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South Indian Cinema As A Mirror: Nakulan's Emotional Journey

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Abstract

In Indian film industries the movie focus about significant underlying psychological issues that has not been talked enough and by discussing portrayal of complex characters. The South Indian film Manichitrathazhu (1993), it's a seminal Malayalam psychological thriller which explores themes like complex of a women fractured identity, trauma and relationships the character portrays the underlying medical issues which connected to chronic trauma, the character is exposed to traumatic circumstances over an extended period. The character Ganga, a young woman moved to ancestral house and she get possessed by the spirit of Nagavalli, a dance in earlier centuries.

The character Ganga in Manichitrathazhu is analysed as a woman who is unknowingly suffered from Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) due to the loneliness and repressed emotion developed even from the childhood, begin experiencing mentally distressed linked to a tragic historical past. The paper examines the profound impact Ganga's mental crisis affect her husband, Nakhulan (Suresh Gopi). His role depicted as a deeply loving partner who attempted to conventional means evolve into the selfless struggle for save his partner. Nakhulan's role highlights the importance a supportive and understanding partner in the phase of psychological crisis, even also when his partner confronting overwhelming obstacles.

By summarizing the abstract this paper explores various types of psychological issues showing the unspoken reality of the society that has not focused or discussed in any particular scenario. Through this depiction of these fragmented psyches, these movies offer a lens through which to understand the psychological issue of individuals.

Keywords: relationship, trauma, psychological crisis, conventional, struggle, reality

Introduction

In movie Manichithrathazhu(1993) directed by Fazil, written by Madhu Muttam and produced by Swargachitra Appachan. This movie is more than just a horror film; it's a nuanced psychological study that predates the widespread public discourses on mental health and considered as an epic movie in South Indian film industry usually reflects on cultural heritage capturing and face of society and identity of people. Apart from all its compelling story line and excellence performance, the movie profound trauma and recovery. Dr. Sunny Joseph (Mohanlal), a psychiatrist doctor whose role change the story of the movie into resolution by unconventional approach.

The film centred by the character Ganga (Shobhana), a young newly married woman, who suffered from exhibiting symptoms of dissociative identity disorder (DID) when she moved to an ancestral mansion with her husband Nagulan (Suresh Gopi). This connected to a horrific and tragic of Nagavalli, a dancer who was brutally killed in the same mansion. Without any realization, Ganga takes on personality of Nagavalli and tries to finish her revenge. Through this research it's focuses on the character Nagulan how he handling and support his partner, the character shows how hidden pain, fear, anxiety, and social pressure that can affect the mind.

The film's strength on the ability to humanizing the external and internal struggles. The mental crisis that faced by Ganga is a raw and unravelling mind to confront the reality to audience. The movie isn't criticizing or villainizing her mental disability; instead of framing the emotional neglect and trauma experienced in her past life. This point of view is a significant form that conveying the mental illness in film which often rely on stereotypes or sensationalism. However, a crucial role of Ganga's husband Nakulan having a significant role in this movie which isn't noticed by audience. His character is beacon of unconditional love and supporting face of an overwhelming crisis. As this situation become worse his initial support evolves into selfless struggles of save his partner as we can see through several scenes he stands by her, his love becoming a source of stability in her chaotic life. He does his best and he tried so many solutions like help from his friend Dr. Sunny when unusual incidents happened, seeking help from priests (Nakulan isn't believe in ritual practices) and traditional healers.

This paper explores the layers of the movie Manichithrathazhu how the film can explain the societal challenges verses fragmented psyches and complex emotional journey offering the lens through which can better understanding the unseen psychological issues. Nakulan as a character in this film presented deeply loving and supportive partner to Ganga. The paper highlights the major role of describing him as a "selfless struggling" partner, his character became the testament to the importance of a supportive partner in her psychiatrist disorder. During her transformation period into Nagavalli, Ganga's mind perceives Nakulan as a cruel Shankaran Thampi, the one who kill Nagavalli. Nakulan stands for Ganga, and he is willing to do whatever she want to recover her from this psychiatric issue. The guidance by his friend Dr. Sunny underscores his commitment and love for his wife. His key figure highlighting the importance of empathy and understanding as a partner.

Methodology

Methodology: This study uses a qualitative approach to explore chronic trauma and psychological crisis in selected South Indian films. The primary data comes from character analyses and narrative accounts within the research document (Manichithrathazhu, Thanmathra, Take Off). The methods involve close reading of the texts, coding themes related to trauma, such as loneliness, survival, dissociation, and caregiving. The study will also compare cases to find patterns of chronic trauma and relational effects. The data coding will be organized in analytical matrices, along with reflective notes from the author. Triangulation combines film analysis with the literature review in the document to improve credibility. The ethical considerations focus on respecting cultural sensitivity and ensuring accurate representation.

