

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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WAVES ARE FLOWING, ALAI PAYUTHEY 2000

Mani Ratnam

(Tamil)

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

The Waves are Flowing is a romantic drama written and directed by Mani Ratnam, the acclaimed auteur of south India. Although it has the obligatory Bollywood song-and-dance routines and flashy cinematography, it rises above the standards of a typical film by its serious depiction of life in India at the turn of the 21st century. The story, which is largely told in an extended flashback, charts the ups and downs of a romance and then marriage between Karthik and Shakti in Madras. It has a happy ending, but also realistic scenes of humdrum life for ordinary people in the big city. Throughout, the film also features the shocking scenes and surprising elements that define Ratnam's films.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The titular waves that 'flow' ('jump' might be more idiomatic) concern marriage, the cultural institution that still dominates Indian society even in the year 2000. This explains, in part, the huge success of the film, which is also graced by a wonderful musical score by A R Rahman. The two lovers meet at a marriage; they are later secretly married; the girl's sister has a marriage cancelled and then rescheduled. The chief merit of the film is its story about modern marriages, which are no longer either 'love marriage' or an 'arranged marriage,' but something of a hybrid.

STORY

No-show The film opens at a railway station in Madras. Karthik, a young software engineer, is waiting to meet Shakti, a medical student, who is his wife. He waits, the sky gets dark and still no Shakti. He goes home confused and disappointed.

Flashback Two years earlier, Karthik first sees Shakti at a friend's wedding. Next, we watch Shakti at home, where she is the younger sister and a dedicated medical student. She fends off her aunt's attempts to manoeuvre her into a marriage with her cousin (a common South Indian marital arrangement). Then we are introduced to Karthik and his family, who are wealthier than Shakti's. Karthik's father doesn't understand his son's 'job', trying to establish a tech start-up, but gives him money to 'ride around on a motor bike and smoke cigarettes.'

Pursuit The two young people see each other a second time when their commuter trains cross. Karthik is smitten and decides that he will somehow find this girl among the millions of people in the city. For her part, although Shakti dismisses this 'mad guy eyeing me on the train,' she is clearly taken with him. He pursues her on the train, locates her house and then her college. After they exchange a few cautious words, Karthik invites her to his house for the Hindu version of a 'baby shower,' where he tells all his relatives that she is the girl he will marry. Soon he proposes to her, but she is dubious that he is sincere.

Parents Karthik's next move is to persuade his parents to go to Shakti's parents and discuss a marriage. That conversation is riddled with misunderstanding and doubts, primarily because Shakti's family is average and Karthik's is wealthy, but also because no one knows if this is a 'love' marriage or an arranged marriage. It ends without any agreement.

Secret marriage Shortly after, Shakti tells Karthik that they need a break, effectively calling off their relationship, and she goes away to Kerala (the neighbouring state) for medical field training. In the course of their separation, both realise that they are sincerely in love. Again, he searches and discovers her. They both confess their love and get married secretly. Even after marriage, they continue to live as if nothing had happened, living in their family homes and saying nothing.

Revelation The secret is forced out in the open when Shakti's older sister, Poorni, is about to marry and her parents fix a marriage for Shakti with the groom's brother. In a tearful scene, Shakti reveals that she is already married, which then prompts her parents to disown her. Karthik also reveals the secret to his parents, who throw him out as well.

Joy and pain Now, finally, Karthik and Shakti live together as husband and wife, albeit without the support of their families. Their initial joy slowly recedes as various problems mount up, from the inevitable squabbling to a serious illness that puts Shakti's father in hospital. Shakti asks Karthik to visit him, but he refuses, explaining that her father had never accepted him. By the time he does visit, her father is dead. Karthik's guilt and Shakti's anger create more distance between them and they are effectively separated.

Another marriage Without Shakti knowing, Karthik decides to help Poorni get married (her marriage to Raghuraman was called off in the wake of the earlier revelation of Shakti's secret marriage). He arranges what is essentially a blind date between Poorni and Raghuraman, but that is a failure. Not giving up, he succeeds in bringing them closer together and in arranging a marriage. Shakti knows nothing about this and grows suspicious when she sees Karthik hug a woman, unable to see that it is Poorni and that Karthik is merely reassuring her.

Accident When Karthik tells her about her sister's marriage, Shakti is overjoyed and rushes home from college to meet her husband and make up with him. She is injured in a traffic accident and taken to hospital. Unaware of this, Karthik waits for her at the railway station.

