

Contagious Disease and Commercial Cinema: A Study of Selected Films for Their Impact on Health Literacy

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Abstract

Cinema being the highest form of entertainment has rarely presented the world of infectious diseases. Even if it has, the plot has been ruined by the presence of unrealistic creatures, politicising the use of bio-weapon. Only the biographies of some famous scientists or to develop the history of great epidemics and pandemics, the infectious diseases somewhat got attention marginally. The current pandemic situation has correctly pointed out to us, that how much health literacy is lacking in both rural as well as in urban society. Therefore commercial films, being made for and accepted by anyone without barrier, how much effectively ascertain towards the health literacy on infectious disease, is a fascinating topic to research further. This paper will try to find out how much commercial films, based on viral infections and contagious diseases, actually contribute towards the health literacy and awareness of the audience.

Introduction

The film, being the unique type of amusement, has consistently been a mirror for the general public. There is continuously a ceaseless discussion, that whether film shows the real happenings of the general public, or it just moves the general public to think the same. As Aristotle said, that, fiction is of great philosophical interest than history. Because, “History represents things as they are, while fiction represents how they might be and ought to be”. (Aristotle, 335BC) . Films, being the most grounded mechanism of all entertainments, needs to mirror the society, circumstances, individuals, and leads a power of progress in the society. The film has another capacity, which is reporting time and society. The significant component of the film is that it records the world all things considered, except for the special effects and skilful editing to make a phenomenal picture, by giving individuals access to a universe of fantasy, fiction and imagination.

For the last hundred years or so, cinema is capturing and recording and recreating time and space—films in every era bear that era's particular architecture, history, politics and society in general. For years, filmmakers considered as social advocates. (Martz, 2009) Rightly, for the documentary or non-commercial film making. With the advent of new wave cinema in the

1970s, some serious efforts were made not only in Indian cinema but also in World cinema. Science fictions, complicated storyline, unrealistic characters, fantasy world around the cinema in the core, was started since then.

- **“Health” in cinema**

"Health" is a serious issue to address in the entertainment platform, has been majorly neglected. Although health has made a significant role in shaping many of the novels and therefore movies, their health is referred to as a particular disease, not health as a whole and also, in the plot, the disease also get a character and plays all ups and downs in the movie. Cancer and cardiac arrest are two health issues addressed in films. In the Films like *Anand* (1971), *Majboor* (1974), *Safar* (1970), *Mili* (1975), *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003), *Aashayein* (2010), the lead protagonists have cancer. However, these films failed to make some contribution to cancer literacy or cancer awareness. Here cancer is taken as an individual character of the film and mostly based on the emotional level, where the family and friends of the patient have to go mentally after one diagnosed with the disease. (Harshal.T.Pandve, 2010). The global cinema is also not an exception in this case. Films from, *THE DOCTOR* (1991), to *FAULT IN OUR STARS* (2014) many films came where the lead protagonists have cancer or any other "clean" disease, the real raw, ruthless picture of the disease has always been unseen of the screen because of lack of aesthetic. Medical research has portrayed in the global film as altruistic and slightly eccentric. (Clerk, 2006)

There is always a saying, that whether life imitates art or art imitates life. In the case of cinema, it is vice-versa. So to depict a wholesome picture of health and related issues, "Health Literacy" is a significant factor that is the need of the hour to address through a film. However, as previously said, most films that are based on health or focus on any particular disease, shows it as a character on the plot itself, and arouse the emotional factor on the screen, but does very little to the society, in terms of awareness and literacy. The World Health Organization defines health literacy as a cognitive and social skill to determine an individual's motivation and ability to receive, understand and use information in a health-promoting manner. It is a degree, obtaining which, the individuals can obtain, process, and understand necessary health information and service, to take the right decision at the right time.

