

Stigma, Shame and Resurrection: An Analysis of the Malayalam Film, *Vellam*

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Abstract: Alcoholism destroys the psychological balance of an individual. Its consumption has created far-reaching effects in several societies. Media and movies portray the impact of alcohol abuse on society and its members. They focus on the family and social relationships of drinkers. The Malayalam movie, *Vellam* depicts the life story of a problem drinker and how it affects his social relationships. The shame and stigma experienced by the protagonist are analysed in this article that throws great insights into the portrayal of individuals as drinkers and how the notions of emotional and mental health can be retrieved by the help of an understanding society that helps the addicts to resurrect as powerful and respectable social figures.

Keywords: Alcohol consumption, binge drinking, problem drinking, shame, stigma resurrection.

1. Introduction

The relationship between man and society has been studied and explained by Sociologists. The social relationships, interactions and norms form the identity of an individual. The affinity that a man shares with the social world determines his existence and it is the society that helps a man shape or build his varied identities. "A society is a collection of individuals united by certain relations or modes of behaviour which mark them off from others who do not enter into those relations or who differ from them in behaviour" (Ginsberg, 1995). Although man differs in many ways, his discernment enables him to adapt to situations and live in society. But some will be different from this. He or she is reluctant to flow with the rhythm of society. Often because of living conditions. Others want to live with justice and morality.

The theories of great philosophers like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau taught us the lessons and importance of how to live in society. Hobbs's theory of social control talks about the concept of social deviance and measures to control it. Who is a social deviant? "The stereotype of someone with an addiction is a social deviant. Deviance is a sociological concept referring to behaviors that violate social rules and norms" (Why Addiction Can Sometimes Be About Fitting In, n.d.). If so, binge drinking can be considered as social deviance. "Alcohol may be the world's oldest known drug. Fermented grain, fruit juice and honey have been used to make alcohol (ethyl alcohol or ethanol) for thousands of years. The production of products

containing alcohol has become big business in today's society and the consumption and abuse of alcohol has become a major public health problem" (Neuroscience for Kids – Alcohol, n.d.).

2. The Origin of Alcohol

The preparation and consumption of alcohol date back centuries. Both the Easterners the Westerners consumed this beverage to get intoxicated and appease ancient deities and Gods. They relied on diverse ways to prepare the fermented drink, through distillation. Even the great Vedas, especially the Rig Veda talks about the consumption of alcohol in India: The Aryans arrived in India circa 1600 BC and displaced the Harappans who had established one of the earliest civilisations here in 3000 BC. Excavations from both these periods have yielded clay pots. Scientists and archaeologists have been able to rearrange somewhat rudimentary but complete distillation set-ups from these findings. The Charaka Samhita (Charaka's compendium), the most exhaustive tome of the day on medicinal sciences, was unbelievably detailed about alcohol and its consumption. (Singh, 2017)

In ancient Rome, Bacchus was considered the god of wine and the Greeks worshipped Dionysus. The importance of alcohol is evident in all ancient cultures: Ancient Egyptians created detailed art featuring the brewing and consumption of beer and wine demonstrating its place in their popular culture. Romans also portrayed the use of alcohol and the drunkenness it caused in leisure settings like banquets and orgies. Some art, like Greek and Christian paintings, features alcohol almost exclusively in a holy or official capacity. (Muldoon, 2021).

3. Alcoholism and Society

Modern times witnessed the huge production of alcohol worldwide because it boosts the economy of all countries. Alcoholism exerts its negative effects on our society. It affects the familial bonds and social relationships of individuals. "Beyond health consequences, the harmful use of alcohol brings significant social and economic losses to individuals and society at large" (Alcohol, 2018). The regular consumption of alcohol tarnishes the social status of individuals. They often forget to act as responsible social members and guide their family members to achieve their personal goals. "Alcohol abuse

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is considered to be an addiction and some argue about alcoholism a “disease”. The term “addiction” refers to both the compulsive aspect of drinking and also to the harm drinking causes” (Gislason, 2011). Drinkers are often regarded as a social nuisance in several societies. They destroy the peace and harmony enjoyed by the others members of the society; so, they are not welcomed by many. They often violate social norms and indulge in all luxuries and even commit crimes in search of money. The mental and physical health issues make them an unsolicited group of people in their own societies and families. Consequently, they will develop severe psychological problems and eventually they start experiencing humiliation. This will label them as social outcasts.

The term stigma is defined as “a strong lack of respect for a person or a group of people or a bad opinion of them because they have done something society does not approve of” (“Stigma Definition: 1. a Strong Feeling of Disapproval That Most People in a Society Have about Something, Especially.... Learn More.”). The stigma and shame associated with drinkers hinder their psychological well-being. Society’s blame for their excessive alcoholism will diminish their confidence level and they will be looked at as unwanted figures. Though many of them try to stop the habit of drinking; however, “people with addiction internalize this stigma, feeling shame and refusing to seek treatment as a result” (Volkow, 2021). Alcoholics are often ignored by society. Society often does not remember the stress it causes. There is a society in Kerala that takes the alcoholic for granted. The misconception that society hates alcoholics often affects it. “. . . self-stigmatisation can derive from an accurate recognition that the affected person has of her [or his] own failures to be an effective agent and to live to her [or his] values” (Avery, 2019).

