

Cinematic Crossroads: Negotiating History and Religion in Sri Lankan Historical Films

A. M. G. K. N Senevirathne¹, G. D. L Kavindi²

Department of Drama, Cinema and Television, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka^{1, 2}

¹kumudukns123@gmail.com, ²lakshikakavindi98@gmail.com

Introduction

Cinema in Sri Lanka has become a vital platform for negotiating issues of history, religion, and cultural identity. Yet, despite the growing body of scholarship on individual historical films, there remains limited discussion of how these cinematic texts collectively construct and sometimes contest the relationship between religion and nationhood. This study responds to that gap by offering a comparative and theoretically integrated analysis of three key films: *Maharaja Gamunu* (2015), *Aloko Udapadi* (2017), and *Gaadi* (2019) to explore how Sri Lankan historical cinema functions as a site of cultural negotiation. These films serve as cultural texts that both reflect and shape discussions about nationhood, belonging, and inter-religious coexistence (Silva, 2018; Hautin, 2024). Rather than treating them merely as nationalist artefacts, this paper interprets them as dialogic spaces where competing visions of identity, memory, and belief intersect.

Maharaja Gamunu highlights the legendary conflict between Dutugemunu and Elara, embedding themes of nationalist pride and Buddhist triumphalism within its narrative. By employing visual grandeur and moral positioning, the film portrays Dutugemunu's victory as a significant religious and political achievement (Rathnayake, 2017). In contrast, *Aloko Udapadi* dramatizes King Walagamba's struggle to preserve the Pali Canon during a time of political upheaval, positioning Buddhism at the core of cultural survival (De Silva, 2022). *Gaadi*, directed by Prasanna Vithanage, breaks away from nationalist narratives by examining issues of caste, gender, and marginalization during the Kandyan era. Instead of glorifying kings or religious leaders, this film questions the social hierarchies that shape Sri Lankan history (Warnapala, 2025). Together, these films offer different but complementary approaches to negotiating cultural memory.

Scholars have recognized the role of postcolonial cinema in producing ideological discourses about religion and culture (Shohat & Stam, 2014). In Sri Lanka, films often embody tensions between celebrating Buddhist heritage and acknowledging pluralistic traditions (Ganegoda, 2022). However, the intersection of historical reconstruction

and religious representation remains an underexplored area. Research on Maharaja Gamunu and Aloko Udapadi typically frames them as nationalist projects associated with Sinhala-Buddhist identity (Silva, 2018; Perera, 2019). In contrast, Gaadi has primarily been analyzed as a critique of caste oppression (Warnapala, 2025). There is a lack of scholarship that examines these films collectively to understand how Sri Lankan cinema negotiates inter-religious and intercultural identities. While prior studies (e.g., Silva, 2018; Perera, 2019; Warnapala, 2025) analyze these works separately, this paper's originality lies in its comparative framework and synthesis of postcolonial theory, cultural memory studies, and ideological analysis. It seeks to reveal how cinematic narratives both sustain and subvert the myth of a homogeneous Buddhist nation. Hence, this research contributes new insight by positioning Sri Lankan historical cinema as a hybrid cultural form one that simultaneously participates in state ideology and provides counter-hegemonic space for marginalized identities.

This research gap highlights the need for a comparative study that situates these films within a unified analytical framework. Such an approach allows for a better understanding of how cinema alternately reinforces and destabilizes dominant narratives of Buddhist cultural hegemony while also providing space for marginalized voices.

The research problem addressed here is the limited understanding of how Sri Lankan historical films collectively mediate religious and cultural negotiations. The aim is to critically analyze how these films represent religion, identity, and cultural conflict in shaping historical consciousness. The objectives are:

1. To examine the narrative strategies used in Maharaja Gamunu, Aloko Udapadi, and Gaadi.
2. To explore how these films negotiate the role of religion in cultural memory.
3. To identify whether these cinematic texts reinforce or challenge dominant historical narratives.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by three interrelated theoretical perspectives:

1. Postcolonial Theory (Homi Bhabha, 1994) – This perspective focuses on the concepts of hybridity and negotiation to analyze how historical films portray cultural encounters among Sinhalese, Tamil, and colonial influences.
2. Cultural Memory Studies (Jan Assmann, 2011) – This approach examines how films preserve, reconstruct, or challenge collective memories related to religion and nationhood.
3. Ideological State Apparatus (Louis Althusser, 1971) – This theory helps us understand how cinema acts as an educational tool that reinforces dominant religious and national ideologies.

By triangulating these frameworks, the study introduces a multi-lens reading of Sri Lankan historical cinema, a methodological originality that moves beyond descriptive film criticism to interpret cinema as a field of ideological struggle. These theoretical frameworks allow us to view films not merely as entertainment but as texts that encode contested meanings, revealing both majoritarian narratives and counter-hegemonic voices.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology, specifically a cultural-textual analysis of films. The sampling method used is purposive sampling, focusing on Maharaja Gamunu, Aloko Udapadi, and Gaadi due to their historical subject matter and engagement with themes of religion and identity. Primary data is gathered through close readings of the films, while secondary data includes published academic analyses, film reviews, and historical commentaries. The study utilizes thematic coding and discourse analysis to identify recurring motifs, such as Buddhist resilience, caste, and cultural hybridity. A three-stage process is employed: (1) coding motifs, (2) categorizing these motifs into broader thematic clusters, and (3) conducting an interpretive analysis that links cinematic representation to socio-political contexts. The originality of this methodological approach lies in its comparative discourse analysis examining not only what these films represent but how their visual and narrative strategies reproduce or resist dominant ideologies.