Nevertheless, film, being a relaxed form of entertainment how much develops a storyline around the severe content of health literacy is still a question, which very few studies have answered. And then, health literacy is a dangerous and not so aesthetically pleasing content of contagious diseases are out of the question. Because, diseases mostly depicted on films in general, has maintained aesthetic of its own. Whereas contagious diseases, like a virus,

flu is not at all pleasing from the viewer's end. The film has always considered as a form of entertainment to which people reaches out to find relaxation. However, still, there are documentaries and non-commercial films, but even there, contagious diseases are hard to see—the world of infectious diseases rarely presented in the cinema with accuracy. Apart from random biographies of scientists and retellings of stories about great epidemics from the past, most films focus on the dangers presented by outbreaks of unknown agents that originate from acts of bioterrorism, from laboratory accidents, or even from space. (Pappas.G, 2007). That is why they end up being either unrealistic or just a mere replication.

Connecting these three components, (i.e. films, health literacy and contagious diseases) much not seen in the research articles worldwide. However, after the current outbreak of Corona Virus worldwide, the literacy on contagious diseases on films is a fascinating area of study certainly.

Background of the study

Sitting in 2020, there should be no explanation needed why health literacy is essential even for contagious diseases. Words like *Pandemic*, *Quarantine* may be first time heard of, for many of us. The film is a craft of the twentieth century, and there has been a lot of progress infectious illnesses and microbiology in the twentieth century. The revelation and across the board utilisation of anti-infection agents concurred with the appearance and spread of the *moving pictures*; the occurrence of and issues related with anti-infection opposition expanded in corresponding with the danger to film introduced by the TV.

Medication has continuously disregarded by the film. The logical investigation is a tedious and, along these lines, exhausting system, the particular terminology utilised in science can undoubtedly distance layman, and surgeries might be unsatisfactory for survey by delicate crowds. Along these lines, the film did not seem to have a proclivity for medication, until at any rate the previous decade. Of every single clinical forte, infectious illnesses are, by all accounts, the main strength that can offer film the necessary tension. Recollections of incredible pestilences and consistently accessible data on new pandemics and hazardous infections have opened a feeling of wonderment about contamination, an essential for real to lifetime achievement. However, still, the film industry has majorly foreseen the awareness and literacy factor of people on health issues, particularly on contagious diseases.

However, in 2020, we felt the need that where we lacked. It took the Government several days to make people understand that why the disease is dangerous, how it can replicate in arithmetic progression, which might not be needed if people were well literate on different

health threats, the danger of contamination etc. Even the highly literate section of the society lacked on awareness, and therefore has taken it casually, which ended up for more contamination.

The film, being the entertainment source could have used the health information, not just a factor to enhance emotional strength, but also delivering something to the society by really showing the brutal face of the situations. However, even if there are films on such topic, mostly are unrealistic and supremely edited a small roll of montages, as they are not very visually pleasing. With special effects, unrealistic scripts, and characters, this severe topic of health has been a mere far-cry of realism.

However, still, there are some films which could manage to apprehend and present the truth to some extent as truth as possible. However, even in those films, how much health literacy did, it is still a matter of doubt.

Health literacy and role of media

While analysing any film, one can have several angles, to reach a particular point. The dimension that the researcher selects makes way for the research question answered by finding the correct methodology.

In this paper, the two variables that made the most of it, are Health Literacy and Role of media. Therefore the research questions, which will answer in the end, would be:

- *How Much the Plot and Dialogues, Addressing People about Health Literacy and Therefore Creating Any Kind of Health Awareness.*

Television and motion pictures can be useful assets for passing on wellbeing messages to a vast crowd. A 2008 report by the Kaiser Family Foundation and USC Annenberg found that 1 out of 4 individuals state that *amusement TV* is one of their top wellsprings of wellbeing data. That is many individuals! Also, it implies that cinema, to be particular commercial cinema is a potential stage for improving wellbeing proficiency.

Cinema being there for a century, how much contributed to the science and medication is still a grey area. Because, the platform mainly created for entertainment, although contributed heavily to the aesthetic, art of living and lifestyle changes, majorly avoided hard science facts, as they are annoying and monotonous for an entertainment platform. However, the films, that have chosen viral outbreaks and contagious diseases as the genre, even how much those films contribute towards obtaining, reading and understanding any medical issue of the audience.

