

Discussion Questions – UNBROKEN GLASS, directed by Dinesh D Sabu

This film is the directorial debut of a young film-maker. His approach to the material seems pretty raw, and I'm hypothesizing that though the editing is very deliberate (i.e. not raw in this regard) there was not much in the way of outside production values dictating either the content or the portrayal. This is definitely a film by, not just about, persons living with mental health challenges. That said, what is the style of presentation of mental illness in this film? What might be some of the ethical purposes served well or not so well by this style? Do we need more films like this one infusing popular culture? If so, why and for what purposes?

Dinesh really works to help the viewing audience to enter into the characters featured in the film—"to walk in their shoes," so to speak. This is to say, Dinesh has produced a film in which he seems to have convincingly entered into all the characters of this film to make each one convincing, sensible, and attractive in their own right to the viewing audience. How is this helpful for understanding all the intersecting factors that contribute to the mental health of those featured in the film?

Schizophrenia has been described sometimes as a "family illness." How does this film give insights into how we might understand this claim?

What sorts of care did the Sabu family need? Were some of their needs for care ones that aren't able to be addressed through state and institutional organizations? Clinical care and state-funded social care as made available to persons affected by schizophrenia is only really made available to them as individuals, not as families? —Is this true? If so, is this a technical limitation or are there other kinds of limitations that make this so? Are there models for the delivery of care for persons with mental health challenges that are more geared to families?

This film is very focussed on family, and conspicuously absent from these children's stories of dealing with the death of their father (Dwarka), living with their mother (Susheela) who herself lived with schizophrenia, and then dealing with her death—conspicuously absent is any mention of interventions or support from outside the family. Why might this be? Dinesh, the film-maker, doesn't even mention it as a defeated expectation. What does this tell us?

As 'newcomers' to America from India, this family was cut off from their home country; they had family living in the USA, but none lived nearby. There is a profound sense of aloneness to the Sabu family story that is a feature documented in the literature on experiences of immigration to the USA. The children grew up as orphans on several levels. Was this an injustice? What are the structural features of their situation that should give us pause to consider the ways we organize our society, including the ways we do and do not take responsibility for one another? Reflect on the question of what could motivate us to live in a more responsive and socially responsible way that would have allowed others to provide care to the Sabu family with the kinds of care that perhaps cannot be paid for—or, at least, aren't usually paid for—or are not organized by the state?

Dinesh's sister Seema says that, "We attribute things when we don't understand." This statement is a running theme that challenges the viewer on various subjects of this film. How true is this not just within this family, but for the society around them looking in on this family?Consider what makes for an 'open' society?

The story of the Sabu family could be described as a tragedy of sorts. But should we perhaps be cautious in assigning it this sort of description? Reflect on what was bad luck and what else made this story seem 'tragic'.

What are examples of resilience in this family story across its members individually, and as the family unit as a whole?

Dinesh's brother Sandeep at one point asks him if he can take the camera and film Dinesh and put him on the spot. Sandeep then informs Dinesh with a somewhat strong tone that his film project is not intended to find his parents but really is for himself. He also warns him that doing so will excavate things that will cause others deep pain in doing so. Sandeep then excuses himself from any further involvement with the film.

Sandeep also says that the family has gone from not talking about their parents and their painful past (for 20 years) to now suddenly talking about it quite a lot and doing so on video. Are there realistic expectations for more privacy from Sandeep's perspective? Obviously it's more than just personal privacy that's to explain Sandeep's commitment to silence. Some might ask whether this is just his own decision, or does he have to consider the effects of an almost code of silence that the family has abided by for so many years and where there has been pressure to maintain this code. Take for example Dinesh's motivation to make this film. Some of what he is doing through his interview is trying to find answers for why his life went the way it did. As the youngest brother he brings expectations of his siblings that would make more sense as expectations of his parents. Is it fair for him to foist these expectations on his siblings? If not, where else can he turn to seeing as his parents are both gone? What's fair and what's healthy, and why does or does this not matter? Is it presumptuous just to ask this question? But if Dinesh needed to talk through their painful past together, might Sandeep have a good point that they don't have to do it on camera. Does the value of privacy perhaps mean something different for the brothers? Is their disagreement a real conflict or just a misunderstanding or is there a better way to understand it than these two options?

