

Ini Avan Review

Written by By Sivahami Vijenthira

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The title of Asoka Handagama's beautiful film *Ini Avan* is a play on words. The phrase "ini avan" means "him hereafter", while the single word "iniavan" means "sweet, good-natured man". In the aftermath/hereafter of the war, the titular "Avan" ("Him"), an unnamed LTTE soldier, comes home from a government rehabilitation camp hoping to find meaningful work, reconnect with his lost love, and create a new life as an "iniavan" in his old village. But the village has turned against Avan and the separatist cause he fought for. From the first moments in the film, his old neighbours, all believably portrayed by amateur actors, stare at him in disapproving silence, and a child runs away from him. An old man comes to shout that Avan "killed" the man's sons by luring them into the LTTE; we learn that he recruited everyone in the village who supported the cause, and they all died in the war. It was only Avan who survived to return and face those who were left behind to mourn their relatives while living in fear of LTTE extortion and government violence. He doesn't want to face them, though. When anyone tries to talk to him, he replies, "piraiyosanam illai": "no point".

The film is slow, quiet, and elegantly framed, with long tracking shots of Avan riding his bicycle along dirt roads lined with palmyra trees, or through arid, windswept fields. People say little, and when they speak they use simple language that floats on the surface of their meaning. At the end of the TIFF premiere on September 7, a young audience member asked Handagama why the Sri Lankan military didn't have a role in the film. They may not be there in uniform, Handagama replied cryptically, but their presence is felt. This is true: a woman in the film is described as unafraid, with "nothing left to save", because she lived through war and refugee

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camps—a reference to rape and torture by military soldiers. While riding home in the dark, a sudden paranoid fear that he's being followed makes Avan hide, shaking, behind a rock.

Handagama's responses to audience questions were generally as inscrutable and seemingly simple as his characters' dialogue. You would understand if you were close to the situation, he told a white woman who asked about the Canadian character in the film. "I don't think you answered my question!" she called back. Maybe Handagama, like his film, had to be indirect because of the context in which he works. He was facing, that night, an audience full of emotional, politically-minded Tamils who may have done what the Canadian character is accused by Avan of doing (giving guns to the soldiers and getting visas for themselves), and he will soon fly home to a country where art and journalism are still tightly controlled. His work has been banned in the past, but he continues to produce it, because he sees its importance in times of oppression. "Why did you make this film?" asked one man. "I am a filmmaker," Handagama replied, to laughter from people who saw this as a joke.

The brilliance of Ini Avan, which the TIFF audience repeatedly praised for its realism, is that its quiet simplicity allows us to find our own perspectives within the wide swath of characters and experiences it portrays: the widow who married while underage in order to avoid LTTE conscription; the impoverished father who loses his livelihood to

Avan; his wife, who survived refugee camps and giggles at her domestic abuse; Avan himself, now sapped of the charisma that was apparently so appealing to the soldiers he recruited; and the villagers around him, who have seen too much and buried too many to still believe that the war had any purpose.

Only the refugee camp survivor seems to have hope, and it is truly positive even though it is the hope of someone at the very nadir of her existence, someone looking up because she can no longer look down. If there is a message in Ini Avan, it is that it is possible to look up and try to "just live", but it must still be acknowledged that the scars of war—physical, geographical, emotional, mental—will remain hereafter.

About the author: Sivahami Vijenthira was born in Sri Lanka and moved to Toronto when she was four years old. She graduated from McMaster University, and a frequent contributor to the Toronto Star.

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