



MEANING OF LIFE IS AN ART: A MISE-EN-SCENE STUDY THROUGH THE FILM

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Abstract

Life is a gift that becomes worthwhile when we give meaning to it. It may be a goal like career, love or family. We question our very existence most of the time, as to why we are here, what is the purpose of our lives? What meaning do we attribute to living in this world? It is quite unique and different to every individual. The paper aims to portray the meaning of life portrayed in the Malayalam film *Charlie* through the study of its mis-en-scene elements. The tendency to live an ignorant and lethargic life is higher in people when they face a crisis in their life. Life is taken for granted that people end it with no qualms. This film brings out the zest to live, it talks of seizing the moment and leave the audience on a positive note. This positivity and meaning of life are studied through the visual and narrative methodology citing instances.

Keywords: *Charlie*, mise-en-scene, meaning of life, positivity.

Introduction

Films portray the society that we live in which is conveyed to the audience through mise-en-scene elements that include costumes used, the décor in the frames and action sequences. Film leaves us with an idea to ponder upon and is an impactful visual media content. The film *Charlie* revolves around mainly two protagonists Charlie played by Dulquer Salman and Tessa played by Parvathy Thiruvoth and one of the major characters named Kani played by Aparna Gopinath. The film takes us through the journey of each of these characters who have a different perspective about their purpose of life.

The paper takes mise-en-scene kit as a kit for analysis of meaning of life. The term mise-en-scene is of French origin meaning putting on stage. The elements focused on include décor, acting, lighting and costume that effectively conveys the plot and idea of a theatre production or film. Using this kit, we can study how in the film, the journey

taken by each character is in search of a goal. The movie begins with a carefree character of Tessa coming home for an engagement function and later runs away as she has no intentions to marry and settle down.

She gets a room that is quite a mess to stay in and is annoyed at the state of it. But seeing the artsy nature she begins to look through the things and is fascinated through the sketches and use of odd and random materials used to decorate the room. The story begins as she comes across a book with a sketched story of the previous occupant of the room. Out of sheer curiosity she begins to ask around and find out about this man always referred to as a 'gin' and never revealing his true name. The curiosity grows to something more as she meets different people from the sketches in the room and hear their past experiences, which were one-time mostly, with this person. This plot is her journey in search of this man as well as parallel journey of Charlie and other minor characters.

The research paper aims to study the meaning of life through the Malayalam film *Charlie* which engages the viewers in a non-linear narrative portraying the journey of various characters. This paper looks at the theme of curiosity that drives one to fulfil a purpose in their journey along with how the personalities of characters are built to the viewers. The paper aims to look into the transition of scenes that is used to trace their journey. The film gives us a concrete plot on the meaning of life to be optimistic and zestful and gives us a positivity after watching the same.

The meaning of life involves the hope and urge to live with positivity which is studied through the mise-en-scene in the characters of the film *Charlie*. Each of the characters are in search of something that would satisfy their lives' purpose. Meaning of life can be studied in novels, short films and written about in articles, however, this film brings out a very different and positive outlook to bringing joy not just to oneself but to those around you. The analysis would be dealing with each of these character's thought and idea of meaning of life.

The methodology used in my study is qualitative with Visual and narrative approach, as the primary text is a film that is in a non-linear sequence. The scenes and the transition of the scenes play a role in conveying the idea of meaning of life to the viewers. Articles that substantiate the paper gives the idea that we are influenced by our own definitions of our purpose in life as well as of others that we meet. Curiosity, personality and lived experiences add to the understanding of what we live for.

Analysis- Charlie

Charlie is the protagonist of the film who does not identify himself until the end of the movie and is referred to as a 'Gin' throughout the movie who is always on the go. We see that he is introduced through a photograph in the room that Tessa rents to stay in. We see the dressing style of Charlie to be loose patterned kurtas, Patialas and multicolored scarves. He wears beaded bracelets, mismatched patterns of clothing which are not combined and is introduced to us as an artist.

This style of dressing is called Boho-Chic style which is a combination of Bohemian hippie style that evolved from the 19th century (Rehab, 2015). This kind of dressing does not restrict movement and were used by creative artists and Bohemians rejected private materialism and centers on creativity. Similarly, we see Charlie to not claim ownership on any material things. He leaves his room and things in it as he believes those things belong to the new occupant of the room and he does not need them to move on.

This shows the openness and free mindset of the character, it reflects the non-rigid nature he holds towards life and is open to varied perspectives to see that no matter what happens he will move forward with complete enthusiasm and enjoy his journey. However, the character maybe also seen to be too carefree with no particular aim to living. But this thought can be negated through the analysis of his actions throughout the movie which is dealt with further.

