

“SAVING” TAMILS THROUGH CHILD ADOPTION: TWO FILMS OF THE SRI LANKAN CIVIL WAR

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ABSTRACT:

*This paper examines two films, Somaratne Dissanayake's *Saroja* (2000) and Mani Ratnam's *A Peck on the Cheek* (2002), through the recurrent motif of adoption. Both films represent a Tamil child, whose parents have been "lost" to the war, in need of rescue. In the Sinhala film *Saroja*, the eponymous Tamil girl is saved by a Sinhala family when both her parents are killed by the Tamil Tigers and in the Tamil film *A Peck on the Cheek*, a Tamil girl named Amuda is adopted by a young Tamil couple in Madras when Amuda's parents choose to join the militant movement in Sri Lanka. The two films' preoccupation with adoption, I argue, sheds light on the ethnic and gender dynamics of the Sri Lankan armed conflict. More specifically, the two films ascribe the role of savior to the Sinhala community in Sri Lanka and the Tamils in Tamil Nadu. While the Sinhala film sees the Sinhala family as a safe alternative to a Tamil home, the (Indian) Tamil film views Tamil Nadu as an appropriate home for an orphaned Sri Lankan Tamil child. The two films' preoccupation with Tamil children arguably renders the Tamil national question a child-like concern. Through the films' uncannily similar portrayal of Sri Lankan Tamils, this comparative study suggests that both the Sinhala and the (Indian) Tamil visions of the conflict propose a solution that denies Tamils any agency and is symptomatic of the marginalization of Tamils during the conflict and in the post-conflict period where a sustainable, long-term solution has proven to be elusive.*

Keywords: War, Films, Tamil, Adoption, Rescue.

INTRODUCTION:

In film and literary narratives of war, children are employed to highlight the callousness and the injustices of war. That war does not discriminate between adults who wage war and the innocent children who are caught in the crosshairs is a common refrain in war narratives. As such, children function as a narrative device meant to dramatize the harmful effects of warfare. This type of blanket statement, however, eliminates any and all distinctions between conflicts; since all conflicts are not the same, their use of children may not be the same either. Furthermore, the figure of the child effectively captures the plight of the refugee, a figure of literal displacement as a result of war. While the refugee is a figure of pathos, the child refugee is doubly tragic as she is both displaced and dependent. This creates conditions of possibility for dominant groups to initiate narratives of rescue that both objectify the rescued and glorify the rescuer.

METHODOLOGY:

This paper adopts a combination of formal film analysis and a cultural studies approach to analyzing cinema. In both cases, films are treated as "texts." This paper utilizes the language of film as well as the socio-political context of the films as the main tools of the study.

Quantitative Approach:

Not applicable.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS:

During the 25-year armed conflict in Sri Lanka, films that focus on the subject of the war were repeatedly drawn to the theme of adoption of Tamil children. Both Somaratne Dissanayake's *Saroja* and Mani Ratnam's *A Peck on the Cheek* use the motif of adoption as a structuring principle to narrate their stories about the conflict.¹ This paper examines two types of adoption of Sri Lankan Tamil children. In the popular Sinhala film *Saroja*, a Sinhala family "adopts" a Tamil girl whose parents are killed by the LTTE. Implicit in the film is a clear power differential between the Sinhala and Tamil communities as the latter ostensibly cannot care for its own children and therefore must depend on the kindness of a Sinhala family. In *A Peck on the Cheek*, by the renowned Indian director Mani Ratnam, baby Amuda's parents are unable to care for her when they join the Tamil militant movement in Sri Lanka. As such an Indian Tamil family in Chennai comes to the rescue of Amuda, a Sri Lankan Tamil child. In both films, a biological parent hands the child over to the adoptive family. By handing over one's child, the parent, and by extension the Tamil community, is consenting to this dependent relationship--one that celebrates the savior while belittling the saved. Whether we view adoption as an act of charity (appropriating the insights on the subject by Mary Douglas) or as a form of child trafficking (as David Smolin does), both films effectively disempower the Sri Lankan Tamil community, denying it agency while ascribing even greater power to the dominant group, be they Sinhala or Indian Tamil. Given that the Tamil-Sinhala conflict was fought over minority rights, this vision of the conflict, shared by both Sinhala and Indian Tamil filmmakers, exacerbates the root cause rather than resolve it.

