

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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## SILENT SYMPHONY (MOUNA RAAGAM) 1986

Mani Ratnam

(Tamil)

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

#### OVERVIEW

On the surface, this is a conventional love story. Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy and girl are reunited. But it is complicated by a second, prior love story for the girl, which prevents her from loving her husband. It explores the plight of Divya, a woman emotionally crippled by the murder of her fiancé and unable to assume the role of wife to a man whom her family choose as her husband. The film delves into these psychological complexities of memory, duty and divorce.

#### CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

*Silent Symphony* was Mani Ratnam's breakthrough film. He began writing it as a short story, with no plans for production, and only later wrote the screenplay. It opened to modest audiences but soon became a big hit and the film-maker never looked back. The story gripped viewers, in part, because of its frank depiction of divorce. Indeed, the Indian censor board was about to give it a restricted 'A' certificate because board members worried that it would encourage divorce. Only after a vociferous campaign did the film receive an unrestricted 'U' certificate. The divorce law in the film, which permits a mutual consent divorce only after a year, was enacted in 1955 and remains the current legislation in India. Two other, small items of cultural significance are noteworthy. At one point, Divya says that her marriage necklace (*tali*) is only 'a yellow piece of string.' This is a powerful and provocative statement, equivalent perhaps to saying 'this ring is only cold metal.' A second matter is the pair of anklets that Chandrakumar gives to Divya (along with the divorce papers) as a wedding gift. For a south Indian audience, those ornaments carry sensual connotations that go back to an epic (*The Lay of the Anklet, Cilappatikaram*) written circa 500 AD.

#### STORY

*Divya* The film opens with a lively domestic scene, in which Divya, a college student, plays the energetic and independent daughter, teasing her mother, not taking a bath and playfully spilling a tub of water on a couple who think their embrace is hidden from prying eyes. After these antics, she encounters her stern-faced father and apologises.

*Prospective groom* Divya's cheerfulness leaves her when she discovers that her parents have arranged for a prospective groom to come over that afternoon. She is already attracted to a boy at college, named Manohar and is definitely not interested in anyone else. The possible future husband is Chandrakumar, a young but successful businessman. Divya tries to put him off with her frankness, but he declares that he is satisfied with her and the marriage arrangements go ahead.

*Heart attack* Her sisters and mother think the man is a 'good catch' and bubble over with joy, but Divya is stubborn and refuses to go along with the plan. When her father has a heart attack, though, she is persuaded to accept the marriage so as not to increase his anxiety.

*Unhappy* After the marriage, Chandrakumar takes Divya to his house, which has a modern but cold interior that matches their relationship. He goes to work, where he is popular, and she stays alone in a spotless building, where she is lonely. When he asks Divya what she wants for a wedding gift, she says a divorce. At work, we also learn that there is a strike looming and that Chandrakumar is worried.

*Rejection* After Divya rejects Chandrakumar's physical advances, he suggests that he could force her. Relenting, he later brings her a wrapped package as gift, but she refuses to open it. When he demands to know why she will not accept him as her husband, she collapses to the floor in tears.

*Revelation* Through a flashback, we learn why, as she says, 'My heart is not with me.' A fellow college student, named Manohar, robs and assaults the son of an MP, but no one has the nerve to identify the assailant. Then Divya plucks up the courage and identifies him. Later, though, she learns that Manohar assaulted the MP's son because he (the son) had run over a girl with his car and that Manohar stole the son's money to pay for the girl's hospital treatment. Contrite, she bails Manohar out of jail by pawning her gold necklace. The grateful Manohar falls in love with her and tries to meet her. Despite some initial reserve, Divya eventually returns his affection.

*Dead* Then she discovers that Manohar is part of a revolutionary group, of which she does not approve. When he asks her to attend a big political rally, she refuses. 'You have to choose between your politics and me,' she says. 'Either one or the other. Not both.' He is angry, but then makes a proposal: if he follows her advice and doesn't go to the rally, she must marry him. She agrees, but on their wedding day, before the ceremony, Manohar is arrested on the suspicion that he attended the illegal rally. He escapes and manages to make it to the registrar's office, where Divya is waiting for him. Just before the ceremony is completed, though, a policeman shoots and kills Manohar.

*Gift* When (back in the present) Chandrakumar hears this explanation, he gives Divya a wrapped package, which she opens and finds a pair of anklets and divorce papers. 'The one [the papers] is what you wanted; the other I chose.' He is ready to forget her past and get on with the marriage, but Divya cannot forget. 'My heart is not with me,' she says and chooses divorce. They consult a lawyer, who says that they will be eligible for divorce only after one year of marriage.

*Role reversal* Now Divya feels somewhat free and begins to draw closer to her 'husband,' at least, emotionally. There are awkward moments, for example, when she leaves the room and embarrasses him in front of his work colleagues. He, on the other hand, steels himself against her, knowing that in a year's time, she will leave him. The roles have been reversed.

