# Reading War Through Cinema: Tamils and the Sri Lankan Civil Conflict in Mani Ratnam's Kannathil Muthamittal

## Megha Khemani
Research Scholar
Department of Indian Languages and Literary Studies
University of Delhi

## Abstract

Cinema has long functioned as a mirror to society and a medium of cultural memory, particularly in representing prejudice, war, trauma and forced displacement. This paper examines how films document collective suffering by foregrounding the human consequences of conflict, with a specific focus on the Sri Lankan Civil War and its impact on Sri Lankan Tamils. Drawing from theories of Conflict Cinema and Cultural Testimony, the discussion first situates Sri Lanka's protracted ethnic war within the global tradition of War Cinema; before turning to Mani Ratnam's *Kannathil Muthamittal*, in particular. The documentary *No Fire Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka* (2013) has also been referred, which provides harrowing visual testimony of civilian suffering and state atrocities during the final phase of the Sri Lankan Civil War, foregrounding the urgency of remembering and reckoning with this history.

Complementing this factual lens, this paper analyses Ratnam's *Kannathil Muthamittal* (2002) as a cinematic testimony to the trauma of the Sri Lankan Civil War and its Tamil victims. Based on a short story titled "Amuthavum Avanum" by the Tamil writer Sujatha, the film allegorizes fractured identities and contested homelands through the figure of Amudha- a child suspended between her adoptive and biological mothers. The biological mother Shyama's forced migration from Mankulam, Sri Lanka to Rameswaram, India and eventual abandonment of her newborn dramatizes the devastating consequences of war: exile, dislocation and uncertainty. Rendering visible the scars of violence, Ratnam translates individual suffering into cultural memory, foregrounding how Cinema not only reflects displacement and violence but also interrogates the longing for reconciliation and peace amidst divided communities.

## Introduction

May the white flowers of peace blossom everywhere in the world,
May the gentle yellow blaze (dawn sunlight) fall on earth, soaking it in harmony,
May the world awaken to the laughter of children,
May the flower stretch itself, waking up from its deep slumber,
May the babies awake to the warmth of their mother's laps,

*Let the world awaken to the smile of the small -faced child*

Media Studies examines Cinema, Television and Digital Media in order to produce, circulate and shape meaning in society. Within this framework, cinema is analyzed not merely as Art but as a cultural entity; wherein it plays a significant role in the society which goes far beyond entertainment. It functions as a cultural entity in the sense that not only does it mirror the society but also shapes the societies that produce it, embedded in ideological, political and economic contexts. Several scholars have analyzed this aspect of Cinema. Scholars such as Robert Stam and Ella Shohat argue that a film is embedded within power structures, functioning as a site where cultural identities and collective anxieties are negotiated. Thomas Elsaesser extends this perspective, suggesting that film history itself must be understood as a form of 'cultural archaeology', where visual narratives act as 'repositories of memory'.

Similarly, Vivian Sobchack emphasizes the phenomenological power of Cinema, highlighting how 'visuality' makes themes of trauma and loss experientially accessible. Sobchack argues that film is not just an object to be viewed, but a subjective, embodied experience for the spectator. She proposes that the cinematic experience involves a dynamic exchange between the viewer and the film, where the film itself acts as a kind of 'seeing subject' and it is this shared, bodily experience that allows Cinema to convey profound emotional and sensory states, making concepts like trauma and loss tangible to the audience, as described. Her work is quite crucial to the understanding and analysis of the film taken for study in this paper.

Particularly in contexts of war and political violence, Cinema operates as what Alison Landsberg terms a 'prosthetic memory'- a way in which audiences can inhabit histories not directly their own, yet deeply felt through mediated experience. This makes film uniquely suited to address conflicts, since it not only represents violence but also inscribes its emotional and cultural resonances onto collective consciousness. In *Representing Reality,* Bill Nichols, writing on documentary, further notes that the moving image is an instrument of testimony, capable of visualizing silences and absences that written records often cannot.

When societies grapple with civil wars, ethnic conflicts or mass displacement, films serve as not just allegory but testimony, too! They render visible the scars of violence, frame struggles for identity, and preserve cultural memory against the forces of forgetting. As Jacques Rancière rightly reminds us that films organize ways of seeing and, consequently, ways of remembering. Thus, to read war through cinema is to engage with a multilayered archive where the experience of trauma and memory converge.

