

## Portrayal of Mental Health Issues in Manichitrathazhu and TaareZameem Par

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### Abstract

The American Psychiatric Association outlines mental illnesses as health conditions involving changes in one's emotion, thinking and behaviour, or a combination of these associated with distresses in one's personal, social or occupational functioning. Indian cinema has explored mental disorders with a particular stereotypical and hyperbolic fascination for decades. According to studies, the media exaggerates and distorts mental illness's danger, criminality, and unpredictability. Current project analyses how this elicits adverse reactions such as fear, rejection, scorn and ridicule. In addition to these inaccurate representations of the clinical picture of mental illnesses occur several instances where its management, treatment and rehabilitation are wrongly depicted. Indian cinema has thus been stated to be about 30-40 years behind Hollywood's standard of portraying mental disorders. There has been an increasing incidence of mental health disorders over time. About one in seven people suffer from illnesses of varying intensities in India, as per statistical reports of 2019. Cinematic depictions have a significant influence over a population amidst which supernatural beliefs and practices are plenty, and mental illnesses are mistreated or even left undiagnosed due to lack of sufficient awareness in this regard. After that, the following study critically analyses the Malayalam film Manichithrathazhu (1992) and Bollywood film TaareZameen Par (2007), given these crucial issues.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Professor Dinesh Bhugra, author of *Mad Tales from Bollywood: Portrayal of Mental Illness in Conventional Hindi Cinema*, states that the mentally ill are often used to induce laughter, fear or sadness, visualised in the form of dramatic breakdowns, paranormal manifestations, ineffective treatment and subsequent relapse. As depicted in most commercial films, the remedy to such disorders lies in timely revelations or receiving attention from the individual's immediate family members. While mental health professionals are depicted as apathetic, eccentric and unethical in these films, electroconvulsive therapy is presented as a tool of torture and psychotropic drugs as triggers to insanity. (Bhugra,2006).

*Manichithrathazhu* (The Ornate Lock) boasts of undiminished fame in Malayalam cinema despite almost three decades since its release. It was a massive hit at the box office and became the highest-grossing Malayalam film to that date, running for more than a year in some centres. Hailed as one of the best films to be made in the language, the film had surpassed Hitchcock's acclaimed film *Psycho* in the number of *IMDb* reviews by 2015 and been rated as the second most popular Indian film among more than 100 regional language films on a 2013 online poll conducted by *IBN Live*. *Manichithrathazhu*, which bagged the National Film Award for Best Popular Film providing Wholesome Entertainment, was remade into Kannada, Tamil, Bengali and Hindi

as *Apthamitra* (2004), *Chandramukhi* (2005), *Rajmohol* (2005) and *BhoolBhulaiyaa* (2007). Being the first Indian film having dealt with split personality disorder, it familiarized the Indian audience to the manifestations of the disease while incorporating supernatural, humorous and Indian folklore elements in a traditional family setting, also probably having contributed to its attribution as an evergreen classic.

The main aspects of the film's plot unfold with the arrival of Nakulan and Ganga, a newly-married couple from Kolkata, at the ancestral house of Maadampally. The former acquires a spare key to the tabooed "Thekkini", assumed to be haunted by palatial dancer Nagavalli's bloodthirsty soul attempting to avenge her lover Ramanathan's execution. The house had centuries ago been the royal abode of King ShankaranThampi, who reportedly killed Ramanathan on knowledge of the duo's affair out of jealousy. Paranormal incidents take precedence over the house, and Nakula calls in his psychiatrist friend Dr Sunny to treat his cousin Sreedevi believed to have concocted these events.

Ganga is a gentle, observant, curious and sensitive lady with a passion for folklore and myths suitable from her young age. She is childlike in her wide-eyed innocence, sense of wonder, pleasantly mischievous behaviour, interest towards stories, yearning for attention, curiosity to unearth facts amidst restrictions and untethered by fear of consequences. She has experienced psychological disturbances as a teen, stemming from the anxiety of separation from her grandmother and native, following her migration to Kolkata. The legend of Nagavalli and her subsequent exposure to the life-sized portraits of the characters of this tale, costumes and jewellery used by Nagavalli during her Bharatanatyam performances rekindle Ganga's vivid imagination and create the perfect atmosphere to unlock her repressed alter ego.

