

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

ROSE, ROJA 1992

Mani Ratnam

(Tamil language)

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

Rose is the second part Mani Ratnam's 'Terrorist Trilogy', which also includes *Nayakan* and *Bombay*. While those films tackled gangsterism and communalism respectively, *Rose* dramatises another one of India's intractable problems: Kashmir. As with the other films, this is a political love-story, inserting a personal drama within a larger national crisis.

The lovers in this case are a young cryptologist (or communications expert) named Rishi and an even younger village girl named Rose. After a somewhat improbable switch of brides at an arranged marriage in the village, Rishi and Rose get married. Rishi is sent to Kashmir to help with military intelligence intercepts of the insurgents fighting the Indian government. He is kidnapped by the insurgents, and Rose embarks on a struggle to convince Indian officials to negotiate his release. After months of refusal, the government agrees to release an insurgent leader in detention in order to free Rishi. But things go wrong and Rishi is nearly killed. In the end, he is reunited with Rose, just as India itself is metaphorically consolidated through south Indians fighting for the nation in Kashmir in the far north.

Some historical background is also necessary. In 1947 more than 500 princely states joined a dozen large provinces of British India to form the country of India. It was expected that Kashmir, a princely state with a 77% Muslim population, would join Pakistan. When the Hindu raja of Kashmir did not do this, Pakistan sent in an army to force his hand. The raja then called on India to support him, and Prime Minister Nehru agreed on the condition that Kashmir join India. The raja agreed, troops entered and a war was fought, which was brought to end by a UN-brokered ceasefire. That ceasefire line remains in place today, effectively separating Kashmir into an Indian-controlled region (most of the state) and a Pakistan-controlled region. Low-level warfare has continued between the two countries, although some insurgents want a Kashmir independent of both.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The genesis of this film has two cultural strata: historical and mythological. As with the other films in this 'terrorist trilogy,' *Rose* was inspired by real events. Only a year before it was released, the filmmaker was moved by the story of a south Indian businessman who was captured by Kashmiri separatists and held for two months while his wife fought furiously for his release. On the mythological level, the story of the film is a loose adaptation of the Hindu story of Savitri, the devout wife whose devotion to her husband persuades Yama, the god of death, to release his soul. Significantly, this is not just an ancient Indian story, it is a Hindu story, which reinforces some critics' view that the film as a whole supports a Hindu nationalist vision of India. Although there is a 'good' Muslim terrorist with a conscience (Liaqat), most Muslims in the film appear as violent extremists. By contrast, the Indian patriot is a Hindu. The argument is that the supposed tolerance of Hinduism enables it to operate under the cloak of religious hegemony.

STORY

Two worlds The opening scene shows a misty forest where Kashmiri insurgents engage Indian soldiers in a gun-battle, leading to the arrest of Wasim Khan by Colonel Rayappa. Cut to a rural landscape in south India, where the sun rises over green rice fields and children play in under a waterfall. These are the two worlds that will later collide.

Wedding mix-up Into the rural paradise comes the male protagonist, Rishi, a tall, handsome, well-educated young man, who has arrived to finalise a marriage agreement. His intended bride, however, is Shenbagam, but it is Rose (her younger sister) who first spots the entrance of the handsome hero.

Rose is not attracted to him but merely happy that her sister has made a 'good catch.' The problem is that Shenbagam is in love with another man. When she explains this awkward situation to Rishi (whom she barely knows), he accepts it and agrees to reject her during the betrothal ceremony.

Surprise bride At the ceremony, Rishi does as Shenbagam wants, causing humiliation to everyone. Then he takes everyone by surprise and requests the hand of Rose, the younger sister. While the parents, after careful consideration, accept this as the best possible outcome, Rose herself is not persuaded. Not knowing that her sister was in love with someone else and asked Rishi to reject her, she is furious with him for betraying her sister. Under duress, the marriage is completed and the distinctly unhappy newly-weds leave for Madras. Rose remains distant from Rishi, still thinking that he mistreated his sister, until he reveals what really happened.

Kashmir Days later, Rishi is sent to Kashmir to help with military communications there. Rishi tells Rose she cannot come with him because it is too dangerous and they aren't really husband and wife anyway. But she persuades him. Now everything has changed. They are reconciled and living in an isolated military post under constant threat of attack from Kashmiri separatists. But the landscape is beautiful and their love develops.

