

Representing Female Spiritual Agency in Sri Lankan Buddhist Cinema: A Semiotic Analysis of *Uppalawanna*

Pramodya Gayangani Siriwardhana¹, Ishini Kuruppu²

Introduction

Buddhism has profoundly influenced Sri Lankan society, shaping its religious traditions, ethical values, cultural practices, and artistic expressions. Cinema, as one of the country's most influential forms of visual storytelling, has long served as a medium through which Buddhist philosophy is interpreted and communicated. Sri Lankan filmmakers have frequently incorporated Buddhist teachings, moral dilemmas, and religious symbolism into cinematic narratives, allowing audiences to engage with Buddhist concepts beyond formal religious settings.

Within Sri Lankan Buddhist cinema, many narratives have focused on the lives of monks, kings, or male devotees, presenting Buddhist philosophy primarily through male spiritual experiences. Comparatively, films that foreground women's spiritual journeys have received less scholarly attention. This creates an opportunity to examine how female spirituality is represented within Buddhist cinema and how women's ethical agency contributes to the communication of Buddhist philosophy.

Released in 2007, *Uppalawanna*, directed by Sunil Ariyaratne and written by Tissa Abeysekara, presents a distinctive contribution to Sri Lankan cinema by placing a Buddhist nun at the center of its narrative. Set during the 1987–1989 JVP insurrection, the film follows the moral and spiritual journey of Uppalawanna, a nun who secretly shelters and treats an injured rebel despite the social and religious consequences of her actions. Through her experiences, the film explores compassion, suffering, forgiveness, renunciation, and moral responsibility.

This study argues that *Uppalawanna* represents female spirituality as an active ethical practice grounded in Buddhist philosophy. Using semiotic analysis, the study examines how cinematic signs including costume, lighting, silence,

1 Department of Languages and Communication Studies, Faculty of Communication and Business Studies, Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Trincomalee, Sri Lanka
pramodyagayangani96@gmail.com

2 Department of Languages and Communication Studies, Faculty of Communication and Business Studies, Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Trincomalee, Sri Lanka
ishinikuruppu04@gmail.com

symbolic objects, and narrative structure construct meanings that communicate Buddhist teachings while positioning the female protagonist as the moral center of the film.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Examine the representation of female spiritual agency in *Uppalawanna*.
2. Identify the Buddhist philosophical concepts represented through the film.
3. Analyze how cinematic signs and symbols construct Buddhist meanings.
4. Explore the contribution of *Uppalawanna* to representations of women within Sri Lankan Buddhist cinema.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative case study approach using semiotic analysis as its primary research method. Semiotics provides an appropriate framework for examining how films communicate meaning through visual and auditory signs. The analysis is informed by Ferdinand de Saussure's concepts of the signifier and signified together with Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of signs.

Uppalawanna serves as the primary case study. The selected scenes were purposively chosen because they represent key moments in the protagonist's spiritual journey and illustrate Buddhist ethical principles, including compassion (*karuṇā*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*), and renunciation. Scene selection also considered the presence of significant cinematic signs such as costume, lighting, framing, colour, dialogue, silence, sound, and symbolic objects that contribute to the construction of female spiritual agency. These scenes were examined using Ferdinand de Saussure's concepts of the signifier and signified together with Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of signs. By integrating semiotic theory with Buddhist philosophy, the study investigates how cinematic language communicates ethical and spiritual meanings.

Results

The central ethical conflict of *Uppalawanna* emerges when the protagonist discovers an injured rebel responsible for murder during the political violence of the late 1980s. Although assisting him places both herself and the

nunnery at risk, she chooses compassion over judgment. This decision reflects the Buddhist principle of *karuṇā*, which emphasizes responding to suffering without discrimination based on social, political, or personal identity. Rather than portraying compassion as passive sympathy, the film presents it as a courageous moral action that requires personal sacrifice.

The film's visual language reinforces this ethical position through carefully constructed cinematic signs. Uppalawanna's white robes symbolize purity, renunciation, and spiritual commitment. Throughout the narrative, silence functions not merely as the absence of speech but as a sign of contemplation, mindfulness, and inner discipline. Equally significant are the restrained background score, natural ambient sounds, and Buddhist chanting, which reinforce the atmosphere of serenity, compassion, and spiritual reflection. Together, these auditory elements complement the visual symbolism and deepen the communication of Buddhist ethical meanings. Close-up shots emphasize the protagonist's emotional struggle, while natural landscapes, subdued colour palettes, and restrained performances contribute to an atmosphere of spiritual reflection rather than dramatic spectacle.