There are several instances in the film depicting the extent of Ganga's mental illness and its manifestations. Once the entire household falls asleep, Ganga sings Tamil songs and dances or

walks around wearing Nagavalli's anklets, although she is not a trained singer or dancer. On one such occasion, Sunny attracts her attention by introducing himself as SankaranThampi before a locked Thekkini and provoking her, saying that she could never hurt him. Ganga ferociously utters cuss words at him and says that she would accomplish her goal of murdering him on the auspicious day of Durga Ashtami, all in Tamil, a language unknown to her. Her violent behaviour at that time ascends from neurotic to psychotic mannerisms. While she introduces Sunny to Nagavalli's ornaments at the Thekkini and he picks up an argument with her saying that the actual anklets were missing from the jewellery box, he experiences fleeting psychic vibrations from her in the form of violent stares, facial expressions as raising of eyebrows and sudden fluctuations in her voice modulation. Ganga attempts poisoning her own husband as she takes him for SankaranThampi whenever she assumes her altered ego, and subsequently tries to strangle him even as the other family members are present and do not take notice.

*TaareZameen Par* (Stars upon the Earth), made on a small budget of Rs.18 crore and is one of the few Bollywood films with child protagonists, became an instant superhit, grossing approximately Rs. Eighty-nine million from the domestic and global box office. It remains the only Bollywood film that has portrayed learning dyslexia. It was appreciated for being a "far cry from the formulaic masala flicks churned out by the Bollywood machine" and "an inspirational story that is as emotive as it is entertaining" (Pandohar, BBC) (2007). The research article "Wake up call from 'Stars on the Ground'" published in the *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* stated that the film "deserves to be vastly appreciated as an earnest endeavour to portray with sensitivity and empathetically diagnose a malady in human life". They also felt it blended "modern professional knowledge" with a "humane approach" in working with a dyslexic child. (Rao & Krishna, 2008). It won several awards, most notably the National Film Award for Best Film on Family

Welfare. In a country like India, where most parents believe that their kid's academic orientation is the sole determinant of his or her future and learning disabilities are met with undue stigmatization, the film sensitized the public towards the fact that every child is special and deserves parental understanding, support and affection to overcome challenges and unleash their utmost potential in life. The film's popularity is evident because it is set to be remade in Chinese as well.

The protagonist of *TaareZameen Par* is Ishaan Awasthi, a cheerful and naughty 8-year-old boy who encounters difficulties in reading and writing correctly, spelling organisation and performing math, although his speech is fluent. However, Ishaan is highly creative and has a keen interest in nature and painting. One day, his parents discover that he had produced a fake leave note at school for having bunked classes. They meet his teachers, who report his unsatisfactory performance and caution them against failing the 3rd grade again. Deeply angered, his father arranges for his admission at a boarding school against his consent.

The new environment causes Ishaan extreme homesickness and agony. He hardly talks to anyone and is ridiculed by his teachers when he does not give an academic answer to questions or refrains from doing what he is instructed. It is at this point that RamshankarNikumbh takes charge as his new art teacher. He notices the child's lack of interest in his classes, despite his efforts to make them as enjoyable as possible. This leads him to talk with the other teachers about Ishaan's demeanour and subsequently request to see his notebooks. He quickly realises the issue and visits the Awasthis to inform them that their child has dyslexia. His parents are both shocked and angered but finally reconcile to the truth, while Nikumbh learns of his behavioural patterns by questioning them in detail. He also gets to know that Ishaan could paint excellently, although he never responded during his classes.

