

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# THE HERO, NAYAKAN 1987

Mani Ratnam

(Tamil and Hindi)

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## OVERVIEW

This film by the acclaimed Tamil director Mani Ratnam is loosely based on the life of real-life gangster in Bombay. Like his real-life model, Velu is a Tamil boy who runs away from home after killing a policeman who killed his father and ends up in Bombay, where he becomes a successful smuggler. Fighting off rival gangs, he establishes his own criminal network, which both steals and at the same time offers protection to the slum neighbourhood in which Velu lives. He marries a prostitute and they have two children. The son follows him into crime, while the daughter rejects her father and ends up marrying the police inspector who brings Velu to justice. With its gritty violence, fast pace and amoral treatment of crime, *The Hero* has been justifiably compared with *The Godfather*. It is also no surprise that it has been included in *Time* magazine's list of the 100 best films of all time.

## CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

This was not the first gangster film in Indian cinema, nor will it be the last, but it has the distinction of portraying criminals in a more realistic way than most other films. The dark tone, interleaved with tender scenes, shot on location and using local accents, make the film a classic of its genre. The mafia boss in *The Hero* does not wear shiny suits or drive swanky cars; he does not swan around nightclubs and bordellos. Velu is himself an outsider, a Tamil-speaker in Bombay, where Marathi and Hindi are spoken. As a clever re-working of *The Godfather*, with the Bollywood features of song and dance, this is a remarkable film that mixes sensational action scenes with others of emotional depth. It represents the best of the Tamil film industry, which is second only to Hindi-language films in the country.

## STORY

*Bad beginnings* Velu is the son of a union leader leading a strike against the government. The police beat up Velu in order to discover his whereabouts. Then an Inspector arrives and tells the young boy that he and his father have nothing to fear; all he has to do is cooperate. 'Go and tell your father,' the kind inspector says to Velu with a gentle pat on the back. However, the Inspector has lied and betrays the little boy's trust by following him to his father's hideout, where he shoots him dead.

*Revenge and flight* During his father's cremation, attended by the police, Velu grabs a policeman's bayonet and stabs the inspector to death, thus avenging his father's killing. Escaping to Bombay, he is taken in by a Tamil Muslim family, whose father is a smuggler. Velu is beaten badly by the police when he tries to stop them evicting poor people from a slum.

*First steps* Velu first gets involved in crime when he steps in for his foster-father, who is too ill to take the boat out to sea to receive smuggled goods. The mission itself has good intentions as the father has promised to get money to hand over to a poor person for a funeral. Once he has a taste for it, though, Velu relishes the challenge and the adventure. By demanding a higher commission for the illegal goods, Velu earns the anger of the smugglers.

*Love* Velu goes to a brothel, where the prostitute asks him if she can leave early so that she can study for her exams. He is so touched that he just lets her go without any sex. She later becomes his wife.

*Injustice* Velu learns that his foster-father has been arrested and goes to the police station, only to see him hanging by a rope in his cell. The police claim it was suicide, but Velu finds out that the smugglers, angered by his demand for more money, have colluded with the police (Inspector Kelkar) to get his father arrested and killed while in detention. Velu seeks out Kelkar and kills him in a vicious attack, but later takes care of the man's widow and mentally-ill son.

*Police hunt* The police investigate the murder of Kelkar, one of their own. When no one in the community will cooperate, the Inspector hits a young girl and says, 'I'll continue to hit her until someone comes forth and tells me who killed the officer.' Blows rain down on the defenceless child until a brave woman steps forward and says she knows who did it. She knows but she won't betray him because 'we're glad to have such a man in our neighbourhood, a man who protects us against violence and mistreatment [from the police].' This defiant woman will not reveal Velu's name even if it means that she will die. The Inspector admits defeat but says he will hunt down the man who killed Kelkar.

*Eviction?* The next crisis is that a local contractor has sold the neighbourhood to a property developer without any compensation to or communication with the poor people who live there. Their shacks will simply be knocked down and they will be forced to move elsewhere. Velu leads the community's response, which is an attack on the contractor's home, where they destroy all his expensive furnishings.

*Widowed* Velu's popularity as a hero grows in equal measure to his smuggling activity. When a rival gang thinks he is getting too big, they mount a raid to eliminate him but end up killing his wife (Neela) instead. Velu sends his two daughters to Madras, tracks down the rival gang and kills them.