Findings and Discussion

1. Representation of Buddhist Identity and Nationhood

The analysis of Maharaja Gamunu illustrates how cinema constructs a heroic narrative around King Dutugemunu, portraying him as a unifying figure who secured sovereignty under Buddhism. This reinforces a form of Buddhist cultural nationalism, simplifying history into a moral tale of righteous conquest. Similarly, Aloko Udapadi shifts focus to King Walagamba's role in preserving Buddhist teachings through written texts, framing Buddhism as both a spiritual and political foundation for Sri Lankan identity. What distinguishes this study's analysis is its attention to contrast and continuity across films, showing how historical cinema both sanctifies and questions the moral authority of Buddhism. This dual reading reveals the nuanced politics of cultural memory construction in post-war Sri Lanka.

2. Alternative Voices and Marginalized Identities

In contrast, Gaadi highlights the oppression of women and lower-caste communities during the Kandyan Kingdom. Rather than glorifying rulers, it interrogates social hierarchies, revealing the suffering of those excluded from nationalist narratives. This indicates that Sri Lankan historical cinema is diverse, with some films reinforcing majoritarian identities while others amplify marginal voices.

3. Cultural Negotiations Across Religion and Class

While Buddhism predominates in *Maharaja Gamunu* and *Aloko Udapadi*, there are moments of cultural negotiation. For instance, Elara in *Maharaja Gamunu* is portrayed with dignity, showing respect for South Indian Tamil traditions. The Kandyan backdrop of *Gaadi* also reflects the interplay of Sinhalese, Tamil, and colonial cultures, demonstrating cinema's navigation of complex intersections.

4. Cinema as a Tool of Ideological Reinforcement

Sri Lankan cinema often serves as a didactic tool, shaping collective memory through narratives of Buddhist survival. Aesthetic choices, such as war epics and religious rituals, align cinema with state-building and cultural pedagogy. Films like *Gaadi* illustrate the potential for counter-discourse, challenging dominant ideologies.

5. Implications for Contemporary Sri Lanka

These portrayals resonate in post-war Sri Lanka, where identity, pluralism, and reconciliation are sensitive issues. By revisiting historical episodes, filmmakers offer not just entertainment but also frameworks that shape community perceptions of their place in the nation's story. This comparative analysis underscores the power and limitations of cinema in promoting intercultural understanding.

This comparative framework therefore provides a fresh contribution to film and cultural studies by reframing Sri Lankan historical cinema as a dialogic field rather than a static reflection of nationalist ideology. It opens new space for understanding how visual narratives mediate between reconciliation and remembrance in a post-conflict nation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Sri Lankan historical films, such as “*Maharaja Gamunu*,” “*Aloko Udapadi*,” and “*Gaadi*,” play a crucial role in negotiating cultural and religious identity. While “*Maharaja Gamunu*” and “*Aloko Udapadi*” emphasize Buddhist-centric narratives of survival and resilience, “*Gaadi*” challenges nationalist myths by highlighting marginalized voices. Together, these films illustrate cinema's dual role: as a medium for ideological reinforcement and as a platform for alternative storytelling.

The research emphasizes that Sri Lankan historical cinema shapes collective memory by balancing the glorification of heritage with critiques of social injustice. Importantly, it underscores the need for more nuanced interpretations that include not only Buddhist narratives but also perspectives from Tamil, Muslim, and Christian communities to achieve a comprehensive understanding of cultural negotiation.

By employing qualitative textual analysis, this paper places cinema at the intersection of religion, history, and identity, offering new insights into how visual narratives construct and contest notions of national belonging. Ultimately, these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how postcolonial societies like Sri Lanka use film to engage with their past, navigate pluralism, and envision their future. This paper's originality lies in its integrated analytical approach: it unites postcolonial theory, cultural memory, and ideological critique to trace the layered negotiations of religion and identity in Sri Lankan cinema. By reading these films comparatively, it expands the understanding of how cinematic storytelling participates in constructing national consciousness while allowing for alternative, pluralistic narratives.

References

- De Silva, G. (2022). *Vigilant Steps: A Study of Buddhist Female Renunciant Groups in Contemporary Sri Lanka*. University of Otago.
- Ganegoda, G. A. P. K. (2022). *Representations of War and Culture in Sri Lankan Cinema*. Swinburne University.
- Hautin, V. T. (2024). Charting the course of Sri Lankan cinema in the context of the Ethnic War. *Carnets de recherches de l'océan Indien*. <https://doi.org/10.4000/oceanindien.5207>
- Perera, S. (2019). *Culture and Politics in Sri Lankan Cinema*. Colombo: Vijitha Yapa.
- Rathnayake, K. (2017). *A Critical Analysis of Gender Stereotypes in Sri Lankan Sinhala Films*. Unpublished dissertation.
- Shohat, E., & Stam, R. (2014). *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. Routledge.
- Silva, K. (2018). Buddhism and cinema: Negotiating identity in Sri Lankan films. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 41(3), 355–372. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1479382>
- Warnapala, K. (2025). Romanticizing caste in *Gaadi* and *Alborada*. *South Asian Review*.