Nikumbh requests the school principal to offer Ishaan special training sessions after class hours, dramatically improving his academic

performance. He holds a painting competition across the school, which Ishaan is proclaimed the winner of and garners immense attention among the students and faculty. His parents receive great reviews of the prodigy he is, which overwhelms them and the film ends with him hugging Nikumbh as an expression of his thanks and admiration. DSM V mentions the diagnostic criteria for learning dyslexia as difficulty in meaning formation or mathematical reasoning and substantially poor academic abilities sometimes unrecognisable until adulthood, with no other medical or environmental deficits contributing to the condition. The opening scene of *TaareZameen Par* shows Ishaan kneeling over a gutter in his school compound while using his socks to collect tiny fish in his water bottle. He is so busy admiring its beauty that he barely takes notice of the conductor calling out to him to alight the school bus back home. Right from the onset, the audience is shown that Ishaan is a self-centred child, happy in his own and quite unusual world that does not fit the expectations or discipline that his parents or the society deems proper for a child of his age. Being shouted at or punished by elders fails to arouse the sense of sadness, shame or lowered self-esteem that most kids experience. The world of colours, art and nature fascinates him a lot that his favourite leisure time activity is painting, doodling, craft making and mixing different colours to create new hues.

The tussles Ishaan engages with neighbouring kids is never initiated by him, and he hits others only to spare himself of serious injury. His tearing his opponent's shirt, kicking of flowerpots or fidgeting behaviour is also quite normal for kids of his age. He is sensitive to others making fun of him but does not consider the consequences before committing any action, such as bunking classes and roaming on the streets alone. He finds no interest in the ranks and prefers to look or stay outside. Ishaan hardly has any friends in his class or interacts with fellow students, who see him as dumb and funny. Even finding the right page on a book and reading or writing a single word correctly,

leaving aside the application of concepts taught in class is a challenge for him, as he finds letters and numbers jumbled, inverted, as mirror images or dancing before him. He also cannot write legibly following notebook lines or distinguish between letters and numbers which look similar, misspelt the same word in multiple ways, confuses words with similar spellings and cannot even recollect what he was taught the previous day. Ishaan keeps repeating the same mistakes and can't concentrate his attention on anything for more than a few minutes. He cannot do most things kids of his age effortlessly do, such as buttoning his shirt and tying his shoelaces or tie. Upon shifting to the new school, the amount of scrutiny he faces for not coping is so immense that he does not find pleasure in anything that earlier amused him, stops talking altogether, and seems lost.

Ganga, the protagonist of *Manichithrathaazhu*, suffers from Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), characterised by the presence of two or more distinct identities that alternatively control the person's behaviour, each completely unaware of the others. The common behavioural changes observed in the victim are as follows: depersonalisation (out-of-body experiences), derealisation (perception of the world as unreal and a far-off entity), amnesia (extensive inability to recall important personal details) and identity confusion (inability to state viewpoints or misperceptions regarding time, place or situation). The diagnostic criteria for DID, as mentioned in DSM V, includes the manifestation of alternative personalities that shifts due to environmental triggers, each with its unique thoughts and perceptions; the occurrence of amnesia; difficulty in daily functioning; and psychological distress that is not influenced by religious or cultural practices, substance abuse or any other medical condition. Although the film's portrayal of the illness was primarily accurate, it furthered the social stigma surrounding one's perception of mental disorders via its insensitive approach to the issue.

As Sunny explores Ganga's childhood days, he realises that her trauma in having been

separated from her parents at a tender age and sudden migration to Kolkata as a 15-year old had caused her first encounter with mental instability. Receiving the news from her parents at the time of her 10th grade public exams had caused her immense anxiety, due to which she had spent insomniac nights pacing across her room and went onto shred her textbooks to pieces while running across the school corridor. It is assumed that her symptoms subsided once she sought medical attention back in Kolkata, after which this psychic episode was forgotten. The mundane loneliness in her marital relationship with a reserved and professionally occupied Nakulan reignite her repressed psychic tendencies at Maadampally. She deeply empathises with Nagavalli's pain, as she has experienced how separation from one's loved ones felt while she moved away from her grandma who had raised her as a kid.