This kind of thought is reflected in the setting of his room, his things in the room he stayed in gives us an idea of how he sees everything to be an art. The lights, the glass paintings, the sketches of people he met, all of it shows how he cherishes everything that comes his way. Even used bottles and glass pieces are used to make decorations in the room adding more color and life to those who stay in the room. Through this we can see how he sees life to be a form of art that can be re-drawn and seen with different perspectives as in creation of art. Every meeting or deed or art piece has a story and a purpose of its own. Finding this story and helping another to weave theirs is what keeps him on the move in life.

His character finds joy and meaning in his life when he is able to surprise people unexpectedly and make a change in their lives. It is in helping others and not being selfish that makes him feel joy. He enjoys giving little surprises to those whom he sees to be down or lack the urge to live. In the film we see how he stops Kani, a doctor, from suiciding because she lost her love and didn't think of life ahead. He later helps her realize how precious her life was to cater to the sick in the village areas and to

the old aged in a hostel that was built by Charlie and an old man named Kunjappan.

Each person, he helps has a unique story, which unfolds with elements of suspense that drives the audience, as well as Tessa to fix the pieces together and see the painted pictures of different lives while making her own story.

Similarly, an instance that shows how much he thinks that life is not a dead end until one dies and it is portrayed when he helps Kunjappan find his long-lost love who had become a nun later. Love also is an essential component that drives one to live on. It is similar to what Jesus spoke about in the gospel that if life has any overarching meaning to it then it is bound by love (Dr. Gunderman, 2018). These instances show that every person in this world has something that drives them to live, a hope that acts as a burning light to guide. Here Charlie finds meaning in giving others happiness and helping them discover their meaning of life.

Clearly, one's personality and perspective add to how meaningful life would be. Bass et al, in his study on creativity and personality, they found that people who are creative tend to look at problems in unexpected angles and resolve troubles. This character trait is seen in Charlie who gives the most different outlook to problems. When Kani tries to kill herself, he calms her down by showing her things she has never seen or experienced in nature that changes her take on her life. He says:

"Have you seen snow fall on hills? Have you seen magic mushrooms? Without seeing any of these what to do when you urgently go there? On reaching there, he will ask, have you come here seeing all that? He has made all of this for us to see and enjoy" (Film *Charlie*)

He helps her to see that life is not just about the downfalls but it can be enjoyed if we want to. It is not something to be rushed but should be taken one day at a time, experiencing its colors, blending our own hues and imagination.

We see Charlie seeing life with a child's perspective where he uses every bit that he has and can, to make life colorful and vibrant. We see him just howling and running and seeing life like how a

child would enjoy doing small, small things. It is this outlook on life that makes him help the other. It reflects in his acts throughout the movie.

Though he is not in the pursuit of love in his life he eventually makes the choice to meet Tessa opening up a chapter to his life. This brings us to understanding that some purposes are unknown to us and that every crisis in life has a beautiful ending which is what we can create for ourselves and others.

Analysis – Character of Tessa

Tessa's journey is what is central to this story as it is her run away search for her real purpose in life. She is introduced to someone whom everyone calls a 'Gin'. We see at the beginning of the movie that she runs away from home when she realizes her mother wants to get her engaged to someone she doesn't really like, when she really doesn't feel she is ready to just settle down according to her mother's wishes but seeks adventure. She leaves home in the hope to a place where she takes up classes for Cello. She wants newness and is fascinated by everything around her. She intends to absorb everything that comes her way.

Tessa also has a care free style of dressing, wearing palazzos, mismatched clothes and slippers, depicting a carefree living. She does not want things decided and done, rather she is driven to do things through curiosity. When she comes across a handmade matchbox in the room she stays at, that contains a story in the form of a sketch it arouses her curiosity to find what happened to the rest of it. She gets interested in the artist as well as in the people's sketches in the room. She is intrigued not just by art works but also by the ways people enjoy and loves to enjoy along too.

Norden in his paper talks of how suspense arouses curiosity of the viewers along with the characters involved. We see Tessa's quest and journey keeps us on tip toes to know if she will find him or when will she reach him. Her new found purpose becomes to find this man who intrigues her. Her dressing and curiosity show how she finds life to be a quest for something new, interesting and that

one must go with the flow. Suspense and unexpected aspects in life makes living much more adventurous at the same time meaningful, giving us a realization as to why we meet certain people or why certain things happen.

She gets herself a room with the help of her friend which happens to be the room occupied earlier by Charlie. The state of the room first disgusts her but soon she takes liking to all the art work around her. She is portrayed as an admirer of art works as well as someone who sketches too. She gets interested in the way he decorates a space. We see the artsy walls of the house broker and the scooter on which she takes a ride in the beginning. It's the artistic nature of the room, the things she hears from people about him that bring her to like this character even before meeting him. She sees a man who is as adventurous and free-spirited as she is.

