

Film Review

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The Portrayal of Survival in *Helen*

Helen (Malayalam, 2019, 117 minutes) Directed by: Mathukutty Xavier. Released: Nov. 2019.

Currently, the Malayalam film industry of India is the largest of all in the entire country and has been producing masterpieces one after the other. Although Malayalam films have explored a plethora of genres, it has not experimented with the theme of survival as such. The struggle for survival is a major concern for people across the globe and the very concept of it varies from person to person; and is, thus, relative in nature. Based on true events, Mathukutty Xavier makes his directorial debut with the Malayalam survival-thriller *Helen*. The film revolves around the eponymous character, a young 25-year old woman, played by Anna Ben, who is encountered by a situation one night where only survival becomes the main concern.

Xavier's debut work meanders through the growing relationship between Helen, a nursing graduate and a part-time worker at The

Chicken Hub restaurant, Grand Center Mall in Kochi, her father Paul, an insurance agent, and her boyfriend Azhar, who somehow manages to skip every job interview making Helen annoyed about it – all these albeit in unforeseen and unwanted circumstances. The film begins with Helen speaking in the English language in order to get the grammar right for her IELTS examination, which she has been preparing for, so as to go to Canada and earn sufficiently as a professional nurse, unlike in India, where they're paid too less. The next few shots of the movie set the pretext of the movie and give the audience a slice of what's about to happen – an ant is seen crawling on the different parts and furniture in Helen's house, almost as freely as a bird, until she opens the refrigerator door and it falls into an ice tray filled with water, which Helen was putting inside the freezer.

Belonging to different religions, Helen knows that her father, being a conservative Christian, will not accept Azhar too easily. As a result, she has his phone number saved as Shahina

to avoid suspicion. But she keeps rejecting his calls as he continues skipping job interviews until one day, to her surprise, he gets one in Chennai for which he would be leaving the next day itself. When they meet that night for one last time before leaving and Azhar gives her a ride on his bike to drop her home, they are stopped by the police for not wearing helmets. A drunken Azhar, unbeknownst to Helen, tells her to hop on quickly, after paying the fine, creating suspicion in the mind of the police. Consequently, Helen's father is called to the police station where the couple had already been taken to and comes to know of their relationship, which he does not approve of. As the SI police officer says that they're responsible for the girls in their city, Xavier incorporates the sound of a criminal laughing at this from inside the lockup, proving very subtly how unsafe the world has been and is for women out there.



Paul, who has always had a very affectionate relation with his motherless daughter, stops conversing with her, even after several of Helen's attempts of breaking the ice. He drops his daughter off at the mall the next morning as usual and leaves immediately without listening to what Helen had to say. Neither did he receive her call when it was time for his daily doses of medicine. Owing to the incidents of the previous night, Helen, too, did not answer Azhar's calls. That night when it was time to check out of the restaurant, two of her colleagues, who were ordered by the manager to take care of a few boxes and keep them in the freezer room, passed the duty on to Helen. Unbeknownst to Helen, the manager, who was busy on a phone call, locked the door of the freezer room annoyingly, thinking that the two irresponsible young boys had forgotten to close it.

Here begins the story of anger, regret, compassion, love and - last but the most important one – of survival. Helen soon realizes that she has been locked inside the freezer room at a temperature of -18 degrees centigrade. This situation faced by Helen kept reminding me of certain Canadian poems that talk of surviving the harsh cold climate in ways that are known only to the indigenous people of that country. With reference to this context, Mathukutty had admitted that there were various cases abroad where he had heard about stories where employees were stuck in freezer rooms for 5-6 hours, exactly what he wanted the main thread of this film to be.

Helen tries all sorts of ways to find help and get out of that room - she searches for her cell phone to contact her colleagues, which she had left outside while carrying the boxes, starts banging a trolley against the metal door to break it down and even beats a steel tray against the same door to make passers-by, if any, aware of her presence – but to no avail. At this point, Helen realizes that she must survive in this room all alone. She covers herself with whatever cloth she had in her bag and cellophane that was available in abundance in the room. Looking at all the boxes around her, she tears the cardboard off them to keep away the gush of wind from the two exhaust fans. But the force of the wind generated by them pushes the cardboard away that makes her fall from the stool she was standing on and topples over a metal shelf, which ends up falling hard on her right ankle, dislocating it. As a nursing graduate, she places her leg in a firm position between two cardboard rolls before relocating her own ankle.

