

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# FROM THE HEART, DIL SE 1998

Mani Ratnam

(Hindi language)

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

### OVERVIEW

With a plot featuring terrorism, doomed love, armed insurgency, an assassination plot and security forces, and shot in locations such as Assam and Ladakh, this is a trademark Mani Ratnam film. Even a synopsis of the complex plot is complicated. Amar is a journalist who travels from Delhi to Assam, in northeast India, to report on fifty years of independence (1947-1997). In his travels he meets and falls in love with Meghna, though she remains mysterious. He pursues her, learns that she is married and returns to Delhi, where his parents have lined up another girl for him to marry. Meghna now arrives in Delhi, and Amar discovers that she is involved in a plot to assassinate the President of India. Beaten up the plotters and pursued by the state's intelligence services, Amar refuses to relinquish his desperate love for Meghna. Finally, both are killed by her suicide vest. Part desperate love story, part political thriller, this is a captivating film. Although *From the Heart* received a disappointing reception in India, it has won several international awards (including Special Mention at Berlin).

### CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

As with many of his other productions (notably *Bombay* and *Rose*), Mani Ratnam uses this film to explore an issue of national politics. In this film, the issue is the disconnect between elites in New Delhi and the common people marginalised in border states (such as Assam). That lack of national cohesion, the film suggests, is behind the terrorism and insurgency that has plagued India since Independence in 1947 and has become more sophisticated with the advent of suicide bombings in the 1980s. Indeed, the key element of a terrorist plot to assassinate the President of India echoes an historical event in 1991, when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was blown up by a female suicide bomber.

### STORY

*War zone* The opening shots of the film tell us that we are entering a militarised area of India. A taxi approaches a barbed wire barricade, where security guards search for hidden bombs. This is Assam, in the northeast, which was at the time (and continues to be) the site of low-level insurgency by tribal groups against the government in New Delhi. Sitting in the taxi is Amar, a journalist sent from All India Radio in the capital to cover the celebrations of 50 years of Indian independence in this far-flung corner of the country.

*Meghna* While waiting on a railway station platform, Amar sees a woman, whose beauty startles him. He goes to get her a cup of tea and returns only to see her boarding a train with a group of men. Later, he sees again in Assam, but she denies that they have met. Despite her coldness toward him, he is in love with her.

*Insurgency leader* In Assam, Amar arranges to be taken to interview the leader of the armed insurgency. Passing through a dense forest, he arrives at a military training camp, where the leader explains clearly that the goal of the insurgency is independence from India.

*Mystery woman* Amar spots Meghna a third time, this time making a telephone call at a post office. Again, he tries to make friends, but she rebuffs him and finally puts an end to his questions by saying that she is married. Still he follows her to a house, where she greets an old woman and he forces a

conversation. Again, she refuses to explain who she is and why she won't reciprocate his interest. After he leaves, he is questioned and beaten up by two men. Back in the town, Amar goes to the post office and discovers that Meghna made a call to Ladakh and that, more crucially, she is not married.

**Ladakh** After telephoning his own home in Delhi to say that he is all right, Amar goes to Ladakh to search for the woman and to document a Buddhist religious festival. In this mountainous part of northern India, he witnesses the killing of a suicide bomber by the military and then sees Meghna on a bus. When the army questions all the passengers, the visibly nervous Meghna tells the officer that Amar is her husband. The bus breaks down and all the passengers continue on foot through a desolate but beautiful Himalayan landscape. While the two travel alone, Meghna finally tells Amar her name and they come close to making love, but something holds her back. In the morning, she is gone.

**Delhi** Meghna is part of a group who are preparing a terrorist attack. Meghna begins to doubt the morality of the plot, but she is silenced by both female and male comrades. Meanwhile, Amar is in his family's home, where he is confronted with a marriage proposal to Preeti. Without any hope of ever seeing Meghna again, Amar agrees to the wedding but then spots Meghna on the streets with one of her associates. When he runs after her, her companion is stopped by the police and swallows a cyanide pill. The incident appears to be terrorist-related and is passed to the CBI (India's domestic intelligence agency).

**Surprise visitor** Meghna shows up at Amar's engagement party and asks if he can get her a job at All India Radio. She explains that she has no place to stay and that she can't go back to her village (without giving any reason). He agrees and arranges for her to stay in a small room in his family's house. In one of the film's most exquisite scenes, the women of the house decorate Meghna with the jewels intended for Preeti at the wedding.

**Raid** A security raid on the plotter's secret headquarters yields evidence that points toward a plot involving a musical event. Based on eyewitness accounts of the arrest of the terrorist who swallowed a cyanide pill, the CBI now regard Amar as a suspect. Amar is also tortured by his love for Meghna and his upcoming marriage to Preeti.

**Revelation** After searching Meghna's room, Amar realises that she is involved in a plot to kill the President at the annual Independence Day parade. He is desperate to both stop the assassination to save Meghna from involvement in it. When he corners her, she reveals that her parents were killed by soldiers, who then raped her and her sister. He is moved but asks her to give up her life of violence. She refuses and he attempts to find out if she is wearing a suicide vest. She screams, which brings policemen who arrest Amar.

