Mental Illness, Trauma and Bollywood: Redefining the Role of Celluloid

Dr. Dharmapada Jena
Lecturer in English, Govt. Jr. College, Phulbani, Odisha, India

Abstract:
The concept of mental illness and trauma appear to be tenebrous and stigmatized in India. People suffering from such illnesses are often “tagged as ‘lunatics,’ ‘crazy,’ ‘possessed’ and many more by society. This leads to a vicious cycle of shame, suffering and isolation of the patients” (Hussain, 2021, p. 1). The dearth of awareness and sensitivity about the issue confound the situation for the victims inducing in them a sense of guilt and trauma. There is an urgency to revamp our understanding and representation of mental issues along with the physical problems or diseases. Bollywood, i.e., the Indian Hindi film industry, serving as a source of entertainment and mass education, has come forward to redefine its role by destigmatizing the mental illness and trauma by providing screen space to mould public perception and reception of these issues. The taboo and rather unheeded subject which has been overlooked and silenced since long is found to be represented in the select Bollywood films, such as, Kartik Calling Kartik (2010), Dear Zindagi (2016), Tamasha (2015), Anjana Anjanni (2010) and Judgemental Hai Kya (2019). This paper tends to analyse these films through the lens of trauma theory to examine how recurrent and intrusive recollections, flashbacks, night mares, sleep deprivation and dissociated and hyper-aroused state of the protagonists impair their mental health leading to their trauma. Translating “nervous shock” and “listening to the wounds of the other” (Luckhurst, 2018, p. 506) will be stressed in this paper. Besides, how these films contribute to the understanding of “post-traumatic growth,” “a positive psychological change that may occur in an individual after having processed and coped with trauma,” (Bryngzeirsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2021, p. 2) will be explored.

Keywords: mental illness, trauma, bollywood films, post-traumatic growth.

Introduction

With the course of time Bollywood transits from the means of entertainment to the source of infotainment. It affords to redefine its role by canvassing a wide spectrum of taboo yet socio-culturally relevant and progressive issues in a more engaging way. In the recent years, it has started representing gender issues, different sexual orientations, substance abuse, domestic violence, impacts of peer pressure and many such burning topics. Altering its stand, Bollywood pins down to explore into sheds of individual struggle, turmoil, and trauma, thus assuming a psychic turn where psychological ramifications of everyday incidents in the lives of the characters are given immense importance. Studies carried in the recent times show how mental illnesses are featured in Bollywood films, breaking the stereotypes. Particularly the researches by Bhugra (2005) and Ajay et al. (2022) deal with the representation of mental illness in Bollywood movies. Basu (2021) takes up multiple personality disorder and

Suggested Citation
schizophrenia issues. Sohini (2020), on the other hand, analyses the relationship between gender and mental illness as reflected in Bollywood movies. Yet a holistic study on the prognosis of human ordeals and trauma has not been fully attempted that this paper strives to cover.

Mental illness and trauma, which has been tenebrous and stigmatized since long in India, are now undertaken for public discourse and often sought for medical intervention. This change is surfaced, though not entirely, by Bollywood. Though education and public awareness programmes help sensitizing about these dearth issues a lot, yet they cater to a certain section of the society. Bollywood comes handy in reaching out mental health issues to a larger population and helps normalizing these. And in a way, it redefines its role by de-stigmatizing the mental illness and trauma, the taboo and rather unheeded subject in India which has been overlooked and silenced since long. The urgency is felt by Bollywood film makers to change the socio-cultural perception of the people towards the mentally ill and the traumatized who are often ‘tagged as ‘lunatics’, ‘crazy’, ‘possessed’ and many more by society. This leads to a vicious cycle of shame, suffering and isolation of the patients” (Hussain, 2021, p. 1). This psychic turn emerges when “trauma is generally taken to mean a blow to the tissues of the body - or more frequently now, to the tissues of the mind - that result in injury or some other disturbance” (Erikson, 1995, p. 183). “Psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from outside. Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind” (Terr, 1990, p. 8).

