

FILM REVIEW

Marked by pain, bound by hope

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68 Pages (The Humsafar Trust 2007). Director: Sridhar Rangayan

68 Pages is the story of Nishit, Umrao, Kiran and Payal—all of whom belong to marginalized communities and are further marginalized by their HIV status. Their lives unfold through 68 pages of a diary maintained by Mansi (Moulli Ganguly), a counsellor at an HIV/AIDS clinic. Passionate about her work, she carries the stories of her clients' lives home and writes about them in her diary.

The movie conveys the message of optimism and hope for the HIV infected. Yet again we see the stereotypical groups affected by HIV—Nishit (Zafar Karachiwala), the typical upper class drug addict, Umrao (Uday Sonawane), a transsexual, Kiran (Joy Sengupta), a homosexual and Payal (Jayati Bhatia), a commercial sex worker. The movie sends across the message that the virus is doing rounds only among the marginalized groups and has not affected the 'common man'.

Payal's life touches the viewer—a sex worker emotionally involved with her client and a doting mother who wants to give her best to her daughter. It gives food for thought to the moral police who believe that sex workers are devoid of emotions. The portrayal of Payal's life is sensitive and insightful and brings to fore the various issues related to sex work. The dignified way in which she deals with her life after her HIV positive status is disclosed to her is heartrending.

The film subtly opposes the ban on bar dancers and upholds the right to work and earn a living with dignity. After the ban on dance bars, Umrao loses her source of livelihood. On the suggestion of her friend, she takes to dancing for truck drivers. The film, however, is not free of Bollywood influence—it stages the entire song and dance sequence by Umrao and her friend which is quite unnecessary.

Nishit musters the courage to disclose his HIV status to his partner through counselling. In a moving moment, his partner decides to stand by him and be a source of strength.

Kiran is in love with his partner and believes that love and loyalty go hand in hand. His partner's loyalty comes under scrutiny when Kiran discovers he is HIV positive.

The National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) has declared it mandatory to screen the film at all counsellor training programmes across the country. There is an assumption that the film deals with the counsellor-counselee relationship and provides a best practice model. There are several problems with the way this relationship is portrayed:

As a counsellor, Mansi does not maintain the physical distance from the client that professional ethics would demand. Nishit

breaks down in a counselling session. In an effort to reach out to him, Mansi gets up and puts a hand on his shoulder. While the principle of maintaining physical distance would apply to the same sex counselee as well, it is more so with a client of the opposite sex. Such an act can very easily create a situation of dependency in the client, who is already in a vulnerable state.

Counselling ethics demand that counsellors realize their limitations. Mansi seems unaware of her limitation to be a counsellor to her friend. She is torn between her personal role—that of a friend, and professional role—that of a counsellor. Kiran undergoes HIV testing on a regular basis. This time, Mansi looks into his report which presumably, reads positive. Swept by her emotions, she hands over the report to Kiran without any post-test counselling. This is clear violation of her role as a counsellor at an AIDS clinic.

Every morning on her way to work, Mansi passes a street cleaner. Suddenly, she stops seeing him and one day finds him on a hospital bed fighting for his life. She feels guilty for not having stopped to speak to him on the street. She feels she could have saved his life if only she had spent a few moments with him. This, again, raises questions regarding limitations of counsellors. They are not omnipotent. It seems too dramatic when she blames herself for not stopping by—there are absolutely no reasons why she should. If it has to do with the fact that his occupation exposes him to the risk then she does not seem to do anything about it in terms of awareness of the unions demand for protection, etc. Ridden with guilt, Mansi stops by the next street cleaner and invites him to her house. Counsellors participate in case conferences to share their dilemmas and work on their emotions. Clearly, she needs space to give vent to her feelings of guilt.

Mansi comes across as a counsellor who is unable to draw a line between her personal and professional life. Her life seems to be ruled by her profession. While professional counselling ethics demand that counsellors do not socialize with their clients, Mansi seems to cross the boundaries. She calls her clients home on the day she is leaving for the States for further studies.

Amidst all this professional turmoil, Mansi is fighting personal trauma of having been turned down by her partner due to her profession which involves interacting with HIV patients. Much later in the film she finally confronts her partner. This is the only scene in the entire film where she shows strength and maturity.

68 Pages raises serious questions about counselling ethics that seem to have been overlooked when declaring it a resource material for training counsellors. The relationship is romanticized to quite an extent - the film fails to establish the fact that this is a professional relationship.