Analysis

Nakulan's experience in *Manichithrathazhu* is a complex and layered portrayal of how chronic trauma shapes an individual's inner world and relationships. His psychological journey unfolds gradually, with the film presenting him as the rational, modern heir of Madampalli, caught between tradition and science, love and fear, past and present. The haunted mansion is not merely a physical space but also a psychological one, where Nakulan's fears and suppressed emotions come alive. His sense of loneliness is one of the earliest emotional undercurrents the film conveys. Even though Nakulan is surrounded by family members, servants, and relatives, there is an unmistakable emotional isolation that defines him. He is the one who must bear the responsibility of the family's ancestral legacy and also act as the guardian of its dignity. This responsibility becomes even heavier when Ganga begins experiencing strange incidents in the mansion. Nakulan finds himself unable to share his deepest fears with anyone, since admitting the possibility that something is wrong with his wife could tarnish the family's reputation and his own image as a husband. This loneliness is not just physical but deeply psychological — a sense of being the only one who must hold everything together when the world is falling apart.

Trauma in Nakulan's life is not a sudden event but a cumulative experience. The very space he inhabits, the Madampalli mansion, is steeped in ancestral tragedy. The legend of Nagavalli, a dancer who was wronged and killed, is not merely a story from the past but a living, breathing presence in the household. For Nakulan, this ancestral memory becomes a psychological weight, an inherited trauma that colors his perceptions. When Ganga begins to embody Nagavalli's spirit, Nakulan is thrust into a situation where the past and present collide violently. His trauma is twofold: on one level, he fears losing Ganga to mental illness, and on another, he fears that the mansion's dark history will consume his marriage and destroy the normalcy he has worked hard to maintain. His psychological state reflects what can be described as chronic relational trauma — the kind that does not erupt suddenly but accumulates through prolonged exposure to distressing events and emotional strain. This is seen in his increasing irritability, restlessness, and heightened vigilance as the incidents in the mansion grow more intense.

Psychologically, Nakulan begins the narrative as a rationalist. He insists that the strange events have logical explanations and attempts to reassure Ganga and the others that there is no supernatural presence. However, as the incidents escalate, Nakulan's rationality is shaken. His mind oscillates between two competing realities: the rational explanation offered by science and the ancestral belief in spirits and curses. This cognitive dissonance becomes a major psychological conflict for him. He wants to protect Ganga, but he is also terrified of what she might do under the influence of Nagavalli's persona. The tension between love and fear begins to erode his composure. There are moments where Nakulan appears to be suppressing his own emotional breakdown, choosing instead to present a calm exterior to the rest of the family. This suppression, however, is costly — it leads to emotional exhaustion and moments of despair where he begins doubting his own judgment. The film subtly portrays these psychological issues without overt dramatization, making Nakulan's inner turmoil believable and relatable.

Survival becomes a central part of Nakulan's emotional arc. His survival is not a matter of physical danger but of preserving his marriage, his sanity, and the honor of his family. He cannot simply abandon Ganga or the mansion — both are integral to his identity. This creates a survival challenge that is emotional, social, and psychological. Nakulan must learn to rely on Dr. Sunny, the psychiatrist who becomes his confidant and guide. Trusting Dr. Sunny is not easy for Nakulan, since it requires him to relinquish a degree of control and admit that the problem is beyond his capacity to solve. Yet this act of trust is essential for his survival. It allows him to navigate the crisis without losing himself to fear or succumbing to the collective hysteria of the household. His survival also depends on finding a way to reconcile modern psychology with the cultural memory of Nagavalli's story, thereby creating a solution that respects both rationality and emotional truth. Reality itself becomes fragile for Nakulan as the story progresses. The mansion, with its locked rooms, shadowy corridors, and echoes of the past, creates an environment where the boundary between illusion and truth is constantly shifting. For Nakulan, distinguishing between what is real and what is the projection of Ganga's mind becomes an exhausting task. Each new incident forces him to question whether he is dealing with a ghost, a curse, or a psychological breakdown. The instability of reality becomes a form of psychological torture, as he is unable to fully trust his senses or his understanding of events. This

reality crisis is resolved only when Dr. Sunny explains Ganga's condition and provides a therapeutic plan. Accepting this reality is a turning point for Nakulan, allowing him to regain a sense of control and move toward resolution.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Nakulan's journey is the theme of sacrifice. Nakulan sacrifices his emotional comfort, his pride, and even his temporary sense of marital intimacy to support Ganga's healing. The therapeutic reenactment designed by Dr. Sunny requires Nakulan to risk Ganga's perception of him. She must believe, in her dissociative state, that she is avenging Nagavalli's death, and Nakulan must play along with this dramatic enactment, even if it means momentarily endangering himself. This is not a simple act of bravery but a deep psychological sacrifice, as it forces Nakulan to put aside his fear of losing Ganga in order to give her the chance to confront and purge the trauma that possesses her. His willingness to allow this process to unfold is an ultimate act of love and commitment. In doing so, Nakulan not only helps Ganga heal but also breaks the cycle of inherited trauma that has haunted Madampalli for generations. These intersecting themes of loneliness, trauma, psychological strain, survival, reality, and sacrifice create a holistic portrait of Nakulan as a man who is quietly but profoundly affected by chronic trauma. His journey is not one of dramatic breakdown but of subtle endurance, resilience, and transformation. He represents the countless individuals who stand alongside those experiencing mental health crises, silently bearing their own psychological burdens. As Viktor Frankl observes, "An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior (Frankl 20). Nakulan's fears, doubts, and emotional turmoil are thus not signs of weakness but evidence of his humanity in the face of extraordinary circumstances. His character arc reminds us that trauma does not only belong to the person directly afflicted but spreads outward, affecting loved ones and reshaping relationships. By the end of the narrative, Nakulan emerges not merely as a survivor but as a participant in healing, proving that compassion, rationality, and sacrifice can coexist to overcome even the most haunting of legacies.