**Finale** Meghna's associates arrange for Amar to be released and then start to beat him up. During the fight, when Meghna calls one of the men, Amar grabs the phone and again tries to talk her out of the terrorist plot. She says it's too late, meaning that he is about to be killed by her associates. Amar gets free but is re-arrested by the CBI and sedated. He later escapes on the day of the planned assassination and again pleads with Meghna to go away with him. When she hesitates, he embraces her, setting off her suicide vest and they both die.

## THEMES

**Fatal attraction** The central theme in this complex and fast-moving story is the doomed love between the two protagonists, the open-hearted Amar and the mysterious Meghna. The impediment to their relationship is not caste or religion or obstreperous parents (as is common in Indian films and fiction), but rather the fact that Meghna is mysterious. From the very beginning of the film, she appears and disappears from his sight—on the train platform in Assam, in a post office and while travelling on foot in Ladakh. It seems that we have an ordinary story about a boy who wants friendship and a girl who just wants to be left alone. But the attraction turns out to be fatal because her disappearing act is linked to her commitment to a terrorist cause and because he is drawn to danger. He is as heedless when arranging an interview with the terrorist leader as he is in pursuing Meghna even after he realises that she is linked to an assassination plot. 'Don't you realise that love is greater than terrorism?' he asks her toward the end. She remains silent but might have answered

that love and terrorism are forms of attachment and that both he and she are ensnared by a loyalty: she to her cause and he to her. She doesn't speak, but in the final explosive scene, we see that their fatal attraction leads them both to death.

**Centre and periphery** Another theme running through the film is the fraught relationship between the centre (New Delhi) and the periphery (border states like Assam). This is the issue that has haunted the nation ever since Independence and that the film-maker explores in impressive detail. India's political system endows the centre with great power (more like the British system and less like the American one, with its emphasis on 'states rights'). It is revealing, then, that Amar works for All India Radio in New Delhi and goes to Assam to report on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of Independence. As soon as he lands up in this border state, racked by terrorism, the film exposes the hypocrisy, ignorance and wilful discrimination that undermine the centrist project of the elites. In the first scene in Assam, we hear a woman (who turns out to be the director of All India Radio in Assam) yelling at a local stall-holder in an open market. 'Just because we aren't local,' she says, 'you cheat us.' Later, she explains to Amar that she was trying to haggle with the man but she didn't know the local swear words. The language divide (Hindi is the pseudo-national language, while Assamese is not known outside the state) crops again when Amar interviews the terrorist leader and tells him to speak in Hindi. The leader stares at Amar and says, calmly, 'You refuse to learn my language, but you demand that I speak yours?' Amar responds with some platitudes about 'India being one nation', but the leader interrupts to say, 'We want independence from your government. In five decades, not one promise to us has been fulfilled. Your government thinks that Delhi is India. States like Assam, on the borders, are forgotten.' Later, it is Meghna who gives him a mini-lecture on politics and terrorism. Amar objects to her criticism of the army, saying that it is what holds 'our country' together. 'Your country,' she sneers, 'not mine.' He says he understands, but she retorts, "You sit in Delhi and play songs on All India Radio. What can you know about our suffering?" Amar cannot reply. He comes from the centre.

## CHARACTERS

**Meghna** Meghna is the female protagonist. Meghna is the terrorist with a mysterious background. 'I am not the girl you think I am,' is what she tells Amar as he pursues her. She is committed to her cause but also traumatised by the terror inflicted on her family by the Indian army. She is both detached and emotionally turbulent, playful and deadly serious. She does not say much, although her eyes and face express a spectrum of feeling from rage to pity to hopelessness.

**Dedicated** Meghna is committed to the cause of independence for the people of Assam. She is not a violent person, nor is she a sadist, but she is unwavering in her loyalty to the political cause, which includes terrorist acts. Her dedication is expressed most powerfully toward the end of the film when Amar has realised that she is part of an assassination plot. He tries to argue with her, mocking her politics ('How many will you kill, huh? 20? 30? 50? Will killing people make you happy?'). She listens but is adamant. 'You'll never understand me,' she says. 'We don't want to be terrorists, but we have no choice. Your army rapes young girls and kills young men. Death in every house, death in every family. The screams still echo in my head. Do you know what that sounds like?' When Amar argues that the mistakes of a few people can't justify destroying the whole nation, Meghna replies, 'Killing innocent people, burning down villages. Are those the mistakes of a few people? If you cannot alleviate our suffering, you cannot give us justice.' She is clearly attracted to Amar, but she has a prior and more demanding loyalty.

