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A Rose by Any Other Name: Exploring the Politics of *Roja*

“January 1993. A cinema hall in Hyderabad. The Telugu version of Maniratnam’s *Roja* is being shown. Every show displays the ‘house full’ board, and every seat in the theatre is occupied. From the opening minutes of the film, the morning show audience (mostly male, middle and lower-middle class, possibly college going) indulges in loud cheering and shouting, their slogans calculated to strike a special chord after the destruction of the Babri masjid just a few weeks previously: Jai Sri Ram, Pakistan Murdabad. Bharat Mata ki Jai” (Niranjana, 79).

Tejaswini Niranjana’s evocative account of a viewing of Mani Ratnam’s blockbuster, *Roja (Roja/The Rose, 1992)* touches on topics at the heart of this essay. Released to wide commercial and critical acclaim in 1992 and the subject of much academic discussion since then, *Roja* was the film that brought accomplished South Indian director Mani Ratnam to the attention of the wider Indian audience.¹ Dealing with complex contemporary issues of separatism in Kashmir and wider notions of Indian nationalism, *Roja* juxtaposes the personal story of a young Tamil cryptologist kidnapped by Kashmiri militants and his wife’s desperate struggle to free him with the burning and basic political questions that India faced in the 1990s, ‘Who is an Indian? What defines him/her? What is the state of the Indian nation?’

This essay aims to analyse *Roja*’s often simplistic responses to these queries. In order to understand these responses, I will look at how *Roja* depicts Kashmir and Tamil Nadu, the portrayal of Hinduism and Islam, the depiction of the Indian state as represented by the Indian Army, the characterization of Rishi, Roja and Liaquat Khan and Rishi’s loyalty to the Indian state which veers between a brand of nationalism and outright jingoism versus Roja’s loyalty to her husband above all else. I am also interested in exploring the differences between the dubbed Hindi version and the

¹ A discussion primarily conducted in the pages of the *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, an influential, left-leaning periodical published in Bombay and kick-started by Niranjana’s January 1994 article on *Roja*. There have been a few articles on *Roja* since but the *EPW* debate which lasted for the better part of the year remains the best source for many, provocative intellectual view-points on *Roja*.

original Tamil version. It is my contention that the mere act of dubbing robs *Roja* of the regional context so critical to understanding the film. When viewed through a regional lens, *Roja* provides subtly different answers to the questions it raises, though these answers continue to be both confusing and contradictory. For the purpose of this essay, I will refer mainly to the original, Tamil-language version of *Roja* mentioning the dubbed Hindi version only to compare the two.

Roja begins with a cacophony of sounds, the whirring of helicopters, the barking of dogs and the tramping of boots are coupled with the sounds of the forest and a muted *azaan*, the Muslim call to prayer, before the screen clears to reveal the familiar uniforms of soldiers of the Indian army who seem to be engaged in some sort of military operation. Within a few minutes, the audience is drawn into a tense gun battle between the Indian army and a group of men the film soon identifies as Kashmiri militants. One man, clearly one of some importance, Wasim Khan, is captured before the scene shifts to the pastoral allure of rural Tamil Nadu and the film's titular heroine prances onto the screen singing its most famous song, *Chinna Chinna Asai* (*Small Desires of the Heart*).

Thus, from the very beginning, Ratnam establishes the vivid differences between the northernmost and southernmost states in India. Kashmir, a land of legendary beauty and the primary location of the film, is a space inhabited by the Indian army and terrorists, who disrupt with their heavy boots and automatic weapons its very essence, not to mention its birds. Tamil Nadu, home to the director, his actors and his original target audience, is a place whose normalcy is warm and inviting. Its fields are occupied by industrious women in colourful saris and its forests by impish heroines who steal fruits unlike the Kashmiri forests which are the sites of war and weapons. Sundarpandipuram in the Tirunelveli district of Mani Ratnam's Tamil Nadu

is not just miles away from the Srinagar of Ratnam's Kashmir literally, it is also worlds away metaphorically. *Roja's* "two beginnings" (Niranjana, 80) makes clear its point of view; Kashmir in its current state is clearly the other.

