



The Representation of Grandiose and vulnerable narcissism in the film adaptation of Dorian Gray and Iravin Nizhal (Shadow of Night)

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Abstract: This research paper aims to promote some interdisciplinary debate in examining how the subtypes of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism coalesce in the portrayal of the protagonists chosen for the study. Employing a qualitative and descriptive methodology, this scholarly article attempts to critically analyse the protagonists of the film adaptation of Oscar Wilde's only novella, The Picture of Dorian Gray. Dorian, as captured on the silver screen in "Dorian Gray" (2009), directed by Oliver Parker and Nandhu, the heartless financier and protagonist of Shadow of Night-Iravin Nizhal (2022), directed by R. Parthiban, is instantiated as the embodiment of the two spectrums of narcissism, namely grandiose in the former and vulnerable in the latter. The scholar attempts to disseminate some aesthetic and critical appreciation of narcissism, examining how it has ruined the main characters' lives, thus calling for immediate attention to mental health issues and awareness of the malignantly spreading diseases like cancer.

Keywords: Grandiose Narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, Qualitative research, Dorian Gray, Iravin Nizha, mental health.

Introduction

Oscar Wilde, the distinguished Irish author, undoubtedly emerges as one of the most flamboyant and charismatic literary personalities who captivated the literary sphere with his ground-breaking and innovative creative brilliance. He gained notoriety primarily due to his sole novella, namely *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which made its debut in the revered pages of Lippincott's Magazine in the year 1890. However, the publication of this literary work encountered a rather lukewarm reception, thereby causing a stir among the accustomed readership, as it presented them with explicit and provocative homosexual elements intertwined with narcissistic undertones. Consequently, in order to cater to the sensibilities and preferences of the readers, the novella had to undergo not just one, but two instances of censorship and modification. Despite the controversies and challenges faced, this book has remarkably managed to captivate and enthrall the minds of readers from all walks of life, transcending geographical boundaries and inspiring countless individuals, both readers and authors alike, across the globe. In fact, it has even served as a profound source of inspiration for creative endeavours in various artistic domains, including but not limited to opera, music, literature, and last but not least, the realm of filmmaking.

Oliver Parker, an accomplished English actor and filmmaker, has garnered significant recognition and acclaim for his notable performances in renowned productions such as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Othello*, and *Johnny English*

Reborn (2011). However, it is his directorial contributions that truly highlight his artistic prowess and expertise, particularly in relation to the works of the esteemed Oscar Wilde. Indeed, Parker has successfully helmed the directorial duties for not just one, but three films that draw inspiration from the literary genius of Wilde. These films include *An Ideal Husband* (1999), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2002), and *Dorian Gray* (2009). By skilfully translating Wilde's writings onto the silver screen, Parker has effectively captured the essence and allure of Wilde's narratives, thereby solidifying his own reputation as a talented filmmaker and a worthy custodian of Wilde's literary legacy.

Radhakrishnan Parthiban, an accomplished and multifaceted individual within the realm of Tamil cinema, has firmly established himself as a revered actor and director in the industry. With an impressive filmography that spans over 70 feature films, including 13 productions that he himself has produced, and an additional 15 films that he has directed, Parthiban's creative contributions are truly commendable and worthy of admiration. Among his extensive body of work, two films stand out as particularly noteworthy and critically acclaimed, namely *Pudhiya Paadhai* (1989) and *Housefull* (1999). In fact, the latter film even attained the prestigious National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Tamil, further solidifying Parthiban's reputation as a skilled director. His outstanding contributions to the Tamil film industry were recognized and celebrated when he was honoured with the Special Jury National Award in the year 2019. This well-deserved accolade serves as a testament to Parthiban's exceptional creativity and his significant contributions to the world of Tamil cinema, particularly through his remarkable directorial venture, *Otha Seruppu Size 7*.

The researcher firmly states that the thematic conceptualisation of the construct, narcissism, and its

subtypes, grandiose and vulnerable, fit the prescription of the *definition* and symptoms proposed in DSM—(*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*), which is primarily regarded as the veritable source and the bible of psychiatry by clinicians, psychologists around the world. The author attempts to explain how the two main characters in the films, Dorian and Nandu, are perfect examples of both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism by employing qualitative and descriptive research methodology.

Definition and Symptomatology of Grandiose and Vulnerable Narcissism

Narcissism, one of the prevailing concerns in contemporary society, has garnered much attention. Its origins can be traced back to the mythological tale of Narcissus, who tragically perished due to his unrequited love and excessive self-admiration. The pioneering work of Havelock Ellis (1927), an English Physician sexologist, contributed to the exploration of this mythological concept. Subsequently, renowned psychologists like Sigmund Freud, Kernberg, and Kohut expanded upon this construct. As a result, Narcissistic Personality Disorder was included in the third edition of the DSM III for the first time in 1980, along with the incorporation of grandiose and vulnerable characteristics within the abnormal narcissistic factors in both the DSM-III and DSM-IIIR (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR) defines a narcissistic personality disorder as a persistent pattern of inner experiences and behaviours that deviate significantly from cultural expectations, are pervasive and inflexible, have an onset in adolescence or early adulthood, remain stable over time, and lead to distress or impairment (APA, 2000, p. 685).

The fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2000, 2013) maintains the core features of narcissism, such as superiority and a lack of empathy, while moderating their haughty and compulsive sexual tendencies. According to the alternative model presented in the DSM-5, NPD is characterized by a substantial or severe disruption in interpersonal behaviour, which frequently gives rise to concerns in four domains: personality, self-control, empathy, and emotional intimacy. Within the realm of social psychology, grandiose narcissism, as one of the phenotypes of the narcissistic subtype, is defined as possessing traits including excessive self-importance, hostility, and dominance (Miller et al., 2012b, p. 284). Pincus and Roche (2011) describe grandiose narcissism as exhibiting intense needs for validation and admiration, resulting in an urgent drive to seek self-enhancement experiences (p. 32). Recent research by Cain, Pincus, and Ansell (2008) has provided an extensive list of keywords associated with grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. These keywords encompass characteristics such as exploitative, phallic, explicit, egocentric, clueless, attention-seeking, and sociopathic (e.g., craving, contact-shunning, thin-skinned, hyper-vigilant, shy). Prudishness, relational domination, self-absorption, lack of compassion, and deceitfulness are typical attributes of grandiose narcissism. Furthermore, a recent study on grandiose narcissism suggests that identifying individuals with this subtype may pose a challenge, as they often excel in various fields such as entrepreneurship, management, and corporate leadership, or garner substantial popularity and a dedicated following. These individuals exhibit a strong drive to succeed in order to validate their own greatness. Initially, the traits of the narcissist may appear charming or desirable to others, but this perception is often short-lived (Patterson, 2021).

Similarly, vulnerable narcissism is described by social psychologists as a form of defensive and insecure grandiosity that serves to mask deep-seated feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, and negative affect (Miller et al., 2012b, p. 284). Pincus and Roche (2011) further elaborate on this concept by highlighting the presence of a socially reclusive mode of self-regulation characterized by an elevated sensitivity to ego-threat, which subsequently leads to dysregulation in terms of the self, emotions, and behaviour (p. 32). These clinical experts assert that vulnerable narcissists exhibit an intricate web of emotions and behaviours that are rooted in their underlying insecurities. Moreover, Travers (2022) delves into the fragile reality of vulnerable narcissists by suggesting that their heightened sensitivity is often coupled with a lack of awareness regarding the impact they have on the emotional state of those around them. Additionally, individuals with vulnerable narcissism tend to possess a strong inclination towards introversion and frequently grapple with feelings of anxiety and guilt. Furthermore, these individuals often experience a profound sense of hopelessness in relation to their own self-worth, leading them to seek validation and affirmation from others. Notably, vulnerable narcissists also manifest depressive-like symptoms, including withdrawal, rejection anxiety, and a diminished sense of self-worth. Given their heightened sensitivity and emotional volatility, it is not uncommon for vulnerable narcissists to exhibit outbursts of violence or anger, often resorting to blaming others when faced with adversities or setbacks in their lives.

Plot and Background to *Dorian Gray* (2009) and *Iravin Nizhal* (2022)

The film adaptation of Wilde's novel, "Dorian Gray," directed by Oliver Parker and written by Toby Finlay, made its debut in the United Kingdom on September 9, 2009. This 112-minute film falls under the genres of mystery, melodrama, and thriller, with Ben Barnes portraying the titular character, Dorian Gray, Colin Firth depicting Henry Wotton, and Ben Chaplin embodying Basil Hallward. The narrative commences with Dorian Gray, the protagonist, committing the act of murder against his friend and painter, Basil Hallward, and subsequently disposing of the evidence. The narrator presents the audience with a backstory that occurred one year prior, in which the orphaned, aristocratic, young, and innocent Dorian sought refuge in his grandfather's home, Lord Kelso. During this visit, he encounters Basil and Lord Henry Wotton, leading to Basil painting Dorian's portrait and Henry Wotton tempting Dorian into making a pact with the devil in exchange for eternal beauty. Dorian then descends into a life of hedonistic pleasure under the guise of aestheticism. The audience is also introduced to Dorian's romantic involvement with Sibyl Vane, an aspiring actress, and her subsequent rejection by Dorian. The plot continues to unfold as Basil plans to visit Dorian at his ancestral home, intending to offer his condolences and support. However, upon witnessing the grotesque alterations in the portrait, Basil confirms the rumours surrounding Dorian's immoral exploits. Dorian responds with a shocking act of violence, resulting in Basil's murder. The film vividly portrays Dorian's descent into drug use, promiscuity, and deceit as he attempts to fill the void within him. Additionally, the premature death of Jim (James Vane), Dorian's sole adversary, occurs due to a mistaken hunting accident. The adaptation also introduces Miss