The psychological trauma is thus understood as something “that was once known as ‘suffering’ is now called ‘trauma’ as the roots of tragic incidents mainly and initially contain despair” (AteşciKoçak, 2015, p. 17). It refers to “a set of responses to extraordinary, emotionally overwhelming, and personally uncontrollable life events” (qtd. in Good man, et al., 1991, p. 1219). Psychological trauma is understood as “a violent shock,” “a wound,” and “the consequences affecting the whole organization” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988, p. 466). The gruesome effect of a traumatic event always manifests through the traumatized. “An event is traumatic if it is extremely upsetting and at least temporarily overwhelms the individual’s internal resources” (Briere & Scott, 2012, p. 4). Particularly with Anderson (2012), the concept of trauma achieves certain pragmatism and diversity. It happens to encompass quite a multitude of issues of everyday life, such as, death, loss, abuse, domestic violence, rape, ill-treatment, and incidents of natural catastrophe and so on. The studies of trauma have become more common. “The term has been applied

Trauma and Its Features

“The word ‘trauma’ comes from the ancient Greek” term *traumatikos* meaning “wound” (Marder, 2006, p. 1). Greeks used the term specifically for physical wounds or injuries until the late 17th century. Subsequently, trauma is understood as a distressing and disturbing experience that affects the life of the traumatized. Now, trauma is mostly received in its psychological connotation implying to an upsetting experience triggered by an emotional shock and pain. “One may experience either or both physical or psychological effects as a consequence of the event” (AteşciKoçak, 2015, p. 14). “In the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud’s text, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth, 1996, p. 3). This psychic turn emerges when “trauma is generally taken to mean a blow to the tissues of the body - or more frequently now, to the tissues of the mind - that result in injury or some other disturbance” (Erikson, 1995, p. 183). “Psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from outside. Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind” (Terr, 1990, p. 8).

The psychological trauma is thus understood as something “that was once known as ‘suffering’ is now called ‘trauma’ as the roots of tragic incidents mainly and initially contain despair” (AteşciKoçak, 2015, p. 17). It refers to “a set of responses to extraordinary, emotionally overwhelming, and personally uncontrollable life events” (qtd. in Good man, et al., 1991, p. 1219). Psychological trauma is understood as “a violent shock,” “a wound,” and “the consequences affecting the whole organization” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988, p. 466). The gruesome effect of a traumatic event always manifests through the traumatized. “An event is traumatic if it is extremely upsetting and at least temporarily overwhelms the individual’s internal resources” (Briere & Scott, 2012, p. 4). Particularly with Anderson (2012), the concept of trauma achieves certain pragmatism and diversity. It happens to encompass quite a multitude of issues of everyday life, such as, death, loss, abuse, domestic violence, rape, ill-treatment, and incidents of natural catastrophe and so on. The studies of trauma have become more common. “The term has been applied
more liberally to circumstances beyond those initially imagined — such as war, natural disaster, abuse, and confinement — to include psychological trauma that might not have resulted in or from physical violence” (Anderson, 2012, p. 6). It can be now viewed as “any form of painful or frustrating experience” (qtd. in Busch and Tim, 2005, p. 324). Jaffe et al. (2005) explore the causes of emotional or psychological trauma that are: unexpectedness, unpreparedness, and inability to prevent it from happening. They also discuss its common symptoms, such as, “compulsive behaviour patterns,” “self-destructive and impulsive behaviour,” “uncontrollable reactive thoughts,” “inability to make healthy lifestyle choices,” “feelings of ineffectiveness, shame, despair, hopelessness”, “hostility”, “social withdrawal”, “feeling constantly threatened” (Jaffe et al., 2005, p. 4) and other such things. The effects of psychological trauma also get manifested through “flashbacks, nightmares, numbness, irritability, sleep disturbances, anger, being easily startled, hyper-vigilance), avoidance, panic attacks, and physiological responses such as sweating and palpitations” (Gamble and Creedy, 2005, p. 218). With the inclusion of such wide-ranging subject matters and effects, trauma studies have drawn profound interest and attention in the contemporary times. “Current trauma discourse has difficulty recognizing that it is not just singular and extraordinary events but also ‘normal,’ everyday humiliations and abuses that can act as traumatic stressors” (Craps, 2010, p. 56).

In this paper the emotional or psychological trauma that occur unexpectedly and which cannot be prevented from happening will be explored in the context of select Bollywood movies, namely, Kartik Calling Kartik (2010), Dear Zindagi (2016), Tamasha (2015), Anjana Anjanni (2010) and Judgemental Hai Kya (2019). It will also be explored if the lead characters of these movies go through common symptoms of trauma, such as, “compulsive behaviour patterns,” “self-destructive and impulsive behaviour,” “uncontrollable reactive thoughts,” “inability to make healthy lifestyle choices” and so on (Jaffe et al., 2005, p. 4).