Kidnapped. From the moment Rishi steps out of a military vehicle at the command centre, we know that he is being watched by the insurgents (black-and-white photos appear on the screen with the tell-tale 'click' to indicate that they are taken by a camera). The kidnapping takes place near a temple where Rose is offering thanks that she has a good husband. Seconds later, she sees Rishi grabbed and driven away.

Pursuit She runs after the kidnappers' car but is left behind. But she doggedly continues her pursuit by going to various government and military offices to plead for Rishi's release. She is up against bureaucratic stagnation, diplomatic agendas, personal reputations and a linguistic gap. She doesn't know Hindi, and the men she speaks with do not know Tamil.

Captivity We then see Rishi held in an isolated house by Liaqat, a comrade of Wasim Khan, the terrorist leader who is held by the Indian army. Liaqat is firm with Rishi, but not violent like some of his men. Liaqat explains that while they will not hurt Rishi, they will also not hesitate to kill him if he tries to escape.

Release? Through a newspaper, Rose learns that her husband might be released if the government releases Wasim Khan. But the officials she speaks with deny that any 'deal' is on the table. The same possible negotiated release is explained to Rishi by Liaqat, but Rishi says that he will not agree to be exchanged for a murderer. When Rishi continues to defy his captors, shouting 'Hail India', he is almost beaten to death

Developments The persistent Rose contrives to visit Wasim Khan in jail and asks him to tell his men to release Rishi. He rejects her plea by saying, 'You are an Indian. I don't listen to you.' Next, Rishi nearly escapes, is recaptured and then the kidnappers are forced to flee when soldiers close in. All this time, Rishi attempts to reason with Liaqat about the futility and immorality of his cause, but Liaqat only changes his views when his own brother is killed by mistake by the Pakistan army, on the other side of the border. In a sensational scene, the insurgents set fire to an Indian flag, but Rishi, with his hands tied, risks his life to put out the flames. Meanwhile Rose manages to finally convince a government minister to release Wasim Khan in order to free Rishi.

Prisoner exchange The exchange of prisoners is agreed, but Rishi, still not wanting to be equated with a terrorist, escapes with the help of Liaqat's sister. When the Indian officials arrive at the exchange location with Wasim Khan, there is no Rishi and no Liaqat either. Wasim Khan is put back in jail.

Finale Rishi manages to get close to the exchange spot on his own after evading the terrorists. During his escape, Rishi kills two terrorists, but Liaqat catches up with him and holds him at gun point. Rishi reasons with Liaqat and convinces him that his war is immoral. Liaqat lets Rishi go and escapes from the Indian Army. Rishi and Rose are united once again.

THEMES

Patriotism The overriding theme of the film is nationalism, though 'patriotism' may be a more accurate term since Indian nationalism is expressed with deep personal fervour and Kashmiri independence is advocated with equal passion. The film is explicit, perhaps even simplistic, in its identification of the hero, Rishi, with Indian patriotism. The first expression of his nationalism comes at an early point, when Rishi is being sent to Kashmir from Madras (from the deep south to the far north). Everyone knows that this is a dangerous posting, as a small-scale war is being fought between the separatists and the army. 'I'm sorry to have to send you there,' Rishi's boss says, to which the hero replies. 'That's fine. Kashmir is in India. Why should we worry about going to any part of India?' Then, from the moment he is taken captive, Rishi expresses his love for his country, a sentiment that is underlined by the patriotic songs that play during some scenes. More than once, he argues with Liaquat about his insurgency, trying to persuade him that India is one and that killing is immoral. In one of the most memorable scenes, he rolls over on a burning Indian flag to prevent it from being destroyed by the militants. Rishi's patriotism for India is matched by the insurgents' deep love for an independent Kashmir. While the film condemns violence, it is to its credit that it includes an impassioned declaration for Kashmiri independence from India.