The narrative structure further deepens the protagonist's spiritual identity through flashbacks to her former life as Upuli. These memories reveal the personal tragedies that shaped her decision to become a nun, including the death of her mother, the killing of her husband by her own father, and her father's imprisonment. These experiences visually communicate the Buddhist understanding of *dukkha*, illustrating how attachment, loss, and human suffering influence personal transformation. Rather than depicting ordination as an escape from grief, the film presents it as a conscious ethical response to suffering.

An important dimension of the film concerns the relationship between institutional religious discipline and compassionate practice. The chief nun expresses concern regarding Uppalawanna's behaviour because sheltering the rebel threatens the safety and reputation of the monastic community. At the same time, Uppalawanna believes that compassion toward a suffering individual represents a higher moral responsibility. The film therefore avoids presenting Buddhist ethics as simplistic or absolute; instead, it illustrates the complexity of moral decision-making when compassion and institutional obligations appear to conflict.

The villagers' reaction after discovering that the rebel received medical assistance from the nunnery introduces another layer of ethical meaning. Their refusal to offer alms reflects a social judgment that contrasts with the film's emphasis on compassion and forgiveness. This tension encourages audiences

to reflect upon the distinction between public morality and Buddhist ethical principles. Through this contrast, the film suggests that genuine Buddhist practice requires compassion even under difficult circumstances.

The concluding sequence, in which Uppalawanna accepts responsibility for assisting the rebel and leaves the monastery carrying only her alms bowl, represents the film's strongest visual symbol. The alms bowl signifies simplicity, humility, renunciation, and non-attachment. Her departure demonstrates moral courage, self-sacrifice, and acceptance of personal responsibility while protecting the other nuns from blame. Rather than depicting defeat, the final image portrays spiritual integrity through action, reinforcing Buddhist teachings without relying on explicit religious instruction.

From a gender perspective, *Uppalawanna* contributes a distinctive representation within Sri Lankan Buddhist cinema by positioning a Buddhist nun as the principal moral authority. The protagonist is not portrayed merely as a supportive or secondary character but as an individual who exercises independent ethical judgment. Her spiritual authority emerges through compassionate action, moral reflection, and personal responsibility. Consequently, the film broadens cinematic representations of Buddhist practice by foregrounding female spiritual agency within a traditionally male-centered religious context.

Conclusion

Uppalawanna demonstrates the capacity of Sri Lankan cinema to communicate Buddhist philosophy through visual storytelling while foregrounding women's spiritual experiences. Through its exploration of compassion, suffering, forgiveness, renunciation, and moral responsibility, the film constructs a nuanced representation of Buddhist ethics rooted in the everyday decisions of its female protagonist.

Using semiotic analysis, this study has shown that cinematic signs—including costume, silence, framing, symbolic objects, lighting, and narrative structure—play a significant role in constructing Buddhist meanings and communicating female spiritual agency. By positioning a Buddhist nun as the moral center of the narrative, *Uppalawanna* expands the representation of women within Sri Lankan Buddhist cinema and offers an alternative perspective on spiritual leadership and ethical practice.

This study is limited to a single film and therefore does not seek to generalize all representations of Buddhism or women within Sri Lankan cinema. Nevertheless, it demonstrates how *Uppalawanna* provides an important case study for understanding the relationship between Buddhist philosophy, cinema,

and gender representation. Future research may compare *Uppalawanna* with other Sri Lankan Buddhist films to further examine the diversity of spiritual representations in Sri Lankan cinematic traditions.

Keywords - Sri Lankan Cinema, Buddhism, Female Spirituality, Semiotics, Buddhist Philosophy

References

- Ariyaratne, S. (2007). *Uppalawanna*. Motion picture. Sri Lanka: Sarasavi Films.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image–Music–Text*. London: Fontana Press.
- Bordwell, D. and Thompson, K. (2020). *Film Art: An Introduction*. 12th edn. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Peirce, C.S. (1931–1958). *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Vols. 1–8. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Saussure, F. de (1983). *Course in General Linguistics*. London: Duckworth.