**Framing War on Screen: From Global Conflict Cinema to *Kannathil Muthamittal***
War Cinema, across the global traditions, has been a central mode of negotiating trauma, memory and identity. Lanzmann and Hirsch talk of Holocaust documentary films such as *Shoah* (1985) and *Schindler's List* (1993), illustrating how Cinema bore witness to history and to the genocide by depicting the human cost and scale of suffering. Roman Polanski's film *The Pianist* (2002) also testifies Holocaust and so does *Life is Beautiful* (1997), wherein Roberto Benigni uses tragicomedy to bear witness to the Holocaust, balancing absurdity and horror to preserve cultural memory. In the context of the Vietnam War, Marita Sturken in *Tangled Memories* depicts how American Cinema turned conflict into both national memory and allegory, mediating political divisions through images of trauma and reconciliation. *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), an animated Japanese film by Isao Takahata, testifies to the trauma of World War II through the story of two siblings struggling to survive firebombings and famine. Paul Rusesabagina's story *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) dramatizes the Rwandan genocide, offering testimony to atrocities that global politics often ignored.

In the Indian subcontinent, the Partition of 1947 has been one of the most enduring subjects for cinematic exploration, offering a template for how film negotiates trauma, violence and the reconfiguration of identity. Filmmak-

ers, across decades, have used cinema- both to document historical rupture and to stage allegories of nationhood and belonging. Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) and *Komal Gandhar* (1961) foregrounded displacement and the psychological fractures of Partition. Govind Nihalani's *Tamas* (1987), based on Bhisham Sahni's novel, vividly reconstructed the violence of communal riots and the precariousness of survival.

More recent films such as Deepa Mehta's *Earth* (1998) and Chandraprakash Dwivedi's *Pinjar* (2003) highlight the gendered dimensions of Partition trauma, depicting abduction, forced migration and fractured kinship. Scholars such as Bhaskar Sarkar and Priya Kumar highlight that Partition Cinema negotiates the silences of official history while foregrounding lived experiences of suffering. Importantly, these films show how Cinema becomes a space for translating unspeakable violence into visual narrative. Studies on these movies, therefore, become significant in developing an understanding about the 'conflict' in question.

Placing Sri Lankan and Tamil Cinema within this global frame allows us to see how films about the Civil War and its aftermath function similarly: they provide testimony to violence, trauma, displacement and loss; while also negotiating contested narratives of nationhood, belonging and identity. Like Holocaust and Vietnam War cinema, Sri Lankan war films act as both cultural memory and political discourse, giving voice to the often lingering silence.

## The Historical Backdrop of the Sri Lankan Civil War

The Sri Lankan Civil War was one of the longest and bloodiest conflicts in South Asia, lasting for nearly three decades (1983- 2009). At its core lay deep-seated ethnic tensions between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority, rooted in colonial legacies and Post-Independence state policies. After independence in 1948, Sinhalese nationalist governments sought to redress the 'imbalance' in the domain of education and employment through measures such as the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 and preferential policies in university admissions and employment. These acts, while consolidating Sinhala dominance, marginalized Tamils, creating widespread resentment, as highlighted in Tambiah's work.

Peaceful Tamil resistance movements of the 1950s and 1970s, led by groups like the Federal Party gradually gave way to militancy as political negotiations repeatedly failed. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) emerged in the 1970s, advocating for an independent Tamil homeland (*Tamil Eelam*) in the north and east of the island. The conflict escalated dramatically in July 1983, during Black July, when anti-Tamil pogroms in Colombo, following the killing of a few Sinhala soldiers by the LTTE, resulted in thousands of Tamil deaths and widespread displacement, marking the beginning of a full-scale Civil War.

Over the next three decades, the war was characterized by massive civilian casualties, forced displacement, disappearances and human rights violations on both sides. The LTTE made use of suicide bombings, political assassinations and child soldiers, while the Sri Lankan state was accused of indiscriminate aerial bombardment, enforced disappearances and systematic targeting of Tamil civilians. The conflict produced a large Tamil diaspora, particularly in Canada, the UK, and India, who became central voices in global advocacy.

