

PAVADA

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“Oh, that men should put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains! That we should, with joy, pleasance, revel, and applause, transform ourselves into beasts!” —Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act 2, Scene 3, Lines 289-93

The portrayal of alcoholism and its vices have been a favorite theme in cinema for decades. These portrayals have ranged from humor to melancholy, with the focus on the character's antics and the transformation from his normal self under the influence of alcohol. From *The Lost Weekend* (1945) to *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), the portrayals have been critically acclaimed and have also won numerous accolades. Both *The Lost Weekend* and *Leaving Las Vegas* have been mentioned in literature reviews on movies depicting addiction in cinema, including their use in teaching about addiction to medical students.^{1,2,3}

Indian cinema has also been enamored by the alcoholic protagonist on the silver screen. The different “reel” versions of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's classic romantic/tragedy novel *Devdas*, with its silent form in 1928 to its modern-day adaptation *Dev. D* in 2009, are a testament to this infatuation of the portrayal of the lover who plunges himself into a self-destructive path of alcoholism. Malayalam cinema too has included portrayals of alcohol use. The majority of such portrayals has been associated with celebrations and having a good time with friends. Jumping into a song and dance under the influence of alcohol has been a popular depiction of behavior associated with alcohol use, with songs like “Paapi Appacha” from *Mayiladumkunnu* (1972) to “Chithirathira” in *Charlie* (2016) being popular among the masses. However, there have been serious depictions of alcohol addiction in Malayalam cinema, including

Chuzhi (1973), *Spirit* (2012), and *Neena* (2015) which was reviewed in the previous issue of this journal.⁴ In a recently published study by Krishna et al. on the portrayal of alcohol and tobacco use in *Spirit* (2012) and *Premam* (2015), which showed alcohol and tobacco use occupying 11% and 15% of the screen time of the films respectively, which leads to increased exposure of the audience to depiction of substance use.⁵

Pavada (2016), the movie in review in this article, doesn't have a serious depiction of alcohol use. It is a commercial film with all the elements to entertain the Indian filmgoer with its humor, melodrama and song and dance routines. However, the use of alcohol serves as a background in the film and its ill effects serve as an important pivot in the storyline. The film will also be one of the last films to portray the consumption of liquor in a bar before the state government decided not to renew bar licenses except for bars in five star hotels in the state in 2014.

The film begins with the introductory narration by a drunkard in a toddy shop claiming his merit to do the narration of the film is his daily consumption of toddy even if it means he has to procure the money for it by loan or begging. We are then introduced to the two main protagonists, “Pambu” Joy (played by Prithviraj Sukumaran) and Professor Babu Joseph (also known as “Pavada” Babu, played by Anoop Menon). Joy and Babu are accompanied by their friends “Villakoothi” Rajan (played by Sharafudheen) and Advocate Gunashekar Nair

(played by Maniyan Pilla Raju) respectively. Joy and Rajan are young and lead a carefree and aimless life, with their main efforts of the day dedicated to the procurement of alcohol by doing odd jobs, donating blood, selling cinema tickets in the black market, etc. Professor Babu Joseph, a former college professor of English who spews Shakespearean quotes when inebriated, and Advocate Gunashekharan Nair are in their middle ages and well educated, but spend most of their day with the consumption of alcohol while shying away from other interests and responsibilities in life. The two have also had trouble in their respective occupations due to their alcohol use.

The film portrays all four male characters bearded, with their unkempt dresses, bloodshot eyes and dark circles around their eyes revealing the effects of alcohol on their external appearances. Their antics under the influence of alcohol, including their impulsive acts, efforts to procure alcohol, craving, eye opener drinks, Joy's transient infidelity ideations against his wife (played by Miya George) and withdrawal symptoms of tremors and chills in Babu have been used to elicit humor in the audience. Two songs in the first half of the film also focus on the protagonists having fun under the influence of alcohol. Both Joy and Babu have tragic backgrounds which they attribute to their drinking behavior.

Cape has categorized the portrayal of addiction in cinema as the tragic hero, rebellious free spirit, demonized addict / homicidal maniac and humorous / comedic user.¹ The portrayal of the aforementioned four male characters are also stereotypical and can be categorized under the humorous /comedic user, with Joy and Babu also fitting the category of tragic heroes.

