

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **A PECK ON THE CHEEK (KANNATHIL MUTHAMITTAL) 2002**

Mani Ratnam

(Tamil)

### **Contents** (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

#### OVERVIEW

This is yet another magnificent film by Mani Ratnam, weaving family drama into a big political story. This time it is the long and terrible civil war in Sri Lanka (1983-2009), which results in a mother deciding to leave her tiny baby in an adoption clinic. Most of the story follows the life of the adoptive parents, who then choose to tell their child the truth about her background. This revelation propels the family into a search for the adopted girl's real mother, taking them back to Sri Lanka and the horrors of war.

#### CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The civil war in Sri Lanka was fought by the Tamil Tigers against the government as the military arm of a broader campaign to ensure equal treatment for the Tamil minority population on the island. Beginning in 1983 and lasting for 26 years, the conflict resulted in the deaths of 60,000 soldiers and an unknown number of civilians. The film-maker does not pass any moral judgement about the war. One character says, 'No one wins a guerrilla war. But no one loses, either. It's like a prolonged cancer.' Although the film does not shy away from the blood of war, it focuses on the refugees it created. More than a hundred thousand people crossed the sea to India, and many more were displaced within Sri Lanka. One of the difficult questions for Tamils in India was the nature of their obligation to their fellow Tamils suffering in Sri Lanka. Should they support them with money or guns? In the film, aid comes in the form of two people who adopt a refugee child.

#### STORY

*Wedding night.* The story starts 'a few years ago' in a Tamil village in Sri Lanka. A wedding is being celebrated, with songs asking that 'flowers of peace bloom everywhere.' The bridegroom is Dileepan, the bride is Shyama. That evening, the sexually-shy couple exchange jokes before consummating their marriage. But as they lie on the bed, they hear a distant rumble. Dileepan knows it is the Sri Lanka army firing guns and planes dropping bombs. He knows because he is a member of the Tamil Tigers, the rebel army fighting against the government.

*A prayer* Sometime later, the couple are in the forest, standing before a shrine. When Shyama says that she has prayed for a child, Dileepan looks serious and says he doesn't want children. 'Why?' she asks. 'Not until the war is over,' he tells her.

*Departure* Weeks later, while the couple are splashing each other playfully in a river, Dileepan again hears the army, this time approaching on foot. He tells Shyama that he must leave and hide away for some time. After he leaves, Shyama discovers she is pregnant. Living with her father, she listens to the gunfire in the night. When the war gets too close to her village, destroying the hospital where her father works, she leaves, but only reluctantly. Along with hundreds of other refugees, she takes a boat from Sri Lanka to India. On the voyage, one of the fleeing men, who was also a rebel soldier, tells her that Dileepan has been wounded. She wants to turn around and go back, but the others stop her.

*Ramesvaram* When the boat reaches India, at Ramesvaram. At a refugee centre, as a local official is recording the names of the refugees, Shyama goes into labour. She gives birth to a girl, but soon the desire to find her husband is too strong. With guilt and grief, she leaves the child with another family (hoping its future would be better in India) and makes the perilous journey back to Sri Lanka.

*Revelation* Nine years later, we see a young girl named Amudha, who has dreams of becoming a 'world famous' dancer or scientist. That is because her father, Thiruchelvan, is not only an engineer but also a writer, who uses the pen name 'Indira' (her mother's name). Indira is a TV news presenter and also well-known. Amudha also has two younger brothers named Vinayan and Akhilan. Amudha's parents take her to a temple on her birthday and then, while relaxing on the Madras beach front, tell her about her 'real' mother. When Amudha hears that she was adopted from a refugee camp in Rameswaram, she takes it badly. Back in their house, her parents are criticised by Thiruchelvan's father for telling her the truth 'at such a young age.' The parents try to reassure Amudha that nothing has changed, but she is afraid that if her brothers find out, they will hit her.

*Runaway* A few days later, Amudha runs away from school and is found by a policeman on a deserted railway platform. Indira begins to doubt herself as a mother and gets angry with her daughter for causing her some much worry. When she asks her parents why they adopted her, her father says, 'We didn't. You adopted us.'