Wotton, Dorian's new love interest and the stepdaughter of Henry Wotton, who symbolizes hope and redemption for Dorian. Unlike the original book, the film presents an altered ending. Henry Wotton discovers Basil's bloodstained scarf and the disfigured portrait, leading him to recall Dorian's Faustian bargain for eternal youth. He then burns the portrait, trapping Dorian in the attic. During their confrontation, Henry's face is burned. Dorian undergoes a transformation, becoming a monstrous creature and destroying the portrait to eliminate any evidence of his depraved soul.

The movie Iravin Nizhal (Shadow of Night) commences with Nandu, a cinematic producer, being fully aware of the impending arrest by the police, thus he decides to flee while clutching a revolver with the intention of shooting Paramaanandha, a deceitful, self-proclaimed godman who happens to be one of several cohorts responsible for orchestrating Nandu's current perilous predicament. The audience is then exposed to the heartrending tale of Nandu, a young boy who transforms into a financier, born into the life of a prostitute and subjected to a sordid, mercilessly agonizing existence. The intricate details of his life, fraught with adventure and constant movement, are revealed as he recalls the individuals who have propelled him into the foreboding darkness, desperately seeking solace. Our protagonist shares his countless transgressions along with a glimmer of hope, embodied by his daughter, which still faintly flickers within him as he eagerly awaits the moment to avenge himself against his adversary at the dilapidated ashram. The storytelling technique employed in this film is non-linear, taking the audience on a tumultuous roller coaster ride through the trajectory of a childhood marred by sexual abuse, including the horrifying act of sodomy inflicted upon him by a policeman for a mere rupee, leading to a life of failed romantic relationships and the overwhelming grief of witnessing his

pregnant wife immolate herself to death. Additionally, the audience is exposed to his transformation into a bloodthirsty murderer, burying alive the unwed companion of the fraudulent godman and her unborn child. Ultimately, Nandu evolves into a penitent soul, yearning for love and validation for the sake of his daughter. It is eventually revealed that Nandu's mother engaged in an adulterous affair with their landlord, which ultimately resulted in his birth. Driven by jealousy and anger, Nandu's father murders his wife. From the age of 10 until his escape, Nandu is raised by his neighbours. Seeking refuge, he is taken in by a transgender woman who, after being violated by a police officer, employs him to sell marijuana. At the age of 18, he falls in love with a girl who initially reciprocates his feelings but ultimately betrays him in pursuit of financial gain, devastating his heart. Subsequently, Nandu develops affection for Chilakkamma, a devoted young woman who reciprocates his feelings. With the assistance of a trader, they marry and establish a modest shop. Encouraged by the trader, Nandu ventures into the hawala business but is forced to abandon it when he becomes embroiled in legal troubles and is unable to pay the loan sharks who relentlessly torment his wife, ultimately driving her to take her own life. Seeking sanctuary, he finds solace in the ashram of the fraudulent godman but swiftly loses faith upon discovering the true motives behind his actions. In an attempt to acquire the godman's wealth, Prema Kumari, a devoted follower who served as his concubine, betrays Nandu and secures his imprisonment. Upon learning of this treachery, Nandu engages in an affair with Prema Kumari, resulting in her pregnancy. Desiring a share of the unborn child, Nandu resorts to murder when she refuses his request. The haunting cries of the unborn foetus then torment Nandu, solidifying his reputation as a moneylender.

Critical Appreciation of the Film Adaption of *Dorian Gray* (2009) and *Iravin Nizha* (2022)

It becomes abundantly clear upon observing the film adaptations of both *Dorian Gray* (2009) and *Iravin Nizhal* (2022) that there exists a strong and undeniable connection between the two feature films in terms of the depiction of the challenging life journey experienced by the main characters, Dorian in the former and Nandu in the latter. This journey spans from their controversial birth to the haunting suicides that mark the end of their stories. A thorough thematic analysis of both *Dorian Gray* (2009) and *Iravin Nizhal* (2022) reveals the fact that both films effectively illustrate how individuals who are born into psychologically debilitating environments, devoid of proper parental care and guidance, often develop maladaptive personalities in their adulthood. This aligns with Kohut's proposal that parental neglect or the absence of "empathetic attunement" leads to the formation of narcissism and narcissistic behaviors (Kohut, 2018). It becomes apparent that both Dorian and Nandhu have experienced a troubled childhood and, as a result, have been deprived of a psychologically nurturing environment that could have facilitated the development and preservation of their sense of self. According to Kohut's bipolar model (2018), the cultivation of a "healthy self" necessitates adequate mirroring and idealizing experiences. Mirroring is a developmental phase wherein a child's innate feelings of omnipotence or grandiosity are accurately reflected and reciprocated by a "selfobject," typically the mother. On the other hand, idealizing is another crucial developmental element through which a child seeks psychological union with an "omniscient self-object," usually the father. The disruption of the bipolar structure can lead to the development of narcissistic pathology (Mann, 2015). The films under scrutiny