- *How The Role Of Media Has Been Portrayed In Those Films.*

Media being the fourth pillar of democracy has always been a boon to the voiceless section of the society. However, when it comes to the movies, they somehow replicate our society. So, how these movies have shown the role of popular media, in the time of crisis, will be a significant issue about what should be the media's role, in the time of such outbreak.

As the movies based on the virus outbreak that leads to an epidemic situation, there would undoubtedly be some clash between Government and media, between media and health professionals and from media to the public. These three types of dialogue will mainly be the concern of the paper to give it a holistic approach.

The film selection approach

The methodology based on qualitative textual analysis of two films, one is International, and the other is regional. Textual analysis is a methodology that involves understanding language, symbols, and pictures present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of and communicate life and life experiences. Visual, written, or spoken messages provide cues to ways through which communication understood. Often the messages are understood as influenced by and reflective of larger social structures. For example, messages reflect and may challenge historical, cultural, political, ethical contexts for which they exist. (Allen, 2017)

- ***Selecting one Hollywood movie***

One Hollywood movie, because, Many researchers acknowledge Hollywood's superior position as an evident dominating power in the media industry from the early 20s on. Most of them, are likely to agree to the statement that "Hollywood early on emerged as a global industry". (De Zoysa & Newman 2002: 189). The economic and political factor of America has helped Hollywood technologies and economics, American films were available for export to all over the world. Moreover, therefore it always carried an impact on the country's sitting on the receiving end. Therefore, what West thinks will have a resonating effect on the overall world and mostly to the third World countries.

So while selecting Hollywood film based on contagious diseases, it has been found that most of the films based on unrealistic themes and progress of the story majorly relies on skilful editing and imagination. The most authentic replication of the situation, in a Hollywood commercial film, was found to be '*contagion*' (2011, *English*).

Cast

The film is a thriller movie directed by Oscar-winning director, Steven Soderbergh. It has an ensemble cast of Marion Cotillard, Matt Damon, Laurence Fishburne, Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow, Kate Winslet, Bryan Cranston, Jennifer Ehle, and Sanaa Lathan. The movie based on

a virus, which spreads from respiratory droplets and fomites. Endeavours by clinical analysts and general wellbeing authorities to recognise and contain the illness, the loss of social request in a pandemic, and the acquaintance of an antibody with stop its spread.

Storyline

Beth Emhoff (Gwenyth Paltrow) was returning from Hong-Kong, with a halt Chicago, where she met with her ex-partner, and unknowingly attacked by a mysterious Virus. For which she started developing symptoms after coming back home to Minneapolis, but ignored it by taking it as a Jet lag. Therefore ended up spreading the virus to her son and husband, and eventually, she and her son died. The husband diagnosed with the immunity system against an unknown virus. In the meantime, in Hong Kong, London and suburbs, instances of the puzzling disease were springing up, as the American CDC and the World Health Organization give their best exertion exploring the infection. A race with time as the opponent starts, as the infection is spreading in a geometric movement, and if no arrangement found - quick - humankind will stop to be.

- *Selecting one regional movie*

The Malayalam cinema is the Indian film industry situated in both Trivandrum and Kochi, Kerala, India, devoted to the creation of movies in the Malayalam language. Malayalam film is known for its sensitive depiction of essential subjects in films with fewer business components. Malayalam film has spearheaded different specialised, topical and creation procedures among films in India. The business is the fourth biggest film industry in India. It is likewise probably the biggest maker of the parallel film in India. The films based on contagious diseases are scarce in other regional languages of India, next to none. However, the Malayalam film industry has managed to make a commercial movie, based on contagious disease, that is, **‘virus’ (2019, Malayalam)**.