From this, it arguably follows that those that live in this Kashmir are also part of the other. Since the film depicts no Kashmiris other than one Kashmiri Muslim newspaper boy, a few Kashmiri Muslim militants and many, pretty Kashmiri women and children dressed in Kashmiri Muslim ethnic wear and used as props in some songs, one is forced to conclude that this other is Kashmiri Muslim. In an influential essay that skewers *Roja's* purported nationalism, Tejaswini Niranjana contends that *Roja* deifies a new middle-class that is distinctly Hindu at heart with Hindutva in its soul and does so by consistently othering Muslims. Its background score, editing choices, use of light etc. all normalise Hindu ethnicity on one hand while demonizing Muslim ethnicity on the other. She posits that the rustic ethnicity of Rishi and *Roja's* wedding is in direct contrast to the blatant display of Muslim ethnicity seen through the dress of the Kashmiri militants and their constant praying. "...their (*Muslim*) ethnicity reveals them as anti-modern (therefore anti-national or anti-Indian), intolerant and fundamentalist, while Hindu ethnicity as displayed by the chief protagonists is merely part of the complexity of being Indian," she concludes (Niranjana, 80).

Rustam Bharucha picks up on Niranjana's overarching theme of othering the Muslim while ruminating on *Roja's* links to fascism.² He writes, "Here there are no villains in the earlier sense, but the enemy figures who are specifically marked as 'Kashmiri' and 'Muslim'" (Bharucha, 1391). Also troubling for Bharucha is the degree of realism that Mani Ratnam uses to depict these militants. The fact that "their

² Bharucha also ties it to Chomsky's ideas of the 'Manufacture of Consent' which is interesting but beyond the realm of this essay.

representation is almost low-key, even ‘realistic’ by commercial film standards” and that “...they are played in the context of verisimilitude” underlines Ratnam’s darker purposes and undermines “the danger of its representation of the ‘enemy’” for the audience (Bharucha, 1391).

If Rishi, with his modern education and outlook, symbolises the ordinary, middle-class Hindu male on whom the Indian nation must now rely on for protection and Roja, his high-spirited but still traditional Hindu wife, signifies why it must be protected, then Liaquat Khan denotes the danger that separation from the actual Indian state holds for the imagined Indian nation. In order to preserve that imagined nation which is unquestionably Hindu, this separation must be prevented and those who champion it recognized for who they really are, enemies of the state and the nation and Muslim.

Parallel to this overwhelmingly negative representation of the Muslim militants is an unabashedly positive representation of the Indian army. Though academics remain divided on the role and representation of the state in *Roja*, the representation of the prominence, power and prowess of the army resounds in their varied arguments.³ According to S V Srinivas, contemporary Indian films have long denied the Indian politician the legitimacy to speak for the Indian state, so “the army alone is being projected as the authentic voice of the state” (Srinivas, 1226) and *Roja* is no different. In not questioning the army’s stand on Kashmiri militants, for not investigating why Kashmiri militants are fighting for separation, by allowing Gen. Royappa to emotionally castigate Roja for securing the release of her husband by appealing to the Minister, *Roja* not only “slickly packages state propaganda”

³ While for Niranjana a certain form of the state is weak and crumbling, for Chakravarty and Pandian, its negative representation in *Roja* deliberately hides its immense power. Niranjana’s response to Chakravarty and Pandian’s analysis can be found in Niranjana, Tejaswini. “*Roja* Revisited”. *Economic and Political Weekly*. May 21 1994, 1299.

(Srinivas, 1226) but also “helps to legitimise army activities such as search operations, the interrogation of ‘terrorists’ and the shooting of them” (Velicheti, qtd. in Srinivas, 1226).

Roja, thus, when viewed through the eyes of these academics is not merely difficult but extremely dangerous. Its insidious ideology, its often jingoistic tenor, its Hindu Brahmin, middle-class hero and heroine, even its sweeping cinematography and catchy music are all symptomatic of a time in Indian politics and society when the Hindu Right achieved an unparalleled hold on the imagination of India. Indian commercial cinema in its single-minded devotion to please the masses was quick to pick up on their new mood and efficient in catering to their new command, making sure, as always, to sugar-coat the pill with peppy music, perfect locales and pleasant leads. *Roja’s* move from a regional film to a national one, its being dubbed into several languages including Hindi, its subsequent popularity with audiences all over India and to add insult to injury, its Presidential award for National Integration are all signs of this unholy nexus between Indian cinema, Indian audiences and Hindutva politics that so typified the India of the 1990s.⁴ Or is it?

