Rani: The Politics of Erasure and the Aesthetics of Forgetting

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Cinema does not merely reflect history; it remakes it

What appears on screen influences what is remembered and what is forgotten. Film scholar Pierre Sorlin, in *The Film in History: Restaging the Past*, argues that cinema serves as a social document, shaping collective understandings of historical events (Sorlin 1980). A film like *Rani* (Asoka Handagama, Lyca Productions, 2025), which claims to be inspired by true events, does not exist in a vacuum. It intervenes in how Sri Lanka's violent past is reconstructed, archived, and ultimately absorbed into collective memory. But *Rani* does not simply distort history; it commits an act of cinematic violence. It digs up a body that was tortured and murdered, defiles it again under the guise of art, and presents this defilement as tribute.

The defilement of Richard de Zoysa—a husk of the original

Richard de Zoysa was not merely a journalist. In a time when safety trumped dissent, he was a voice that refused silence. His poem "Animal Crackers" (de Zoysa 1990) was a direct assault on the nationalist politics of the Premadasa regime. His reporting named names. His activism was a threat to the state. His queerness, in a country where state and social repression worked in tandem, made him a powerful yet vulnerable symbol of resistance. His murder was not incidental; it was political. The real history of his death is clear. He was taken from his home, tortured, and executed by government operatives, allegedly under orders from then Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne, a man known for his violent temper and ego-driven need for control.

Yet *Rani* chooses not to tell this story. Instead, Richard's assassination is recast as an unfortunate event in a chaotic period. His death is not a state-sanctioned execution but the result of nameless, drunken men acting on impulse. The state is not held responsible; it fades into the background, an unnamed force, distant and unaccountable. This is not ambiguity; this is revisionism.

As Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) argues in *Silencing the Past*, history is not just about what is remembered but about what is actively erased. Fictionalising history is not inherently unethical, but when fiction rewrites the past in ways that absolve power, it becomes an extension of historical violence. This is how *Rani* makes history disappear. Not by denying it outright but by softening, blurring, and making it into something that can be mourned rather than confronted.

This defilement of Richard de Zoysa in *Rani* denies viewers the chance to grapple with the complexities and brutality of state repression. Instead of presenting a defiled *husk*, the complete removal of Richard from the film could have been a tremendously powerful narrative tool.

Sometimes, silence speaks louder than words—a haunting reminder of the void left by state-orchestrated disappearances.

Not the only one

Richard was not the only one. Many within his circle, fellow journalists, activists, and artists were also abducted and killed. Few of their bodies were ever found. Wijeyadasa Liyanaarachchi, a human rights lawyer, was taken and brutally murdered in 1989. Daya Pathirana, a young student leader, was assassinated for his leftist politics. Lalith Athulathmudali, once part of the system, was gunned down when he turned against it. Approaching Richard's death, members of his Inter Press Service were also abducted and murdered. This was not random; it was systematic. *Rani* conceals this larger network of disappearances that made Richard's death inevitable. It isolates him as an individual tragedy rather than a cold and deliberate elimination of dissenting voices. This omission is especially stark given what Manorani Saravanamuttu herself said in real life: "It's not just Richard," she said. "As a doctor working in Colombo, I know of many others. There are many mothers, … who are sent away to live year after year in hope. I am the luckiest mother in Sri Lanka – I got my son's body back" (Crossette 1990).

In *Rani*, this reality is reduced to a quiet, personal sorrow. The violent crackdowns of the late 1980s, a period when thousands were disappeared, burned, or buried in mass graves, becomes a vague backdrop. There are no scenes of mass protests, no echoes of Tamil mothers still searching for their vanished children.

Instead, we get 'Rani's' solitary anguish, her grief polished into a metaphor, so much so that it betrays the true character and power of Manorani Saravanamuttu.

