

LESTER JAMES PERIES' VILLAGE IN THE JUNGLE

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Lester James Peries' film *Rekhāya* (1956) marked a decisive departure from South Indian cinematic tradition which had dominated the Sri Lankan scene and Peries went on to establish himself as the father of a distinctively Sinhalese cinema and win international recognition too. When a man of his stature makes a screen version of a distinguished novel such as Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle*, our expectations are great. He calls his film *Bāddegama*, the name of the village and also the title of the Sinhala translation of Woolf's novel.

Leonard Woolf who is known in the West as a political theorist and an active Labourite, a member of the Bloomsbury group and husband of Virginia, a publisher and the author of a highly acclaimed five-volume autobiography, worked in Ceylon from 1904 to 1911 as a civil servant when it was a crown colony and has a living reputation here as the author of *The Village in the Jungle*. The novel, reprinted last year by Oxford University Press, has been lauded by a few discerning foreigners such as Pablo Neruda, Arnold Toynbee, Kingsley Martin and Alec Waugh, but critics and the reading public in the West have paid it scant attention. I agree with majority Sri Lankan opinion that Woolf's novel is the finest creative work in English about our Island as does film-maker Peries who said: "Woolf's is the best novel written in English about Sri Lanka. In fact, it has no parallel in English writing about Asia - Woolf got closer than any other Western writer to the heart of Asian life."¹

When the eagerly-awaited film appeared, it was greeted with howls of disappointment unmatched in Peries' career. It was condemned so roundly and almost universally that it was left to the director and his script-writer, A. J. Gunawardana, to defend it. But the fact is that the film has elicited a favourable response abroad, and Peries was driven to flaunt it as his trump card: 'How could the film be chosen as one of the 20 films out of 421 films for the Directors Fortnight at Cannes? why should it be chosen as one of the 20 films from around the world for this year's San Francisco Festival, if it was the cinematic disaster certain local critics said it was? why should the committee of the London Film Festival select it this year, thereby

1. A. J. Gunawardana, 'The Village in the Jungle': *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 49, No. 1, Winter 1979/80, p. 26.