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Chachu: The Wounded Soul in *Kishkindha Kaandam*

Anjali A

Department of English,
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham,
Amritapuri, India.

&

Dr. Gopika Raja

Department of English,
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham,
Amritapuri, India.

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Abstract:

The movie “Kishkindha Kaandam”, released in 2024, unveils the mystery behind the missing military pistol of Appu Pillai and disappearance of his grandson, Chachu. The Malayalam mystery movie is directed by Dinjith Ayyathan and scripted by Bahul Ramesh. The film is produced by Goodwill Entertainments. Asif Ali, Vijayaraghavan, and Aparna Balamurali are cast in the lead roles. The narrative starts with Appu Pillai boldly confronting the consequences of his professional negligence. There is no sudden revelation in the movie, and the mystery is gradually unlocked. The movie revolves around Appu Pillai, a retired Army officer, and his family. He has dementia. Though this is not revealed at the beginning of the movie. It unfolds with the issues connected with the disappearance of Appu Pillai's pistol as well as the disappearance of Ajay's son Chachu, nearly three years ago.

Keywords: Victimization, trauma, alienation, dysfunctional family, death.

Appu Pillai is portrayed as a stubborn and dominant character. Initially, the audience assumes Appu Pillai's behavior is a reflection of his military background. However, as the

story progresses, it becomes clear that his rough and tough demeanour is a mask to hide his illness. As the truth in the movie unfolds, Aparna, Ajayan's second wife, leads the audience to the stark reality behind Chachu's missing. Chachu, son of Ajayan, and Praveena, is portrayed as a hyperactive and disobedient child. No child is born rebellious; but instead, they become so under the influence of their social environment. In the case of Chachu, his family atmosphere makes him defiant as he grows up. Chachu is not an unusual child, but when the whole family neglects him, he is left alone, retreating into a world of his own.

When Chachu's mother, Pravina, is diagnosed with cancer, his father, Ajayan, prioritizes her and Chachu is left with his grandfather, Appu Pillai, who keeps an emotional distance due to his harsh military demeanour. The lack of parental attention during his most vulnerable moments, combined with the cold atmosphere created by Appu Pillai adds to Chachu's sense of social isolation. As a single child, Chachu receives all the love and attention from his family. This flow of love continues until news of Pravina's terminal illness hits the family hard. At barely ten years old, Chachu cannot fully grasp the gravity of what's unfolding around him. In addition to this, Appu Pillai's unsettling nature only intensifies the turmoil within the family.

The social isolation experienced by Chachu compels him explore his own private space within the house. Appu Pillai finds faults with Chachu in whatever he does. Moreover, he scolds and punishes him cruelly in a manner inappropriate for his age. Ajayan and Pravina never enquire whether he feels comfortable with Appu Pillai. He is a strict and dominant grandfather, is unable to accept Chachu's innocence and childish behavior. Thus, in the eyes of Appu Pillai, Chachu is a naughty and disobedient child.

Chachu's alienation deepens as Ajayan and Pravina get busy with their frequent hospital visits. As a child, Chachu even missed his birthday celebration because no one was at home at

that day. In his loneliness and social exclusion, Chachu wanders through the house and comes across the military pistol. Driven by childlike curiosity, he takes the rifle outside and fires a shot. Unfortunately, the bullet strikes a wild monkey, killing it instantly. Appu Pillai rushes to the courtyard hearing the gunshot. On seeing this, Appu Pillai loses his calm and beats him severely contributing to the trauma and apprehension confronted by Chachu.

Childhood trauma reflects the memory of those experiences during one's childhood that cause long-lasting emotional, psychological, and physical distress. Such traumatic events can lead to neglect, abuse, fear, instability, and isolation. These experiences often overwhelm a child's ability to cope, leading to long-term effects on their mental and emotional well-being, potentially influencing their relationships and ways of living. Appu Pillai embodies a character who is torn between the rigid military demeanour of his professional life and the frailties of his declining years. He also bears the burden of the intriguing secrets that are too heavy for a person to endure. Aparna lifts a heavy veil that Appu Pillai had convincingly put for years intending to mask the stark realities of his cryptic existence. Instances of verbal abuse include verbal assault, threats, and humiliation that damage a child's self-esteem and emotional health. In the case of Chachu, he frequently endures verbal assaults from Appu Pillai. Appu Pillai often remarks, " Oh! They can leave him here and go anywhere, right? Why even have kids if you can't take care of them? (1:27:51) He is unable to shoulder the responsibility of caring the child and repeatedly tags Chachu as a disobedient child. This throws the child into an identity crisis that continues to haunt the child throughout his life.

The next assault is neglect- failing to provide a child's basic physical and emotional needs such as food, shelter, and affection. In Chachu's case, although he receives adequate food and shelter but as a child, he needs more affection. He lacks the necessary caring from his parents. He is just a child unable to comprehend the serious incidents unfolding around him. When his parents neglect him, it is Appu Pillai who should assume greater responsibility for

Chachu's care. Instead of showing care, he regards Chachu as a burden. Chachu starts to feel alienated. At the time Chachu was not particularly close to Appu Pillai, but circumstances compelled him to stay with his grandfather, Appu Pillai. The tough time with Appu Pillai and the negligence of his parents make his situation all the more pathetic.