Cast

A *virus* is a 2019 Indian Malayalam-language medical thriller film co-produced and directed by Aashiq Abu set against the backdrop of the 2018 Nipah virus outbreak in Kerala. It stars an ensemble cast that includes Kunchacko Boban, Asif Ali, Parvathy Thiruvothu, Tovino Thomas, Rahman, Indrajith Sukumaran, Indrans, Soubin Shahir, Sreenath Bhasi, Dileesh Pothan, Rima Kallingal, Madonna Sebastian, Ramya Nambeeshan, Joju George, and Revathi.

Storyline

The film set up on specific occasions during the 2018 NIPAH Virus flare-up in Kerala. The plot is set in Kozhikode and follows the different phases of the flu from distinguishing proof

to its all-out destruction. It depicts brave minutes that helped in viably controlling the virus from spreading further. The film investigates the aggregate suspicion made by the Virus flare-up and how it upset the life of people, the two casualties and medicinal services experts. The adventure of a gathering of daring individuals who stood up even with misfortune, taking a chance with their own lives, battling with all their will.

From the above discussion, it is clear that both the films are closer to reality, not much based on editing and supernatural kinds of stuff, and also both are commercially successful.

Findings

“contagion” on health literacy

While making a medical thriller, no one can stick to only one part of the health. There will always be some references for other health concerns, to reach to the exact one. This film is also not an exception.

- The first disease mentioned in the film took place in 5 minutes from its opening scene, and the disease is *Attention Deficit*. However, the movie has nothing to do with the disease after that, the symptoms, were mentioned, as the garage person of Dr Elees Cheever was talking to him, about if he can help his children, who are having some bullying issues in school. The virologist made him understand that it is not his part of the job, but surely he can suggest someone, and therefore explained the symptoms to confirm the same.

Moreover, in the very same way, one other disease came as a reference, which is Minamata disease. One of the main antagonist Alan Krumwiede (played by Jude Law) had almost a minute long dialogue on how and why Minamata caused, and why the fishing industry has suppressed it, by labelling it "Industrial Disease".

Here, very subtly but intentionally two diseases have been mentioned, with its symptoms and causes. That is very important in terms of reaching a basic level of health literacy.

- The index patient of the infectious virus found in first 15 minutes’ of the movie, but that time there was no mention of the virus, as it is supposed to be an unknown one, so no one knew of its symptoms and cure.
- The next significant mention was, on 18 minutes of the film, where Dr, Erin Mears (Played by Kate Winslet) described what Fomites are? Why a contagious disease which can be transferred by respiratory droplets and fomites, can be dangerous and also it initiated towards a health belief system, where she explained, that people touches there

face almost 2000-3000 times a day, and that is why a disease that can be spread by droplets is dangerous.

- Within the same scene, she further explained another complex topic on health literacy and therefore, awareness, that is *R-NAUGHT* or reproduction naught. That implies how quickly one patient can spread the virus to how many numbers of people at a time. Almost a minute long dialogue went on like,

“What we need to determine is this, for every person who gets sick, how many other people are likely to infect. So, for seasonal flu, that is usually about one. Smallpox, on the other hand, had the value of 3, and before we had a vaccine, Polio spread at a rate between four and six. Now we call that number the ‘R-naught’, which stands for the reproductive rate of the virus. Moreover, how fast it multiplies depends on a variety of factors, like, the incubation period, how long a person is contagious, and most importantly, sometimes people can be contagious, even without having symptoms. Moreover, we also need to know how big the population of people susceptible to the virus might be. And once we get to hold on the R-naught, we can say it on the scale of the epidemic”

- Apart from the points mentioned earlier, the film had very less to contribute to the health awareness of the people, except for some examples here and there because the plot of this particular film evolved around how tough the profession on the front field, how difficult it is to come up with a vaccine, without knowing the exact characteristics of the virus, how an unknown virus can cause an epidemic, and how Government can be unhelpful with the medical team, and how that can delay the vaccination process.
- The most important part of the film, towards false health literacy came at almost end of the movie, where Dr Elees Cheever seen to give the inhale vaccine to the patients and telling the patient to breathe in through their nose.

