

THE DEPICTION OF PARAPHILIC DISORDERS IN SOMARATNE DISSANAYAKE'S *UNDERPANTS THIEF*: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

P.V.S.S. Ranthilini¹, H.M.S. Wathsala^{2*}

¹ Department of English and Linguistics, University of Ruhuna

² Department of Modern Languages, University of Kelaniya

Abstract

Paraphilic disorders refer to deviant sexual urges that negatively impact both the individual suffering from the disorder and society. Sri Lankan cinema has overlooked this theme until the production of *Underpants Thief: Jangi Hora* by Somaratne Dissanayake in 2021 and a paucity of research pertaining to the cinematic depiction of paraphilia in the domestic context can be seen. This paper attempts to critically analyse the cinematic depiction of paraphilic disorders in *Underpants Thief*, adopting a descriptive qualitative methodology. The analysis shows that paraphilic disorders are portrayed accurately to a certain extent. Yet, rather than demystifying the depiction of paraphilia problematizes and complicates paraphilic disorders. The research concludes that the film accurately depicts the negative impact of paraphilic disorders on the protagonist's life. Further, an 'ideal' reaction to paraphilic disorders is proposed by the film.

Keywords: *Cinematic depiction, Critical analysis, Paraphilic disorders, Somaratne Dissanayake, Underpants Thief*

*Corresponding author: Tel.: 0710463968; Email: hmsanduwathsala@gmail.com.

Introduction

The depiction of paraphilia is a common theme in cinema. Films like *La Pianiste* and *Salo* depict paraphilia in both men and women in the western context. However, in the domestic context, paraphilia had been an overlooked cinematic theme until the production of *Underpants Thief* by Somaratne Dissanayake in 2021. *Underpants Thief* aka *Jangi Hora* is a Sinhala movie with a running time of 96 minutes. The protagonist of the film, Sam, is an individual with paraphilic disorders and the film is woven around him and Nayani, his sister-in-law.

The film is significant to Sri Lanka's cinematic landscape as it is one of the few films with commercial success that addresses sexual deviance and the present study explores the depiction of paraphilia in this film.

Material and Methods

The objective of this research is to explore the depiction of paraphilic disorders in the film *Underpants Thief*. Provided that the research is situated in the interpretivist paradigm, it adopts a descriptive qualitative approach. Accordingly, the film *Underpants Thief* by Somaratne Dissanayake is used as primary data and the plot and the characterisation of the film are analysed qualitatively.

Results and Discussion

The analysis suggests that paraphilic disorders are depicted accurately in the film. For example, the characterisation of Sam shows that the protagonist is diagnosed with two paraphilic disorders in accordance with DSM-5 paraphilic disorders: fetishism and frotteurism or partialism (First, 2014). The former relates to the fetish for women's underpants which prompts Sam to steal underwear and touch women's posteriors. The latter can be identified in relation to Sam's desire to touch women's breasts. The film depicts the said disorders accurately in accordance with the classification criteria of DSM-5 disorders, portraying how they negatively impact the socio-economic life of the paraphilic protagonist.

However, it should be noted that the said depiction of paraphilic disorders in the film is complicated and problematised to a certain extent through the lead actor's portrayal of the protagonist. The character of Sam is portrayed by the lead actor as a person with intellectual disabilities. The protagonist, based on Chaturanga's interpretation and portrayal of the character, can be identified as a person with autism spectrum disorder. While the incorporation of the intellectual disability into the character of the paraphilic individual can be understood as an attempt at increasing representation and inclusion by the

director, it seems to make paraphilia as a disorder even more obscure and detached from the realm of ‘normality’ rather than educating the audience on paraphilic disorders and demystifying them.

Further, as aforementioned, the analysis shows that the protagonist is depicted in the light of a person with disabilities. For example, paternalistic attitudes, which are prevalent in society according to the minority group model of disability (Bennett, 1968 as cited in Hahn, 1986), are projected on Sam, aptly showcasing how he is exploited by his brother who is curtailed by a veneer of benevolence. In addition, the desire to segregate those with disabilities is brought out through the recurrent references to mental asylums. The stigma aimed at Sam is implied through the depiction of societal reactions where Sam is rejected, beaten and despised. This particular depiction stands true to Sam’s intellectual disability and, it can be conceived that it applies to individuals with paraphilic disorders too. However, it should be noted that this is complicated by the blurring of the lines between intellectual disability and paraphilic disorders.

In terms of the societal reaction to paraphilia, it can be seen that the director’s approach is two-fold. On one hand, he presents the way society reacts to paraphilia. The multiple instances where Sam is thrashed, the aforementioned segregationist desires and the stigma depicted in the film accurately and realistically portray the way society reacts to and treats paraphilic individuals. On the other hand, the director presents the way paraphilic individuals ‘should be’ treated. This ‘ideal’ reaction to paraphilia as conceived by the director is presented through the character of Nayani, bringing the audience along the journey of her character development from an intolerant individual to a sensitive individual who is accepting and accommodating of paraphilia.

While this idealistic reaction imagined and promulgated may positively impact the marginalized and mal-treated existence of paraphilic individuals, it cannot be neglected that it simultaneously contributes to the trivialization of paraphilic disorders. Marriage is presented as the ultimate cure for paraphilia and medical treatments are overlooked in the film. Nayani’s reception of Sam seems to promulgate the notion that paraphilic individuals should be accepted and accommodated at any cost. In other words, the compassionate and humane Nayani allowing Sam to steal her underwear and fondle her breasts is presented as the ‘ideal’ reaction to paraphilia and the viewer is prompted to follow suit. This may have negative consequences and it seems that giving precedence to medical treatments would have presented a far more accurate depiction and ‘acceptable’ treatment of paraphilia.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research concludes stating that the film *Underpants Thief* depicts paraphilic disorders in an accurate manner to a certain extent. The depiction of paraphilia is problematized and complicated through the incorporation of autism spectrum disorder into the characterisation of the protagonist, who is presented in the light of a person with disabilities. In terms of the reception of paraphilia, the film forwards two strands, one depicting the actual reception of paraphilic individuals by society and the other depicting an ideal reception as imagined by the director. The former is accurately brought out through the depiction of stigma, segregation and violence projected on the protagonist. The latter is brought out through the character development of Nayani and it seems that medical treatments aimed at curing paraphilia are overlooked in this regard.

References

- Dissanayake, S. (2021). *Underpants Thief: Jangi Hora*. Cine Film - Sri Lanka
- First, M.B. (2014). DSM-5 and Paraphilic Disorders. *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 42, 191-201.
- Hanh, H. (1986). Public support for rehabilitation programs: The analysis of US disability policy. *Disability, handicap & society*, 1(2),121-137.