Soon, she finds a companion for herself – a rat that had entered the freezer room the previous day. Though scared at first, Helen gradually grows protective of & empathetic towards the rat and provides it with the warmth that she needed for herself. Survival is a tricky situation where one might have to sacrifice even what is truly dear to oneself. Here, too, a simi-

lar thing takes place. Giving up on her dreams, Helen starts tearing off pages from her book on IELTS and lights it up with her father's lighter to make the place a little warmer. All she has in mind at this moment is that she must survive the immense cold; may be even the thought of going to Canada for a better paying nursing job did not occur to her in that particular situation.



It is always said that regret is an emotion that is always felt stronger than any other. This was what Paul was feeling when it was past midnight and his daughter had not returned home yet. Along with his trusted neighbour, Raghav, Paul goes to the police station to file an FIR, but they are made to go from one place to the other. From there, they even arrive at Azhar's place for any possible information. Paul starts blaming himself for this incident & says to himself that if he had spoken to her, when she was afraid to even face him, she might not have gone missing.

The emotions of regret and anger at oneself start seeping in and the characters of Paul and Azhar start growing closer when Azhar comes back to Kochi and joins them in their investigation; even after being accused of making her run away or selling her to someone else by both the SI police officer Ratheesh Kumar and Paul. During events, Paul starts trusting Azhar while Ratheesh Kumar chooses not to forward the tower location of Helen's cellphone even after being reprimanded by his senior. The location is then forwarded very tactfully to his senior by constable Sudevan when the same criminal, who had laughed at Kumar's comment on women's safety, creates a commotion inside the lockup to divert the SI officer's attention.

According to Charles Darwin, survival is only for the fittest. Thus, even after making a canopy with cardboard boxes to provide warmth both for herself and the little rat, the latter dies in the severe cold leaving Helen all alone yet again in her journey of surviving this physical turmoil. In the meantime, Azhar finds out from the two colleagues that she had gone to the freezer room to keep a few boxes. By this time, the security guard of the mall, whom Helen used to smile at each and every day, informs Paul that she might not have left the place. As all of them barge into the mall, they find Helen lying on the ground – senseless or probably, succumbing to the situation, lifeless. In a matter of seconds, she utters “Pappa” and is immediately rushed to the hospital during the last stage of hypothermia.



At the hospital, the security guard meets Paul, who asks him how he was so sure that she might not have left the mall. To this, the man replies that as he's been working for thirty years, he has seen hundreds of people going in and coming out, but Helen was the only one who has always smiled and waved at him without missing to do so even for a single time. And in these times when people have become less compassionate, it is easier to remember those who are. Lastly, when he asks his daughter's name, Paul proudly answers,

“Helen”.

The titular role has been played by Anna Ben who had made her debut in the Malayalam film industry with the very famous ‘Kumbalangi Nights’. And now she has performed in this excellently made film, which is a very rare genre in this industry, which is what led Mathukutty Xavier to make this film with the

SI Ratheesh Kumar, the security guard of the mall and constable Sudevan, respectively. Last but not the least, the soundtracks of the film by Shaan Rahman continuously reflects the theme of the story by talking of a butterfly covered in snow constantly trying to fly away.

Outstanding performances by everyone and precise direction are what has made this quite



producer Vineeth Sreenivasan under the banners of Habit of Life and Big Bang Entertainments. Lal, who played her father, knits very carefully an affectionate relationship with his onscreen daughter. Paired opposite Anna Ben is Noble Babu Thomas, who perfectly complements with the character of Helen and Paul. Rony David, Aju Varghese, Jayaraj and Adinadu Sasi have created lasting impressions long after the end of the film with their portrayals of the manager of The Chicken Hub,

unknown film a must-watch. It took a lot of time to find out this gem of a movie but now everyone can be made aware of it as it is easily available on Amazon Prime Video. In conclusion, it can be said that Mathukutty Xavier has perfectly portrayed a story of survival that wrenches the heart with its emotional upheavals. It is guaranteed that *Helen*, if not in the film industry, will definitely remain etched in the memory of its audience.

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