

The Struggles and Ironies of Life: Insights from the TV Show ‘Here and Now’

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Plot

The story of the show starts off with introducing Bayer-Boatwrights, a multiracial family of Portland, Oregon, in the USA. The family has 6 members; a white couple and their four grown-up children, three of whom are adopted from Liberia, Vietnam and Columbia. Though all the members of the family have their own psychological worries that are an important part of their character build ups but the one detail that the show decides to build the story around is the mental illness of one of their children.

The couple's adopted son, a young gaming development student of 23 years of age, dreams, hallucinates and has visions about the number 11:11. The psychiatrist who starts treating him, a Muslim, who has his own past shadowing his life, finds out that he has some kind of mental connection with his new patient. The family of the psychiatrist also forms an integral part of the show where his wife and gender fluid son are practicing Muslims while he denies and runs away from religion.

Weaving around this plot line, the show tries to touch upon many issues that a person may have in today's day and age through the characters of varying age groups, pasts and struggles. Some of the major issues depicted are racial, sexual and religious discrimination, impacts of a traumatic childhood on a person's life, being adopted in a diverse family, high-school struggles, familial relationships in general and several more. A well-off, well-educated family, caring for each other but still having a slight bitterness in the relationship with somebody or the other, is a

realistic one where nothing is black or white. It shows how these relationships actually are. Their lives might seem perfect as they portray it but everyone has their complexes, issues or baggage of their past. They live their lives constantly dealing with these worries, sometimes applying harmful coping strategies, that lead them to even more stress.

This review tries to discuss some of the major mental health concerns raised in this show and at some points, to relate them with Indian contexts. Some important themes, concerns, and issues highlighted in the show are discussed below.

Mental illness

The younger son of the family, Ramon, starts dreaming and hallucinating about some unusual events. He lives alone, is scared and reacts terrifyingly to these visions in public. The family in this show is a progressive one where everyone is very much aware of and sensitive about mental illnesses. The illness is not labelled in the show and is seen differently by different people. The mother, Mrs. Bayer, demands quick results with the use of heavy medications but the psychiatrist wants to understand the 'mystery' of this condition as he considers Ramon to be connected with him on a spiritual level.

In Indian context, considering most of the population is uneducated with religion being a dominant force that leads people's lives, people run to religious places to seek answers to their questions. People would never agree on it being a medical condition. Those who are educated or who have experienced such cases earlier in their family consider taking the suffering person to a medical expert but still keep visiting their religious Gurus.

Ramon feels frightened and confused, as any usual mentally ill person would feel in the beginning but later starts believing that he has a 'porous' mind and nature wants to communicate with him through these visions. Such an interpretation comes quick in Indian contexts. For example, there may be persons claiming to foresee the future or calling the mental illnesses of women as possession by some goddesses.

Routine work of such people remains affected but they are convinced that the phenomena is something related to the supernatural powers. Ramon takes weed to feel secured from these terrifying visions and stops working on his video game which was earlier used by him as an escape from his stressful condition. He unintentionally hurts a small child physically because of his hallucinations that turn his own family members against him. Though the mystery behind the relation of this character and his psychiatrist is never revealed but his illness is portrayed as being some indication of a disastrous event.

Concerns of adopted children

Children who are adopted face problems in their new family where the degree of the problems largely depends upon the age at which they are adopted. The more the age at which the child is adopted, the more experiences, negative or positive, and memories they take with them as baggage of the past. Displacement from one place to another and being surrounded by different people altogether is a challenge for them. Children and parents both are counselled before the actual adoption to prepare them for the same. Lack of adaptation sometimes makes the children face rejection from the new family which leave them scarred for life.³

The problem of adjustment to the environment would be more for a child belonging to a different race as is shown in the show. Creation of a multiracial family requires immense sensitivity. Parents have a pressure on them to give the adopted child a secure environment. Despite their sensitivity, the couple faces criticism from their black daughter, Ashley, of 'not letting her belong' to their group of whites. She didn't even feel that her parents would understand her concerns of being discriminated against in the world. There are comments in the show about this multiracial family being an unsuccessful 'experiment'. Apparently, Ashley was never okay with this type of family. She always had a feeling of alienation. She complains of being reminded of her being black by her mother during all her growing years.