4. Vellam-The Essential Drink

The Malayalam movie Vellam, is directed by Mr. Prajesh Sen. The term “Vellam” is defined as “the essential drink” by the director as it shows the life of an alcoholic, Murali. Alcohol acts as an unavoidable drink in his life though it disturbs the harmony of his family life. “Alcohol helps in giving Kerala’s economy a good high - shockingly, more than 40% of revenues for its annual budget comes from booze” (Biswas, 2010).

5. The Neglected Life of a Soaker

Murali is married and the father of a girl child. He is portrayed as a regular soaker and a jobless man who lives in Kannur, a northern district of Kerala. He is unwanted by his relatives and family members due to his addiction. They start cursing him when he creates issues in society, the neighbourhood and even in his house due to his alcoholism. His married life is totally shattered due to this. His wife neglects him during her struggles to cope with the situation. His drinking becomes the bane of her life. He tries to be a good son, husband and father; but fails miserably because of his excessive drinking. He has a good network of friends who help him buy alcohol and drink with him. This shows that there are people in our society like Murali, the protagonist of the movie, who fail

to fulfil their duties as family members and social members. They are satisfied with the hallucinations they experience due to alcohol consumption. “When a person has a problem with alcohol it can affect a wide range of people, including their spouse, family, and even their children. It can also have a large impact on their community, workplace, and society as a whole” (Go Sober, 2019). Most of the time, these dipsomaniacs are regarded as unwanted people. So they ruin their lives because of the usual indifference they face.

The neglect that the regular drinkers face from their own society will reduce their confidence level. This gradually causes psychological issues which cannot be easily cured. Problem drinking is a condition when individuals consume alcohol without any limits and disturbs the peace and harmony of society. They drink throughout the day without any hesitation. Their reason will not guide them anymore owing to their excessive urge. This deadly intoxication makes them act bizarrely that they overlook their environs, familial bonds and even health. “Alcohol is considered a drug because it depresses the central nervous system and can disrupt mental and motor skills. It can also damage internal organs when used excessively. Unhealthy alcohol use can be harmful physically, emotionally, and economically” (Social Drinking vs. Problem Drinking - Health Encyclopedia - University of Rochester Medical Center, n.d.). Such problem drinkers rely on falsehoods to convince their dear and near ones. They avoid workplaces, social gatherings and religious ceremonies as they think that will expose their true identity. All these are due to the psychological stress they experience in search of economic sources to buy alcohol. “People who find themselves in a romantic relationship with someone struggling with alcoholism may end up making excuses for their lack of attendance or improper conduct at social functions” (Effects of Alcoholism on Families & Close Relationships, n.d.)

6. Stigma and Shame

Murali, the protagonist suffers from stigma and shame due to his problem drinking. Years back, his lover left him thinking that he was a pervert. Later, we can his dejected family members and how their advice falls on deaf ears. They miserably watch his social and psychological breakdown. He tries to stay away from alcohol but he feels attracted towards it and even drinks Paracetamol syrup that the doctor prescribes for his daughter when she falls ill. On the same day, he tries to steal his daughter’s gold chain. The family members, including his mother and wife, start detesting and cursing him. However, he is not moved by the emotions but continues to drink. Mental imbalance pushes him to suicide. But all his efforts were in vain. However, some of the villagers view that he is sincere and industrious, and it is his thirst for liquor that has ruined his life. In fact, he wants to lead a happy life with his wife and daughter. It is clear when he promises his daughter to accompany her to the school for a meeting. His addiction does not allow him to attend the Parents Teachers Association meeting and returns at night with food for his daughter and wife. Slowly, he develops Alcohol Abuse Disorder (ADU). He does not realise the importance of time. For him, the day and the night remain the

same. He spends thirty-one days in prison. He wants to stop drinking but is unable to do. He searches for the last oozing of the empty liquor bottles let by other drunkards on the roadside. Having been deserted by his friends and relatives he roams around the town for a job and food. He becomes homeless and abandoned and realises the stigma of being alone in society He attempts to commit suicide again but is rescued by the villagers.

7. The Resurrection

Resurrection is “the act or fact of bringing someone back to life, or bringing something back into use or existence” (Cambridge Dictionary). In the film, spectators can see how one of his friends takes him to Dr. Subramaniam, a psychiatrist who, after several attempts, tries to rescue him from alcoholism with the help of his wife, relatives and friends. The doctor instills positive thoughts and advises him to start his own business. The god-like man tells him that insult is the biggest investment which ultimately boosts confidence in Murali. He approaches several entrepreneurs and finally reaches the door of a famous businessman, Chittilappilly, who inspires him with his words. Later, he starts a tile making firm “Waterman” and succeeds in his life and amasses wealth with his hard work, sincerity and dedication. Eventually, Murali himself becomes a redeemer and tries to save the lives of people like him. The change that happens to the protagonist can be viewed as resurrection. He rises from his ashes like a phoenix. The movie tells us that people like Murali needs social support to recover from ADU and live their lives.

8. Conclusion

A Person May not be addicted to alcohol if he realises that he needs to be accountable to his community and family. Personal freedom is always good, but social consciousness reminds us how to behave in society. Murali’s life is a perfect example of how society can change a person’s life. Sometimes some

individuals or situations change our lives. His friend comes as a saviour and takes the ‘hero’ to the hospital. The doctor acts as a mediator between the protagonist and his family. It is the doctor who sows new seeds of hope and optimism in his patient’s life. Thus, the hero becomes a big tree that gives shade to others. Ignoring the shadow of stigma and shame, he is resurrected to conquer new worlds such as the great Odysseus and walks confidently to the horizon. Thus, the film shows us how a society and its members can help alcoholics rise to become strong and decent social figures.

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