Back to the present Now, the film has returned to the opening scene at the railway station, where Karthik grows anxious because Shakti hasn't shown up. Hours pass, night falls and Karthik begins to search out the station, eventually finding her in intensive care unit in hospital. She is registered under a different name and is in a coma, having undergone brain surgery.

Reunion Waiting in the hospital, Karthik is approached by the man who says he caused the accident that injured Shakti. When Karthik verbally attacks the man, his wife intervenes and explains that, in truth, she was the driver and that her husband only wants to protect her and take the blame himself. Karthik realises that he must do the same for his own wife. Days later, Shakti wakes up from her coma and the long-troubled couple are happily reunited.

THEMES

Accident At first glance, this appears to be a conventional story about marriage. However, Mani Ratnam has made the film with an emphasis on the accidental nature of romance and life. This theme of the arbitrariness is introduced in the opening shots of a traffic accident, which we watch as the credits roll. It recurs in the first scene of the long flashback, when Shakti's mother warns her that she is hurrying too much and might 'fall under a train.' So worried is her mother that she ties a yellow string around her daughter's wrist as protection (a Hindu custom). More important is the accidental meeting of the two lovers, the arbitrary result of their morning routines during which they ride on trains that cross at a particular station. Later, Karthik finds Shakti in hospital only because of a freak coincidence. Shakti's brother is visiting his ailing mother in the same hospital and happens to see Shakti through a glass partition, lying in a coma. Karthik is a software geek, a person who relies on predictability and regularity, but he has discovered that life serves up a series of accidents and coincidences. The waves of his life are indeed flowing.

Marriage While those currents flow in unpredictable ways, there is one constant in the lives of the two protagonists. Marriage. However, this masterful director has taken this most frequent of all themes in Indian cinema and created a story with a clever twist. The dramatic tension is not, as is often the case, between love and the conventions of an arranged marriage; that tension no longer

exists for educated urban families because marriages are usually a blend of both love and parental involvement. This reality of the mixed-marriage is established in the long conversation between Shakti's parents and Karthik's parents. Then, the film shows us two different scenarios of married life. First, Shakti and Karthik are secretly married and live in separate houses. Second, when their marriage becomes known and they live together, they become emotionally separate. The real test of marriage and love, the film suggests, is not simply being able (or permitted) to live together; the enduring trial is to learn to support each other emotionally. This is the lesson of the last section of the film, when Karthik finds Shakti in hospital and meets the husband of the woman who caused the accident. He is a high-ranking government officer, but he is willing to take the blame for the accident (possibly a fatality) without a second thought. He wants to protect his wife from the media and a possible court case. In this closing section, that man becomes a substitute father for Karthik, who learns a valuable lesson from him. Days earlier, Karthik had received advice from another older man, a drunken landlord, who says, 'Love before marriage is fragile, but love that comes after marriage is strong like the roots of a tree. It is intact.' The waves are flowing, but the roots are also growing.

CHARACTERS

Shakti Shakti is a medical student and later Karthik's wife. Shakti is a strong character, determined to earn a medical degree and support herself. She has energy and spirit, and is so combative that her mother describes her as a 'fighting cock.' She is aspirational, coming from a modest family in an increasingly competitive world. Pragmatic, she first rejects Karthik's advances as a distraction. Although single-minded, she is also vulnerable, the younger sister to a more sedate older sister, Poorni.

Impetuous Shakti is always on the move, anxious to get somewhere. To medical college, to her exams and, eventually, to a better life than her parents have. This impetuous quality is revealed in the first scene within her family home. It is breakfast, but she hardly has time to eat. She's reading a text book while at the same time spooning rice onto her plate. Two seconds later, she is up from the table, ready to leave, when her mother pushes her back down. 'Eat, mad girl. If not, you won't remember anything in class.' Shakti shovels in some food, jumps up again and heads for the door. Her mother notices that her hair is dishevelled and helps her fix it. 'Don't be in such a rush,' her mother warns her. 'You might fall under a train.' Finally, she waits impatiently while her mother ties a protective string around her wrist. Shakti is plunging headlong into the world of trains, cars and accidental sightings of a young man, but she has only one thing in mind: get to college, pass my exams and become a doctor.

