerable looks (and what a change this is from her role as the fire breathing, cussing and kicking Naxalite in Prakash Jha's *Chakravyuh*), Vithanage had the right cards to play with.

Shot by one of Sri Lanka's best known photographers, Mahindapala, *With You, Without You* is visually arresting, cinematically stunning (with haunting pauses and very little dialogue). This is cinema all right, not the kind of loud theatrical rubbish that is passed off as a movie.

The question now is, will Vithanage's masterpiece be screened in India? It may not if the powers that be see it as a political work, which it is not. It is a story of two people from different communities bonded by love that unfolds in a nation which is trying to get over years of bloody gore. Can we describe *Casablanca* as a war film? Can we say *Gone With The Wind* is all about the American Civil War? No way. Why then must we give *With You, Without You* a political tag?

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and world cinema for over three decades and may be contacted at gautamanb@hotmail.com)