Joy and Babu eventually meet for the first time in a deaddiction center run by priests. Joy gets admitted voluntarily in a ruse to win back his wife who had left him due to his infidelity ideations. Babu is tricked by his well-wishers and coerced into

treatment at the center. It is not known whether the priests led by Father Kattiparamban (played by Chemban Vinod Jose) are medical professionals. However, they are shown to be involved in strong-arm tactics to coerce patients into treatment, including forcefully treating drunkards who become a public nuisance on the streets and using parenteral medications to control agitation when patients resist treatment. The treatment setting is shown to be that of a controlled environment, including cellular rooms for patients who might escape from the center. The portrayal of treatment of addiction to alcohol has been inadequate, with the depiction of treatment limited to the use of meditation, group therapy and awareness classes by doctors. Coercion as a treatment for alcohol addiction has been demonstrated to have only limited efficacy, and the method is shrouded with ethical issues, including violation of human rights.^{6,7} This can add to the misconceptions of treatment of alcohol use in the audience. The film, however, depicts Father Kattiparamban requesting the caregivers of Babu not to come and receive him after treatment since he prefers his patients to go to their home on their own after discharge. He explains this effort as an attempt to destigmatize deaddiction treatment from being compared to treatment of mental illness.

During their stay, Joy and Babu form a bond, covertly consume alcohol, and finally escape from the center with the help of Rajan. With alcohol as a common denominator binding them together, they live a life of merry until they realize their tragic pasts are also connected. Babu had previously produced a film which was stopped midway due to the unexpected demise of the director. To avoid financial ruin, Babu had entrusted the production controller of the film, Eldo (played Kalabhavan Shajon), to release the film by any means. Eldo, without the permission of Babu or others associated with the film, manipulated the film and released it as a soft porn film called "Pavada". This had brought ill-repute to Babu, who later earned the nickname of "Pavada" Babu. The film's heroine, Cicily (played by Asha Sarath), is Joy's mother and she had

abandoned her family upon release of the film when Joy was a child. (It has to be noted that a similar theme on the travails of workers in the Malayalam soft porn industry had also been previously dealt in *Matinee* (2012).) Babu eventually finds Cicily in an old age home, but Eldo plans to re-release Pavada again to earn a quick buck. The latter half of the film portrays the efforts of Babu and Joy to stop the release of the film and thus save them from further disgrace. It is also here where the film finds merit in terms of its portrayal of alcohol use.

In the ensuing legal battle, the statements as witnesses of Babu and Cicily are disregarded since Babu had presented himself drunk at the court and Cicily was found to be suffering from dementia. This is based on Section 118 of Indian Evidence Act, 1872, which describes the competency of the witness in court. It states, “All persons shall be competent to testify unless the Court considers that they are prevented from understanding the questions put to them, or from giving rational answers to those questions, by tender years, extreme old age, disease, whether of body or mind, or any other cause of the same kind”.⁸ Although Cicily has been described to be suffering from dementia, the depiction has been inadequate, with symptoms being portrayed as minor remote memory loss and somatic symptoms of arthritis and difficulty in walking. (The invalidity of the statement of a dementia patient in a court had also been recently portrayed in *Utopiyile Rajavu* (2015), where a prime witness suffering from dementia is portrayed to be having perseveration of speech when questioned by the lawyer.) However, our protagonists turn their incompetence due to alcohol use to their advantage when they prove that Eldo had procured the rights of the film from Babu while he was under the influence of alcohol, alluding to section 11 of Indian Contract Act, 1872 which describes the competency to contract as “Every person is competent to contract who is of the age of majority according to the law to which he is subject, and who is of sound mind, and is not disqualified from contracting by any law to which he is subject.” with section 12 further describing sound mind as “A

person is said to be of sound mind for the purpose of making a contract if, at the time when he makes it, he is capable of understanding it and of forming a rational judgment as to its effect upon his interests.” and “A sane man, who is delirious from fever or who is so drunk that he cannot understand the terms of a contract or form a rational judgment as to its effect on his interests, cannot contract whilst such delirium or drunkenness lasts.”⁹ In the end, the film again adds to the misconceptions about alcohol use, with our protagonists becoming sober, without any treatment or withdrawal symptoms, but motivated by their determination to fight the case and after realizing that alcohol has also affected their personal lives.

Although the film is riddled with inappropriate portrayals of alcohol use and its treatment, it has to be considered that the film has been made with commercial intentions, with a primary purpose to entertain, rather than educate, the audience. The humorous stereotypical portrayals and the glorification of alcohol use are a cause of worry, since studies have shown that portrayal of alcohol use in films have been associated with increased risk of alcohol use in adolescents.^{10,11} However, this author also feels the makers of this film do deserve some credit for leaving a lasting impression on the audience with intelligent use of the concept of unsound mind or incompetence to contract / stand as a witness under the influence of alcohol in the plot of the film. It would be easy to criticize all the negative things in the film, albeit it would be inappropriate to turn a blind eye towards the little positive things the film also has to offer.

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