Nation and family The conflict between Indian and Kashmiri patriotism is not the only, or even the most important, example of competing loyalties in the film. Much of the drama concerns the question of priorities between one's love of family (especially husband) and one's love of the nation. Which is more important? Rose is filled with self-righteous anger when she berates the army officials for not doing more to rescue Rishi, but the officials criticise her as being selfish and caring only about her own family. When she demands the release of Wasim Khan in exchange for Rishi, an officer points that releasing the terrorist might enable him to kill more innocent civilians. 'I don't care,' Rose screams, 'I want my husband back.' The officer screams back, 'Shut up! Don't you care about the country? Are you an Indian? Terrorists are trying to destroy this country and you're crying over your husband!' In the end, a minister is impressed by her sincere love and sanctions the prisoner exchange, suggesting that these two competing loyalties can be reconciled. After all, the film suggests, if the nation is to remain united, the family must be reunited.

Language A third theme, which weaves through the other two, is the importance of language and communication. Although Hindi is the most widespread among India's many, many major languages, it is not spoken widely in the Tamil-speaking area, from where Rishi and Rose come. Rishi, as an educated person, speaks Hindi and English; indeed, he is a 'communications' expert, whereas Rose is monolingual. This raises the tension after Rishi is kidnapped because the distraught wife cannot even make herself understood to the army officials when she tells them about the circumstances of his abduction. Here, then, is another test of Indian unity—a person from the deep south is in trouble in the far north and cannot even begin to solve the problem. Nor can she understand what the army officials are trying to tell her about her husband's kidnappers or their attempts to rescue him. In one loud argument, which reflects a nation-wide debate, the army official berates her for not knowing the national language of Hindi, and she says she resents having a 'northern language' rammed down her throat. Finally, when Rose sees a newspaper frontpage with a picture of her husband among masked men, she has to track down a fellow south Indian to tell her what the Hindi paper says. In another scene, the issue of the language barrier is raised when Rose wants to offer a prayer in a temple to a god whose name she does not know. 'I don't even know if you speak Tamil,' she confesses to the deity. 'But then gods know everything, so you must.' Human beings, she soon discovers, are not gods and their linguistic shortcomings imperil her husband's life.

CHARACTERS

Rose (Roja) Rose, the female protagonist, is his wife. Rose is a spirited but naïve young woman (perhaps 18 years old) from a village. She is loyal to everyone, which makes her vulnerable. She is also tenacious with her loyalties, including to her local god. In the end, she is a fearless fighter.

Vulnerable As an innocent and unsophisticated young woman, Rose is easily hurt. Her vulnerability is illustrated in the first half of the film, which takes place in her village, when her sister is publicly rejected by her intended husband (Rishi). The fact that Rishi chooses to marry her does not impress Rose (because she does not know that he was forced into that choice); in fact, it makes her even more exposed and vulnerable. After the farcical marriage, she turns on her 'husband' in disbelief and asks, 'How could you do this? You deceived and then humiliated my sister. She is too good for you. Now I can't face her or anyone in the village. They think I enticed you.' This conversation takes place

in Madras, where the newly-weds have gone after the wedding, but Rose says she wants to go back to her village. She feels defenceless, living with a bogus husband, a man she despises, in a city where she has no friends or family.

Devout One aspect of Rose's uncomplicated character, in contrast to her husband's cosmopolitanism, is her devotion to Hindu gods. This pure loyalty is displayed in a scene after she has learned why Rishi married her and she has begun to love him. They are in Kashmir, a strange land, but she wants to give thanks for her wedding. She goes to the nearest temple and says, 'Dear god of the north, I don't even know your name, but grandma says that all gods are the same. I don't know if you understand Tamil, but of course, you must because gods know everything. When I left my village, I fought with my god because he had allowed me to marry a bad man. Now, I know he is a good man. So I have come to offer thanks.' These words are spoken with such innocence and heart-felt sincerity that even the most committed atheist cannot help but be moved.

Tenacious However, all her vulnerability and innocence are swept away when her husband is abducted and she sets out to have him released. Now, we see her tremendous tenacity in a fearless pursuit of what she wants. Her determination is shown throughout the last hour of the film, but it is most clearly illustrated in a confrontation with an army official. The officer has, quite reasonably, explained that the life of one individual cannot take precedence over the security of the whole nation. But Rose is quick to say, 'Would you say the same if your daughter or wife were held captive? Huh? Now, listen to me. You have been sent here to achieve my husband's release. I will not leave this place until you find him. I will not leave you alone until you do what is your responsibility.' The girl, who was so shy in the village only a few months earlier, is now a single-minded wife who fights with everything she has until her husband is safe. After this scene, we understand why the director named the film after her.