It is probable to read the politics of *Roja* as the politics of division, communalism and majoritarianism. It is plausible to theorise that *Roja* denigrates Nehruvian ideals of secularism and rationalism while supporting the lunatic ideas of Hindu fundamentalism. *Roja* certainly invites such an analysis with its infamous flag-burning sequence, its clever use of the poems of nationalist poet Subramanya Bharati and other patriotic punctuations like Rishi’s repeated ‘*Jai Hinds*’. *Roja’s* barbs about the reel-life treatment accorded to her kidnapped husband’s case, the ordinary Hindu citizen and the real-life treatment of the kidnapped Minister’s daughter’s case, who

⁴ As Nicholas B. Dirks notes, the Award made *Roja* tax-free entertainment, therefore bringing down ticket prices and making it even more popular.

was Muslim, raises eyebrows.⁵ Rishi's provocative question regarding the plight of the Hindus who have fled the Kashmir Valley while disregarding the miserable situation of the Muslims of the Valley raises not just eyebrows but also red flags.⁶ Niranjana, Bharucha and Srinivas, among others, certainly make credible cases for such a reading.

Nevertheless, it is possible for *Roja* to be read differently, as a film of loss and mourning – the loss of beloved ideals and the mourning of lost humanity, the loss of opportunity and the mourning of the lack of responsibility. *Roja* indirectly chronicles a decisive shift in the idea of the Indian nation and is not necessarily sympathetic to that shift.⁷ *Roja's* support of an idea of the Indian nation and it does have a very definite notion of this nation, should not inevitably be read as support of the Hindutva idea of the Indian nation⁸. To maul Shakespeare, a rose by any other name need not smell as sweet or in this case, need not reek of the stench of Hindutva.

In most critiques of *Roja*, despite the title of the film, Rishi is cast as the central character. He is the urbane technocrat, the ordinary citizen, the cosmopolitan city-dweller and above all, the middle-class but high-caste Hindu. Niranjana, Bharucha and Srinivas all use his class and caste identity as the starting point for their diverse arguments. The film, however, never seems to emphasise his religion. Yes, he is Hindu, his name gives that away, yes; he is married according to Hindu rites and enjoys it enough to dance at the end of it but, this is all incidental to understanding

⁵ The kidnapping of Rubaiya Sayeed, daughter of then Home Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, by Kashmiri militants. She was returned unharmed in exchange for the release of some militants.

⁶ Rishi coyly refers to “those who have left” but since the bulk of the migration out of the Kashmir Valley has been Hindu, the inference is quite clear.

⁷ A shift spear-headed by varied arms of the Hindu Right as its Ayodhya pogrom gained popularity and the Indian state's responses to the ways of the Hindu Right.

⁸ A nation that is not only one's *pitrbhumi* or fatherland but also one's *punyabhumi* or holy land. In essence, a nation of Hindus.

Rishi's character in the film. Unlike Roja, he is never shown in a temple other than at the time of his wedding ceremony and is never shown praying, not even in his darkest hour of captivity. Despite the religious connotations of his name, his identity seems to be defined by his career, his city and his citizenship.⁹

The film consistently frames Rishi as a man of science. It also emphasises his urbanity seen through his consistent use of English which seems to go part and parcel with his technical education. He works with computers and codes and mouths words in English like "cryptology" and "clearance". Rishi's affectionate but derisive moniker for Roja is '*Pettikaadu*' or 'the villager/rustic'. When Rishi takes Roja to meet his supervisor, his boss in a conversation with Roja is critical of Rishi's Tamil which he dismisses as "Madras Tamil". In a Tamil-language film which is primarily a love story, Rishi's most important emotional interactions with Roja are in English. When he apologises to her, he does so in English, spelling out the word 'sorry'. When he tells her he loves her for the first time, he does so in English, first checking if she knows enough of the language to understand his naughty, nonchalant 'I love you'. Rishi's other primary partner in the film is his main captor, Liaquat Khan with whom he has many conversations about the motives of the militants. In a particularly heated exchange about what Liaquat terms his '*jihad*', Rishi retaliates with a disgusted 'You're all misguided' in English.