*Housewife* While Divya gets involved in turning her house into a home, cooking meals and serving him coffee, Chandrakumar is facing increased tension at work because of an imminent strike and is forced to fire one of the union leaders.

*Invalid* Their warming relationship assumes a new level of intimacy when Chandrakumar takes her on a day trip to Agra to see the Taj Mahal. When they return home late at night, though, he is severely beaten by a disgruntled worker and hospitalised. Sitting by his bed, where he seems barely alive, she realises that she feels affection for him. When he comes home to convalesce, she looks after him, but he keeps his distance. She attempts to feed him with her hand, but he says no. 'You might feel like bugs are crawling on you,' which is the phrase she used at the beginning of their marriage.

*Parental visit* Divya's parents make a brief visit to her house, during which her mother advises her to 'give in a little. Fighting is natural, but not having separate beds.' When they leave, Divya's father asks Chandrakumar for his forgiveness as he made a mistake in the marriage and asks him 'not to make my daughter cry.'

*Anklets* Determined to win Chandrakumar's affection, Divya wears the anklets that he gave her (along with the divorce papers), but Chandrakumar doesn't accept her gesture. Instead, he tells her it's time for her to go back to her parents and books her train ticket.

*Rescue* That evening, Divya walks out of the house, confused and is taunted by a group of drunk men. She cries out for help and Chandrakumar rescues her. They embrace for the first time and walk home arm in arm.

*Decision* But in the morning, the Divya's train ticket is delivered to the house. Chandrakumar gives the ticket to Divya, who says, 'Tell me not to leave now and I will never leave you. It's your choice.'

To which, he says, 'I want your opinion. Your decision has nothing to do with me. You're the one who said that the marriage necklace was only a piece of string.' Divya says nothing and he walks away. He returns carrying his briefcase, and she hands him the household accounts, his cheque book and the keys. Everything is settled. 'Right, I'll come back at 2 pm and take you to the station,' he says. 'Not necessary,' she says. 'I'll go by myself.' He leaves

*Railway station* Chandrakumar comes to the station and hands her a document that confirms their divorce. 'The law says there's nothing between us now,' he says. 'But this is only a piece of paper. What does your heart say,' she asks. 'I can bear you not liking me. But you do like me, yet won't admit it. I admit that I wholeheartedly love you.' She also says that she will wait for him at her parents' house, if he wants to take her back. Then she rips up the divorce document and thrusts it into his hands. Two minutes later, he runs down the platform, racing with the train and finally manages to leap on. They are reunited, forever.

## THEMES

*Love and marriage* Can something new be said about love and marriage, the most overworked theme in Indian cinema? Yes, is the answer provided by Mani Ratnam's clever film. Rather than explore the pain of love without marriage, or the tragedy of marriage through jealousy and betrayal, the film sets the protagonists a new test: how to endure an unhappy and asexual marriage that has an expiry date of one year? Of course, Divya's alliance with Chandrakumar has the typical (Indian) tension of being an arranged marriage, to which the bride only consents for reasons other than love (in this case, to help her ailing father recover from a heart attack). Almost like a scientist in his laboratory, the film-maker places his two guinea pigs in a comfortable house, where we watch how they behave in this unusual situation of a marriage with an end-date. Chandrakumar reacts by withdrawing his affection, not wanting to expose himself to further rejection and hurt, while Divya appears lonely and unhappy. The fact of the end-date, though, allows Divya to loosen her grip on her feelings, and, incrementally, through minor incidents, she begins to develop warm feelings for her 'partner.' The experiment ends with the guinea pigs alive and happy. Conclusion for the scientist: love and marriage may be, as the saying goes, just 'like a horse and carriage,' but sometimes the carriage comes before the horse.

*Past and present* The other theme of the film (and the key to the outcome of the first theme) is Divya's inner conflict between clinging to the past and coming to terms with the present. It is a choice between two marriages, one that ended before it began with the brutal murder of the fiancé, and the other that begins with an end-date in place. Can Divya forget Manohar, their loving relationship and his bloody death? Should she simply 'get over it' and 'move on'? As she herself explains, she cannot bring herself to return Chandrakumar's love because she has had her heart torn out of her. How does that scar heal? Should Divya be strong, face the reality that the past is past and try to learn from it? It is a question that everyone faces, in one way or other, to stick to old ideas and habits or adjust to a changing world. The key factor in Divya's case is her young age. Time heals, and it heals more quickly for the young. New experiences, such as the wonderful trip to the Taj Mahal, build up new layers of skin over the scar and allow Divya to enjoy the present. And yet, at the end of the story, when Divya and Chandrakumar, accept each other's love, one still wonders if the old memories will come back. The past has been displaced but not completely eliminated by the past.

## CHARACTERS

*Divya* Divya is a college student and later wife of Chandrakumar. 'I'm lazy, I have no responsibility and I talk back to my elders.' This self-assessment pretty much sums up Divya's lively character. From one angle, she is the proverbial college student, but at least she is self-aware. As the story moves forward, we also learn that she can be considerate and loyal and warm. For the first half of the film, her character is dominated by her emotional secret that makes her emotionally distant. The second half is the healing process that concludes with a happy woman.