However, in reality, one should NOT breathe in a while getting an intranasal vaccine, as the attenuated virus must replicate in the warm nasal passage before spreading to the rest of the airways, so your body can make antibodies against the virus. (Yusuf, 2016).

“Contagion” on role of media

The film has rarely mentioned any positive side of any media, whatsoever. There is always a hush-hush situation from the media, as according to the Government if the news of epidemic once formally releases on the media, they will make a nuisance, and that might create panic and anxiety in general people.

- The chief lack of social media has been shown in the movie brutally. The major grey character Alan Krumwiede (played by Jude Law) had its blog, where he posted recordings about the infection on his blog. In one video, he guarantees he has relieved himself of the infection utilising a homoeopathic fix got from *Forsythia*. Individuals looking for Forsythia overpower drug stores. Where found by 41 minutes that there is no proof that the drug can cure the virus, it was nothing but a piece of fake and misleading news, but by then it created enough nuisances, people were fighting over a bottle of this.

This points out the general lack that social media nowadays suffers, that is lack of authenticity. As a follower of that particular blog was more than 12 Lakhs, it was easy to propagate even fake misleading news.

“Virus” movie on health literacy

- The movie as based on a particular virus outbreak and how a particular state dealt with it. In the first 08 minutes of the film, the vital health information given about sudden heart attacks, and how by pumping for 30 minutes in 3 slots, the pulse beat regained, which is beneficial information, in terms of health awareness, literacy and cautions.
- The habit of cleanliness and sanitisation first mentioned in the film, by one of the main protagonist's husbands (Played by Jinu Joseph).
- For a 3 minutes long conversation, the main protagonist C.P.Bhaskaran (played by Senthil Krishna) made it clear to the audience, as well as to the Government that what are the characteristics of the VIRUS, how World Health Organization describes it, what are the treatment protocols etc.

The conversation goes like this,

"NIPAH is a zoonotic disease, which is one of the ten WHO priority diseases. This could be transmitted from animal to human or directly between humans. It has reported in Singapore, Malaysia, Bangladesh and India till date.....the scariest part is that there is no vaccination and no treatment protocol till date."

- Another critical issue that was addressed by the movie is about the cremation of the patients. Here a regional barrier in solving health issues also added as a layer in the film. A Muslim family in Kerala wanted to bury their son, instead of to burn. However, till that time, there were no examples of burying such contagious patient, which created a moment of tension. However, with the help of the medical team and gravediggers,

they could bury the body, and also found out that deep digging and burying infectious patients are better than burning them.

- Except for the incidents as mentioned above, there are some examples of health literacy and examples of cleanliness and sanitisation here and there. However, nothing enforced clearly or state from the main character's voice, so sometimes they are even looked over, and the audience could have missed it.

“virus” on role of media

The movie at several points of time addressed the issue of informing people through media, and therefore was given considerable importance for the propagating factor of media.

- Several points of time, even the audience of the film, was getting information, via the news channels, which were telecasting the constant news on the updates of the virus and its treatment.
- Although throughout the movie, there were no initiatives from the media's side to health literacy and awareness, majorly used for propagating news from government and health officials to colossal mass.

Conclusion

To conclude that yes commercial movies, which based on infectious diseases, even lack health literacy and awareness at large, be it global or regional. Most of the movies, based on infectious diseases, are unreal, based on editing thoroughly. So, the pressing issue like this needed to be addressed more seriously and should not lack authenticity. Some portrayals on parts of contagious maladies in the film are even incorrect. Indeed, even the truest endeavours will, in general, damaged by extraordinary logical mistakes, and the reason of pandemics including obscure infections of questionable inception that cause prophetically catastrophic occasions serves to impart people in general with dread, which may go to freeze when comparable circumstances emerge. Control of the substance of the film is neither attainable nor moral. Hence, authorities ought to be alert about the impact that film has on transforming popular supposition and the ideas including medication that introduced, and endeavours toward illuminating the overall population ought to strengthen.

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