The other marker of Rishi's identity is his nationality as an Indian. As Chakravarthy and Pandian remark, "He is not an arrogant Tamilian but an arrogant Indian" (Chakravarthy and Pandian, 642). His patriotism which often devolves into jingoism is a key facet of who he is and that is made very clear from his first remarks about Kashmir being an integral part of India. However, in my view, it is not drawn

⁹ It means a Hindu sage/wise-man.

from an understanding of Hindu superiority but an intolerance of any form of communalism and communitarianism. His Tamil identity is closely bound to his Indian identity but there is no doubt about which takes precedence. In this understanding of Rishi as being defined by science, rationality, modernity and secularism, he is not a representative of the educated, middle-class, new Hindu male but a representative of the educated, middle-class, old-school, secular male. He seems more like a disciple of Nehru than an acolyte of Advani. His captors certainly seem to see him that way as he is kidnapped not because he is an average Hindu but because he is an average Indian scientist.

The scene where Rishi throws himself on a burning Indian flag is one of *Roja's* best remembered scenes. Intercut as it is with shots of Liaquat Khan serenely saying the namaz, it seems to suggest that the Muslim prays, while India burns. Often forgotten is that it is Roja's act of going unaccompanied to a temple that leads directly to Rishi's kidnapping. When put together, both Roja's and Liaquat's religious activities seem to be equally dangerous for Rishi and equally anti-national because it causes harm to the ideal citizen. The film seems to suggest that any religious activity has the potential for manipulation and though it should be treated with respect, caution must also be exercised. Nehru once stated, "...communalism which is only another name for groupism dividing mankind on some primitive notions and faiths, has no place at a time where science has placed truth at our door step" (Nehru, qtd. in Perumal, 163) which sounds suspiciously like a quote Rishi might have framed in his office.

If Rishi is a secular, rational man in the model of Nehru and a perfect Nehruvian citizen, then Roja is the constant challenge to that model. If Rishi represents the abstract ideals of the Nehruvian nation then Roja represents the

problems with practicing those ideals in the current Indian state. Roja constantly questions the idea that one must be loyal to one's state and nation at all costs. Roja's loyalties and politics are personal because her loss is personal. Words like '*Jihad*' and '*Jai Hind*' hold little meaning for her and she prizes emotionality above rationality. In a place where no one understands her language, she uses primordial human emotions to communicate what her tongue cannot.

In one scene in particular where she faces the Minister at the parade grounds, her Tamil words are initially translated by a conveniently placed Minister's aide. As her frustration grows at the Minister's willingness to placate her but not take her plea to the higher authorities, the translation stops and the Minister continues to hear an alien language but finally, listens to the emotion that laces it. The scene ends with the Minister assuring her that he will take her case to Delhi. Roja's is a battle against a remote state and a suggestion that its problems are caused not by its secular nature but by its impersonal one. In prizing borders and barbed wires, this state has forgotten its citizens and has therefore, forgotten part of its ideals. Like Rishi who appeals to the humanity of the militants, Roja appeals to the humanity of the state. The appeal to humanise politics is not just a familiar theme for Mani Ratnam but also seems to be his solution to political problems.¹⁰ Just because she does not wear her patriotic heart on her sari-blouse's sleeve, does not mean Roja is any less concerned about the Indian state but her concern is tinged with some doubt about its compassionate credentials. In keeping with the film's Nehruvian bent, Rishi idealises the nation but Roja problematises the state.

¹⁰ Much of Ratnam's work after *Roja* (*Kannathil Mutthamittal, Fuvar and Ayutha Ezuthu/Yuva*) focuses on political situations and human responses to them. *Roja* itself is part of a trilogy, unplanned till after its release, that deals with various separatist and fundamentalist movements. The other two films of the trilogy are *Bombay* (1995) which looks at the rioting that followed in the city after the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and *Dil Se (From the Heart, 1998)* which looks at unspecified North-Eastern separatist movements.

