

Commentary

Hollywood's Depiction of Mental Health and illnesses

Bhakti Murkey¹, Suresh Kumar Mehta^{2*}

¹Assistant Professor, ²Professor and Head

Department of Psychiatry, Pacific Medical College and Hospital,
Udaipur, Rajasthan, India

*Corresponding author Email: v2d.bm3@gmail.com

Mental health translates into our thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and functioning in interpersonal, social, and occupational domains. Whether it is a peek behind the curtains of our left brain, or the splash of colours, music, and vitality of our right brain; a thorough depiction of wellness and illness from both hemispheres needs a rather skilful blend of accuracy with art.

So, what other than our very own cinema could do justice to such sensitive and challenging depiction? None other than the exquisite, well-researched, meticulously scripted, and beautifully recorded reels of Hollywood's finest. Below are the reflections on a few movies from the West, which have attempted to highlight various faces of human emotion, and their impact on our lives, leaving lasting impressions for generations to follow.

1. A Beautiful Mind: Released about two decades ago, this movie is a classic for those who would be curious to sneak into the mind of a person suffering from schizophrenia. The real-life plot of the movie is based on the life of Dr John Nash, an American mathematician, famous worldwide for his contribution; and it beautifully depicts various components of schizophrenia – its real-like symptoms, treatment options with their perceived hazards, and the shattering impact of psychosis on one's personal life, along with the crucial role of loved ones in achieving a recovery at some point. Russel Crowe has truly done justice to playing the character of an asocial but brilliant mathematician, who believes that he has been offered confidential work in

cryptography and has only his (imaginary) roommate to trust. While his delusional system evolves into madness and mistrust with his spouse, he finds it hard to distinguish reality from his hallucinations. The rest of the story shows the painstaking efforts of his wife (Jennifer Connelly), who truly empathises with him, and remains consistent in working towards an effective recovery and resumption of daily life. This movie was a turning point in improving the common man's outlook towards schizophrenia patients and the limitations in attaining full recovery.

2. One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: This is another classic, which needs little introduction to most, and has been the winner of 5 Academy Awards in 1975. The protagonist of this movie Randall Mc Murphy (Jack Nicholson) has antisocial personality disorder, and is charged guilty for gambling, battery, and statutory rape. His sexuality and determinism clash with the ideals of other inhabitants at a mental institution, and make him a victim of abused power of the authorities, who subject him to lobotomy, after failed attempts to discipline him. There is a unique belongingness that grows between the inmates, suffering from various disorders of the mind, becoming unfortunate targets of those who feel superior to them by mere occurrence of controlling the place. It also makes a deeply sensitive portrayal of how suicide could knock without notice and leave us with deep wounds.

- 3. Rain Man:** Long back, in 1988 A light comedy drama, based movie attempted to show the simple yet extraordinary side of what Autism could present like. It is a journey of bonding between two brothers, who learn about each other's existence after the demise of their father, when he leaves his hefty fortune in the name of a mental institution taking care of his elder son. The movie has umpteen examples of how a genius, born with deficits in social interaction and language, could still be as good as anyone else. After all, each one of us is a combination of our gifts and shortcomings and none is a bigger or smaller person. The movie ends on a bittersweet note with the two brothers living separated, thus emphasizing the importance of psychological and social support systems for patients of autism spectrum disorders.
- 4. Good Will Hunting:** Inspired from real life experiences, this movie sends a light message of keeping positive attitude towards life. However, the cast of actors have done a phenomenal job at taking us through some intricate conversations over birth, identity, love, success, and growth. The performances by Robin Williams and Matt Damon are noteworthy and contagious for youth. Since its screening in 1997, this romcom continues to be a must watch for all teens and alike.
- 5. Silver Linings Playbook:** Released in 2012, this movie struck a chord with the contemporary audience by beautifully taking us through the emotional roller coaster of borderline personality disorder. Whether it is promiscuity, skewed sense of identity, erratic moods or the chronic emptiness of a BPD patient, Jennifer Lawrence takes us through the expressions of it all. This movie also showed the life behind the screen of a patient suffering from bipolar disorder (played by Bradley Cooper), which could easily be mistaken for BPD and vice versa. This movie shows a realistic side of these illnesses, where the patients could be difficult to identify. The title of the movie reflects its message – that two broken individuals could be the strongest supports of each other, together finding silver linings in their darkness.
- 6. The Aviator:** Released in 2004, this movie takes us through the eccentric, obsessive mind of a legendary tycoon, an aviator – who builds planes. Portraying in much detail, the compulsions of vigorous hand-washing or extreme symmetry, or fixation on white cleanliness, and ultimately proxy-compulsions and threat to the aviator's empire, the movie slowly proceeds to encase the deterioration of severe OCD. The role is wonderfully played by Leonardo Di Caprio, and the message shared on climax speaks of truly loving one's work as the way to happiness.
- 7. Split:** A rare attempt to showcase the faces of many personalities inside one person – dissociative identity disorder, commonly known as multiple or split personality disorder. A fairly recent movie from 2016, Split is scripted around 24 different personalities who exist in different modes (dominant versus suppressed) inside one person named Kevin Wendell Crumb. The dialogues between different personalities and their therapist unfold the basic principles of psychotherapy, including honesty, concern, empathy, active listening, problem solving, and insight building. Towards the end, the movie displays exaggerated realities of what could happen if our fantasies and hidden potentials were unleashed, and touches upon the sweet pain of suffering as true human experience.
- 8. American Sniper:** A biopic dedicated to the legendary sniper Chris Kyle, this movie is a war drama from 2012 and intends to focus on lives of high achieving accurate marksmen, who endure life-threatening experiences while saving lives of their own countrymen and often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder after returning back to family life in the community. War veterans often find it difficult to adjust to civilian life and the movie shows the healing role of helping fellow veterans suffering from PTSD. This creation of legendary director Clint Eastwood was nominated for 43 awards, and won 24 in total, including an Oscar.
- 9. The King's Speech:** A historical drama from the British culture of the 1940s, this movie is based on the true story of Queen Elizabeth II's father Prince Albert (Colin Firth) who suffered from stuttering. Screened in 2010, it takes us through the friendship between the King and an unorthodox speech therapist, who helps him overcome his impediment.
- 10. The Silence of the Lambs:** Speaking of mental health, the extreme aberrations of a psychopathic mind cannot go unnoticed, as they continue to haunt us through the covert and overt existence of serial killers. Based on a novel by Thomas Harris, this movie was released in 1991 and told the tale of a young lady (Jodie Foster) who was also an FBI agent, on a quest to find a serial killer who was abducting young women and collecting their skin as trophies. The movie successfully creates a very frightening atmosphere and gives a glimpse of the dark dungeons inside a twisted criminal mind. The pursuit of cues and gradual discovery of the intent and location of the perpetrator is a thrilling experience in itself.