*Flashback* The film shifts back to the refugee camp at Rameswaram nine years earlier. Thiruchelvan goes there to find material for his fiction inspired by the refugees' terrible plight. One story, entitled 'Umbrella', tells of a child's birth and the pain of the mother who left her. That story is read by Indira, who falls in love with the child in the story (Amudha) and the writer (Thiruchelvan). Indira meets Thiruchelvan and they flirt, but Indira is already promised to another man, a rich industrialist.

*Adoption* Thiruchelvan wants to adopt Amudha but is told that that is possible only if he is married. He goes to Indira and asks her to marry him and become Amudha's adopted mother. Indira is interested but hesitates because she feels that she is simply a tool for him to adopt Amudha. Soon, though, they do marry and adopt the child.

*Present* Back in Madras, Amudha asks her grandfather about her real mother. She is told that her mother's name is Shyama and where she lived in Sri Lanka. Two days later, Amudha takes her cousin with her on a long bus ride to Rameswaram. Her parents track her down at the orphanage there, where she has gone to check records. Indira insists that they all return to Madras, but Amudha is adamant that she must find her mother. 'Maybe she's dead,' Indira says. Thiruchelvan convinces his wife that they must take Amudha to Sri Lanka to search for her mother.

*Sri Lanka* After arriving there, they meet Dr Vikramasinghe, a Sri Lankan friend of Thiruchelvan. Staying in the friend's house, Amudha becomes increasingly disobedient and rude toward Indira. 'Don't talk like that to you mother,' she says. 'But you're not my mother,' Amudha replies.

*Suicide bomber* While her parents are attending a lecture, Amudha meets a man in a wheelchair and tells her story to him. A minute later, that man runs into the road and blows up an army convoy by exploding a suicide vest. Amudha is injured but not badly.

*Mankulam*. The trio arrive in Mankulam, where Shyama is from and immediately are told to evacuate because the Sri Lankan army is advancing. In a mass exodus of people carrying all their worldly possessions, the parents ask about Shyama and find a woman with that name. But this Shyama denies that Amudha is her child. The next day, Thiruchelvan goes looking for Shyama's father, but villagers say that he has gone and that his house was destroyed by bombing.

*Meeting* While walking in the countryside, Thiruchelvan and his friend are seized by Tamil fighters, who then realise that he is a Tamil writer and accept that his Sri Lankan friend is not a threat. When Thiruchelvan explains that he is looking for Shyama, the rebel leader (who turns out to be Shyama's brother) arranges for them to meet her. The rebel leader tells Shyama about the meeting, but she refuses to meet them. 'But she's your daughter,' he says. 'These are my children, here,' she says, gesturing toward the rebel camp. All 300 of them.' Thiruchelvan and his friend wait at the arranged meeting place, where they get caught up in a fierce fire fight between the rebels and the Sri Lankan army.

*Going home* Amudha apologises to her mother for all the harm she's caused and agrees to give up the hunt and go back to India. On the way to the airport, though, Indira insists that they drive by the meeting spot. And this time, Shyama is waiting for them. In an emotionally draining scene she accepts that Amudha is her child. The two mothers and the child embrace. Amudha asks about her real father (about whom nothing has been said since he fled from the soldiers). Shyama simply shakes her head. 'Come back to India, with us,' Amudha pleads. Shyama turns this around and says that Amudha must come back to Sri Lanka, when there is peace. When Amudha calls her 'mom,' Shyama says, 'Please don't. If you call me that, I can't leave you.' Amudha again calls her 'mom,' and Shyama goes to her and smoothers her with kisses. Then she leaves.

