

“Miracle in Cell No. 7”: The Representation of Mental Illness Essay

Introduction

The fairness and depiction of mental disorder representation in movies, books, songs, and other media remain a significant concern. In a new study, the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative (2019) found that popular media still largely underrepresented and misrepresented characters with mental health issues.

Only 2% of movie and 7% of TV characters had an explicit history of mental illness, with the majority of them being adult, male, and white. Apart from that, the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative (2019) discovered a certain dehumanization and trivialization of mental illness in popular culture, which was likely to have contributed to the existing social stigma.

In the light of these trends, the 2013 Korean comedy-drama movie *Miracle in Cell No. 7* provides a refreshing perspective on the representation of mental illness. This essay argues that *Miracle in Cell No. 7* has excelled in portraying intellectual disability and its impact on a person's life but missed some important points.

Miracle in Cell No. 7: Plot Synopsis

Lee Yong-gu, the central character of the movie, suffers from an intellectual disability. Despite his limitations, he is capable of parenting his seven-year-old daughter Ye-seung. Young-gu's peaceful existence is disrupted on the day when he gets into a physical altercation with a police commissioner. The reason is laughable: the policeman has bought the last Sailor Moon backpack at the store that Lee-Yong-gu wanted to buy for his daughter.

The commissioner's daughter turns out to be more sympathetic: she takes Yong-gu to a nearby store to look for a backpack. On the way there, the girl suffers a freak accident in which she trips and injures her head. Yong-gu tries his best to resuscitate her, but the blow proves to be fatal.

A bystander that witnesses it thinks that the man is molesting the girl, not helping her. Soon Yong-gu is taken into custody and falsely accused of kidnapping, murdering, and raping the commissioner's daughter. The man's disability plays against him: he cannot defend himself, and the police take advantage of his shortcomings while ignoring all other potentially exonerating evidence.

Yong-gu's inmates are initially hostile against him because of his child murder charges. However, as the time goes by, they realize that the man is innocent and does not deserve to be in prison. The inmates attempt to help him escape the death sentence by rehearsing his court speech. In the end, nothing proves to be of any help: Yong-gu is blackmailed by the system into

confessing and executed on his daughter's birthday. Ye-seung grows up to be a successful lawyer who finds a way to prove her father's innocence.

The Analysis of Mental Illness Representation

From the plot synopsis, it becomes clear that the movie approaches the topic of mental disability with great care. Yong-gu is a likable character that has a distinct personality. Despite his day-to-day challenges, the man is a good father to his little daughter. From the very beginning, the movie shows that Yong-gu prioritizes his daughter's needs. He is saving up the little money that he has to give her a present that she really wants: a Sailor Moon backpack. The daughter is healthily attached to her father and does not seem to be disturbed by his mental status. If it had not been for the tragic accident, Yong-gu would have continued to live a relatively normal life and parent his child.

An inquisitive viewer might rightfully wonder whether in real life, mental disabilities like the one that Yong-gu has allow individuals to successfully rear children and build emotional connections with others. Another reasonable question that may arise when watching *Miracle in Cell No. 7* is whether the family life depicted in the movie is exactly what people with mental retardation experience.

Llewellyn and Hindmarsh (2015) say that there has been a long-standing concern about parents with mental disabilities. Such concerns are not completely ungrounded: according to Llewellyn and Hindmarsh (2015), families with parents with a mental retardation are more likely to live in poverty and isolation. Moreover, they often lack resources and social support to provide their children with a better life. The living situation in the *Miracle in Cell No. 7* is consistent with this description: the family is living in a rundown house, and the father is struggling to cover the most basic needs.

Despite the challenges that people with mental disabilities experience, they might still be good parents. Llewellyn and Hindmarsh (2015) that parenting abilities are not completely contingent on a person's IQ level unless it is lower than 55-65. In actuality, many other factors influence how good of a parent a mentally disabled person might be.

For instance, their emotional stability matters quite a lot, and several studies have shown that mental retardation does not necessarily mean a total inability to recognize emotions and provide support. Apparently, the father in the *Miracle in Cell No. 7* has an intellect intact enough not to give up on parenting responsibilities. Besides, he has an emotional intelligence to bond with his daughter and become friends with his inmates.

One important aspect that needs to be pointed out is the life outcomes of children growing up in families with parents with intellectual disabilities. Llewellyn and Hindmarsh (2015) show that such children are likely to have developmental delays because their intellectual pursuits do not find enough support. In the *Miracle in Cell No. 7*, such a possibility never manifests itself: Ye-seun grows up to be a talented lawyer. However, her academic and professional success could have been attributed to her adoptive family's efforts to make use of her potential.

Lastly, the *Miracle in Cell No. 7* sheds light on an often dismissed problem encountered by people with disabilities, which is abuse. Disability Justice (2017) reports that people with developmental disabilities are more likely to be abused during their lifetime, be it sexual, financial, psychological, or physical abuse. Moreover, they are likely to stay in abusive situations for longer periods and have less access to the justice system. This aspect is depicted quite well in the *Miracle in Cell No. 7*: Yong-gu falls victim to the malfunctioning criminal justice system.

Conclusion

Mental health awareness that has been on the rise in recent years has influenced popular culture and led to more portrayals of people suffering from mental illnesses. The 2013 South Korean comedy-drama *Miracle in Cell No. 7* depicts the life of a mentally disabled father whose life falls apart after a false accusation. The movie depicts mental impairment with a high degree of accuracy and provides a positive portrayal of a father who loves his daughter. The *Miracle in Cell No. 7* is also a realistic take on the legal hurdles and injustices that mentally disabled people have to experience.

References

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