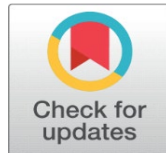


CHALLENGING PERCEPTIONS: ATHIRAN THROUGH THE LENS OF DISABILITY STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Autism research has become a significant aspect of disability research. In this paper, the notion of autism, rather than a disability but as a different kind of ability, is examined through the lens of the Malayalam film Athiran. The Nithya's character problematizes the societal constructs of autism as a disease, leading to a reconsideration of neurodiversity. Based on disability studies theory, the paper analyzes the way the film represents autism and its unseen strengths, including unusual cognitive abilities and differing modes of experiencing the world. The research attempts to demarcate the change from disabilities to capabilities, encouraging a more equitable and knowledgeable understanding of autism in cinema and society.

Keywords: Autism, Cognitive Strengths, Disability Studies, Neurodiversity



1. INTRODUCTION

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder that influences the way people communicate and think, and they are thus different from neurotypical individuals. Regrettably, being different tends to isolate. Yet, having a developmental disorder should not be a cause for social degradation. Greater understanding and acceptance will enable autistic individuals to live meaningful lives despite being different from neurotypical individuals.

Disability studies is an interdisciplinary field that explores the social, cultural, historical, and political aspects of disability. It resists dominant-perspectives that perceive disability solely as a medical or biological condition and instead emphasizes how societal attitudes, stereotypes, and institutional structures create

the experience of disabled people. Disability studies encourage the perception that disability is not merely an individual limitation but a condition shaped by the manner in which society includes or excludes bodies and minds.

Even though society has made progress, autism is still stigmatized. Society immediately brands a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as being unintelligent, a burden, or bad luck. The attitude is carried down through generations, impacting the life of autistic people and restricting their choices. According to the neurodiversity approach, autism is not something that needs to be cured or fixed but is a normal variation in human thought and behavior. It is an alternate way of being in and experiencing the world.

Although a lower IQ can make things harder with learning and communicating, autistic adults typically have the most incredible strengths. Their intensity of concentration, their passion for specific interests, their frank honesty, their refusal to conform socially, and their capacity to get enthusiastic about little things are strengths that cannot be ignored.

Cinema is at the forefront of constructing and projecting social attitudes. Films have the ability to break stereotypes and form new thought patterns. Athiran accomplishes the same by raising awareness regarding the lives of specially-abled individuals and initiating debate regarding their position in society.

Athiran is a psychological thriller movie directed and written by Vivek. The movie features Fahadh Faasil and Sai Pallavi in the lead, with Fahadh playing the role of Dr. M. K. Nair and Sai Pallavi playing the role of Nithya. The movie begins with Dr. Nair visiting a mental asylum to evaluate its patients and operations. There, he meets Nithya. Throughout the narrative, the background of Nithya and how she relates to Dr. Nair is revealed. Her background is important-in revealing social stigmas.

2. ANALYSIS

The film Athiran is relevant to disability studies in the sense that it is the way it describes Nithya's condition. We can study the differing attitudes of her father and her relatives from the film. Her father is not concerned with-curing her but with discovering and developing her abilities. Nithya displays symptoms of autism, such as social withdrawal, sensitivity to sensory stimuli, and nonverbal communication. Her relatives observe her relatives observe only these symptoms and finds her as good for nothing. The asylum in the film also reflects actual histories, in which neurodivergent people were excluded instead of being understood. The film offers clear dialogue that supports the fact that autism can be thought of as a different ability instead of a disorder.

The main argument of this paper is that Athiran explains both groups in our society—those who accept the neurodivergent and those who reject them—extremely well. The difference in the two groups' mindset impacts the lives of autistic people.

Nithya's personality makes us reflect on society's judgment about the differently abled. The film makes us reflect on Nithya's autism not as a disability but as a talent. There are some scenes wherein we see how Nithya is uneasy due to her sensory sensitivity. But the film also shows us the same condition that makes her sensitive gives her incredible talent in Kalaripayattu. Nithya's focused attention, attention to detail, excellent memory, and dedication enable her to perform better in Kalaripayattu.

The reaction of her family members before Nithya's rendition of Kalaripayattu presents another face of society—society which shames persons like her and refuses to accept them. Having special talents, will not, remove a person from the field of disability, and it shouldn't. Disability, however, cannot be used as a criteria for exclusion from society. Despite being disabled, persons like her must be accorded an opportunity to discover and cultivate their talents. Following Nithya's father's death, rather than being put in a situation where she could excel, she is taken to a mental asylum and cut off from the rest of the world. Autism is not an disease that has been caused and therefore should be cured. It is only when society includes them that autistic individuals can really excel by accepting their differences. Their disability must be accepted as a unique way of perceiving and experiencing the world. Nithya's use of nonverbal communication is viewed as an autistic symptom of illness and not as a unique way of engaging with the world.

Is being different in a way of communicating abnormal? Nithya is considered "diseased" by her relatives mainly because she is not normal in verbal communication. While society views her non-verbal communication and social withdrawal as signs of disability, the film subtly reveals that Nithya's perspective is simply different, not deficient. She is not even in control of her life; whatever is going to happen to her in the future depends on other individuals. Although she is not a danger to society, she is confined to single room in the asylum, indicating how society isolates individuals who are neurodivergent. The doctor in the asylum views her as only a means of earning money, indicating how individuals with autism and other types of disability have a tendency to be exploited based on their disability. The film positions the asylum as a symbol of society's unwillingness to accept difference. Instead of recognizing Nithya's strengths and individuality, the asylum staff reduce her to a set of symptoms.