The film begins three years after Chachu's disappearance. Even though he is absent, his presence felt throughout the movie. At the beginning of the film, a mystery prevails behind the missing of Chachu. The entire narrative revolves around the missing Chachu. His disappearance affects the lives of all the other characters. The scattered toys throughout the house symbolises his lingering, unseen presence. When Ajayan meets his nephew on a video call, his eyes become wet thinking of his own son's lost childhood. The tears remind us of the depth of the loss.

The Generation gap is a prominent factor that shows the estranged relationship between Appu Pillai and Chachu. Appu Pillai is not a person who easily adapts to Chachu. Appu Pillai strictly follows his military discipline and imposes the same on everyone. He does not care or consider Chachu's age, and what he is going through. Instead of attending to the needs of Chachu in the absence of his parents, Appu Pillai asserts his dominance over him. This is evident in the following scene (1.27.13).

(Gunshot sound.....sound of birds flying away)

Chachu: Mumma

Appu Pillai: I will show you today

Chachu: Mumma

Appu Pillai: I'll whack you

Chachu: Grandpa!

Appu Pillai: I'll peel your skin off

Chachu: Grandpa!

Appu Pillai: I will show you who I am

Chachu: Please don't beat me

Appu Pillai: Move this way

: I will show you--

Sumadathan: Stop it! Please stop it!

Appu Pillai: If we keep giving him a pass just because he's a kid, this brat will burn the house in the future!

: Look at the way he stares!

Sumadathan: Hey, hey!

Isn't he just a child?

Appu Pillai: Yeah, right! Just a child!

: He took this gun out from my locked box

So, this imp knows how to steal, right?

And he took the cartridge that was stored away, disabled the trigger lock, and fired!

Now, can we really call him a child?

: If any mishap happens with this gun, I'm the one who's answerable!

During the conversation with Sumadathan, Appu Pillai lets loose his frustration. He says, "If Chachu's parents are unable to take care of him, send him to a boarding school" (1.28.00). Appu Pillai considers Chachu as a storm in a teacup. To Appu Pillai Chachu is always a disobedient and unruly child. He subsequently portrays Chachu in such a manner to everyone. Ajayan reveals to Aparna about Appu Pillai's action towards Chachu, in the scene, "Ajayan: Chachu was mostly with dad. A friction has always existed due to Dad's strict military discipline." (56:00). Appu Pillai's actions are impolite and rude not only towards Chachu but also towards everyone. Ajayan stays silent in spite of being aware of all these problems.

The scene illustrates, dysfunctional family. As Ajayan recalls his memories to Aparna, he adds that Chachu was the first one in the family to note Appu Pillai's memory loss. Ajayan suggests the treatment plan to Appu Pillai, but Appu Pillai loses his temper and completely ignores Ajayan's suggestion. The scene represents a terrified Chachu who rushes to Pravina after confronting Appu Pillai's anger. Appu Pillai's ego prohibits him from acknowledging his medical issue and notifying people about the same. He is reluctant to disclose his illness, fearing public opinion.

The sudden shift in Appu Pillai's demeanour is a revelation of his illness, causing him to be unaware of his words and actions just moments later. However, for those around him, the confrontation is weird—they cannot simply forget what they have encountered. Chachu, in particular, suffers from immense mental pressure and trauma owing to the unprecedented shifts in character. As a child, Chachu lacks the emotional maturity to understand and cope with Appu Pillai's mood swings fully. Unlike an adult, who might adjust their responses accordingly, Chachu is left feels confused and afraid. This is evident in the stark contrast between Appu Pillai's vicious treatment to Chachu and his seemingly indifferent attitude as if nothing had happened. Even Sumadathan struggles to comprehend Appu Pillai's intentions. Unlike Appu Pillai, who is oblivious to his actions, Chachu carries the burden of these experiences.

Ajayan mingles with his colleagues and Praveena too has a social circle to interact. Appu Pillai is no exception-though less interactive with the outside world, he also creates a world of his own. However, Chachu's world is confined to a small circle of family members, with no mention of any external connections in the dialogues or scenes. Through the movie, it is conspicuous that he goes through emotional trauma as an outcome of Appu Pillai's rough behavior. The only instances where Chachu feels free is in the presence of Ajayan and Pravina. In their absence, he is left alone to cope with his distress, further deepening his sense of trauma. The movie manifests Ajayan as an obedient and loyal son who respects his father's decisions and wishes by keeping the news of his illness confidential. His unwavering care and support for Pravina during the worst part of her life and his timely interference in disposing of the body of Chachu further establish him as an ideal husband.