Analysis of the Select Bollywood Films through the Lens of Trauma Features

Kartik Calling Kartik (2010) is a Bollywood psychological thriller that unravels the mental illness of the protagonist Kartik Narayan, the role played by Farhan Akhtar. Kartik is portrayed as the victim of multiple personality disorder. His such mental illness is conditioned by the traumatic experiences of his childhood. The incident, that Kartik’s elder brother, Kumar accidentally fell inside the well and died while trying to throw Kartik in it, haunted him gravely. He “believes himself to be the murderer of his brother” (Basu, 2021, p. 35). Kartik can be argued as a trauma victim as he encounters recurrent and intrusive recollections of the death of his brother. He also suffers from sleep deprivation and undergoes dissociated and hyper-aroused state of mind. His condition can be diagnosed as complete “nervous shock” (Luckhurst, 2018, p. 506). He forgets things and for which his phone records his messages and plays them back. He wakes up at the middle of the night and records messages and returns to sleep. Kartik decides to commit suicide after being scoffed by his boss Mr Kamath. For he thinks his life cannot get any worse. He used to attain phone calls from a stranger named Kartik with the same and exact voice. Kartik suffers from schizophrenia, a mental disorder characterized by abnormal social behaviour and failure to understand reality.

The film makers try to depict his “post-traumatic growth” (Bryngelsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2021, p. 2). Kartik tries to overcome his condition. He moves to Cochin and comfortably settles there. The stranger’s call again disturbs him following which Kartik loses his mental peace and attempts to commit suicide again. Shonali, realizing the truth, arrives at the right time to save him. They reconcile and Shonali stands by him, helping him with his condition. After a few months, Kartik is in the process of dealing with his disorder and lives a happy and rehabilitated life with Shonali by his side.

The movie Dear Zindagi (2016) takes another turn in opening about mental disorders and
motivating to take professional help in order to cope with. The lead character Kaira played by Ali Bhatt suffers from anxiety attacks and insomnia. This film appears quite relatable to contemporary society where every one of us undergoes through anxiety issues and panic attacks in some point of our lives. The film in a way tries normalising mental health difficulties and therapy that is needed as coping mechanism.

As the plot unwraps, we find Kaira aspiring to be a cinematographer. She dreams of directing her own films. Until then everything has been quite fine for her. Her life takes a downturn when she casually sleeps with Raghuvendra, a film producer, and then breaks up with her childhood sweetheart Sid, a rest-o-bar owner. Sick of her bohemian lifestyle, Kiara’s landlord evicts her. Upon which she is bound to go back to Goa to live with her parents, with whom she has some old issues. She ends up spending many sleepless nights in unhappiness and uncertainty, this thus leads her to the process of traumatization. To this, Kaira seeks out Dr. Jehangir "Jug" Khan, a psychologist, for her insomnia.

Kaira has always been possessed by the thought that her parents have abandoned her for years at her grandparents’ house. This turns to act as a traumatic stressor for her. Once she confronts her parents about them abandoning her and outbursts at a family get-together which later, she confesses to Jug. With jug’s proper counselling, Kaira tries to reconcile with her parents and works to finish her short film. Kiara’s overcoming trauma and undertaking everyday projects and prospering on that can be viewed as her “post traumatic growth” (Bryngeirsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2021, p. 2).

Tamasha (2015) deals with a borderline personality disorder manifested through the protagonist Ved. The film uses flashbacks as its narrative techniques. At the outset the film presents the monotonous office lives of people as spectacled by Ved (Ranbir Kapoor) and Tara (Deepika Padukone). The film then shifts to a time where Tara meets an adult Ved while both are on a holiday in Corsica. There they engage in various jovial activities to keep their real identities undisclosed. They often pretend to be movie characters where Ved poses as "Don" and Tara, as "Mona Darling". As their bond grows stronger, Tara realizes she is falling in love with Ved and afterward, decides to leave Corsica despite their romantic friendship. Later when she meets Ved again, she notices his charismatic persona and carefree attitude has changed. He talks differently, behaves more formally at their dates, and shows up at a fixed time at her place. His monotonous and tedious lifestyle on a daily basis, from morning to evening in a similar pattern, disheartens Tara. When Ved, now more reserved, proposes to Tara with a ring on his birthday she declines as she is unhappy with this reserved version of him.

Due to his identity crisis, Ved ends up upsetting his boss with nonsensical presentations and random behaviour display in business meetings. This ends with his eviction from job. Then he returns to Shimla and gets in a tussle with his father. Ved then gains introspection from a reflection in the mirror, as he decides to meet the old storyteller from his childhood in order to complete his own story. Upon their encounter, the old storyteller criticizes Ved’s irrationality and confronts him to complete his own story. This thus leads him to complete his story. Moved by his art of storytelling, Brijmohan forgives him for leaving his job and lets him pursue his life as he wishes. The film winds up with a sense of “post-traumatic growth” (Bryngeirsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2021, p. 2) as Ved emerges with his cheerful attitude that impresses Tara and compels them begin impersonating characters again.