The betrayal of Manorani Saravanamuttu

The film does not stop at rewriting history. It rewrites Manorani herself. The real Manorani Saravanamuttu was not just a grieving mother; she was a Tamil woman, an elite, a doctor, an actress, and an activist. In a society that abhorred queerness, she was a progressive soul who unhesitatingly accepted Richard's queerness. She occupied a unique intersection of privilege and marginalisation. Her status gave her access to power, but it did not protect her from the state's brutality. Manorani was a woman who fought through her grief. In her own words, she has claimed: "I have learned that there is a grief beyond tears, … I am angry. I am very angry. All I can do to fight for my son is to use his death for Sri Lanka" (Crossette 1990). But Handagama reduces her to a pathetic figure, cigarette in hand, drowning in whisky, a woman too weak to seek justice, too lost to act, waiting for God to intervene. A woman whose own life has no existence beyond her son's absence.

This follows Sara Ahmed's (2004) critique of the feminisation of emotion, where emotions like vulnerability and grief are culturally coded as "feminine" and relegated to the personal and sentimental sphere. This framing suppresses the political nature of such emotions.

In this vein, Handagama seems obsessed with the idea that a woman who has lost her child cannot possibly think politically. That she cannot see beyond her loss. That her grief cannot be political. His entire construction of 'Rani' reeks of the belief that a woman's story can only be told through her suffering. And thus, Handagama falls into his own trap. He wants to rewrite 'Rani' as an object of sorrow, but in doing so, he seems to expose his own deep-rooted anxieties about women who refuse to be reduced to nothing but their grief.

Handagama does not merely strip Manorani of her political agency; he actively rewrites her as a pawn, framing her not as a woman who challenged the state but as one manipulated by the opposition. This is where Handagama's politics become most obvious.

As bell hooks (1992) argues, dominant cultural narratives often strip radical figures, especially women, of their activism and political agency. Their complex identities are reduced to dehumanising stereotypes or symbols of suffering and their contributions are erased. *Rani* follows this exact formula. It suggests that Mahinda Rajapaksa and Mangala Samaraweera used Manorani for their own political gains, reducing her from a leader to a woman caught in the political crossfire. *Rani* ignores her documented resistance to their political agenda. It does not show the deliberately public funeral she held for Richard, her public naming of her son's killers, her efforts to include Tamil mothers in the Mothers' Front movement, and her eventual departure from the movement when her vision was sidelined. Instead, it only shows her being used by others. Even the banner behind her at a protest misspells Mothers' Front—a small but telling detail that ridicules the movement, making it seem weak and incompetent. In a film that pays meticulous attention to realism through casting, makeup, and dialect imitation, creating an illusion of historical fidelity, this comes off not as a neutral omission but as a deliberate act of cinematic gaslighting.

Thus, an insurgent force against state repression, who mobilised thousands of women who had lost their sons to state violence, is reduced by Handagama to nothing but grief. This is a fundamental betrayal of Manorani Saravanamuttu.

The young widow — invisibles among invisibles

The film tries to balance Manorani's grief with a second storyline—one that should have exposed class tensions, the broader structures of violence, and the asymmetries of loss. Instead, it reduces yet another woman's suffering into something ornamental. The film opens with a birth; a boy enters the world, delivered by 'Rani's' hands on the same day Richard is ripped from her. A young widow, whose husband was killed during the same period, delivers a child into a nation where men like Richard de Zoysa are abducted, tortured, and discarded. She lingers at the edges of his life, a secret admirer, but her love remains unspoken, just as her grief remains private. When she finally seeks out 'Rani', she does not speak about justice or rage against the system that devoured both their loved ones. Instead, she makes an absurd request—to see Richard's room—as if momentarily forgetting the grave injustices that brought them together.

What is she really searching for in his room? Proof of his existence? A recognition that loss alone binds them? But grief without confrontation is just submission, and *Rani* ensures that their pain remains personal, their sorrow aestheticised, and their suffering stripped of urgency. This subplot could have been a rupture, an interrogation of how grief operates differently for those without power and how some bodies are mourned while others disappear without consequence. It could have revealed that Manorani, for all her loss, still had something the young widow never would: visibility. Instead, it reinforces what Rancière (2004) calls *consensus*, a softening of contradictions, a smoothing-over of struggle into something digestible. The young widow does not challenge 'Rani' to see beyond her son's body. Their relationship dissolves into sentimentality, with sorrow standing in for critique. What could have been a space for *dissensus*, a disruption of dominant narratives, instead becomes yet another avenue for depoliticised grief.