**Inner struggle** The mystery that is Meghna is revealed only toward the end of the film, when we learn how she and her sister were raped by soldiers. Before that revelation, though, we see that she is struggling with herself when it comes to physical intimacy. One of the most moving scenes opens up a little window into that trauma. She and Amar are alone in a deserted landscape, travelling together after a bus breaks down. As they talk under soft moonlight, he asks what she likes most. She says poetry, flowers and lullabies. She laughs a little and he moves closer to her. But when he leans in and asks what she dislikes, her answer is: 'You coming close to me.' He tries to smile and says she's lying. She doesn't disagree but she remains withdrawn. And in the morning, when he wakes up, she is gone. Meghna is pulled in two directions: she is falling in love with this handsome and affable young man, but she is still struggling with her inner demons.

**Normal woman** Meghna, the terrorist and mystery femme fatale, is also a woman with ordinary hopes and fears. While those feelings are suppressed in order to carry out her political aims, they do surface in one very powerful scene. She is staying in Amar's house, where the women are preparing

for Amar's wedding to Preeti. IN this scene, the begin to inspect the jewellery that the bride will wear. Preeti is busy, so the women put the ornaments on Meghna to see how they look. One by one, the necklace, the bangles and the forehead pendant, are lovingly placed on Meghna, who is fighting back the tears. 'Look,' the grandmother says, 'just like a bride.' This is the life that Meghna might have had—married to a loving husband in this happy house—but the jewellery is then taken away and she returns to reality. It is a brief moment of normality and of a future she will never have.

**Amar** Amar is the male protagonist. Amar is almost a flawless hero. A serious man, he has a light-hearted side. A dedicated journalist, he is courageous in tracking down big stories. A loyal man, he will not give up on the girl he loves. A patriot, he will defend his country against a terrorist plot. The only shortcoming, if one can even call it that, is his half-mad dogged pursuit of his love. In terms of the 'big picture,' Amar (which incidentally means 'immortal') is a stand-in for India: he works for the government, he lives in New Delhi, his father was in the army and his grandfather fought in Gandhi's campaign against the British.

**Determined** Amar is a reporter for All India Radio sent to Assam, where he shows his determination to get the real story. The regional director of the radio station warns him about the dangers of going to interview a terrorist leader, saying that Amar has gone mad and that he won't return alive. He responds that it is his job to find out what all Indians think, even terrorists. His assistant, who carries the recording equipment, is also afraid and says, 'I have three children. I don't want to die yet.' But Amar isn't listening to these voices of caution. He is led blindfolded for a long way until he is allowed to remove the cloth and see a military camp of insurgents. Guns and fierce-looking men are all around, but he remains calm and conducts the interview without fear. He asks pointed questions, won't accept easy answers and is eventually threatened by the armed men guarding the leader. It is an impressive performance by a young journalist who is alone in a forest with men who are committed to terrorism.

**Desperate** Affable and open-hearted, Amar is desperate in his love for Meghna. He is drawn in by her mystery all the more because it is not the feigned pretence of a coy lover. His desperation grows until it explodes in a scene that occurs after she has sought refuge in his family's house. He is about to be married but cannot expunge his love for her from his heart (thus the film's title). In this scene, Amar finds Meghna alone and presses close to her. 'We can get married,' he whispers in her ear. 'All our differences will disappear when we have children.' Meghna, true to her character, says nothing, but she does not push him away. 'Say you love me,' he pleads with her. 'Say it. Just once. And we will go away.' Their faces almost touch, she is crying and Amar is about to embrace her, when a voice from downstairs calls him away. In this scene, Amar reveals that he is ready to give up everything that his middle-class life has given him: a good job, a lovely fiancé and a supportive family. He is a desperate man.

**Normal man** Just as the mysterious Meghna is shown to have the feelings of an ordinary woman, so, too, does the desperate Amar harbour normal emotions. This side of the courageous hero is dramatised in a scene, where friends and family have gathered to celebrate his engagement to Preeti. She is the girl chosen by his family and (reluctantly) accepted by him. The scene begins as Preeti knocks on the door of the bathroom, and Amar, covered only in a towel, comes out. Visibly anxious, she reminds him that once the engagement is formalised, there's no going back. 'So, think about it now,' she says. 'You can still change your mind.' Amar doesn't answer but merely shakes his head as if to say, 'Yeah, I know. No problem.' It's not a ringing endorsement of the engagement, but it is honest. Then, fully dressed, he joins the party and glides between the party guests like a man in fully control of his destiny. He is gracious and courteous. The couple exchange rings, the confetti flies and he is congratulated by everyone. Just like a normal man, except that the corner of his eye has been monitoring Meghna in the background.

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| <b>Preeti</b>     | Preeti is Amar's fiancé.                           |
| <b>Mrs Burman</b> | Mrs Burman is the radio station director in Assam. |
| <b>Shukla</b>     | Shukla is Amar's recording assistant in Assam.     |
| <b>Kim</b>        | Kim is one of the men in the terrorist gang.       |



(Amar in Assam interviewing local people)



(Amar meets Meghna on the railway platform)



(Amar and Meghna during a moonlit conversation)



(The terrorist gang, with Meghna on the right)



(Meghna is decorated with Preeti's wedding jewels, with Amar reflected in the mirror)