Conclusion

Nakulan's experience in *Manichithrathazhu* is a heart-wrenching analysis of the way trauma creeps silently and steadily in someone's life, influencing not just his own mind but also the way he interacts with the world around him. The film presents him as the contemporary but intensely conflicted scion of Madampalli, a man torn between tradition and science, reason and emotion, loyalty and fear. His silence, his duty, and his frustration with his wife Ganga's change demonstrate how trauma is not necessarily loud or flamboyant but rather resides in the quiet moments of solitude, self-blame, and crushed feeling. A conclusion to such analysis must then emphasize the richness of Nakulan's emotional journey and the larger truths it speaks to regarding human endurance and love. What is most characteristic of Nakulan's personality is his isolation.

Although he is among relatives, family members, and servants, since he is the person responsible for maintaining the honor of the family, he remains emotionally isolated. He cannot discuss his suspicions or fears freely because confessing weakness or implying that his wife is ill would taint not only her reputation but also his own reputation as a self-respecting husband and upholder of tradition. This emotional weight captures what happens to many in life — the weight of obligation that compels them to keep their own hurt hidden and show strength to the world. His isolation is not physical but psychological, and it gnaws away at him throughout the story. The trauma that Nakulan undergoes is also not an individual occurrence but an inherited one compiled over the years. The Madampalli mansion is more than a house; it is a space filled with stories of suffering, betrayal, and violence.

The story of Nagavalli is not just history but a living presence that dominates the household and adds pressure onto Nakulan's mind. He must constantly balance between the weight of this dark past and the challenges of the present. His trauma is two-fold: he is afraid of losing Ganga to the sickness, and simultaneously, he is afraid that the past will ruin his marriage and reputation. Double trauma is the reason why Nakulan gets so restless, irritable, and finally emotionally drained. This is also a representation of how trauma is usually multi-layered — one's personal suffering is augmented by inherited or cultural agony. Another crucial aspect of his transformation is how his rational mind starts to break down under stress. In

the beginning, he firmly believes in science and rational explanations. But as Ganga's condition worsens, he gets entangled in the conflict between rationality and superstition.

His inability to choose which reality to believe — the scientific or the ancestral — gives way to internal strife and self-doubt. Though he attempts to fight down his emotions and present a calm face to the family, those moments of the inner breakdown are evident in his eyes, his restlessness, and his uncertainties. This describes the psychological reality that very often individuals subjected to trauma present themselves as strong on the outside but bear unbearable burdens on the inside. Nakulan's survival is not escape from physical injury but maintaining his marriage, his sanity, and the honor of his bloodline. He cannot let go of either Ganga or the mansion because both are part of his identity. The only path ahead is that of trust — trust in Dr. Sunny, the psychiatrist who is now a guide and a helper. This is not simple, as seeking help necessitates that Nakulan acknowledges his own limitations, but this act of letting go reveals progress in his character.

His survival comes only when he learns to divide the burden and accept assistance, and this indicates the necessity of group healing over individual strength. Reality itself is in danger of breaking down for him, as the mansion erases the difference between illusion and reality. Every bizarre event gives him reason to wonder if he is seeing supernatural forces at work or a psychological disintegration. This unceasing unsteadiness is its own kind of torture. But with Dr. Sunny's clarification and treatment regimen, Nakulan achieves the clarity he so desperately requires. Embracing the reality of Ganga's mental health not only restores his own sense of agency but also enables him to make meaningful strides toward healing.

Ultimately, it is what makes Nakulan's journey most powerful that it is his sacrifice. He sacrifices his emotional security, his ego, and even his trust with Ganga in the enactment therapy organized by Dr. Sunny. This act of permitting Ganga to feel as if she is killing Nagavalli, even if it means endangering himself, is the ultimate form of sacrifice. It is not so much about courage, but about love — he is willing to endure pain so that Ganga can recover. By doing so, Nakulan proves that survival itself is most likely to be achieved by acts of giving, such as giving comfort, security, or pride. Ultimately, Nakulan becomes not only a survivor but a contributor towards healing.

He proves that trauma is not only borne by the visibly suffering individual, but by loved ones who are silent sufferers of their own wounds. His tale is a reminder to everyone that trauma gets passed through generations and relationships, but sacrifice and compassion have the power to stop this pattern. Nakulan's silent grit, his fight, and his ultimate gesture of love remind us that resilience is not about remaining unshaken but about deciding to carry the burden with dignity. His character progression implies that healing is not achieved through avoiding pain but through confronting it together, patiently, with trust and empathy.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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