Thiranagama and Höglund and Orjuela in their work highlight that while the war ended in May 2009 under Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa, the final stages were marked by unprecedented civilian deaths, and estimates as per a report by United Nations published in 2011 suggest up to 40,000 Tamils were killed in the last months alone. In the aftermath, the conflict left trauma, contested memory and unresolved questions of justice, reconciliation and minority rights, making it a central theme not just for Political Science but also for Cultural Studies, Literature and Cinema.

## Tamil Experiences of Sri Lankan Civil War in Cinema: Narratives of Violence in Raavan Desam and No Fire Zone

Scholars like M. Ranganathan and S. Velayutham believe that despite the magnitude of the Sri Lankan Civil War and its devastating human consequences, the conflict has remained relatively underexplored in mainstream global cinema. Unlike the Vietnam War or the Holocaust, which have generated vast filmographies across different traditions, depictions of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict have often been regionally constrained or politically muted. This absence is not accidental, according to Jeganathan and Tambiah- reflecting both the difficulties of narrating a protracted and politically charged war, and the risks faced by filmmakers working within or in proximity to the Sri Lankan state, where censorship and surveillance have shaped cultural production.

When cinematic representations do emerge, they tend to reveal more about the contested politics of memory than about consensus narratives of the war. For instance, Sri Lankan filmmaker Prasanna Vithanage in his work- *Purahanda Kaluwara* (tr. *Death on a Full Moon Day*, 1997) has taken critical, though often allegorical approaches to civil war themes; frequently focusing on Sinhala subjectivities. In contrast, the specific experiences of Tamils- particularly their displacement, grief and struggle for belonging, have remained less visible, often overshadowed by state-driven accounts of terrorism and national security. Ranganathan and Velayutham thus, argue that despite the fact that the Tamil film industry historically maintained strong cultural and industrial ties with Sri Lanka, involving both Sinhalese and Tamil collaborations in production and casting, the outbreak and intensification of the civil war waged between the Sri Lankan state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) disrupted these exchanges entirely. Although several figures within Tamil cinema expressed solidarity with the Tamil struggle, the industry as a whole remained largely reticent. "It was only almost two decades into the conflict that Tamil films began to directly represent or engage with the themes of war and its consequences," as per Ranganathan and Velayutham.

Documentaries such as Anand Patwardhan's *War and Peace* (2002) and Sri Lankan works like Prasanna Vithanage's *August Sun* (2003) or Chandrasiri Dodangoda's *Sri Lanka: The Search for Peace* (1991) also tackle themes of war and reconciliation. Together, these works indicate how cinema, both popular and independent, has sought to grapple with the traumatic legacies of South Asian conflicts.

*Raavan Desam* (2013), directed by Ajay Nuthakki, is one of the few Tamil films to deal directly and unflinchingly with the plight of Tamil civilians during the Sri Lankan Civil War. The film narrates the story of Tamil civilians caught in the crossfire between the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE, emphasizing their desperate attempts to flee across the Palk Strait to India. In doing so, it confronts the audience with images of perilous sea journeys, drowning bodies and the trauma of displacement, drawing attention to the humanitarian catastrophe that mainstream cinema often elides.

The film's title itself, *Raavan Desam*, or "The Land of Raavan" carries symbolic weight. It invokes the mythological demon-king Raavan as an emblem and metaphor of tyranny, which the land of Sri Lanka was witnessing again. Through this lens, the film functions as a cinematic counter-history, documenting experiences that official state narratives sought to erase.

While *Raavan Desam* did not achieve the mass appeal or transnational circulation of Ratnam's *Kannathil Muthamittal*, its significance lies in its commitment to historical witnessing. The stark depictions of refugees braving the sea resonate with documented testimonies of survivors, anchoring the fictional narrative in lived experience. In this sense, the film participates in what scholars term "conflict cinema" or "cinema of testimony," and the screen becomes a site for preserving cultural memory of atrocity and displacement.

When it comes to non-fiction, Callum Macrae's *No Fire Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka* (2013) is a devastating documentary that exposes atrocities committed during the final phase of the Sri Lankan Civil War (2008-2009). The film documents how gov-

ernment-declared "No Fire Zones," which were supposedly safe civilian areas, were in fact, relentlessly shelled by the Sri Lankan military, killing thousands of Tamil civilians. It also reveals the systematic execution of surrendering LTTE cadres, sexual violence against Tamil women, and the mass starvation of internally displaced populations. By making these images public, Macrae challenges state propaganda that had framed the war as a "humanitarian operation," instead presenting it as a planned genocidal campaign.

