

MOVIE REVIEW: NJANGALUDE VEETTILE ATHIDHIKAL (2014)

KR Balasubrahmanya

Consultant Psychiatrist, Rajiv Gandhi Specialty Hospital, Agatti, Lakshadweep.

Correspondence: Rajiv Gandhi Speciality Hospital, Agatti Island, Union Territory of Lakshadweep, 680 553. Email: balasubrahmanya@gmail.com

Malayalam cinema has always been inspired by the complexity of the human mind. Right from *Iruttinte Aathmavu* (1967) till *Njangalude Veettile Athidhikal* (2014), psychiatric issues has been portrayed in Malayalam cinema with intentions of telling a good story and dispelling the myths about mental illnesses. A few of such attempts, like Blessey's *Thanmatra* (2005), have been well researched, and had depicted mental illnesses with utmost clarity and sincerity. On the other hand, many other films (including Priyadarsan's *Thalavattom* and Fazil's *Manichithrathazhu*) have portrayed mental illnesses and their treatments in a negative way quite contrary to the real scenario.

Sibi Malayil's *Thaniyavarthanam* (1987) had attempted to showcase the society's beliefs and misconceptions about psychiatric diseases, and was very well appreciated by the audience and the mental health fraternity alike. In 2007, the director had also made *Flash*, a movie in which he tried hard to portray the intricacies of the subconscious mind; but the movie was judged a failure by both the common audience and the critics. *Njangalude Veettile Athidhikal*, the movie being reviewed here, is his latest offering.

Njangalude Veettile Athidhikal, scripted by K. Gireesh Kumar, is a family drama that revolves around Manoj Kumar (played by

Jayaram), an advocate, and his wife Bhavana (played by Priyamani). The movie depicts how the duo copes with the loss of their only daughter in an accident. Manoj tries to suppress the memories of the incident by starting to socialize more and to give added attention to his work. However, Bhavana, depicted as a loner, immerses herself in books, and starts avoiding her husband and other family members. She also develops a delusion of infidelity, and is shown as misinterpreting phone calls and other day to day activities of her husband.

As the film progresses, Bhavana is shown to seek solace in two friends; sharing her problems with them, and seeking their advice. Manoj sees her hallucinating, and suspects that she may have a mental illness. A psychiatrist's help is sought; who diagnoses Bhavana to have schizophrenia and advises counseling to cure the illness. He also advises Manoj to confront her with evidences of her psychotic behavior.

What ensues is the struggle by Manoj to treat his wife's psychosis. He behaves according to her wishes, and asks his parents (Innocent and KPAC Lalitha) also to do the same. He eventually succeeds in introducing an element of doubt in his wife's trust in her friends, and her delusional system and hallucinations come collapsing down.

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The major asset of this movie is the performance of the lead actors and other supporting actors. The makers of the film are to be appreciated for depicting a serious mental illness and highlighting the importance of timely psychiatric intervention in its treatment. However, it also has some deficits worth mentioning. For example, it showcases schizophrenia as a disorder which manifests with only delusions and visual hallucinations. In reality, however, the negative symptoms of schizophrenia, such as affective flattening and avolition, are more common than positive symptoms, and auditory hallucinations are far more prevalent than visual hallucinations.¹ (Incidentally, Lohithadas' *Bhoothakkannadi* (1997), another important Malayalam movie on schizophrenia, too had made the same mistake of overreliance on visual hallucinations, though the character was correctly portrayed as suffering from some negative symptoms.)

Portrayals of causation and treatments of schizophrenia by movies from India and the rest of the world have mostly been inaccurate or distorted, and this movie is not an exception. Movies have falsely promoted the premise that schizophrenia is caused by traumatic life events like loss of a loved one or dysfunctional parenting, and that it can be cured by the special empathetic understanding of a loving caregiver.^{2,3,4,5} Though a special empathetic understanding may help in symptom management, the notion of cure through a loving relationship, as shown in this movie, is in contravention to scientific facts.

This movie gives absolutely no emphasis to the psychopharmacological treatment of schizophrenia. It has been noted that movies often give less importance to psychopharmacological treatments for mental illnesses, and offer undue

prominence to other treatment modalities like electroconvulsive therapy and catharsis.⁴ Gabbard had observed that the “usefulness of the role of psychotherapy in the narrative of the film may partially explain why the psychopharmacologic revolution in psychiatry never materialized on the movie screen”.⁶

In Indian cinema, only a handful of movies have handled the psychiatric illnesses well without falsification and much modification. These include the Hindi movie *15 Park Avenue* (2005) and *Devrai* (2004), a Marathi film, both of which deal with schizophrenia. In world cinema too, there are few movies which provided realistic and sympathetic representations of the numerous challenges encountered by people with schizophrenia, such as societal stigma (*The Soloist*), disruption of family and other relationships (*Canvas*, *Oil on Water*, and *Some Voices*), and day-to-day struggles to cope with symptoms (*Through a Glass Darkly*, *Angel Baby*; *Clean*, *Shaven*; and *Revolution #9*).

Clearly, there is a need to provide accurate information about mental illnesses to dispel the stigma associated with them and to counter the negative messages found in mass media. This movie seems to make less impact in that direction. A thorough research about schizophrenia would have helped to make it an eye opener for the masses about the myths and misconceptions about mental illness.

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