*Family reunion* Years pass and Velu acts as a godfather to people in need, giving them money for medical expenses and helping them to avoid the police. He also helps a Superintendent of Police, who asks him to 'take care of' some men who abused the policeman's daughter. Velu is reluctant but finally agrees saying that he, too, has a daughter.

*Daughters* Velu's two daughters return to Bombay as educated adults. Surya is happy to follow in her father's life-style and is killed in one of the many gang raids. Charumati, the other daughter, then speaks out. She blames her father for both her sister's and her mother's death. She tells her father that his vigilantism is wrong and that there is a legal system to deal with problems. She urges him to leave Bombay and start a new life. When he refuses, she leaves him and gets married.

*Shocking in-laws* After another passage of several years, a high-ranking police officer (Assistant Commissioner Patil) is sent to Bombay to eradicate the gangsters and his priority is Velu. Summoned to the officer's house, Velu is shocked to see that he is married to his daughter, Charumati; the officer is equally surprised to learn that Velu is his father-in-law. Still the officer is committed to bringing Velu to justice.

*Surrender* In a sensational chase-scene, Velu escapes and finds a hideout. However, when the determined officer arrests all his cronies and threatens to torture them, Velu agrees to surrender. In a dramatic scene, he telephones his daughter, wife of the officer, and arranges for his arrest. The daughter is conflicted: she does not want to turn in her father, but she believes in legal justice.

*Evidence* Velu is arrested. In order to get enough evidence to convict Velu, the officer meets the wife and son of Inspector Kelkar, whom Velu murdered in a revenge killing. He is seeking a witness who will say that Velu is a killer, but the wife (who knows how brutal her husband was) refuses to speak against Velu in court.

*Courtcase* As the case is heard in court and local people riot in the streets, the officer asks Velu's help in restoring public safety. The verdict is due the following day. 'It may be the death penalty,' Assistant Commissioner Patil says. Velu says in a resigned voice. 'I should have died at age ten. I would have saved you a lot of trouble. I'll do what I can.' True to his word, he calms the crowd and enters the courthouse.

*Final revenge* For lack of evidence Velu is declared not guilty. When he emerges from the courthouse to the cheers of a huge crowd, the son of the murdered Inspector Kelkar steps forward and shoots Velu dead.

## THEMES

**Revenge** The theme that propels the story is revenge. Not just a single case of avenging an injustice but a series of them that reverberates through this long film. In one of the most shocking opening sequences in Indian cinema, young Velu witnesses his father's death at the hands of a duplicitous police officer, and, while they are gathered at his funeral, kills that same officer with another policeman's bayonet. Having lost his biological father, Velu learns that his foster-father, a smuggler, has been killed in police detention. Velu then practices retributive justice a second time by viciously killing the responsible officer (Inspector Kelkar). A third example, is when Velu avenges the death of his own wife by killing the rival gang leader whose men committed the crime. The fourth and final instance is when he himself is the victim of another's revenge attack. The son of Inspector Kelkar shoots Velu dead on the steps of the courthouse. Violence breeds violence, murder follows murder, in a long cycle in which right and wrong are blurred.

**Justice** The second dominant theme in the film is exactly this question of morality. When is violence justified? While academics debate the theory of a 'just war,' the director dramatises this dilemma in the life of one man. Early on, Velu's foster-father seems to offer an answer when Velu (still very young) puts a question to him. 'You give food and things to anyone who asks,' the boys says, 'but at night you smuggle things. Isn't it wrong?' 'No,' is the older man's quick reply. 'Nothing that helps other people is wrong.' Ten years later, when Velu is a mafia boss, he repeats this formula. But the film asks several questions: Is this a good principle to live by? What does the phrase 'other people' mean? Doesn't it imply one's own group, tribe, caste or family? What if helping one person causes harm to another? Perhaps, as daughter Charumati suggests, we should leave it to the state to arbitrate between doing good to one person and evil to another. But the state, in the form of its officers of the law, have failed Velu from the beginning, which is why he is a vigilante. Even the upright Assistant Commissioner Patil (Velu's son-in-law) is confused about right and wrong when he talks with Velu in his cell. There is melodrama in this film, and the requisite amount of song and dance, but in exploring the theme of justice in such a thoughtful way, the director has given us a classic.