*Candid* One of Divya's admirable traits is her candour. She may be selfish and arrogant, but she is honest. Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of this quality occurs in her 'interview' with Chandrakumar as her prospective husband. In this excruciating ceremony in modern Indian marital arrangements, the man and woman are allowed to meet and speak together alone for a few minutes. In this case, Divya, who is probably only 18 or 19 years old, seizes the chance to speak before Chandrakumar can object. 'Before you say anything, I want to speak,' she says, keeping her distance from him. 'I don't like this ceremony at all. It's like buying cattle at a market. I don't mean to insult

you. My parents will have sung my praises, but I'm not like that. I have many flaws: pride, anger, selfishness.' That is a bold speech by a young intended bride, but it is only half the truth. What she does not say (and we the audience do not yet know) is that her heart has been ripped out of her by the murder of another man, Manohar, whom she loved. In retrospect, then, we can see that Divya's candour is more a reflection of her independent spirit than her openness.

**Caring** Selfish at times, Divya is also a caring person. This aspect of her character is displayed sometime after she rejects Chandrakumar as a marriage partner. Her father has a heart attack and is recovering, when her mother comes to her and begs her to accept the marriage arrangement. 'I'm afraid he'll die soon if you don't give in,' her mother says. The independent-minded Divya loves her father more than her own happiness and agrees to accept the marriage. Early the next morning, in a slow-moving scene, she walks silently to the room where her father is resting. He is surprised to see her up so early. She bows her head and says that she is ready to be married. He is delighted but doubtful and makes her repeat her words while looking at him. She just barely manages to do that and then collapses in his arms. 'You're doing this for me, aren't you?' he says. 'Yes, papa. I'll do anything for you.'

**Withdrawn** After the marriage, we again see the distant Divya, not because she is insincere or arrogant, but because she is emotionally incapable of loving her husband. After weeks of her avoiding the marital bed, Chandrakumar confronts her and wants an answer for her unwillingness to become intimate with him. She says that his touch 'feels like bugs crawling along my skin.' This shocks him into saying, 'After all, I put your marriage necklace on her neck.' 'Ah, but that's just a piece of string,' she replies. 'The world may disagree, but I'm not your wife... Apart from the roof, we don't share anything.' It is a devastating moment for the husband to find his wife completely shut off from him. But Divya has withdrawn deep into herself, where he cannot reach him.

**Chandrakumar** Chandrakumar is the groom chosen by Divya's parents, who becomes her husband. Chandrakumar is a likable person, and a model husband. He loves books and music, he is soft-spoken and considerate. And he is attractive. He is also patient and understanding, both with his complicated wife and with colleagues at work. But his fair-mindedness has limits because he also has deep feelings and is vulnerable.

**Sensitive** Divya is fortunate that her parents did choose Chandrakumar as her husband because he is a sensitive man. He is frustrated by her emotional coldness, but rather than force intimacy (as some Indian husbands might do), he is patient and understanding. In the middle of a tense discussion of their lack of intimacy, he says, 'I understand. A new-born child cries because the world is unfamiliar. It's the same with you. I'll wait until you feel comfortable.'

**Fair-minded** Chandrakumar is patient, and eventually Divya reveals her great secret about Manohar. Even then, however, he shows his fair-mindedness and remains loyal to her. He says that he still loves her, but is ready for a divorce if she wants one. She doesn't answer and he says, 'I don't care about your past, only our future.' Again, she is silent and he then gives her a wedding present, a wrapped box that contains two objects: divorce papers and a pair of silver anklets. 'The first is what you wanted; the other is my choice,' he says. Rather than become angry and force some immediate decision, Chandrakumar has the sense to offer her a choice: separation or continuing with the marriage. This act is consistent with his thoughtful and patient character.

**Vulnerable** The emotional dynamic between the married but distant couple shifts sometime through the year before the divorce is possible. Just as Divya, now freed from the pressure of marriage, is beginning to find that she likes Chandrakumar, he is beginning to pull away from her. He has loved her all along but now that the end is in sight, he feels hurt by her previous coldness and protects himself by withdrawing. In a moving scene, she apologises for embarrassing him in front of his business colleagues and says, 'I'm sorry. I'll change. I won't do that again.' He looks at her tenderly but says, 'Not necessary. You don't have to change. You'll be gone in a year.' He moves her bedding to another room and says, 'This can be your room, where you can be as you like. On your own.' The emotional tables have turned. Chandrakumar has been hurt for too long and has withdrawn into himself.

**Manohar** Manohar is a student whom Divya was about to marry when he is shot dead.

**Divya's parents** Divya's parents play roles without much characterisation.



(Chandrakumar and Divya)



(Divya and Chandrakumar at their wedding)



(Divya with Manohar as college students)



(Divya and Manohar in the middle of a riot)