Critically, the documentary highlights the role of visual media as testimony: the footage, often filmed by perpetrators themselves, becomes incontrovertible evidence of crimes otherwise denied by official narratives. Scholars such as Des Freedman have argued that *No Fire Zone* is not merely reportage but also a form of political activism, mobilizing international human rights advocacy and reframing Sri Lanka's war in global discourse. Its unflinching images of corpses, sexual assault and bombed-out civilians, allow viewers to witness the grim reality of supposed 'no fire zones' first hand.

While fictional representations such as Mani Ratnam's *Kannathil Muthamittal* humanizes displacement and fractured identities through allegory and melodrama, *No Fire Zone* directly confronts viewers with graphic evidence of war crimes, drawing on authentic mobile phone footage smuggled out of the conflict zone, survivor testimonies and investigative journalism.

## Mani Ratnam and the Cinematic Imagination of Conflict

Mani Ratnam's body of work occupies a particularly important place in the tradition of depicting conflict on screen. His films- *Roja* (1992), *Bombay* (1995) and *Dil Se* (1998) represent what scholars have described as a "conflict trilogy," where melodrama and romance intersect with conflict.

Ratnam is significant because he brings issues of violence and displacement into popular cinema with mass appeal, reframing them through intimate family stories that make political crises emotionally legible. Ratnam's

*Roja* (1992) situates its narrative in Kashmir. Scholars like M. Madhava Prasad argue that Ratnam's strategy is to collapse the nation and the family into one another, thereby mediating state discourse through melodramatic forms. Roja's voice and determination become emblematic of India's perseverance. This aspect is crucial to our understanding of *Kannathil Muthamittal*, as well.

With *Bombay* (1995), Ratnam juxtaposes lyrical romance and idyllic family life with shocking scenes of riot, arson and death. As Rachel Dwyer observes, Ratnam mobilizes "melodrama and the domestic sphere to create a popular humanism," offering a plea for co-existence and tolerance. With *Dil Se* (1998), Ratnam expanded his cinematic intertwining a romantic narrative with the conflict. As Lalitha Gopalan notes, Ratnam employs "spectacle and desire as a narrative strategy," allowing the musical form to co-exist with the theme of violence, thereby complicating the conventions of mainstream Hindi cinema.

*Kannathil Muthamittal* (2002), literally translating to 'a peck on the cheek,' marked a further expansion of Ratnam's Conflict Cinema, as the director turned to the Sri Lankan Civil War. Ratnam's films are part of a larger ecosystem of Indian cinema that has grappled with issues of war, displacement, and partition.

## Filling the Void: Tamil Testimonies of War and Belonging in Kannathil Muthamittal

Tamil cinema, despite its strong trans-national connections with Sri Lanka, was initially hesitant to represent the conflict directly. Ranganathan and Velayutham note that "it took Tamil cinema nearly two decades after the start of the conflict to depict or deal with it." The political sensitivity of the issue, alongside fears of censorship and reprisal, meant that only in the late 1990s and early 2000s did filmmakers begin engaging with the war. Ratnam's *Kannathil Muthamittal* thus, holds a unique place as one of the first major Indian films to foreground the human cost of the Sri Lankan war, making the suffering of Tamils part of a larger narrative of identity and reconciliation.

It is within this space of representational scarcity that *Kannathil Muthamittal* (2002), directed by Mani Ratnam, becomes especially significant. Although an Indian Tamil film rather than a Sri Lankan production, the film courageously foregrounds the Tamil experience of the Sri Lankan conflict through the story of Amudha, a child adopted by Indian parents who later learns that her biological mother gave her birth at Red Cross Society, Rameswaram and left, abandoning her as soon as she was born. It is later revealed that she does so in order to contribute towards the Tamil cause in Sri Lanka, as she becomes a militant.

### Scholarly Readings of Kannathil Muthamittal

By weaving together the personal journey of adoption and identity with the collective history of war and displacement, the film exemplifies how cinema can bridge private trauma and political violence. In this sense, *Kannathil Muthamittal* operates both as testimony- bearing witness to silenced Tamil suffering and as allegory- dramatizing the wider fractures of home, belonging and nationhood in the shadow of civil war. Not only did it receive praises from popular outlets, it also is appreciated by the scholars.