Then, the final insult: The sea.

As the film nears its end, the two women stand together at the shore, staring at the waters that once spat Richard's battered body back onto land. The young widow's son plays in the sand, oblivious, a convenient symbol of continuity. Here, *Rani* offers its audience an illusion, the seductive promise that time heals, that history folds neatly into the next generation. But for whom? For the dead, who will never return? For the families who still search for bodies that will never be found? The film turns a crime scene into a postcard, a soft-lit metaphor where suffering is something to be gazed upon rather than confronted.

The invisibles remain invisible.

Undressing Richard de Zoysa, dressing power

Handagama, in his desperation to strip those in power of direct culpability, ends up exposing himself. If the 'state' was ruthless enough to assassinate Richard, then it must be dragged into the light—not hidden behind a veil of artistic cowardice.

Even the state's architects evade scrutiny: Ronnie Gunasinghe, Premadasa's enforcer, identified by Manorani as her son's abductor, is never named. The president himself is a distant villain, his infamous slogan "*Mē Kauda? Monawada Karanne?*" ("Who is he? What is he doing?") never once mentioned, though it remains a chilling refrain tied to Richard's murder.

Mahinda Rajapaksa appears, but not as the man who would later oversee mass disappearances. He is young, charismatic, and almost noble. Mangala Samaraweera is softened, his turncoat nature and contradictions erased. Ranjan Wijeratne, the man who allegedly ordered Richard's murder, is entirely absent. He is not named, not referenced, not implicated. His later death in a bomb blast, which could have been examined as a moment of reckoning, is omitted entirely. Ranil Wickremesinghe, widely associated with Batalanda's infamous torture chambers, also escapes scrutiny.

Handagama, for all his reputation as an "intellectual rebel", plays it safe. He ignores how those who orchestrated and benefitted from the violence of the past, went on to reshape themselves into respectable figures of governance. He strips Premadasa's regime of its sharp edges while giving himself the illusion of radicalism by exposing Richard's sexuality.

Handagama dares to undress Richard but lacks the spine to undress Premadasa.

Aesthetic complicity: Beautiful amnesia

The cinematography, helmed by Channa Deshapriya, drapes trauma in elegance, with symmetrical frames and chiaroscuro lighting dominating every scene. Richard's abduction unfolds like a staged tableau, bathed in dramatic shadows that evoke Renaissance art rather than the visceral chaos of real disappearances. The result is a visual paradox: brutality rendered beautiful, state violence repackaged as a consumable spectacle. Ravindra Guruge's editing adheres to a rigid, linear structure, flattening grief into a predictable sequence of legal petitions, political confrontations, and tearful monologues.

The beauty of the screen allows us to depart, not with fire in our veins but tear-stained catharsis—hearts heavy, hands clean. We mourn phantoms while their tormentors walk free, cloaked in the shadow of our beautiful amnesia.

A debt to truth

A radical *Rani* would have refused resolution. It would have demanded that we confront how history is being rewritten, even now, in real time. It would have shattered the screen, forcing us to reckon with the discomfort of remembering.

Instead, we are given this *Rani*, a film that remembers just enough to be palatable but not enough to be incendiary. It mourns but never disturbs. It makes history softer, quieter, and easier to consume–a lullaby for forgetting.

This is the film's fatal flaw: it borrows the gravity of real trauma while evading its truths. Imagine a film about Steve Biko's murder that sidelines apartheid to focus on his mother's tears; or a Rwandan genocide story that obscures ethnic divisions for personal melodrama. Would we call that "fiction" or complicit erasure? *Rani*'s refusal to engage with archives and its reliance on fragmented memories over testimonies transforms radical histories into apolitical fables.

Artistic license is not limitless. When fiction borrows the gravity of real suffering, it must answer for its distortions. We can and should hold films accountable, not for failing to be documentaries, but for laundering historical amnesia as entertainment. The screen is not a vacuum. What we see there bleeds into what we remember and what we forget.

Rani forgets and washes away sins. But history is not the sand on the beach. It does not wash away. It does not forgive. It does not forget. And neither should we.

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