A gendered analysis of *Roja* is out of the scope of this essay, but one of Roja's most important dialogues is a telling one.¹¹ When asked by Gen. Royappa after yet another futile attempt to find Rishi, where she is going to go, what she is going to do on her own, she says she will go from house to house, asking about Rishi, appealing to the women of the houses, women like her. In one sense, Roja also represents Ratnam's request to his audience to understand that India's public problems have private consequences. The plight of a lone Tamil woman in Kashmir is not very different from the plight of many Kashmiri women, Hindu and Muslim and also not very different from the plight of Sikh women at the height of the Khalistan movement. Though located in various areas of a vast country, Ratnam thinks we must regard them all not only as national problems but as personal problems and in doing so, we might arrive at solutions the state cannot. This might not be required of us as members of the Indian state but is needed of us as members of the imagined Indian nation.

If Rishi is the ideal citizen and Roja rebels against that definition by querying the state's methods, then Liaquat should represent the failure of the state but does not and this is *Roja's* greatest misstep. Like Rishi, Liaquat is educated in the sciences; he possesses a B.Sc. in Agriculture. He pursued that education in Coimbatore which explains his fluent Tamil and signals a time when he thought this country offered him opportunities as a citizen. He is now a militant persuaded by radical Islam and Pakistani rhetoric that those opportunities no longer exist for him. He now battles the state of which he was a citizen, preferring to abandon the freedom he once had and fighting instead for a different kind of freedom. *Roja* suggests, as part of its Nehruvian point of view, that the replacement of Liaquat's secularism with

¹¹ Therefore, the essay does not look at the representation of Liaquat Khan's silent sister in the film or how Roja herself is configured to fit the idea of an imagined Indian nation.

fundamentalism has made him less human. Yet, making Liaquat's lack of humanism his defining characteristic is no less awkward than making, as some have suggested, his religion his central characteristic. This is when *Roja* moves into dangerous territory because in making Liaquat less than human, it places the onus of secularism solely on the individual and not on the state.

In not questioning why an educated graduate would take up arms, *Roja* fails to understand the state's role in Liaquat's evolution or devolution. In the case of Kashmir in particular, where the Indian state has been involved since 1947, not always in very admirable ways, this lack of questioning is inexcusable. *Roja's* jingoism, so obvious in many ways, also takes these more subtle forms which is when it becomes most challenging. It is not enough to point fingers at Pakistan or depict Kashmir's loss of innocence, it is important to understand why that loss occurred.¹² It is important to note both the state's role and its responsibilities in that loss. In prizing a Nehruvian idea of an imagined Indian nation, one united by its differences, *Roja* does not document the failures of the Indian state, Nehruvian and otherwise.

By making Roja and Liaquat servile to Rishi in its climax, *Roja* makes every question, concern and issue they stand for servile to Rishi's pure patriotism.¹³ It thus propagates an idealistic vision for India that evokes nostalgia but does not offer any concrete solutions to its many problems. *Roja's* biggest failure, therefore, is that while it mourns the loss of secular values and humanity of some individuals, pleads for the state to investigate other means of settling conflict and appeals to its citizens to take more responsibility in India's future, it concludes that all this is secondary to Rishi's

¹² The film is one of the first to openly name Pakistan as the sponsor of Kashmiri militants, a charge consistently made by successive Indian governments and denied by Pakistan.

¹³ When she finally sees Rishi, Roja falls at his feet in relief leading a few commentators to caustically remark on her taking her rightful position as the traditional Hindu wife. Liaquat submits to Rishi's call to become human and seems to be ready to lay down his arms. The film does not follow up on what happens to Liaquat.

Nehruvian ideals. It puts forward the notion that with the right kind of patriotism and nationalism, India will thrive. *Roja* extols Rishi's victory, even allowing Gen. Royappa to glance contentedly at the happy, hugging couple, but never comprehends that the victory is Pyrrhic.¹⁴ Ratnam ends the film with Rishi and Roja, united but we never know what happens to Liaquat. Thus, while *Roja* is a well-made film with good intentions, the shadow of Liaquat looms over its intentions making them suspect and open to interpretations, ones that are not as kind as mine. Some may argue that to expect any different from a commercial Indian film is to not understand commercial Indian filmmaking but perhaps the answer lies not in the logic of commercial cinema but in the logic of contemporary Tamil cinema and politics.

