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## Beyond blaming the victim

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We need to revise received and uncritical constructions of the “mentally ill” as a “deficient” or “inferior” other.



**Authentic portrayal: A scene from “Provoked”.**

BY considering mental illness analogous to physical illness, we ignore the socio-cultural roots of psychological problems and hold the patient responsible for his condition. The mental patient is then “treated” by chemo- or psycho-therapies where he/she is “made to change” rather than the circumstances surrounding him/her. Rather than existing “within the individual”, it is his/ her reaction to or negotiation with his/ her life condition. Further, behind this uncritical construction of “mentally ill” lies mental health professionals’ and laypersons’ tendency to create a “serviceable other” and “deficient other” respectively so that we gain a sense of being superior to, mentally stronger or more civilised than the “other”.

### A vicious cycle

Inadvertently or otherwise, “blaming the victim” and our spontaneous but divisive ways of relating to a “deviant” or “mentally ill” person constructs a vicious cycle. Popular fiction and cinema have played a role in strengthening this vicious cycle, by supporting the creation of a “deficient other”. Nearly every movie created in the history of the industry somehow shows the triumph of good over evil. We have a hero only because we have a villain. The glory of the hero implicitly lies in the contrast with the villainy of his opposite. But who is to decide who is a true hero in life? For any allegiance to a fixed value system would constitute the very definition of bias itself. Perhaps it would be much better to portray life as it exists and not take a didactic view to it.

“The Lord of the Rings” is a good example. At the very outset we know that Frodo has to

win, Sauron cannot. Another parallel example would be “Ben-Hur”. Mesala can never win; Ben-Hur is the hero who has to preserve his position as the protagonist. We are nowhere trying to suggest that these are not classic movies but these tend to over-emphasise what we “want” to see rather than what actually happens.

### Capacity to empathise

This issue keeps haunting many of us because such a didactic view about “normal” and “deficient” and our value-judgment about them may restrict us to listen, to empathize with sufferers in real life. For example, let us look at Sylvia Plath’s poem, “The Tulips”:

*Stubbornly hanging on to my name and address.  
They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations.  
Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley  
I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books  
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.  
I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.  
I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted  
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.  
How free it is, you have no idea how free —  
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,  
And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.  
It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them  
Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet.  
The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.*

A tragic yearning for a non-existent absolute in these lines. Plath suffered from what Freud would call an “Electra Complex”, developed due to a fixation at the phallic stage. She vacillates between existence and obliteration but the very nature of her choice is based on the assumption that the value of life is defined by the perception of those around us. Relations are like burdens, lead sinkers around the neck. Why? People all around just feel that that an electra complex is something “bad”. No one tries to empathise with Plath herself. Her existence becomes intertwined with the existence of a shadow of her natural self which is nothing but a puppet in the hands of people around. Here lies the basic flaw in our didactic view and value-judgment associated with it. We live for our own sake, for a cause that we define. Why should our existence be defined by something so foreign?

Movies can also act as a force against stigmatising people suffering from psychological “problems”. “Patch Adams” and “Provoked” are good examples.

In “Patch Adams” (which is based on a true story), the protagonist (Hunter “Patch” Adams) gets himself admitted into the psychiatry ward of a hospital. But, to his surprise, he finds that mental patients can be creative. He finds that like “normal” people, they also have authentic feelings for others. Most importantly, he realises that the mental patients’ abnormal behaviour is a manifestation of their struggle for emotional space which has been thwarted by prevailing social norms. For example, a “mentally ill” character called Arthur Mendelson always complains that people do not “look beyond the obvious”. During one conversation, he tells the protagonist, “See what no one else sees. See what everyone chooses not to see... out of fear, conformity or laziness. See the whole world anew each day!” His protest is against people’s uncritical way of adhering to the traditional and accepted ways of understanding truth and justice. The protagonist could find a genuine human being in Arthur rather than just an individual with a set of symptoms of a psychological disorder.

### Fruitful approach

Another important theme that catches a sensitive viewer's attention is that the protagonist actually demonstrates that the doctor-patient hierarchical relationship (which is much more pronounced in a psychiatry ward) may serve the purpose of the doctor by giving him/ her a feeling of "superiority and power" but a more humane and collaborative approach actually does wonders to the quality of life of the patients. Rudy, a patient suffering from paranoia, has delusions of squirrels. Whenever Rudy shouts out of fear of being attacked by squirrels, he is given an injection by two authoritative hospital staff. The injection has its impact for some time during which he gradually becomes quiet but not before having a delusion that he was bitten by a squirrel (a distorted perception of physical pain due to injection). On the contrary, Patch plays an illusory game to provide a sense of companionship to Rudy. With illusory guns and bazooka, he pretends to kill all the squirrels which 'existed' in the room for Rudy. Patch cannot treat his symptoms but he can provide Rudy a positive self-belief by empathising and relating with him as a compassionate human being.

### Refreshingly different

The recent movie, "Provoked", not only represents gender issues and authenticity of trial processes but it has an important message for society where people generally do not think twice before blaming a depressed or a "mentally ill" person for being responsible for illness. The movie reveals that the protagonist's (Kiranjit) depressed state (due to being a victim of domestic violence) is recognised by the court of law in U.K. When justice finally comes to her, it is important to note that she is not blamed for being either clinically depressed or killing her husband because she was rightly found to be provoked by the circumstances. Indeed, movies such as "Patch Adams" and "Provoked" are worth-appreciating for their efforts to spread the message of looking for a human being rather than an "evil other" or a "deficient other" in a person diagnosed as "mentally ill".

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