The verbal encounter between Nakulan and Ganga towards the end of the film is an iconic scene. In the first instance where the audience clearly shows how severely she has been affected by the disorder, the events mentioned until now are mostly explained as flashbacks. On Sunny's advice, Nakulan prohibits his wife from accompanying the bridal company for purchasing Alli's wedding ornaments. Ganga wonders why he says so since she had already informed him of the plan, and he had agreed then. As he continues insisting her not to go and she goes on questioning why she is not to, her tone and body language change from gentle to demanding. Each consequent dialogue from Nakulan marks a noticeable shift in her behaviour. Finally, she transforms ultimately into Nagavalli and starts hurling profane verbal abuses at him in Tamil. As she points her finger at him and asks him how dare he appeared before her on the Durga Ashtami day itself while saying that she would murder him and drink his blood, she lifts the bed next to her with her bare hand. She starts to come closer to Nakulan, and he bangs on the door while loudly calling out her name to control her. Ganga instantly regains her original self and innocently looks all around, realising something wrong had

just happened. She questions him as to what she has just done and spoke. Nakulan comforts her, saying that she had said nothing. At the same time, she hysterically bursts into tears and asks him to forgive her, subsequently losing consciousness due to the energy outburst that had just occurred.

Towards the end, a dishevelled Ganga dresses in dance costumes and jewellery and starts dancing like a maniac, as if in a trance. She hallucinates performing in a palace with elaborate furnishing and all the people she sees around her for the ministers or palatial attendants. Nagavalli grows ecstatic when she catches sight of Mahadevan, who she sees for her lover Ramanathan and starts dancing more enthusiastically as she is led into the site of the ritualistic exorcism. When the priest repeatedly asks her who she is and what she has come for, she says she is Nagavalli and promises to leave Ganga's body once she murders Thampi. As Nagavalli grabs the sword and prepares to slice Thampi, who lays on a plank before her, Sunny overturns the plank to reveal a look-alike dummy of Thampi, which she then chops to smithereens. Thus, Nakulan is saved, and Nagavalli leaves Ganga's body, duped into believing to have accomplished the mission. The Ganga, who regains consciousness from her hypnotic treatment session, does not remember anything about what has happened and claims that she is delighted with her life. She does not seek to know what was wrong with her, although she is aware that she was diseased and is thankful to all those who helped her recovery.

Yet another instance of mental illness presented in the film is that of temple priest Kaattuparamban, who suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder following the shock caused by an encounter with Nagavalli at Maadampally. He starts calling out people by different names that are not even gender-specific and goes on asking everyone he sees if something is wrong with him while keeping a straight face, popping his eyes out and constantly moving his eyebrows. When he finally confronts Dr Sunny, suspecting some

psychological disturbance, he mocks him and flippantly gives the disease a fictitious name, asks him to avoid touching the water as the cure, knocks hardly on his head in the pretext of examining him and finally fools him saying that he is mentally ill. The portrayal of PTSD in the film is nowhere close to the real since the usual reasons for the illness are deaths or sexual violations. The symptoms include frequent thoughts of the traumatic event and heightened negative emotionality. The character Kaattuparamban provides comic relief in the film, and it is evident that the disorder has been merely utilised to this effect.

The stigma associated with mental illnesses has also been explored in the film. In the first half, Nakulan believes that Sreedevi is psychologically disturbed due to the trauma of her short marital life and consequent divorce. Nakulan's uncle Unnithan decides to find out if there is something abnormal with Sreedevi's behaviour. He finds her shouting at the helpers at the house for being careless and irresponsible in managing the kitchen, following Ganga having burnt her saree. When she finds her uncle staring at her perplexedly, she asks him what the matter is while he starts distancing himself from her. He waves his umbrella backwards to shoo away the ghost that is supposed to have possessed her. When Sreedevi comes in later, all the family members stare at her in horror while her parents break down tears. None of them speaks a word to her or explains what the problem is. Whenever Sreedevi addresses Unnithan as 'uncle', he retorts by telling her not to call so and asking Nagavalli to stay away from him in Tamil, also wondering why she was roaming free despite being mentally disturbed. She is then kept confined in a room for suspected mental illness and administered injections by the psychiatrist to get better. However, it is revealed later that Sreedevi's victimisation was part of the plan to bring Ganga's doings to light.