convey the idea that both Dorian and Nandhu were deprived of the essential parental support necessary for healthy development. In Dorian's case, the loss of a father (as a result of a duel arranged by his grandfather, Lord Kelso) and the premature death of his prostitute mother deprived him of the fundamental care and guidance he needed from his parents. Similarly, Nandu also suffered from the absence of proper parental care due to the death of his mother. As a result, both characters experienced a disruption in the formation of a cohesive self, which manifested in their overall disposition as individuals with narcissistic personality disorder.

However, it can be observed from the diagnostic symptoms that both Dorian and Nandu demonstrate distinct phenotypes of narcissism, with Dorian embodying the grandiose form while Nandu exhibits the vulnerable form. In the case of Dorian, his charismatic nature as a prince charming and extroverted individual, coupled with his relentless pursuit of perfect love and beauty (as evidenced by his ill-fated Faustian pact to maintain eternal beauty at the expense of his soul), his notable lack of empathy (as seen in his rejection of Sibyl Vane), his excessive passion for dominance and subsequent manipulation (including engaging in numerous sexual affairs, engaging in homosexual acts with his physician friend Campbell, and manipulating him to serve his selfish desires, as well as disposing of Basil's corpse), and his tendency to shift blame onto others (such as Basil, Sibyl Vane, and Hendry Wotton, among others, for his own moral degradation) all align perfectly with the prescribed attributes and traits of a grandiose narcissist. Furthermore, Dorian's irrevocable involvement in sexual perversions and substance abuse, as well as his ultimate act of suicide by stabbing the disfigured portrait in an attempt to destroy any remaining evidence of his debauched lifestyle (symbolically representing his own

soul), and his status as a wealthy aristocrat all further solidify his classification as a grandiose narcissist.

On the contrary, Nandu, the protagonist of Iravin Nizhal, exemplifies the traits of a vulnerable narcissist, thus fitting the criteria for Vulnerable Narcissism. Nandu's deep-rooted sense of insecurity and inadequacy (as evidenced by his belief as a child that his own birth was the cause of his mother's death), his incapacity to effectively communicate with his love interests, and his notable inability to comprehend the emotional impact he has on those around him (such as his lover abandoning him for a wealthier suitor and his wife Chilakkamma tragically ending her own life due to the mental anguish inflicted upon her by Nandu's fanaticism) all align with the characteristic traits of a vulnerable narcissist. Additionally, Nandu experiences intense feelings of guilt, depression, and shame following his murder of Prema Kumari, his temporary love interest at the ashram, where he callously buried both the pregnant mother and her unborn child alive. These emotional struggles, coupled with his insomnia and anxiety related to rejection (as evidenced by his incessant wailing akin to that of a wounded child), culminate in his ultimate act of self-destruction by shooting himself when his daughter Arputha and second wife abandon him, fully aware that his selfish ambitions as a ruthless money lender have led to the demise of an entire family. Furthermore, Nandu exhibits addictive behaviors towards money and alcohol, which serve as clear symptoms of entitlement. Above all, the protagonist displays a tendency to attribute blame to others and to resort to violent outbursts when faced with adversity. This vulnerable narcissistic trait is particularly evident in Nandu's inclination to blame the false godman Paramanandha for all his misfortunes and grievances, even expressing a desire to kill him. Thus, when considering the aforementioned characteristics and behaviors,

it becomes evident that Nandu undeniably conforms to the established criteria of a vulnerable narcissist.

Conclusion

Thus, the examination of the film adaptation of Dorian Gray (2009), directed by both Oliver Parker and Iravin Nizhal (20022), as observed by R. Parthiban, establishes a profound and interconnected relationship centred around the theme of narcissism in a broad sense, with a specific focus on the portrayal of the clinical subtypes of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. The meticulous scrutiny of this cinematic work in the context of narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder further accentuates the essential role played by parents in the upbringing of their children, highlighting the significance of empathy and the creation of a psychologically sound environment that is indispensable for the healthy development of every child. By delving into the experiences of the main characters, namely Dorian and Nandu, it becomes self-evident that the mental well-being of both children and individuals holds utmost importance within any given society, as it serves as the foundation for cultivating well-adjusted and responsible future members of society, fostering optimism, and safeguarding the intricate cobweb of meaningful connections within our social fabric.

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