Released in the year 2000, *Saroja*, begins with a dedication to "all human beings who suffer the inhumanity of war!" and by so doing reminds the viewer that the film is an appeal to universal human values that are threatened by warfare. Moreover, this dedication points to the filmmaker's desire to bridge the communal divide exacerbated by the war. Commenting on the film's popularity, Professor Sunil Ariyaratna remarks, "although there are several artistic creations about the ethnic crisis most of them are false, fashionable creations. The distinguishing feature of *Saroja* is the sincerity and humanity of the creator" (Medis). There is no doubt that the film appeals to our common humanity and is politically more complex than several popular renditions of the conflict.² However, it also reveals the limitations of that humanity and certain truths about Sri Lankan political culture that make this conflict especially complex.

The film's claim as a cross-cultural paean is first signaled by the use of two girls, one Sinhala and one Tamil of similar age; the film blurs the boundary between our children and their children by making *Saroja* comparable to *Varuni*. In the scene where the two girls are playing with coloring books, *Saroja* decides to give herself a

¹ Santosh Sivan's *The Terrorist* also features a similar dynamic between Malli and her Indian host/farmer "mad Vasu."

² Mohan Niyaz's *Kalu Sudu Mal*, Chandran Rutnam's *The Road from Elephant Pass*, and Thushara Peiris' *Prabhakaran*, to name a few.

pottu using watercolors. When Varuni asks for the same, Saroja responds, “Only Tamil children wear the pottu.” Varuni, however, is not deterred by this insular notion: “I am a Tamil girl,” she says in Tamil, which Saroja accepts as she gives her a pottu. While the scene captures a playful moment between two children, the significance of a Sinhala girl adopting a Tamil identity is noteworthy. More importantly, not only the children but the adults, too, seem to support this game. Upon seeing the two girls, Varuni’s father, Punchibanda, remarks, “I thought we had only one Tamil child. If we also had a pottu we can all go to Jaffna.” Although the film may have reduced the pottu to the status of an ornament, the larger point is that Tamil and Sinhala are contiguous identities, if all one needs is a pottu to move between communities. In addition to the pottu, in this scene, the girls are dressed alike, in the same frock or dress, which as western attire is neither Sinhala nor Tamil. This makes the two girls more alike in appearance and underscores the likeness between the two communities. Likewise, in a later scene, the film invokes the likeness of the two languages when each girl teaches the other her native tongue. Though the Tamil language has no value in their present context (and is in fact a liability in this anti-Tamil community), Saroja still teaches Varuni the Tamil alphabet and concludes, “The Sinhalese alphabet and the Tamil alphabet are the same.” Though somewhat simplistic and innocent, the scene’s larger point speaks once more to the cultural traffic between the two communities, anchored, in this instance, by language. At the same time, the film is also acutely aware of the limitations of its desire to cross the communal divide when the schoolteacher cautions Saroja against speaking Tamil to her father when they visit him in the hospital. Thus the film’s vision of cross-communal harmony and language parity is confined to the private sphere of the “liberal” schoolteacher’s home; in the public sphere, however, even the schoolteacher must conform to the status quo.