Rishi Rishi, the male protagonist of the film, is a cryptologist. Rishi is a less complex character than Rose. He is a clean-cut, amiable chap, a confident and educated man looking to marry a simple village lass, even though he hardly knows what a village is like. He is smooth and self-assured, but he is also kind and, above all else, patriotic. Perhaps he is too good to be a real hero.

Self-assured From the moment he enters the village, Rishi gleams with polished confidence. Even the dramatic turn of events, when he is forced to choose another bride, does not appear to faze him. But the moment that best illustrates his somewhat disturbing self-assurance occurs after he has married Rose (against her wishes and without her understanding why). They are in a house in Madras, a few days after the wedding. When she is cooking, he sneaks up from behind, embraces her and tries to kiss her. She winces and shrugs him off, but he wears a look that says, 'Listen, I'm your husband.' A more sensitive person would not have forced physical intimacy on her when he knows that she only married him because her family forced her. The scene ends with Rishi lighting a cigarette and pushing it between her lips, making her cough. Again, it is a minor gesture of arrogance, and one wonders why the film-maker chose to make his 'hero' so unpleasant.

Patriotic Perhaps confidence is at the foundation of Rishi's patriotism, too, which is clearly the characteristic that makes him the hero in this film. From the moment that we see him with his boss in the security services, we never doubt that he deeply loves his country. Still, the most sensational demonstration of his patriotism comes much later after he has been kidnapped. One of his captors is angry because the Indian government has refused to exchange Rishi for Wasim Khan (their leader). When the man sets fire to an Indian flag, Rishi rushes out and, though his hands are tied, knocks the man to the ground. Then he rolls over the flag, putting out the flames but igniting his clothes in the process. Songs are played in the background with lines such as, 'India is one, faiths are many. India is united, made by hard work.' The songs are corny and the action somewhat improbable, but it is nevertheless an unforgettable scene.

Liaqat Liaqat is an insurgent who kidnaps Rishi. Liaqat, the insurgent who abducts Rishi, is a more complex character. He is a devout Muslim, often shown in prayer, and committed to the cause of Kashmiri independence. Unlike his scruffy gang of captors, who are violent, he is soft-spoken and even gentle. He never mistreats Rishi and, in the finale, even lets him escape unharmed. While half of the film shows Rose's confrontations with government officials, the other half presents Rishi's conversations with Liaqat about the morality and viability of his separatist campaign.

Committed While Liaqat may be thoughtful and gentle, he is implacably committed to the cause of Kashmiri independence. His fierce loyalty matches Rishi's patriotism and Rose's tenacity, which is

why the film is so compelling. The clearest articulation of Liaqat's commitment occurs during one of his discussions with the captive Rishi. As he ties his hands with rope, Liaqat explains things. 'Don't be afraid,' he says, 'we won't hurt you. But if we don't get what we want, we will kill you.' When Rishi asks what he wants, he says, 'Independence. Freedom for every Kashmiri person, everyone living and every new-born child. For our hills, our valleys, our rivers. Freedom from India.' This mini-speech, spoken with self-righteous defiance, is a rare example of separatist ideology permitted in a major Indian feature film.

Conscientious Although steadfast in his political commitment, Liaqat is not a violent man. He focuses on the goal, not the means to achieve it, but it is violence that eventually pricks his conscience. When his own brother, along with many other young men, are senselessly killed by the Pakistani army in a terrible accident, he begins to question the war. And the most dramatic moment of his moral reckoning comes, appropriately enough, at the very end of the film. He and Rishi stand toe to toe, by themselves, but Liaqat has a gun. Rishi tells him to do what he likes with him, adding, 'You won't kill me. You're a man with a conscience.' And he is right. Liaqat lets Rishi walk away, while he runs back into the forest to escape the onrushing Indian soldiers. His character, a militant with a conscience, complicates the politics of this engaging picture.

Rayappa Colonel Rayappa is the official tasked with releasing Rishi.

Wasim Khan Wasim Khan is the insurgent leader held by the Indian army.

Shenbagam Shenbagam is Rose's older sister.



(Rose and Rishi, happy in Kashmir)



(Rishi, hands tied, risks his life to extinguish a burning Indian flag)



(Tenacious Rose tells the army officer that she will never give up)



(Liaquat and the captive Rishi on the run)