**Fatherhood** A third theme which deserves mention is fatherhood. Arguably, Velu's life is doomed from the moment he sees his father killed. And he is definitely locked into a spiral of violence and revenge when his foster-father is also killed. Velu himself becomes a father and acts to protect his daughters. In a telling scene, the older daughter (Charumati) watches as he and his men beat up a young man. She is horrified, but we know that Velu has acted on the request of a man whose own daughter was raped by the young man. Not knowing this motive, Velu's daughter is indignant and asks him, 'How could you do this?' Without explaining everything, Velu simply says, 'I gave my word to a man. He's a father, like me.' The relationship between Velu and his daughter is one of the highlights of the film, as illustrated in the final scene. Charumati has disowned her father and leads a separate life, but when he is on trial for murder, she does not abandon him. Just as Velu is going into the courtroom to hear the verdict, he sees Charumati with her young son. He has never seen his grandson before and asks him what his name is. 'Velu,' is the little boy's answer and grandfather Velu almost breaks down in tears.

## CHARACTERS

**Velu** Velu is the protagonist, the 'hero' and the mafia don. Velu is a man made by his childhood and youth. Having lost both his father and foster-father to police brutality, he lives outside the law. He can be extremely violent one minute and compassionate the next. He protects his own people from the police and greedy businessmen and becomes a hero, but one never knows exactly what his motives are. The mafia boss is a hero and an anti-hero, with a backstory that leaves him flawed.

**Compassionate** One is tempted to say that compassion is Velu's default position. Certainly, he displays genuine kindness on numerous occasions—helping his foster-father and many others in his slum neighbourhood—but one scene stands out from the rest for its transformation from crude selfishness to spontaneous affection. Velu has been led to a brothel by his uncle and starts to undress. The prostitute, a young girl, maybe sixteen or seventeen, asks if they can stop early. 'Oh, I see,' sneers Velu, 'so you can go elsewhere and make more money.' 'No,' she says, 'I need to study

for my exams.' Stopped dead in his tracks by her admission, Velu's whole body language shifts from sexual predator to kind protector. He asks about her school, her exams and her family. Then he lets her go, without having sex but still paying her some money. When he gets ready to go, she says, 'If they see you go, they'll just send in someone else.' Sighing, he takes off his shirt and rests in a chair, while the young girl gets books out of her bag and begins to study. If there is a more tender scene between a prostitute and her customer, I'd like to see it.

**Violent** Not many minutes later, the compassionate Velu embarks on a violent mission to avenge the death of his foster-father. Fittingly, he finds the police officer (Inspector Kelkar) responsible for the death sitting in another brothel surrounded by half-dressed girls. The man is drunk and doesn't recognise the person who has walked into the room. When he offers the newcomer a drink from a whisky bottle, Velu takes the bottle and smashes it against Kelkar's face, leaving shards of glass sticking out of his cheek. Then he subjects the man to a sadistic beating that only ends when he bashes in his head with a sledgehammer. It is gratuitous violence at its most vicious and cannot be simply explained away as righteous revenge. This is the damaged man that Velu has become.

**Reflective** Velu often deprecates himself by saying he is uneducated, doesn't understand rules and regulations, and is incapable of following legal guidelines and arguments. Still, he is a thoughtful man, nevertheless. This capacity is beautifully illustrated in the closing sequence. Velu is approaching the courthouse where the final verdict will be shortly announced. He is older now, maybe thirty or forty years have passed, he's seen many deaths and killed many men. On the courthouse steps, he sees a little boy who turns out to be his grandson, whom he's never seen before. When he crouches down to look at him, the little boy says, 'Grandpa, why are you in jail? Are you a good man or a bad man?' Velu purses his lips and looks away before saying, 'I don't know. I just don't know.' All through his life he has been convinced that 'helping others cannot be bad' no matter how immoral an action may be. This is what his foster-father had taught him. Now, he is not sure. And neither are we.

**Neela** Neela is the prostitute whom Velu marries.

**Charumati** Charumati is Velu's older daughter, who turns against him. She is an outspoken person, a social worker and political activist. But she also loves her damaged father, whom she tries to reform and fails. Like her husband, Assistant Commissioner Patil, she is committed to the 'rule of law' and abhors the vigilantism of her father. She is a person caught in between the two men and torn apart by her conflicted loyalties.