## THEMES

**Refugees** Each one of Mani Ratnam's films focuses on a social or political issue. With this film, he examines the refugee problem as a consequence of the long and bloody Sri Lanka civil war (1983-2009). Over those 26 years, more than 150,000 people fled the island and took refuge in India (and other countries), while another 300,000 people were displaced within Sri Lanka. What happened to the refugees is the untold story that the film highlights. In particular, it dramatises the pain of family separation, not once but twice. First, there is the separation of husband and wife in Sri Lanka. Pregnant Shyama reluctantly leaves her husband, Dileepan, who is a fighter with the Tamil rebel army. 'Go, go!' he tells her as the Sri Lankan army is closing in on them. And when her village is destroyed, she joins hundreds more in taking the dangerous voyage across the sea in a small boat. Once there, at the refugee centre in India, a second separation occurs. She gives birth but leaves the baby in an adoption clinic, believing that it will have a better life in India, while she goes back to her husband and the war in Sri Lanka. All this occurs within the first twenty minutes of the film, and the remaining two hours are consumed by the emotional fall-out of these two decisions. Amudha is herself a refugee, separated from her mother and her home country. The reunion achieved at the end is only a temporary one.

**Duty of a writer** A less sensational but nonetheless significant theme is the question of duty. What is the obligation of a writer (or any creative artist) to engage in the social realities about which he writes? This is the question posed by Indira when she meets Thiruchelvan in Ramesvaram. He is there to gather material for his short stories and has written one featuring a baby (later called Amudha). The story, which Indira has read, describes the sad plight of a motherless child. When she and the writer go to see that actual child, she asks, 'Are you going to adopt it?' He remains silent. 'Oh, do your ideals stop at the level of writing?' she asks. Then she cuddles the child and asks him, 'What's its name?' Again, he is silent and she mocks him, 'Such a great writer and you can't even think of a name for it?' Goaded by her, he does adopt the child, marrying Indira in order to do so. Later, he gives a public lecture about writing, which ends with this statement: 'Some people say that writing is a gift. Or that you need a special spark. That's not true. All you need is to observe life intensively. Because all stories begin in life, and end in life.' And that is what film director demonstrates here, that his fiction emerges from history.

**Adoption** A third theme is the emotional complexity involved in adopting a child. Both Thiruchelvan and Indira are filled with compassion for the little thing lying in the adoption centre. They first love the child and then realise that they love each other and get married in order to be able to adopt Amudha. This raises questions about who is the priority in this adoptive family. Was marrying Indira merely a necessary step in order to adopt the child? Or, conversely, did Indira use Thiruchelvan to become a mother? Then, there is the difficult issue of when to tell the adopted child the truth about its background. Amudha's parents tell her at age nine, which the grandfather thinks is far too early. The film might bear him out since the young girl is hurt, confused and angry at learning that her world is not what she thought it was. But, as Thiruchelvan asks, what is the correct age? Maybe later would be more traumatic. It is a harrowing experience for Amudha (and her parents), but in the end she learns to accept that she has two mothers.

## CHARACTERS

**Thiruchelvan** Thiruchelvan is the male protagonist. Thiruchelvan is the most complicated figure in this complex film. He is a writer and an engineer, a loving husband and an angry young man. He is censorious only because he holds himself to high standards. He is committed to telling the truth, even when it will certainly upset his daughter.

**Short-tempered** Thiruchelvan, who is admirable in every other way, has a single flaw. He takes offence easily and loses his temper. A very early illustration of this aspect of his character occurs before we even know who he is. He is riding in a crowded bus, when another passenger recognises him, stands up and offers his seat. 'Sir, I know you are the writer Indira [Indira is his pen-name]. Please have a seat.' Thiruchelvan smiles but declines the offer. 'Please, sir,' the man persists. After a few more exchanges, Thiruchelvan explodes, 'What? Can't I stand on my feet? Am I disabled or something? Sit down!' Looking back at this incident, after having seen the entire film, we might interpret his reaction as motivated by an egalitarian impulse: why should he be given a seat just because he has a reputation as a writer? But there are other similarly unprovoked outbursts, one even threatening violence. So, we are left to conclude that Thiruchelvan is another one of the filmmaker's male characters with a tendency to anger and violence.