Roja is, first and foremost, a Tamil-language film made for a Tamil audience. Its subject may have been national but its audience was regional. It was also made in 1992 at a time when Tamil Nadu politics was in a state of tumult, as Nicholas B. Dirks points out in an essay that is perhaps most gentle to *Roja's* inconsistent ideologies, writing:

“...We must recall that the film was made shortly after the political horror of the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi...by a suicide bomber, an act of terrorism performed by Sri Lankan Tamil terrorists...In this context, a Tamil hero sacrificing himself for the Indian nation in Kashmir readily displaces the guilt by association for the death of an Indian national hero on Tamil soil, even as it dramatically enacts the sudden change in Tamil political relations with the national state; after 1991, the Tamil Tigers were designated as enemies of all Indian Tamils and Jayalalitha's government associated itself more comfortably with mainline Indian nationalism...” (Dirks, 161-162).

Roja, thus, resonates very differently with its Tamil audience. To them, Rishi and Roja's primary identities are those of Indian Tamils. Their religion is but a small, negligible part of this identity as is Liaquat's. Liaquat Khan's primary identity is that he is not Tamil and is a threat to the Indian state. Everything else, his religion and

¹⁴ His is a two-fold victory seeing how he manages to escape and thereby, secures his own release without forcing the state to release militants in exchange and in making Liaquat see the error of his ways.

dress included can fall under the category of Ratnam's idea of Kashmiri exotica. He could be easily replaced by a Khalistani militant, an Assamese separatist or even a Bal Thackeray look-alike; they could and would all represent the same other.¹⁵ However, the Kashmir conflict was a contemporary issue and a part of India with which Indian cinema shares a very special relationship¹⁶. Hence, it made it the softest target for Ratnam to locate his discourse of Tamil and Indian identity on while giving him the opportunity to showcase his visual style in a unique way.

The best example of *Roja* as a film primarily about Tamil identity in the aftermath of the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi and as a paean to lost Nehruvian values just after the violent death of his grand-son, is seen the lyrics of its most moving song, *Tamizha Tamizha (O Tamil!)*. Originally a poem by Subramanya Bharati, it plays over two crucial scenes, Rishi's rescue of the blazing Indian flag and as the final credits roll over the frozen frame of Rishi and Roja, reunited on the bridge.

For Rishi's flag heroics, the song lyrics begin mid-way through the original referring to the oneness of virtue regardless of the difference of community, the oneness of the land regardless of the difference of place, the oneness of the voice regardless of the difference of language, the oneness of the flag despite the different staffs etc. until it finally ends in a lilting chorus, "*Namm India adh ondra tha*" (*Our India is one and one only*). As Rishi continues to fight, it goes on to talk of a common, modern India whose fundamental ethos is diversity, created after a long, hard struggle, a strong India that should never be separated, finally calling on all

¹⁵ Bal Thackeray is the now-retired but still controversial leader of an important regional party, the Shiv Sena, who claimed that Maharashtra in general and Bombay in particular had been taken over by non-Maharashtrians and famously launched campaign in Bombay to right these alleged wrongs, a campaign that often targeted Tamils in the city.

¹⁶ Long before Indian cinema discovered Europe, Kashmir was the snowy haven it rhapsodized in song and dance and in entire movies like *Kashmir ki Kali (1964)*. When the Kashmir conflict began to involve militants and insurgents in 1989, Indian cinema was forced to abandon the Himalayas for the Alps.

humans to rise up and defend this land. Here are in plain view are Ratnam's Nehruvian buzzwords on which the film is built, 'modern', 'unity', 'diversity' and 'human'. Interestingly, the lyrics also contain a single word in English - 'India'.

The entire song then plays over the film's final credits beginning with the reassuring words that tomorrow and the nation both belong to the Tamil and that while Mother Tamil Nadu is the house, one must be firm in one's Indian identity before segueing into the stanza played before. It then asks the Tamil not to cry, to not be distressed because tomorrow will dawn. Finally asking rhetorical questions like whether or not Indian blood flows in Tamil veins and if it does, then united India will protect the Tamil. Again there are only two non-Tamil words and both are in English – 'India' and 'Indian'.