One of the film's most poignant moments occurs when Amudha's adoptive parents reveal her past on her birthday. Ratnam deploys choreography, music and movement to symbolize her destabilized identity- her circular running slows into collapse as she processes the revelation. This sequence, as scholars like Ranganathan and Velayutham argue, marks Ratnam's distinct departure from the formula of conventional Tamil melodrama into a terrain where cinema becomes testimony to historical violence. The child's innocence collides with an irreconcilable past, opening the door for the film's larger interrogation of war's scars on civilian lives.

Critics have been particularly attentive to the ways Ratnam uses *Kannathil Muthamittal* to mediate between personal melodrama and political violence. Ranganathan and Velayutham argue that the film marks a significant departure in Tamil cinema, serving as "a belated attempt to engage with Sri Lanka's war after decades of silence." While Rachel Dwyer sees the film as part of Ratnam's larger humanist project, in which private stories dramatize "the unbearable costs of intolerance and hatred", Anjali Gera Roy emphasizes that the film "foregrounds a trans-national Tamil identity that spans India and Sri Lanka". In this sense, the film complicates the neat boundaries of nationhood, raising questions about diaspora, belonging and statelessness. Amresh Sinha and Terence McSweeney further argue that Ratnam's cinema functions as "cultural testimony," offering visual memory of conflicts that states would prefer to erase.

Together, these interpretations position *Kannathil Muthamittal* as a landmark film in South Asian cinema not only for its artistic merit but also for its political courage in bringing the Sri Lankan Tamil experience into Indian cinematic consciousness.

### The Weight of War: Uncertainty, Displacement, Violence and Divided Identities in Kannathil Muthamittal

The film opens up on a hopeful note through a song calling for Peace, highlighting the very absence of it. It depicts how war intrudes even upon intimate moments, as Dileepan (J. D. Chakravarthy) experiences disturbing sudden flashes of violence while resting beside his wife. His clear refusal to have children until peace returns to Sri Lanka underscores how warfare erodes the very possibility of a future. This renders the wife, Shyama heartbroken as she declares she wanted eight. His belief that this is not a good world to bring children into, situates the conflict not only as political but existential, where the cycle of violence forecloses hope and continuity. Ratnam uses Dileepan's trauma to foreground the psychological scars of protracted war.

In a pivotal scene, Shyama (Nandita Das) is playfully asked by Dileepan what she values more than him, and subsequently what she values more than God. Her silence and simple gesture of pressing wet soil against his cheek becomes a profound cinematic moment. Without words, she declares her love for the land above all else, suggesting that identity and be-

longing are rooted in soil rather than divinity or conjugal ties. Ratnam deploys silence and visual metaphor here, allowing the image of earth to carry the weight of motherland devotion and the inexpressible bond between Tamil people and their homeland.

Shyama's journey is marked by painful ruptures. First, she had to leave Sri Lanka without her husband, who was fighting against the state and second, and the most devastating one, being her separation from her newborn daughter in an Indian refugee camp in Rameswaram. While her husband dies fighting for the Tamil cause, Shyama is twice exiled- from her homeland and from her own family- her husband and her child. The stoic grief with which she relinquishes Amudha in Rameswaram reflects the gendered dimensions of war, where women become the bearers of sacrifice and dislocation. The scene speaks to the silent endurance of refugee mothers, forced into impossible choices between survival and belonging. She again chooses the Tamil cause and leaves for Sri Lanka to become a militant.

Pregnant and displaced, Shyama is shown struggling as she journeys across the waves from Sri Lanka to India, a harrowing depiction of exile. The imagery of expectant mothers battling the sea accentuates the fragility of life amidst chaos, layering biological creation with violent destruction. These sequences of mass departures foreground the intergenerational trauma of war, where unborn children inherit displacement even before birth, like Amudha, in the movie. Ratnam's framing of women and children at sea is a stark allegory for the uncertainty of diasporic identity.

