

(Originally published on *ReSet Your Everyday* on May 30, 2021)

Why Horror Films Need to Stop Villainizing Mental Illnesses

TW: Eating Disorder, Suicide, Death

Catherine Clare, an outwardly happy young woman, cheers along with her family and friends as her daughter Franny cuts a birthday cake. Clare takes a bite of the cake, with a smile on her face, and then excuses herself to go to the washroom. In there, she makes herself throw up as if purging herself of the cake.

This scene, played by Amanda Seyfried, from the recently released horror flick, “Things Heard & Seen,” is jarring and stands out even as the plot furthers. Many horror filmmakers over the years have employed this trope of depicting something that is already considered repulsive to shock audiences and induce fear and revulsion.

Unfortunately, this comes at the expense of discounting mental health challenges and illnesses as something that should be looked down upon, something that is strange, something that is not ‘normal.’ The 2020 psychological horror, “Nocturne” starring Sydney Sweeney as Juliet Lowe, shows her as a young pianist living with anxiety. To unsettle the audience, the filmmakers repeatedly fall back on showing close-up shots of Lowe’s medication building an eerie atmosphere, which is completely unnecessary to the plot.

Many filmmakers have regularly relied on such visuals depicting the characters’ “mental illness and emotional instability to instil fear in the audience” and drive the story forward. However, such depictions, where mental illness is used as a plot element for horror stories, only adds to the stigma and misinformation around mental health.

Media representations suggest that a person living with mental illness is inherently bad. Both Indian and international producers have milked the clichéd trope where a person living with a psychological illness is depicted in a malicious and downright evil way. In the 2020 Tamil horror-thriller “Andhaghaaram,” a man living with mental illness and undergoing treatment, fatally shoots his psychiatric doctor, Dr. Indran (Kumar Natarajan), and massacres the doctor’s entire family before killing himself. As viewers, we know nothing about this person, there is no character arc to his depiction.

However, his action has a domino effect: when Dr. Indran recovers, he has lost all his faith in humanity and sets out to avenge his family and manipulates all his patients through hypnosis to die by suicide. Such portrayals leave no room for healthy conversations around mental health; there is no room for corrective behaviour. Instead, the movie focuses on the extermination of ‘evil’ — in other words, the person living with a mental illness. Moreover, the depiction of mental health professionals in an equally negative light leads to doubt and suspicion in the minds of people who may need help or who are already sceptics.

In the 2020 American psychological thriller “Run,” Diane Sherman (Sarah Paulson) grapples with the long-lasting effects of losing a child. The film depicts a version of Munchausen syndrome by proxy, where Sherman controls her child to the point of illness just to keep her close. Although it isn’t explicitly mentioned in the movie that Sherman lives with any mental illness, the emotional blow associated with child loss and how it can trigger a wide range of psychological issues is pushed to the background and gets replaced with a sensationalized topic — a mother’s oppressive love. In such movies, psychological issues are used as explanations for bad or negative behaviour, which is a gross misrepresentation and oversimplification of mental illnesses. Moreover, these stories offer no redemptive pathway to the characters; they are never given a chance to overcome their mental illness and the baggage that comes with it.

A common argument against these points is to say that movies are just stories with no impact on real-life behaviours. However, reports suggest that fictional ideas can influence real-life perceptions. Societal stigma keeps mental illnesses hidden, and using them as a way to further the narrative of horror movies adds to the stereotypes already prevalent in our society, where the casual usage of derogatory terms like ‘psycho’ and ‘crazy’ are normalized and are offensive to people living with mental illnesses.

As a person who has lived with depression and anxiety, overcoming the sense of shame was crucial in my journey to be kinder to myself, to accept that living with mental illness is not ‘abnormal.’ This understanding played a pivotal role and in turn, prompted me to seek help. Seeing how fiction can bleed into reality, I want movies where the person can be mentally ill but not a monster. I want to see us fight and win in movies, just like we do in real life.