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psychiatry in movies

The Boy with the Topknot: a portrayal of mental illness in the British Asian community

Henna Qureshi

The Boy with the Topknot is a British Broadcasting Corporation dramatisation of the memoir by Sathnam Sanghera. It portrays Sanghera (played by Sacha Dhawan) as a high-achieving journalist whose luxurious London lifestyle provides a stark contrast to his humble beginnings in Wolverhampton. He is the son of Sikh Indian immigrants, with an illiterate father and a mother who worked as a seamstress. His return home to tell his parents about his English girlfriend is interrupted by the revelation of his father's chronic paranoid schizophrenia. As repressed memories from his childhood emerge, it becomes clear that his distance from his family was as much psychological as it was physical.

At first glance, the use of schizophrenia seems a heavy-handed means to contrast the split mind of the father with the split life of the protagonist. However, many other splits soon become apparent. There is the split between childhood and adulthood, as highlighted by images of Sanghera as a child, critically watching over his adult self. The split between the women in his life is also clear, with his assertive girlfriend sharply contrasting with his passive mother, who said of her arranged marriage that 'in those days girls were not consulted about their marriages any more than a cow being asked which field it would like to graze in'. The social, cultural and linguistic split within immigrant families is further exemplified by Sanghera's mother speaking in Punjabi, while he replies in English. Overlying all of this is the split between a wilful ignorance of the past and a painful awareness of it. In facing each of these conflicts, Sanghera is able to move forwards cohesively, both in his mind and in his life.

This work has a varied and sensitive depiction of schizophrenia and its impact. Anupam Kher adeptly plays the father, subtly revealing his schizophrenia through social withdrawal, monotony in his speech and inexpressiveness of his face before we are made aware of his delusions. *The Boy with the Topknot* therefore manages to evade the usual stereotypes seen in film, such as the mad genius or the violent 'psycho'. It is also a powerful depiction of the experience of mental illness within the British Asian community, providing healthcare professionals with an apt reminder of the influence of social and cultural factors on mental illness.

The Boy with the Topknot directed by Lynsey Miller, UK release 2017, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Two (21:00, 13 November).

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