The movie may not have delved deeper into Nithya's thoughts, but her mind is shown through her interactions with other characters. Dr. Nair's arrival at the asylum is a turning point in Nithya's life. Unlike other doctors who treat her as a patient to be manipulated, Dr. Nair slowly comes to know her. His nonjudgemental mindset helps Nithya's real self to come out. Dr Nair was able to create a space where Nithya feels safe and secure. It is only because of his patience that he manages to gain her trust and emotional connection. Nithya's father is aware of her strengths and not her differences. His support for her interest in Kalaripayattu proves his faith in her strength. We realize through flashbacks the warmth and the understanding in their relationship, representing how Nithya felt accepted and loved without conditions. Her father's encouragement developed her confidence and toughness, which continue to stick with her even amidst loneliness in the asylum. Her emotional connection to him still informs her self-esteem. The way her relatives treats her is entirely different from doctor and father. They

disregard her emotional needs and see her only through the lens of her diagnosis. Nithya's silent responses to their dismissiveness show her pain and frustration, highlighting her awareness of how she is perceived. These shows that her the absence of conventional speech does not limit her understanding; instead, her world is shaped by non-verbal cues, body language, and energy.

The way of introduction of Nithya's character first gives us the idea that Nithya is mentally unstable. Being autistic along with mental pressure had lead Nithya into a state of mental and emotional distress. When her father dies, she is neither given emotional support nor the care she needs. She is locked away in the asylum. Her silent communication is interpreted as instability instead of a reaction

to isolation and grief. The dark, frigid asylum and unsettling environment heightens her unease. Nithya's reaction to sudden and loud noises reveals her sensorial overload. Her relatives institutionalize her rather than motivating her to keep on practicing Kalaripayattu, rejecting her abilities. She loses the liberty she enjoyed in her father's custody. Nithya's character shows us the difficulties of autistic individuals. They can be considered unique personalities, rather than excluding them from society. Nithya faced exclusion from her relatives, it shows us the societal failure to accept and understand neurodivergent people. Instead of giving support and encouragement, Nithya is treated as a burden. The film clearly portrays that, their helplessness is taken as granted without seeing their potential. The movie also shows how accepting and understanding them can make a difference in their life. Nithya's father believed in her, helped her find something she is good at. It is only because of her father her talent in kalaripayattu revealed. It helped Nithya find a meaning in her life and development confidence in her abilities. Nithya's father faith in her is direct opposite to the views of her relatives they consider her as a failure. Because of her difference, that extra care and love is essential for her to be able to find herself.

The introduction of Dr Nair adds new perspectives and insights. In the movie we can notice the difference in how the doctor in asylum and Dr Nair treats Nithya. Dr Nair accepted her as herself as the way she is and helped her to keep her authentic self within. The huge difference in Nithya's life is marked with the presence of Dr Nair. It gives us the idea that genuine care and respect can lead to meaningful relation. Athiran also challenges the widely accepted dominant model of disability that autism is an illness to be cured. Rather the movie encourages us to think through the lens of neurodivergence that promotes understanding of neurological differences as a natural aspect of human diversity.

Our society usually does not accept an autistic person learning something like a martial art, but Nithya's strong focus, determination, persistence made her stand out. It depicts the idea that autism is not merely a limitation but as a way of being and interacting with the world differently. In addition, the film is a critique of exploitative nature of certain psychiatric hospitals. The asylum where Nithya was sent after her father's death, can be described a place where they prioritize profit over providing proper care for each patient according to their condition. The hospital administrators didn't treat Nithya as a person in need of care but as someone to be controlled for their financial gain. This reflects the dehumanizing nature and greed for money. So the film put forward the need of proper care for patients and demonstrates, how lack of it can ruin their lives. The effect of social stigma on Nithya's life also shows the societal attitude towards autism. Her relatives didn't value her talent and chose to institutionalize her because of her differences they weren't willing to make an effort to understand her. The movie is also a powerful reminder that despite being misunderstood, autistic people have their unique strengths. The movie doesn't completely portray Nithya's point of view but it allows the viewers to connect with and understand the real life experiences of autistic. The movie in that sense succeeded in developing an empathy for their challenges and strengths. In the movie Nithya's character presents common symptoms of autism like non-verbal communication style, sensory sensitivity and difficulty with social interactions etc this portrayal helps the audience have a thoughtful understanding of autism. The movie makes the audience think and question how the society decides what is normal or who is capable. The film creates an inclusive space where the audience not just see but become participants who can empathize with the autistic individuals. The movie encourages a shift in mindset moving from exclusion to inclusion, from judgment

to acceptance, from avoiding to empathy. The film fosters the society to let go of the traditional views and to expand the views about autism. The representation of autistic individuals in film can eliminate the stigma and create a better future for them. Athiran conveys that autism itself is not what limits people, but it is the society's structure and refusal to accept differences that create barriers for autistic individuals. By developing a society that values empathy and understanding, we can create a world where everyone can have the opportunity to live a meaningful life.

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