Cautious Impetuous in her career drive, Shakti is nonetheless cautious when it comes to love. Even when the handsome Karthik pursues her from train to house to college, she does not want to be deflected from her educational goal. This practical side of her character is illustrated in the first scene in which she actually speaks to him. She is at college, and he watches her through a mesh-iron fence. Unable to ignore him, she strolls over, studies his smiling face and asks abruptly, 'Ok, what's your name.' He tells her. 'So, are you rich?' she asks. 'Or have you failed your exams?' When he looks perplexed, she says, 'I ask because only stupid rich guys chase after a girl who has no work prospects.' Shakti the medical student has no time for frivolous things like romance and no interest in rich boys who fancy her.

Uncertain Underneath her determined and spirited surface, Shakti is uncertain about her future. Will she pass her exams? Will she become a doctor? The most dramatic illustration of her self-doubt comes just before she gets secretly married to Karthik. He has arranged for the ceremony in a temple, with only a few close friends and relatives, who are sworn to keep quiet. As she dresses herself that morning, she looks in the mirror and tears form in her eyes. Her older sister, Poorni, tries to reassure her, but she can only repeat her fears that 'something will go wrong. I don't know how to manage this.' Poorni says that it's 'only a marriage,' which prompts Shakti to say, 'That's just it. A marriage and I have no idea what it will mean.' Of course, her situation is exacerbated by the fact that her marriage is secret, but her sense of unease is something that will accompany her throughout the remainder of the story.

Karthik Karthik is a software developer in Madras. Karthik is a foil to Shakti's aspirational and practical character. He is rich and has no real job, just training as a software engineer, while he tries to get a start-up company off the ground. Like her, though, he is also brash, yet sensitive and vulnerable. Most of all, he is a true romantic. And, in a strange way, that makes him as determined as Shakti, except that their goals differ.

Determined Karthik is determined to find the girl he sees on the train. It is a romantic quest, in the best traditions of Asian epics and songs. This dedication to pursue his love is illustrated in an early scene, right after his second sighting of Shakti. He is among a small group of friends, who like him dabble in computer software developing. When he says that he must find the identity of this girl, his friends are incredulous. 'You don't know her name, where she lives or anything about her. It's stupid.' Karthik is undeterred and explains. 'How many people in Madras?' he asks. 7 million is the answer. Then he begins to narrow the odds. Of them, 3.5 million are women. 40,000 are aged between 18-22. 3,000 are medical students. And of them, only 70 take that particular train every morning to the college. 'So,' he says at the end of this statistical pursuit, 'can I find this girl among those 70?' Of course, he can. And he does.

Proud Karthik has a certain amount of pride, perhaps inbred from the status of his father as a wealthy lawyer. This self-regard is illustrated in a moving scene that occurs after he and Shakti are secretly married. In another one of the many coincidences in the story, Shakti meets her mother on the train and learns that her father is seriously ill in hospital. She goes to Karthik and asks that he accompany her to the hospital. But he refuses, saying 'I've got my self-respect, too, you know. He slapped me [in an earlier scene]. I can't forget that. Not even my own father ever did that.' Shakti pleads with him to do this for her, but he becomes angry. 'I'll never go to him face to face. I'd rather die.' His refusal forces Shakti to make a choice between him and her family. Karthik is aware of the enormity of the situation, but he will not back down. He is the son of a well-known lawyer and will not forgive a railway employee who has insulted him.

Cocky The cocky side of Karthik's character is revealed in an early scene, when he first speaks to Shakti. Having seen her only once before on the train, he sees her again while their trains stand in the same station on adjacent platforms. He walks across the platform, takes off his designer sunglasses and grabs one of her notebooks. Without explanation or apology, he reads her name, which confirms that she is Shakti (he knows the name only because her sister used it when Karthik did a reconnaissance mission on her family's apartment). Then he smiles at her and says, 'I don't love you and I wouldn't even say that I like you. In fact, I can't say you're very attractive.' She waits with a frown, and he continues, 'But if all that comes true, then....' The train whistle blows, he puts his sunglasses on and waves at her on the departing train. His arrogance would be enough to unsettle anyone, let alone a young woman dead set on getting her medical degree. But Karthik's brashness, we soon learn, is a defensive cover for his lack of confidence in pursuing a woman whom he has fallen in love with at first sight, quite literally.

Varadarajan Varadarajan, a successful lawyer, is Karthik's father.

Poorni Poorni is Shakti's older, unmarried sister.

Sethu Sethu is Shakti's and Poorni's father.



(Karthik first speaks to Shakti)



(Shakti awakes from a coma and is reunited with Karthik)



(Shakti's cousin tries to win her affection)