The scene where RamshankarNikumbh talks with Ishaan's parents is the most significant one in the film. Nikumbh enlightens his parents that he cannot read and is, therefore, unable to

derive connections between his existing knowledge and what he reads. His fine motor and gross skills were feeble. His disobedience was only a counter-reaction to his disabilities and the low levels of self-confidence that he had, causing considerable disappointment and frustration to people around him. Back at school, Nikumbh instils self-confidence in Ishaan before the whole class by pointing out the cases of renowned figures as Leonardo da Vinci, Albert Einstein, Walt Disney, Agatha Christie and Abhishek Bachchan, who struggled with dyslexia but were intellectually brilliant. He requests the school principal to let him be tested verbally for the time being. He uses creative methods to convey concepts to Ishaan, such as writing in grids to ensure form, using picture puzzles, making him feel and paint letters, constructing clay models, and learning basic mathematical operations via climbing the stairs.

In *TaareZameen Par*, the educational institutions that Ishaan studies label him as a weak student who had to be taught at a special school. His parents cannot accept that their child has a disability and consider it mental retardation. Mr Awasthi is disappointed that his son's condition may prevent him from achieving a place in the competitive world that values only academic pursuits and career choices. He does not understand that Ishaan's passion for art manifested in the form of confident brush strokes, bold use of colours, and out-of-the-box depiction of themes was exceptional for a child his age. The teachers at the new school tell Nikumbh that dancing and singing during classes would only help "those" kids, referring to the mentally and physically disadvantaged kids he taught at a special school. He was going against the school's emphasis on academic excellence and disciplinary behaviour. They are for the conventional system of education that uses the same techniques to teach all students in a class and does not realize that even differently-abled kids have their own set of potential and can do excellently in life if trained to develop on these. The film's climax sequences highlight the

significance of nurturing the afflicted individual's unique abilities to their full capacity, rather than overemphasizing correcting defects. After that, it acts as an eyeopener to parents of dyslexic children by pointing out that such learning disabilities could be rectified with appropriate psychological intervention and subsequent design of a well-suited learning approach.

The film *Manichithrathaazhu* reinforces that DID involves being possessed by a supernatural force, which is far from the truth. It, however, rightly presents conflicts between black magic and the field of psychiatry in treating mental disorders. Although the obsession Ganga develops for folklore and superstitions to get over her childhood agony act as triggers for activating her repressed self in the film, many severe issues as marital strain and sexual abuse are the triggers in reality. In addition, Ganga's condition is relayed as a state of psychosis, and dissociation is shown as involving intense aggression and homicidal tendencies, both erroneous concepts. Hypnosis is a method of identifying the disease's symptoms, with the actual cure being antidepressant and antipsychotic drugs. The patient's necessity to frequently interact with the therapist is also not shown in the film. Although Dr Sunny's annoyingly light-hearted nature has been a strong point of contention for most critics, it may also have been his way of relieving his patients of stress and filling them with positivity and happiness. The juxtaposition of exorcism and psychiatric beliefs, the logic of fruitful vengeance helping the patient get over the illness and dance sequences are mere cinematic representations.

## II. CONCLUSION

This study found that while *TaareZameen Par* (2007) mostly did justice to the onscreen portrayal of learning dyslexia, *Manichithrathaazhu* (1992) reinforced biases towards the popular audience's perception of mental illnesses. Indian cinema needs to account for significant social and mental well-being levels and related factual awareness, considering its widespread consumption across

the mainland (Alekhya et al.,2014). In recent times, healthy changes incorporated in Indian films have resulted in accurate, responsible, sensitive, balanced, and trivially sensationalised representations of mental disorders while retaining their entertainment value. Hindi films as *Devrai* (2004), *15 Park Avenue* (2005) and *Kaasav* (2017), and Malayalam films as *Thanmaathra* (2005) and *North 24 Kaatham* (2013) act as examples in this regard. Because of *Manichithrathaazhu* and *TaareZameen Par*, it seems like there has been a marked progression in the resemblance of filmy depictions to real-life instances of mental illness. If this trend is to follow, it would mean a revolutionary change in popular understanding of mental health issues, pertaining to its effective cure and rewarding opportunities to lead a normal life ahead.

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