**Satirical** This male lead character can also be satirical, perhaps a more predictable trait in a writer. But again, his mockery seems undeserved. A good example is an early exchange with Indira, when they are neighbours and before they are married. She is betrothed to an unsuitable rich man and declares, in a melodramatic speech, that she will commit suicide. He replies, nonchalantly, 'That's good. I can write a story about it. But tell me, will you swallow poison or throw yourself into the sea? One thing, though. Don't hang from a ceiling fan in your house. They're too old and won't hold.' It is all cold and cruel. Surely, our hero cannot be that mean-spirited. And on reviewing the scene, in light of what happens subsequently, it does appear that we can acquit him of any viciousness. We realise that his satire was a defence mechanism. She was about to marry someone else, and he had to cover up his own love for her.

**Indira** Indira is *Thiruchelvan's* wife. Indira is young woman, possibly 19 or 20, with a spirited personality. She is candid and affectionate, if a little melodramatic. She can argue and joke with her husband, and becomes a TV news presenter. But she is also a devoted mother, perhaps because, as we discover toward the end of the film, she was left by her own mother in childhood.

**Outspoken** Indira is a match for her husband in her ability to tease and make fun of anyone, particularly him. This directness in her character is illustrated in the first scene in which she appears. She is cycling furiously along a road in order to catch up with Thiruchelvan, who is on a motor scooter. They are neighbours but not really friends. Nearly out of breath, she interrogates him. 'Why do you write under my name?' He says there are lots of Indira-s in the world. 'No, you did it because you were thinking of me. And in any case, I want 50% of your royalties.' It is a wonderful scene, the cycling and the banter propelling the young girl into a budding love affair.

**Maternal** A highly educated and articulate woman, Indira is also deeply maternal. This quality is expressed when she goes with Thiruchelvan to see the baby about whom he has written a story, which she has read. In sharp contrast to the sun-bleached photography of the outside scenes, the interior of the adoption clinic is shot in soft, dark colours. The child lies on its back, gurgling away until Indira stokes its stomach and brings a smile and laughter. She picks up the child and speaks in a gentle tone. 'Your mom left you all alone, but I'm here.' When she finds out that Thiruchelvan hasn't given the baby a name, she does. 'I'll name her Amudha because her first cry flowed out like nectar [*amudham*].' Within minutes, she has become a mother.

**Amudha** *Amudha is their daughter.* Amudha is the true star of this family drama. She is only nine but has the mental strength of an older person, although she is still susceptible to the confusion and hurt of a girl her age. Like her father, he is uncompromising in her search for the truth.

**Confused** Amudha's life is overturned when her parents explain, or try to explain, that they did not 'give birth' to her (that is the Tamil phrase). Instead, they adopted her. But they love her deeply. Nothing has changed. As Thiruchelvan speaks these words, nine-year-old Amudha runs around in a circle, a clever visual metaphor for her confused mind. Her eyes show disbelief, fear and a refusal to accept what she's hearing. A single tear crawls down her face, then she runs away. She will keep running for most of the film, away from her parents (who, she believes, have betrayed her) and from the life she now knows is not really hers. She has so many questions: are her brothers really her brothers? Where is her mother? Why did she abandon her? Too many unknowns for a young girl. Her mother tries to soothe her by saying that nothing has changed. But, in truth, nothing is the same.

**Determined** The confusion turns into determination after a few weeks. No matter what the obstacles, she will stop at nothing to find her real mother. Accompanied by a slightly older male cousin, she takes a long bus ride to Ramesvaram in order to fulfil that desire. After asking at the

refugee centre, she is told that her mother is not there. Her parents catch up with her and try to persuade her to come back to Madras. 'She could be anywhere in the world right now,' Indira says. 'This is your mother, and I am your father,' Thiruchelvan says. But Amudha shakes her head. Unable to undermine her determination, the parents give in and the three of them set out on what will be a dangerous but ultimately successful journey to Sri Lanka.

**Vinayan and Akhilan** Vinayan and Akhilan are their sons.  
**Shyama** Shyama is Amudha's biological mother.  
**Dileepan** Dileepan is Shyama's husband and Amudha's father.  
**Dr Vikramasinghe** Dr Vikramasinghe is a Sri Lankan friend of Thiruchelvan.



(Thiruchelvan and Amudha ponder their next move)



(Shyama in pain)



(Amudha, Indira and Thiruchelvan)



(Thiruchelvan asks Indira to marry him)