The film’s politics become regressive, however, when it comes to Saroja’s “adoption.” The question of adoption first arises when Saroja’s father, Sundaram, asks Punchibanda to take Saroja away from their hiding place in the woods. Then while Sundaram is in the hospital convalescing from his injury, Punchibanda and his wife become Saroja’s *de facto* guardians, a situation that becomes permanent when Sundaram is killed. Although the film recuperates Sundaram’s militant past, it does not extend the same humanism to the Tigers as a movement,³ after all the Tigers are implicated in the deaths of both of Saroja’s parents, rendering her an orphan, which puts Punchibanda in the position of hero and savior. When Sundaram is killed, there is never a question of placing Saroja in the care of a Tamil family, or at least in a Tamil community. Even while he is alive, Punchibanda attempts to enroll Saroja at the school where he teaches, which we may safely assume offers instruction in Sinhala medium only. This process of incorporating the Tamil “other” into a Sinhala family reminds one of Mary Douglas’ critique of charity. In her foreword to Marcel Mauss’ treatise “The Gift,” Mary Douglas writes “charity is meant to be a free gift, a voluntary, unrequited surrender of resources [but] we know that it wounds”(xi). How then does this act of charity of adopting Tamil children “wound”

³ Gamini Fonseka’s *Immortal Men* offers an unexpected example of this phenomenon. See Nalin Jayasena for an extended discussion.

the very community it is meant to help? On the one hand, as Douglas would say, a free gift is never truly free: by not expecting any form of reciprocity or some other reward for our generosity, we take the upper hand, morally or materially, in the act of charity. This means that Punchibanda's generosity proves the moral superiority of the Sinhala community; while the bigoted villagers are redeemed at the end of the film, the Tamil Tigers are beyond redemption. On the other hand, the fact that the film never considers the possibility of returning Saroja to her community is informed by the problematic notion that Tamil children are better off in a Sinhala home than in a Tamil home, arguably in the war zone. This sets up a dynamic comparable to the type of inter-country adoption critiqued by David Smolin.

In his essay "Intercountry Adoption as Child Trafficking," Smolin refutes the humanitarian presumption that undergirds international adoption and justifies the unlike coupling of adoption, typically associated with mutual benefit, and child trafficking, which is aligned with exploitation and abuse. While not all adoptions across borders fall into the latter category, Smolin foregrounds the political and economic dynamics that inform such "traffic" of children from one space to another and is, thus, relevant to the intercountry adoption portrayed in *A Peck on the Cheek*.

In Ratnam's film, Shyama undertakes a perilous journey to Tamil Nadu only to give birth to Amudha at a refugee center in Rameswaram and return to Sri Lanka, effectively putting her child up for adoption. Given the historical links between India and Lanka vis-à-vis Tamil identity, Tamil Nadu can be viewed as a second home for Sri Lankan Tamils. On the other hand, Shyama's decision to travel to India to have her baby rehearses the cultural tradition of an expectant mother who travels to her parents' home to give birth. In other words, the film suggests that Tamil Nadu is not a second home for Sri Lankan Tamils but the genesis, the birthplace of the Tamil race. This, however, is a product of Ratnam's Indocentric imagination and not an irrefutable fact.

Commenting on the alleged intimacy between these two Tamil societies, Sankaran Krishna argues that this essentialist formulation denies "Sri Lankan Tamils cultural originality and autonomy by seeing them as derivative appendages of a larger cultural and intellectual formation in Tamil Nadu" (65). Krishna's critique of an Indocentric conception of Tamil identity is readily applicable to *A Peck on the Cheek*, which introduces us to a more urgent desire to attain fatherhood. Further complicating the film's homogenizing impulse is Amudha's identity crisis that revolves around the search for her birth mother, although her father is equally estranged from her. Once Dileepa joins the Tamil militants, we meet him only once before he carries out a suicide mission but Amudha has no idea that this man is her father. What is equally revealing is Amudha's lack of interest in her biological father; implicit in her indifference is her ready acceptance of Thiru as her father. Midway through the film, Amudha runs away from her adopted home to Rameswaram, her place of birth, in the vain hope of finding her birth mother, Shyama. When Thiru and Indra find her standing on the seashore looking longingly across the ocean (presumably in the direction of Sri Lanka), Amudha tells Thiru: "My mother's not here, pa." Thiru places his hand on Indra's shoulder and says, "This is your mother. I am your father." Thiru uses the uncontested knowledge that he is her father (after

all she calls Thiru “pa”) to anchor the claim that Indra is Amudha’s mother for all intents and purposes. What underscores the importance of paternity in this film is how Amudha’s search for her birth mother further reinforces Thiru’s claim as her biological father, which the film sees as crucial to its vision of Tamil nationalism, one centered on Tamil Nadu. Mani Ratnam’s desire to replace Amudha’s Sri Lankan father with an Indian is an attempt to conflate Sri Lankan Tamil with Indian Tamil on the basis of biology. This conflation has geopolitical significance in that it justifies India’s intervention in Sri Lanka’s civil war.