Dinesh also has an on-camera disagreement with his brother Arvind. Arvind says that he's not as committed to honesty as Dinesh. Dinesh puts forth a rejoinder, claiming he is concerned with getting at the truth. What, if anything, is the significance of this disagreement? ...At another point we see that Dinesh struggles with some pretty severe depression. Is his need for excavating the family story critical to what he feels he needs to do to survive? But what if that conflicts with Arvind's methods of coping and survival?

What are we to make of the testimonials of intimate partner violence in this film? Mr. Sabu is reported by those interviewed to have been under an incredible amount of pressure, and both a very self-controlled man while at the same time having anger issues. There is an effort to on the part of the film-maker to portray Mr. Sabu sympathetically and to understand the source of this anger as being understandable. What did you think of Mr. Sabu's reported explanations for his wife's condition of schizophrenia? (e.g. a "flaw in the self", a "spiritual issue", exposure to the "corrupting" [libertarian] influences of the new, American culture.) ...Reportedly, Mrs. Sabu would falsely accuse Mr. Sabu of having extra-marital affairs with other women, presumably a result of her paranoia/delusions—arguably stemming from her condition of living with schizophrenia. This would lead to fighting between the couple that would escalate from verbal to physical abuse. To state the obvious, families and homes tend to be very private spaces that make for conditions of profound vulnerability. What are ways to stop violence and make these spaces safer? What are some of the different levels of conflict that impinge on how we make sense of this example of intimate partner violence? What kinds of summary judgments should we avoid? In terms of systemic issues, what are measures that can be taken to prevent intimate partner violence? What is the role of law, of education, and of healthcare in terms of 'needed' social reform to deal with and prevent intimate partner violence?

Anger has been treated as an 'outlaw' emotion? Sometimes we are afraid even to think about it and acknowledge its presence either in ourselves or in persons we are intimately related to and from whom we have expectations of being loved. Anger is an emotion which creates incredible force for all who relate to persons with anger—this sometimes without the angry person's awareness of this effect. What's the difference between denying one's anger and controlling it? How does anger crowd out other emotions for not just the angered person but for those intimately tied to that person? How is this film an exercise in processing anger, and an emotion sometimes confused with anger, namely sadness? What are some of the healthy ways in which those who feel pain and anger from this film deal with these sources of emotion? And, what do we mean when we say there are "healthy" versus "unhealthy" ways of processing emotions?

Dinesh's interviews an uncle (Raju) and aunt (Sashi) from his mother's (Susheela's) side of the family. His uncle lives with schizophrenia. Aunt Sashi describes her worst experience (in life) as marrying Raju because he is a "paranoid, schizophrenic patient, and uh, they are a cheater." Sashi also claims that her husband's condition was certified by a doctor and "No doctor will ever say for a mentally sick person to get married." In her opinion it is a mistake to be married and to have children if you have schizophrenia. She obviously thinks that the family who arranged this marriage were both irresponsible and unfair to her and all her children. What do you think of this perspective?

Parents who live with schizophrenia and like all other parents face parenting challenges but some of these are (perhaps?) different owing to their illness experiences. The literature reports risks of child custody battles between spouses and sometimes between the state and the parent(s). This is a very painful and divisive issue that touches on capacities for parenting and child welfare. What are some of the ways the children featured in this film describe how they were parented and what this felt like? What are ways to support children who have one or more parents living with schizophrenia? What are ways to support parents who live with schizophrenia? What are some of the stigmas at issue here and how should we deal with these stigmas in our society?

Running through this film there is a fear repeatedly voiced by Dinesh and his relatives that schizophrenia or other serious mental health conditions are heritable ("that it's in [their] blood") and the imposition this might pose on the choice to have or not to have children, as well as what this might mean for any future related children. What are some of the hard questions to be asked here around the ethics of reproduction? What are some of the stereotypes, stigmas, prejudices, and sources of bias and unfair discrimination that need to be guarded against when answering these questions?