This song is fundamental to understanding this film. It invokes not the '*Hindustan*' of the Kashmiri militant or the '*Bharat*' of the Hindutva rank and file but the India of Nehru and of Ratnam. This is not the India of fundamentalist manifestoes but of secular tracts like Nehru's *A Discovery of India*. It addresses not only the Tamil who makes Tamil Nadu his physical home but also the Tamil who makes India his spiritual abode, not in the sense of the Hindu religion but the religion of being Indian which was so clearly Nehru's religion of choice. The dubbed version of this song is also the basis for much of the misunderstanding of this film. Its Hindi equivalent begins with "*Bharat humko jaan se pyara hai*" (*Bharat/India is dearer to us than our life itself*) before going on to talk of '*Janmabhumi*' (*Birth place*) and clichés of '*Mandir*' (*Temple*) and *Masjid* (*Mosque*). *Roja's* regional recipe for Indian nationalism is subsumed in the dubbed version by the nationalist rhetoric that can be and has been interpreted as overpoweringly Hindu. It is also worth noting that in the Hindi version, new words enter the lexicon of *Roja's* vocabulary. Words like

'*deshpremi*' or patriot are bandied about more freely and the emotional sucker-punch that is Roja's lack of Hindi language skills suddenly does not factor into the equation. With each Tamil word that is erased, a greater depth of meaning is lost and another, almost alien layer is added.

The fact that many of *Roja*'s academic critics, especially those involved in the *Economic and Political Weekly* debate of 1994, refer solely to its dubbed Hindi version to substantiate their arguments does not necessarily make their arguments less potent but it does make them lack some context.¹⁷ Those who do refer to the Tamil original, often make minor mistakes like Bharucha's reference to Roja's village as '*Sundar Perumal Puram*' (Bharucha, 1392). Their arguments are also as much a product of the time they wrote in as much as *Roja* is a product of the period it was made in. Ravi S. Vasudevan theorizes along these lines in the sole academic article of the 1994 period that attempted to provide another interpretation of *Roja*'s nationalism.

In the article, he argues:

...for the complication of a certain agenda emerging in the radical critique of popular cinema. Of late this criticism has been particularly concerned with the way in which cinematic narratives re-produce nationalist ideologies which legitimate oppressive communal and caste perceptions. This approach reflects an impassioned protest against the figuration of the nation in majoritarian Hindu terms, and it has yielded many fresh insights. Yet this body of work may have begun to impose a priori framework of political perception, in the process sidelining the specificity of the cinema, and the complexity of narrative processes. The end result is univocal, with the various narrative elements drawn together in coherent demonology (Vasudevan, 43).

In other words, the valid worries of the secular academics in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the communal rioting in many parts of the country are as central to their argument as Tamil identity after the death of Rajiv

¹⁷ Niranjana makes perfunctory references to the dubbed Telugu version and Bharucha does the same for the original Tamil version but the bulk of their analysis is based on the Hindi version. Chakravarty and Pandian and Srinivas focus only on the dubbed Hindi version. Vasudevan and Dirks, interestingly the only two mildly sympathetic to *Roja* and not part of the *EPW* exchange, acknowledge and refer to the differences between these two versions.

Gandhi is to *Roja*. Just as *Roja*'s reel world refers constantly to the politics of real India, so do these arguments. Their fears while substantiated are not always *Roja*'s fears, their ideology while convincing when viewed in a certain light are not necessarily *Roja*'s. Similarly, the audience response in different parts of India, painful though some of it may be to stomach, cannot always be read back to *Roja*'s intended messages.

Roja is not Mani Ratnam's best film. It is not his only film that deals with politics, it is not the only one that won many state and national awards and is not the only one that is controversial. It is as flawed and fulfilling as many of Ratnam's other, greater, better films. It is as ambiguous and paradoxical and as simplistic and superficial as his other classics. Yet, it is his most successful film till date and his only true all-India success. *Roja* lives on in video stores and film festival retrospectives, on television movie channels and music channels and in doing so, signals the reason for its long life. Its many interpretations allow it to live in many imaginations. It can take on many forms, champion many causes, some more sinister than the others and can still be over-analysed in many an essay, this one included. Though many might roundly disagree, for me, the perfect red rose of its title will always signify the Indian man on whose lapel it most famously rested and the film itself, an imperfect representation of everything he stood for.

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