The film cements the biological claim further by introducing a narrative of cultural continuity signaled by Ratnam’s use of a poem written by Subramanya Bharathi, a famous Tamil nationalist poet of the early twentieth century, for the title of his film. Likewise, Thiru, too, professes an abiding interest in literary culture, especially in his role as a popular poet. When Thiru travels to Sri Lanka in search of Shyama, he uses his reputation as a poet to make his way from the South of the island to the North. Upon arrival at the Colombo airport, Thiru is hailed as a famous Tamil poet celebrated by the Tamil literary community there. If Tamil nationalism asserts that Tamils belong to one nation united by culture, then Thiru is the embodiment of Tamil nationalism linking India and Sri Lanka in one cultural narrative. This self-aggrandizing desire to focus Tamil culture on Tamil Nadu denies the complex crosscurrents of Tamil culture from multiple points of origin.

Historically, Sri Lankan Tamils have played a vital role in the development of modern Tamil literature and culture. Arumugam Navalar, the famous Hindu revivalist, and Kumaraswamy Pulavar, poet and scholar, both hailed from Jaffna and went on to become eminent figures on both sides of the Palk Straits. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently acknowledged, MG Ramachandran, a colossal figure in contemporary Tamil culture and politics, was born in Sri Lanka (“Narendra Modi woos Tamil community in Sri Lanka”). Ratnam, however, only recognizes influences originating from Tamil Nadu, which is projected as the cultural and political center of Tamil identity while Sri Lanka, as its foil, occupies the periphery.

The portrayal of Sri Lankans either as dependent women or as orphaned children and the parent as male and Indian betray a masculinist framework—one that can be compared with the exercise of India’s geo-political interests in the mid to late-1980s. During this period in Indo-Lanka relations, Indira Gandhi’s “twin track policy” represented the Indian position on the so-called Tamil national question which meant that New Delhi covertly supported Tamil militants while overtly promoting a political solution (Krishna). Moreover, during this period of heightened tensions between the two nations, expressions of India’s regional power were often coded as masculinist. A good example can be found in the jingoistic political atmosphere leading up to the Indo-Lanka accord of July 1987 that sent Indian “peace keeping” troops to Sri Lanka. Preceded by the accord was the Indian government’s unilateral decision to airdrop relief supplies to the besieged Tamil population in Northern Sri Lanka, thus violating the airspace of the weaker country and sending a strident signal to the latter that it has the power to interfere in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation. This type of militant intervention in Sri Lanka is exemplified by

Ratnam's preoccupation with adoption and paternity and the subsequent infantilization of Sri Lankan Tamils.

CONCLUSION:

To conclude, despite the alleged humanism of the two films, both betray the dominant cultural vision of the respective communities that view the Tamil national question as a problem only they can resolve. In *Saroja*, the "liberal" Sinhala view of the conflict (espoused by Punchibanda) reflects a failure to find a collaborative solution to Saroja's (and the Tamil community's) future. Despite the film's best intentions, Saroja's Tamilness will necessarily be diluted when a Sinhala family is charged with raising her. In *A Peck on the Cheek*, Ratnam's vision of saving his kindred across the sea is also an attempt to claim Sri Lankan Tamils as members of the global Tamil diaspora. This vision fails to grant Sri Lankan Tamils in Sri Lanka their own cultural history and is thus hardly different from the majoritarian policies of successive Sinhala governments that marginalized Tamil demands for autonomy.

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