**Principled** Charumati's firm moral stance is clearly displayed in a scene where she finally confronts her father about his actions. She has witnessed him and his men beating a man senseless. Concerned, she goes to the hospital and returns to the house steaming with rage. 'He's alive, but no more than a vegetable,' she says. 'I hope you're happy. He was innocent.' 'No,' Velu says, 'he did wrong.' (The man raped a girl, but Velu doesn't tell this to his daughter.) 'Just tell me one thing,' the outraged Charumati asks, 'Are you god?' Velu shakes his head and she continues, 'Then, how do you have the right to decide who to punish?' Velu protests that he had made a promise, and she says, 'We have a legal system to decide these things.' After this argument, Charumati decides to leave her father and go away. It is a difficult decision, but her principles will not allow her to stay in his house.

**Conflicted** When Charumati gets married, to a police officer who is tasked with bringing her father to justice, she is torn between her principles and her innate love for her father. This torment rages within her for some time before it is brought to a head when she receives a phone call from Velu. He is on the run from the police, from her own husband, and is safely hidden away, but he calls the police and offers to surrender in order to stop his associates being beaten up in jail. On the phone, he tells his daughter to tell her husband where to find him. Charumati is stunned by this request. She hated what her father stood for and left him because of his actions, but now she is about to become the instrument of his arrest and possible execution (India still had the death penalty for certain crimes). Her conflicted loyalties are increased when her father says, 'Tomorrow is your mother's death anniversary. You know where to find me. Tell him.' Charumati cries, 'I can't. I know what they'll do to you.' When Velu insists, she hangs up and wheels around in tears to see her husband. He forces her to tell him what Velu told her. She speaks very slowly in a flat tone, her face drained of emotion. She has four different motives in this scene. First, she wants to obey the law. Second, she wants to obey her father. Third, she wants to obey her husband. Fourth, she wants to keep her father from harm. She follows the law, her father and her husband, but only with great pain.

**Surya** Surya is their other daughter.  
**Ravi** Ravi is Charumati's son.

**Assistant Commissioner Patil** Assistant Commissioner Patil is the officer who arrests Velu and marries Charumati. Of the remaining characters, Assistant Commissioner Patil is the most interesting. He is the highly-regarded officer sent to apprehend the notorious criminal known as Velu. Arriving in Bombay, he meets, falls in love with and then marries Charumati, who (unbeknownst to him) happens to be Velu's daughter. He is a determined man and diligently sets out to gather the evidence necessary to arrest and then convict Velu. He can be severe and short-tempered, but he also has hidden depths of kindness and perception.

**Determined** We get our first glimpse of Patil when he is being driven in a car toward the slum district ruled over by Velu. It is a close-up, emphasising his rigidly held head, unwavering eyes and forward thrust of his chin. When he arrives at his destination, he immediately orders his men to seize a fleet of ambulances used by Velu's people both to transport drugs and take people to hospital. His own officers warn him that it will be a problem—a 'Velu problem.' 'Listen to me,' Patil says as he strides toward the ambulances, police stick in hand. 'Who pays your salary? The government or Velu?' When local people try to stop the police, they bundle them into jeeps and take them to jail. All this happens in five minutes. Assistant Commissioner Patil has served notice that he is serious about cleaning up the 'Velu problem.'

**Thoughtful** It takes many months, however, before Patil arrests Velu, and that only because the fugitive turns himself in. Now, we see the thoughtful side of the hard-nosed assistant commissioner. The scene begins when Patil enters Velu's cell and deferentially takes off his cap and lays it on a table. The two men look at each other, criminal and police officer, father-in-law and son-in-law. Patil drops his head and says, 'I need your help.' It turns out that the public riots in protest at Velu's arrest have created a situation in which 'innocent people might get hurt.' Patil asks Velu to calm the crowd. When Velu agrees to do what he can, Patil again bows his head and says, 'You know, there's only one difference between what you do and what I do.' He pauses and adds, 'I do it with a uniform.' This is an extraordinary statement from an Assistant Commissioner of Police, but, having watched the film, we understand what he means.



(The young Velu, with his wife, pondering an uncertain future)



(Neela, Velu's wife, with one of their daughters)



(Charumati argues with her father, Velu)





(Velu, after one of his fights)