Discrimination

Discrimination is a one of the main themes of this show. Racial, religious and sexual discrimination with different characters make them all live in constant fear. Ashley faces such

behavior by the police when she is suspected to be a thief because she possesses an expensive purse. Her daughter gets called "poopy" by a classmate. Ashley starts taking self-defence classes, considers keeping herself armed and for the first time in her life starts hanging out with black people where she seeks security.

Dr. Farid, the psychiatrist, is a Muslim and does not want his family members to look like one because the world is unsafe for them. His son, Navid identifies himself as gender-fluid. His parents accept it but are not in favor of revealing this to the world. Cases of hate crimes are happening in schools continuously. While Navid is comfortable, Farid tries to hide his diverse identity.

Both Ashley and Farid have a deep desire to belong and not to be treated differently and Navid is attacked when he shows the people what he actually is. India being diverse in many more ways sees such cases of discrimination every day. A feeling of alienation in their own land compels people to either live in constant fear or lead a life of the society's choice. Cases of mob lynching recently, our strange behavior towards transgendered people or anybody else who doesn't fit in the binary of gender and cases of assault of North-Eastern people of India because they look like 'Chinese'. These are all examples of discriminatory cases that impact the normal lives of such people and a sense of being alone. It can even produce a feeling of inferiority if diversity is not accepted as normal by themselves.

Kristen, the biological daughter of the lead couple in the show, is accepting of diversity because she has been born and brought up in a diverse family. But she still does not realize her privilege of being a part of the 'normal' group. Despite the education, our privilege is unknown to us and we don't realize how we are pushing the diverse people out at the periphery.

Traumatic childhood

A traumatic childhood haunts a person for their whole life. They get nightmares and flashbacks if they see something similar happening or if they are reminded of that age when they had a bad experience. Such people may struggle hiding these experiences their whole life, and try escaping and avoiding it by substance abuse. These incidents are sometimes so damaging that they fear having children of their own or they

might end up hurting their own children in a similar way. They can suffer from low self-esteem, chronic guilt, anger and/or frustration.

In the show, Duc, was adopted from Vietnam at a tender age of 6-7 years where he had seen his biological mother working as a prostitute. He had a bad image of men in his mind who can do harsh things to women. He never gets over this trauma and thus has a distant relationship with his father all his life. He gets in an argument with him when he gets to know that his father had been hiring an Asian prostitute. He decides to remain celibate and guide his energy towards rigorous physical training. He fears a loss of control and wants to portray himself as being perfect.

Dr. Farid also had a traumatic childhood in Iran where his mother accused him of killing his father and made him injure himself. He had marks on his back that kept reminding him of these incidents. He resented his religion for the rest of his life because of it. It slowly becomes a problem of anxiety after he meets Ramon and finds out about some mysterious connection between them. It becomes even more serious mental condition later on that he again physically hurts himself in the guilt of killing his mother also just as he was made to do in his childhood.

Existential concerns

Some other concerns like the existential crisis of Mr. Boatwright, the father, who had just turned

60 and is unhappy with what all he has done in his life while being a Philosophy Professor. He remains frustrated, displays unacceptable behavior in his lectures at times and cheats on his wife with a prostitute. Kristen, a teenager, has self-image concerns and keeps trying to fit in the 'cool' group of the school. Mrs. Bayer, being the mother of a mentally ill son, feels stressed while managing both her family problems and professional upheaval. Such is the case of many Indian mothers also where they are responsible for taking care of everyone in the family and managing the stress of their job, if they have one, without approval and emotional support of even their husbands. They live an exhausted life, become selfless and have a pressure of performing as per the social standards, making them sick mentally and physically.

Conclusion

'Here and Now' is the title of a book written by Mr. Boatwright in the show. It is an idealistic book based on the philosophy of 'living in the present moment'. In my opinion, the show tries to show the irony of such an ideal that even the writer (of the book) is not able to uphold. People in the world are either stuck in the past and struggle with the memories or afraid of the future and working for it to be safe and secure. The present is full of stress, frustration, guilt and fear. We are all seeking an escape from the present in some way or the other.

Notes

The show is originally an HBO production and is available on Hotstar Premium.

<https://www.hbo.com/here-and-now>

This website has been used for its interviews to understand the characters a little better.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/its-a-long-road-to-joy-for-these-adopted-children/article30660773.ece>