

NEE-NA

KR Balasubrahmanya

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

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

INTRODUCTION

Filmmakers across the globe have always found alcohol and alcoholism as interesting subjects that can be effectively dramatized on screen, and have used them as a medium through which various dimensions of human life and existence can be meaningfully portrayed. For example, *Days of Wine and Roses* (1962) depicted an alcoholic encouraging his wife with OCD traits to take up drinking, *Barfly* (1987) and *Factotum* (2005) depicted the creativity and romanticism of famed author Charles Bukowski under the influence of alcohol, *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995) projected a vivid picture of codependence, and *28 Days* (2000) portrayed how alcohol dependence leads to a person's downfall.

Popular movies are considered to have a powerful influence on the kind of attitude the general public has about mental illness and addiction.^{1,2} Research has shown that youth are more likely to start using drugs and alcohol when exposed to movies that include images of youth using drugs.³

Closer home, Malayalam movies have both glorified the use of various substances and portrayed their ill-effects. The song "hridayathin romanjam" from *Utharayanam* (1975) celebrated the high of psychedelic drugs, while the lyrics of the song 'marijuana virinju vannal' from the Prem Nazir movie *Vijayanum Veeranum* (1979) blatantly promoted cannabis. The movie *Idukki Gold* (2013) portrayed the use of marijuana in children, depicted the actors of seeking it again after many years, and

aired many pro-cannabis dialogues. On the other hand, movies like *Bharatham* (1991) and *Akashadoothu* (1993) painted, in a touching way, the interpersonal consequences alcoholism can produce in families of sufferers. The wave of new generation Malayalam cinema, which has attempted to portray simple themes as well as complex characters with ease and justice to the concerned subjects, recently turned its spotlight to alcoholism with *Spirit* (2012), a movie which depicted the harmful effects alcohol can have on people of various strata.

Nee- Na, the movie being reviewed here, is another tale of substance abuse and its effects on human minds and relationships.

CAST AND PLOT

The movie is written by R. Venugopal and directed by Lal Jose. The title 'Nee-Na' is an abbreviation of Neena and Nalini, the central characters portrayed respectively by Deepti Sati and Ann Augustine. Vinay Panicker, played by Vijay Babu, is the male lead. He has been heading an advertising agency in Mumbai and, as the movie begins, relocates to Kochi with his wife Nalini and their only son Akhil. Neena is the creative director in the firm's Kochi office. Though she is very good with her work, her alcoholism and smoking, along with her snobbish behavior, overshadows it. During their interactions, Neena gets attracted to Vinay and expresses her love to him. He rejects her request. Being unable to handle this, she absconds and attempts suicide.

Please cite this article as: Balasubrahmanya KR. Nee-Na. Kerala Journal of Psychiatry 2015; 28(2):216-8.

Vinay meets Neena in the hospital where she is admitted, takes her to a deaddiction center, and stays there with her. She experiences withdrawal symptoms of alcohol and nicotine, craves for them for a few days, attends group therapy and relapse prevention sessions, listens to patients who have had multiple relapses, and gradually gains insight into her problems. Vinay, who was initially ambivalent about an affair with Neena, slowly resolves his internal conflicts and gets attracted to her during their stay in the hospital. However, with her thinking skills improved after a brief period of sobriety and her impulsivity enfeebled after professional interventions, Neena decides to become more practical and, in spite of being in love with him, decides to leave him. Her psychologist explains to Vinay that Neena's love for him was an obsession under the influence of alcohol and that it has decreased with treatment. In the final scenes, Vinay, inebriated with alcohol, finds solace in the loving hands of Nalini.

ANALYSIS FROM A PSYCHIATRIC PERSPECTIVE

This movie attempts to display Neena's impulsive behavior as an outcome of her childhood experiences. Neena's parents, who had lost their adolescent son in a tragic event, wish for a boy during the second childbirth. Though they are disappointed when Neena, a girl, is born, they bring her up like a boy — she is dressed like one and spends her leisure time playing with boys who in turn address her as a boy. All this generates some gender identity issues in Neena's mind in her teenage. However, once she attains menarche, her father changes his stand and starts restricting her interaction with boys. She rebels against it. Her initial curiosity towards alcohol and cigarettes is aroused in this stage by her friends, and is subsequently maintained by her anger towards own parents. Thus, the movie emphasizes that erratic parenting, peer influences, conflicts in accepting her gender identity and the associated emotional turmoil led to Neena's alcoholism.

This movie also showcases Nalini's 'emotional eating' — whenever she is craving for Vinay's attention, she gorges on food as a coping mechanism.

CRITICISM OF THE NARRATIVE

The movie portrays alcoholism as a disorder than a bad habit, and this is not a usual practice for our filmmakers. The need for family involvement, problem solving training, group therapy, etc. for recovery from the condition are portrayed well. The possibility of relapses and techniques for relapse prevention are depicted in detail. However, the movie's portrayal of the process of deaddiction is not fully accurate. For example, excruciating leg pain is depicted as a prominent symptom of withdrawal from alcohol and tobacco, but this is not scientifically correct. In order to dramatize the events and to suit the plot, the film's makers have devised their own treatment methods — like the couple being not allowed to stay in the same room after the third day of inpatient treatment. On the day of admission, after a brief initial assessment, the doctor tells Neena and Vinay that now the psychologist will take over the treatment and that he will see her only after ten days. However, in a clinical setting, medical supervision is more important during the detoxification phase. This movie also portrays male drug addicts to be expressionless and potentially violent and to vent out their violent impulses by 'body building' in the gym. All these may lead to creation of false stereotypes in the minds of lay people.

Neena's impulsivity and recklessness are shown to disappear dramatically during the short inpatient stay at the center. However, impulsivity displayed by patients of chronic alcoholism is reported to be due to the damage alcohol causes to the frontal lobes, and the reversal of such changes will take much more time than is depicted in this movie.⁴

Usually, in entering a new relationship, men are supposed to be impulsive and jump in quickly, while women are thought to be and found in research to

be more calculative in making their decision. Some evolutionary explanations have been cited for this difference.⁵ In this movie, the pace with which love blossoms in the minds of male and female leads is quite contrary to this — but this could be partially explained by the innate and alcohol-induced impulsivity in the female lead.

CONCLUSION

The problem of addiction and its treatment are important social issues, and sending a clear message through mass media is an integral part of tackling this and is the need of the hour. Such a message needs to be carefully conceived and analyzed, with an understanding of what effect such a depiction will have on the audience. The message in this movie falters midway through the narrative, with the filmmaker taking liberties with portrayals of patients with addiction and their coping strategies. With better research and depiction, this movie, with

its strong theme and unconventional portrayals, would have made an indelible impression on the public.

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Source of support: None *Conflict of interest:* None declared.