

Movie review

ATHIRAN

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There have been numerous films belonging to the mystery/thriller genre that have portrayed mental illness in its main characters and set in psychiatric hospitals or asylums. Hollywood films *Shock Corridor* (1963), *The Shutter Island* (2010) and *Sucker Punch* (2011) have been able to captivate the audience with use elements of mental illness in adding to the mystery of the narrative in the films. This movie review will focus on the recently released Malayalam movie, *Athiran* (2019), which also belongs to this genre. This author would like to caution readers that this review contains spoilers from the movie.

Athiran starts in 1967 with scenes of four murders occurring in a home and the female protagonist, Nithya (played by Sai Pallavi), sitting calmly amidst the corpses and fidgeting a piece of string. It is assumed that she has committed the murders. The film then fasts forwards to the 1970s to a psychiatric hospital run by Dr Benjamin Diaz (played by Atul Kulkarni), located at a picturesque but a remote hilly area. Nithya resides there as a patient of the hospital. Dr Moothedathu Kannan Nair (played by Fahad Fazil), a psychiatrist appointed by the state government, is visiting the hospital to enquire about the unnatural deaths that have

occurred there. The film revolves on how Dr Nair unravels the mystery behind the initial scenes of murders and frees Nithya from the hospital.

Athiran, being set in a psychiatric setting, touches upon many themes related to the portrayal of mental illness in films, including negative stereotypical portrayals of psychiatric patients. Apart from Nithya, the hospital has five other patients who appear well-groomed. They do not display any overt psychiatric symptoms except for a nun, Sister Anna Maria (played by Leona Lishoy), who makes homicidal statements. This character can be categorised as the negative stereotype of the homicidal manic as described by Hyler et al. in his classification of negative stereotypes of mental illness in films.¹ Other patients at the hospital include two middle-aged-men. Mr Subramaniam Iyer (played by Vijay Menon) converses as if his family exists even though they had been deceased many years ago, and Hussain Bala (played by Jayaprakash Kuloor), a painter who is mute and paints events that he foresees in the future suggesting he has powers of clairvoyance. The remaining patients are a female, Vadakeddath Kamala Lakshmi

(played by Subbhalakshmi), who appears eccentric with inappropriate affect and young male, Jeevan (played by Sudev Nair), who is described to have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and is possessive about his affection towards Nithya. The security guard of the hospital is also described as suffering from “shell shock” (a historical term for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) even though symptoms of the same have not been depicted in the film. The depiction of these institutionalised patients with their diagnosis serves the purpose of capturing the fascination of the audience without the accurate portrayal of psychiatric symptoms. Dr Diaz’s also describes his patients being abandoned by their families because of shame from the stigma of mental illness. These characters including Nithya have been filmed alone emphasising their isolation from each other and the society which is a recurring theme in the negative depiction of mentally ill patients.²

With her restricted facial expressions, avoidance of eye contact during conversation and stereotypical motor behaviours of fidgeting a piece of string, Nithya is said to be suffering from autism which is described in the film as a neurodevelopmental disorder. However, the first depiction of Nithya sitting amidst a murder scene and later on shackled in chains and unkempt along with an eerie background score to elicit horror with the audience. In the film, there are multiple scenes of Nithya, Jeevan and the security guard assaulting Dr Nair. Mentally ill patients have historically been depicted in films as impulsive and violent. Such dramatic depictions create impressions in the society that mentally ill patients are aggressive, malevolent and violent.³

When Dr Nair meets Dr Diaz for the first time,

a tense dialogue happens between them based on Dr Diaz’s treatment methods. Dr Diaz with a proudly claims that the families dump the patients in the hospital for a hefty sum of money, making him “filthy rich”. He claims only an insane mind can understand another insane mind and thus his methods are considered nontraditional. Dr Diaz’s explains that the mentally ill are not patients but victims of their hurtful memories. He claims to use hypnotherapy to erase those memories and thus curing his patients. Dr Nair berates Dr Diaz on hypnotherapy having no scientific basis including stating the historical fact of Benjamin Franklin discrediting Anton Mesmer on the use of hypnosis.⁴ Dr Nair boasts that he is not suggestible and challenges Dr Diaz to hypnotise him. Using a pocket watch, Dr Diaz puts Dr Nair in a hypnotic trance in seconds in a ludicrous manner. Such a dramatic portrayal of the use of hypnosis is in tune to the stereotypical portrayals of hypnosis as a metaphor of control of patients by the therapists.⁵

We later see, Dr Diaz having vested interests in hiding his treatment methods, including the use of coercion and physically restraining his patients with chains and straitjackets. Dr Nair is shown to display compassion and rationale in his treatment approaches while advocating for the patients. Being the antagonist in the film, Dr Diaz uses Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) to subdue Dr Nair from escaping with Nithya. Just like hypnosis, Dr Diaz is shown to use ECT for control and punishment, which is a common portrayal of the use of ECT in films, including Indian films.⁶ The portrayal of this duelling psychiatrist is also stereotypical of the depiction of psychiatrists in films. As per Schneider’s classification of stereotypical portrayal of psychiatrists in films, Dr Diaz and

Dr Nair can be considered as Dr Evil and Dr Wonderful respectively.⁷ However, to negate the good intentions of Dr Nair as a psychiatrist, he is later revealed to be an imposter who has schizophrenia and has come to free his cousin, Nithya. Psychotic and with aggressive traits, he had been behind the initial murder scene shown in the film. He had murdered his family members when they had tried to kill Nithya for the family fortune.

As described above, *Athiran* is riddled with numerous negative stereotypical portrayals related to mental illness in films. Violence and death are important elements in the narratives of commercial films and associating them with mental illness have been considered an important factor in contributing stigma to mental illness by the media.⁸ During the past two decades, Malayalam cinema has taken efforts in embracing the positive portrayal of psychiatric disorders in films like *Spirit (2012)*, *North 24 Katham (2013)*, *Aby (2017)* and *Hey Jude (2018)*. These films helped raise awareness about mental illness and bring a dialogue between mental health providers and the community on them. One can argue that the treatment methods portrayed in the film are in tune to practice of psychiatry during the period depicted in the film. However, the negative portrayal of psychiatry reinforces the fear of our society towards mentally ill and undoes the efforts of previous filmmakers in depicting mental illness in a positive light. This author

prays that *Athiran* is a minor glitch in the current era of the positive on-screen portrayal of mental illness in Malayalam cinema and future filmmakers would be cautious in depicting such negative stereotypical portrayals of mental illness.

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