However, from Chachu's perspective, Ajayan is never the manifestation of an ideal father figure, though he makes sure Chachu is not left behind in his presence. As a father, Ajayan should have been more responsible, shielding him from the suffering and isolation he confronted at his own home. Had Ajayan fostered a better bond with Chachu, the unfortunate incident would have been avoided. A brave and candid conversation between them could have helped Chachu understand the gravity of Appu Pillai's illness, possibly leading him to act with greater awareness and responsibility. However, by protecting everyone else except Chachu, Ajayan commits an unforgivable mistake.

Ajayan's failure as a father is evident as he chooses not to ask Appu Pillai anything about Chachu's absence. This decision adds to the series of mistakes Ajayan commits adding to his image as a failed father. Thus, his tears are not just the reflection of the emotional turmoil but instead of his deep-rooted regret as an unpromising father. To Appu Pillai, Ajayan was the manifestation of a perfect son, but to Chachu, Ajayan was just a failed father figure. Chachu is the bona fide victim in *Kishkindha Kaandam*. It was unintentional but not convincing enough.

He suffers beyond his age to an extent where his death creates a sense of unending mystery. He is portrayed as a random lost child. The conversation between the police officers reveals the mystery surrounding Chachu's existence. The Police Constable remarks:

Police Constable: "Even before that, he had gone busy from school a couple of times. The kid just takes off on his own! Both times, his family and the school authorities managed to find him at night."

Sudheer: "Where was he then?"

Police Constable: "The kid was making up stories like it was a movie. Yet the story he told had no connection to where he was found". When he went missing for the third time, or rather than the last time, upon hearing that everyone thought, "The crazy boy has taken off yet again."

While everyone sympathizes with Appu Pillaii, nobody cares about the existence of Chachu. In another instance (1.03.58), Police Constable: "It's been a couple of years since the boy's mother died. She was frequently sick and often in the hospital. I guess the boy got frustrated since no one was giving him enough attention." Everybody considered Chachu as a mischievous boy, even the people in the open. He was just a child, who did not know anything about the medical conditions of his grandfather as well as his mother.

The adverse experiences of Chachu imply his miserable co-existence with Appu Pillaii. The conditions and limitations set by Appu Pillaii never permit Chachu to live the life of his wish. Nobody realizes the volcano of emotions burning inside Chachu. This challenges the idealistic notions of parenthood and family relationships. Chachu's victimization serves as a testimony to the ultimate breakdown within the family. Despite living in a closed surrounding, no one understands his sense of alienation and emotional turmoil. Chachu's death becomes insignificant and his sacrifice is streamlined into a mere missing case ultimately questioning the very essence of his existence.

When Chachu is criticized by those around him, neither Ajayan nor any of the family members tries to dispute the statements. By not interfering with this, they are indirectly accepting the rumours. The character Aparna is portrayed more in an empathetic way. The film additionally captured the urge of Aparna to find Chachu. She has a significant role in the disclosing of the mystery behind Chachu's missing. She attempts a lot of hazardous circumstances to reveal the actual reason for his doubt. Chachu's emotions and struggles were not as evident as the other character's emotional turmoil. When everyone considers Appu Pillai, Aparna is the only one who tried to understand the situation of Chachu due to her unawareness to his death. Her each question towards Ajayan was pointing on the emotional rollercoaster, Chachu faced in that house. She earths the hatred of Appu Pillai and Ajayan due to her investigation, which even lead her to search the room of Appu Pillai. After the revelation of Chachu's death, Aparna is helpless. She has to enter into the whirlpool continued by Ajayan to unwind the mystery behind Chachu's disappearance.

The subsequent actions taken by his parents and the effects of Appu Pillai's memory loss represent Chachu as a victim of circumstances beyond his control. Chachu's death is not a spontaneous incident, rather it was the result of a series of terrible incidents connected to the family's handling of the missing pistol and its consequences. After shooting the monkey, again the pistol in the hand of Chachu showcases that, which was not adequately accounted for or secured. The falling out of Chachu leads the family into severe emotional circumstances. The character Ajayan's regret and guilt echo around the family. They are realising his absence only after his death.

The character Chachu, in the movie *Kishkindha Kaandam* serves as an indelible mark of the dangers that ignorance and unresolved issues can pose. He can be considered as the representation of unfulfilled dreams and innocent aspirations of childhood. The wings of his dreams are slashed there. Chachu's victimhood is further illustrated by the family's fabrication

that "he went missing" to shield themselves from reality; rather than being remembered and honoured for who he was, he is subjected to a legacy of lies.

The house's location in Kallepathi near a dense forest symbolizes the psychological and emotional isolation of the family. The seclusion reflects their struggles with hidden secrets and trauma. Chachu's victimization is aggravated by the physical distance from the rest of the world, pointing out how the family's secrets remain buried, much like the forest conceals what lies within. The vulnerabilities of Chachu being a child can transfer into the broader context of nature's unpredictability. His playing with the pistol is linked to the monkey holding the pistol. It becomes a metaphor for how innocence can be endangered by both familial negligence and the wild forces surrounding them.

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