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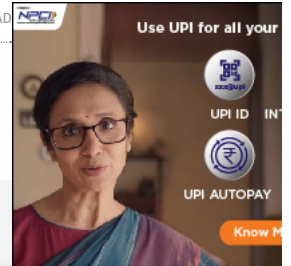


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# Tokyo Film Festival: The Dawning of the Day Underlines Horrid Chapter From Pablo Neruda's Life

Asoka Handagama's *The Dawning of the Day* chronicles Pablo Neruda's life as a Chilean Ambassador in Sri Lanka.

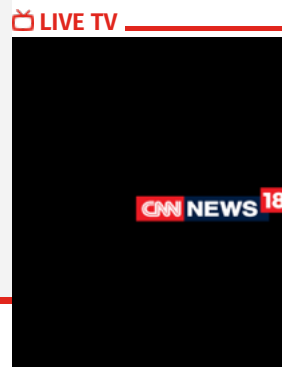


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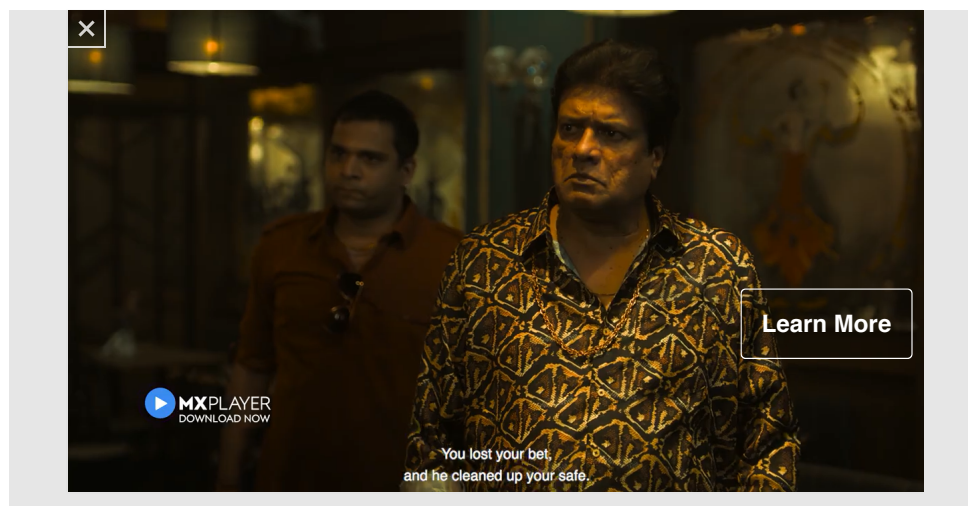
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Chilean activist Pablo Neruda is often described as the “greatest 20th century poet”. This may or may not be true, but he was adored by hundreds and admired for his verse. What some may not know is the dark chapter in his life that he described in his memoirs. Certainly, the man was gutsy to admit that he had raped a Tamil woman in Sri Lanka during his stint there.

Director-screenwriter Asoka Handagama's *The Dawning of the Day*, which competed at the ongoing Tokyo International Film Festival, fictionalises this – though in a very dramatic way that appears to be tipping on the side of exaggeration. And, this scene, which mercifully comes at the end of the movie, is nothing but loud titillation. And hardly done with any aesthetic sense, and I would like to compare a similar episode in Aparna Sen's *Busan* title, *The Rapist* – where she films the sequence with enormous dignity and restraint.



What is even more awful, Neruda describes the rape as an “experience”. He says in his 1974 memoir replicated on the screen : “She kept her eyes wide open all the while, completely unresponsive. She was right to despise me. The experience was never repeated.”

At close to two hours, the movie harps on male supremacy, turning him into a romantic demi-god! A subject of many movies, including the 1994 Oscar runner, *Il Postino*, Neruda has somehow managed to avoid close scrutiny, also thanks to the films and writings on him that have tried to underplay or completely blackout the rape.

There is not much of a plot here. Neruda (played by Luis J Romero) arrives in Colombo to serve as the Chilean Ambassador to Sri Lanka or Ceylon as it was then called. His friendly assistant is a Tamil, Rathnaigh (Malcolm Machado), who tutors his master on the prevailing social conditions. The assistant also explains how he is different from the Tamil worker, a Sakkil (low caste) woman (Rithika Kodithuwakku), who clears night soil and carries it on her head – a practice that was seen even in India till about a couple of decades ago.

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Although strictly cautioned by Rathnaigh not to engage with her, Neruda's curiosity and roving eye get the better of his senses – despite the fact he already has a lover, Patsy (Nimaya Harris). Adding to all this is his former Burmese girlfriend, Josie Bliss (Anne Solenne-Hatte), who lands in Colombo. The way he treats her is degrading, and there is a powerful commentary here of degenerate male attitude and arrogance.

The performances are raw, the line readings seem to stick out like a sore thumb, and *The Dawning of the Day*, despite trying its best to highlight Neruda's literary genius, fails to evoke any sympathy for him. With the rape coming at the end of the work, it left me with a bad taste and not-too-happy memory of a man, who fancied himself as a hero because he had sexually subjugated a woman much against her will.

*(Author, commentator and movie critic has covered the Tokyo International Film Festival for several years)*

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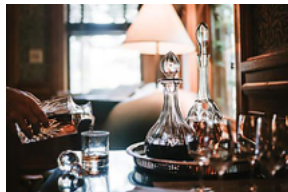
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