Another Bollywood film that portrays anxiety and suicidal tendencies as its prominent theme is Anjana Anjanni (2010). The lead characters of the film Akash and Kiara are played by Ranbir Kapoor and Priyanka Chopra respectively. They often slide into acute stress disorder. Akash lives in New York City where he has bankrupted his company. He needs $12 million for paying the shareholders, but is unable to obtain a loan due to a stock market crash. The bankruptcy and inability to cover up stringency becomes his traumatic stressors compelling him to attempt to jump off the George Washington Bridge. The
other lead character, Kiara is also suicidal after catching her fiancé Kunal cheating on her. Both Akash and Kiara attempt to kill themselves, but are prevented from doing so by the Coast Guard. Still suicidal, Akash deliberately allows himself to be hit by a car, and Kiara falls on the bridge and breaks her neck. Their suicide attempts are unsuccessful, and they end up in hospital together. Again, and again the pair try to kill themselves and fail each time. Their situation confirms to what Freud (1920) asserts, the goal of all life is death. People who experience a traumatic event would often hold an unconscious desire to die.

The movie has created space “post-traumatic growth” (Bryngeirsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2021, p. 2) for the both the characters. For Akash attends the bank settlement and reconciles with several friends with whom he had fallen out, including his best friend Gaurav, as well as with his estranged father. Meanwhile, Kiara cannot stop thinking about Akash, and on the 31st she realises that she has fallen for him. The movie has a happy ending showing Akash and Kiara getting married and having two-year-old son.

Judgemental Hai Kya (2019) is of another Bollywood movie starring Kangana Ranaut as Bobby who has undergone deep-seated traumas about her father being abusive to her mother. This acute trauma leads her believe that all men are beasts. Bobby often hallucinates as her trauma caused her to become schizophrenic. The title itself undercurrents to “mental hai kya,” a phrase people often use to describe people who have mental illnesses or disorders. Bobby is an eccentric affluent young woman living in Mumbai and working as a dubbing artist. She is an acute psychosis mental patient. During her childhood, she had caused her parents to fall off the terrace to their deaths while interfering in a fight between them. This sudden and unexpected event becomes her traumatic stressor. Often, she behaves as outrageous. She slices a producer’s nose with a knife as he touches her at work. Then she is sent to an asylum.

She is found obsessed with the couple, Keshav and Reema staying on rent in her house. Reema dies in a fire in the kitchen when a bottle of pesticide explodes. Bobby suspects Keshav for being the cause of her death and tries to get the police to investigate him. But there remains no evidence. Bobby’s characters take another dimension as she hallucinates Keshav threatening her. She thus hits him with a chair in front of the police and is put back in the asylum. It is revealed during electric shock treatment that she is imagining things which is a characteristic feature of a trauma victim. She remembers that she threw the pesticide on the wife because she hallucinated a cockroach on her. Her bewildered behaviour takes twists and turns. She is after Keshab who marries her cousin. She does everything to prove him as a serial killer who takes on new identities and kills his wives. Bobby fights him and she and her cousin are both saved when Keshav is burnt alive in the same way his victims burned to death. Unlike other movies under this study, Judgemental Hai Kya (2019) is not so flamboyant about “post-traumatic growth” (Bryngeirsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2021, p. 2), but it does depict such growth in a very subtle way. Bobby reaps certain stability after taking revenge and positively saving the life of her cousin.

Conclusion

Bollywood films, such as, Kartik Calling Kartik (2010), Dear Zindagi (2016), Tamasha (2015), Anjana Anjanni (2010) and Judgemental Hai Kya (2019) undoubtedly serve to entertain people and at the same time these help to shape mass education about mental illnesses and trauma, thus come forward to redefine the role of Bollywood by de-stigmatizing the taboo and rather unheeded subject which has been overlooked and silenced since long. Through screen space these movies mould public perception and reception of these psychological or mental problems. The lead characters of these films have recurrent and intrusive recollections, flashbacks, night mares, sleep deprivation and dissociated and hyper-aroused state which impair their mental health leading to their trauma. They suffer from “nervous shock” (Luckhurst 506). The great part of these movies
is that unlike western depiction of mental illnesses and trauma these movies have space for “post-traumatic growth” (Bryngeirsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2021, p. 2) of the characters. These movies thus have a positive and constructive impact on the audience as these present such illnesses as curable things. These movies also contribute to understanding the notion of “post-traumatic growth” (Bryngeirsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2021, p. 2) which in a way expands the scope of trauma studies.

References