The unpredictability of violence is another thematic thread, illustrated through sudden aerial bombings that interrupt civilian life. Just when characters seek normalcy, warfare erupts, reminding viewers of the instability that defines conflict zones. Ratnam's portrayal emphasizes how civilians live in a constant state of dread, never knowing when normal routines will be ruptured by violence. This visual rhythm of peace shattered by explosions highlights the precarious temporality of war, where survival itself becomes contingent. This is witnessed in the opening few frames only, when Dileepan and Shyama are sharing some happy moments near waters and the Sinhalese troops enter the frame; marking the final separation of the newly married couple. It is also witnessed quite frequently when Amudha and her parents go to Sri Lanka to meet her biological mother- suicide bombers and aerial explosions happen when you are least expecting them.

The film also depicts that women and children also participated in suicide bombings and armed resistance. Ratnam thus highlights how ordinary lives are disrupted under conditions of war. Amudha, at once, is shocked during her military encounter when girls her age were armed with weapons. In that sense, perhaps, she also realises that she was privileged to have been with her adopted parents in a land that was safe.

However, at the emotional core of *Kannathil Muthamittal* lies Amudha's dilemma- torn between her adoptive parents who nurtured her and her biological mother Shyama, who abandoned her out of compulsion. This duality of motherhood becomes an allegory for divided homelands: the India that reared her and the Sri Lanka that birthed her. Ratnam uses the child's anguish and predicament to dramatize the fragmented identities of displaced communities, suggesting that belonging is never singular but always split by history and conflict. The final umbrella scene, uniting both mothers under one canopy, epitomizes Ratnam's cinematic vision of reconciliation, however fleeting.

Amudha's desire to meet her mother had propelled the family into war-torn Sri Lanka, where the lines between mother, daughter and nation blur. Selvaraj Velayutham (2008) argues that Ratnam uses the innocence of childhood to critique the destructive consequences of nationalism, contrasting the purity of Amudha's longing with the devastation of civil war.

## Conclusion

Conflict Cinema has always wrestled with the difficulty of representing violence, atrocity and displacement. From Holocaust testimonies to Vietnam War and Partition of India, Cine-

ma has functioned as a cultural archive that preserves what might otherwise resist representation. These films reveal that conflict is not confined to political history or military battlefields but enters the deepest folds of domestic life, reshaping identity, memory and belonging. In the South Asian context, Indian cinema has long negotiated questions of nationalism and violence through allegories of family and romance, evident in Mani Ratnam's works based on Indian themes. Yet when it comes to the Sri Lankan Civil War, a conflict spanning nearly three decades, the cinematic record has been comparatively fragmented and politically fraught.

This absence makes Ratnam's *Kannathil Muthamittal* (2002) especially significant. While global audiences came to recognize the brutality of Sri Lanka's war primarily through documentaries like Callum Macrae's *No Fire Zone* (2013), which lays bare the horror of state violence through harrowing evidence of bombardments, executions and mass civilian deaths, Ratnam chose a cinematic strategy wherein war is not at the forefront. Where Macrae insists on legal accountability by confronting audiences with unbearable realities, Ratnam translates the same historical trauma into melodrama, music and allegory. His film reframes the war's political violence through the intimate story of a child torn between two mothers, a narrative structure that renders unspeakable trauma emotionally legible for mass audiences.

While the film's representation of violence is not too explicit, it is also never distant or abstract, it seeps into every layer of life. Dileepan, Shyama's husband, is shown haunted by war even during moments of intimacy; articulating his refusal to bring a child into a world torn apart by violence. The uncertainty of survival is dramatized through sudden bombings, aerial raids and the harrowing crossing of the sea by refugees, images that condense the experiences of thousands displaced during the war. Shyama's journey epitomizes this collective trauma: forced to flee while pregnant, separated from her husband, and compelled to abandon her newborn in a refugee camp, she becomes an allegory of Tamil womanhood fractured by conflict. Her final appearance- silent, estranged, marked by the cyanide capsule that identifies her as a militant, embodies the impossible choices war imposes, where love for homeland demands separation from family and even from one's own child.

At the center of this allegory stands Amudha, the adopted child who discovers her fractured origins. Her dilemma- torn between the biological mother who represents her violent homeland and the adoptive mother who symbolizes security and exile, becomes a metaphor for the divided identity of the Tamil community itself. Through her story, Ratnam dramatizes how war transforms children into bearers of unresolved historical wounds, where questions of belonging and identity remain perpetually unsettled. The child's fractured subjectivity resonates with the broader Tamil diaspora, who continue to grapple with loss, exile and memory.

In this way, Ratnam's cinema demonstrates how melodrama and popular form can elevate private suffering into collective memory. As scholars like M. Madhava Prasad and Lalitha Gopalan argue, Ratnam collapses the boundaries of family and nation, transforming domestic stories into allegories of political crisis. The "two mothers" of *Kannathil Muthamittal* are not merely characters but allegorical figures: one representing the intimate, nurturing security of home in exile, India and the other embodying the violent pull of homeland and resistance, Sri Lanka. Their irreconcilability dramatizes the condition of displaced Tamils caught between nostalgia for a lost homeland and the necessity of building new lives elsewhere.

Placed alongside *No Fire Zone*, the contrast is illuminating. Macrae's documentary insists that the world acknowledge atrocity as atrocity, unmediated by melodrama or allegory; while Ratnam softens the rawness of trauma to make it bearable for collective engagement. But undoubtedly, together, they demonstrate the dual role of conflict cinema: one strand insists on testimony and historical record, while another transforms violence into narrative forms that allow viewers to mourn, identi-

fy and imagine reconciliation. Both are necessary. Without testimony, atrocity risks being forgotten; without allegory, trauma risks being unrelatable.

Ultimately, *Kannathil Muthamittal* exemplifies how cinema mediates between the unbearable realities of violence and the need to make meaning out of suffering. It is not merely a film about one child or one family but a cinematic allegory of an entire people's trauma, displacement and fractured identity. In Ratnam's hands, popular cinema becomes a form of cultural memory, archiving both grief and hope, pain and the longing for peace. The film demonstrates that war is not only fought through guns and bombs but also through silences, separations and impossible choices. In doing so, it joins a global tradition of Conflict Cinema that refuses to let violence disappear into history, insisting instead that the pain of the displaced and the silenced be remembered, retold and perhaps, one day, healed.

## Works Cited

1. Elsaesser, Thomas. *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema*. Amsterdam University Press, 2016.

2. Höglund, Kristine, and Camilla Orjuela. "Winning the Peace: Conflict Prevention after a Victor's Peace in Sri Lanka." *Contemporary Social Science*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2011, pp. 19–37. *Taylor & Francis Online*, https://doi.org/10.1080/17450 144. 2010. 534491.

3. *Kannathil Muthamittal.* Directed by Mani Ratnam, Prime Video, 2003. *Amazon Prime Video*, https://www.primevideo.com/detail/Kannathil-Muthamittal/0 LTTA BAQDXRXMIVU FL GB0X7CKJ. Accessed 23 Aug. 2025.

4. Landsberg, Alison. *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. Columbia University Press, 2004.

5. Monaco, James. *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, and Beyond*. 4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2009.

6. Nichols, Bill. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Indiana University Press, 1991.

7. *No Fire Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka.* Directed by Callum Macrae, No Fire Zone, 2013. *nofirezone.org/watch*. Accessed 23 Aug. 2025.

8. Ranganathan, M., and Selvaraj Velayutham. "Tamil Cinema and the Sri Lankan Tamil Conflict." *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India's Other Film Industry*, edited by Selvaraj Velayutham, Routledge, 2008, pp. 871–889.

9. Ranganathan, Maya, and Selvaraj Velayutham. "Imagining Eelam Tamils in Tamil Cinema." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2012, pp. 65–76. https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2012.731261.

10. Rancière, Jacques. *The Future of the Image*. Verso, 2007.

11. Roy, Anjali Gera. *Cinema and Nation*. Routledge, 2012.

12. Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2014.

13. Sobchack, Vivian. *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Princeton University Press, 1992.

14. Stam, Robert. *Film Theory: An Introduction*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2000.

15. Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja. *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*. University of Chicago Press, 1986.

16. Thiranagama, Sharika. *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

17. Turner, Graeme. *Film as Social Practice*. 4th ed., Routledge, 2006.

18. Vasudevan, Ravi. *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema*. Permanent Black, 2010.

19. Werbner, P. (2002). *Imagined diasporas among Manchester Muslims: The public performance of Pakistani transnational identity politics*. James Currey.