Her journey is portrayed in a non-linear narrative style where the viewer does not lose the connections between scenes. The transition happens between past and present where characters give her an idea of their encounter with Charlie which is unforgettable. In spite of not being in a linear form the film still conveys its theme and plot well. The idea of narrative transportation (Cohen, 2015) is seen to be prominent in the shots which may create chaos in usual scenarios but in this film these transportations help us to understand the characters, their motive for the journey and why is finding someone so interesting to Tessa.

Her journey and her reasons to go in search of Charlie increases after the meeting of every character he has influenced leading her to fall in love with him, holding the nonlinear form of narrative very crucial for the viewers. We see her going to any extent to meet this man which has been exciting her and at the end we see a satisfied journey coming to an end only to begin a new one together as they travel with a new purpose in life. The meaning of life changes in every phase is what we infer from Tessa's journey- from learning Chellos, finding the rest of a story, finding the artist, falling in love with someone she hasn't met to their new journey as a couple.

The meaning of life to her was not to get married and stop aspiring her desires. From the analysis we could conclude that her urge to live was to find the one she would love, to have an adventurous journey than a normal routine of conforming to the family norms and commands. She meets him at the famous festival called "Thrissur pooram", an annual temple festival celebrated in Kerala. The place they meet at is a magic show where he emerges out of an empty screen and makes eye contact with her. This scene has the setting of color, celebration, magic and groove.

She tries to fool him by saying she is not Tessa but Shruthi, bringing a look of doubt on Charlie's intuitions. However, a picture they take on a polaroid camera shows her wearing the same clothes as on the night she ran away from the wedding and took a lift on the artsy scooter. This is the moment she is able to piece together her story, where she had actually begun her journey sitting behind this man's scooter. A sense of completeness is seen on her face in the last scenes of the film as she completes a part of her story with colorful strokes.

Analysis- Character of Kani

Kani is one of the major characters who play a major role in helping Charlie and Tessa meet at the end. She plays the role of a young doctor who lives in the hostel for old aged, serving the local hospital there.

We see her attempting a suicide because she had to break up from a serious relationship, being depressed she accidentally kills a child during surgery that makes her want to end her life. But Charlie unexpectedly sees this and stops her from doing so. If we were to analyze the character of Kani in terms of her thought and perspectives through her costume and action, we see in her past she wears normal clothing expected of a doctor. She is very depressed when she is taken to the hostel by Charlie and nothing brings her to smile. "Importance of experiencing meaning in life to maintain high levels of well-being when confronted with a chronic illness" (Dezutter, 2013). We see her get out of her depressed state when Charlie helps her experience

life in the nature around, meeting the people in the hostel and taking in the positivity while breathing.

Later on, we see how he pushes her into water playfully where she struggles first and then swims ashore. She is then shown to wear a vibrant color kurta with a shawl, something similar to what Charlie wears showing a change of perspective to life. It depicted a fall that can take your life, but you fight back and add what you can to come out it, in this case she starts to swim.

The struggle to live when she fell into water along with Charlie behaving very calmly and asking her to just breathe and see the beauty it has, makes her want to live. She realizes that though there are shortcomings and troubles, it is each individual who chooses how to draw out a path that satisfies oneself. We make our lives into art by creating and giving meaning to it, one day at a time.

A study by Miller and Rottinghaus showed that "The relationship between a student's degree of career indecision and anxiety is not significantly different among levels of search for meaning in life. Although the search for meaning was significantly correlated with the other variables, the relationship of career indecision and anxiety did not differ based on the degree of search for meaning." In the case of Kani there is a character transformation from finding meaning in her career to being of service to the needy and being a medium to bring together two people.

She finds her purpose of life in learning about herself and being an aid to others, being concerned and enjoying small acts of love in the hostel. She shows concern to Tessa which is what brings Charlie to meet her after the long quest. When he refuses in the beginning to meet Tessa, that is when Kunjappan asks him that if his love had known about his search for her from someone, they would have united. Kani looks at Charlie at this dialogue meaning to say that it is not too late to meet Tessa, because he is lucky, he knew of such a person before he ran out of time. We see that Charlie was hesitant to act but is persuaded by Kani who believes that delayed action in life may lead one to regret later. Meaning of life doesn't always have to be the same for all as we see Kani's meaning in life

became service and uniting two people unlike the other two characters.

Her character voices out the fact that we all have a fate but changing it is up to us through our decisions. If it is too late to say or do something then you may not find what you wanted.

Conclusion

This paper investigates the three characters in the film *Charlie*- Tessa, Kani and Charlie to study their perspectives on life and its purpose. The paper infers the ideas that to live we seek a purpose and that is different for everyone. The hope for something, an urge that drives us ahead leading to fulfilment of dreams and a satisfied mind. This meaning makes life similar to a piece of artwork that is painted carefully over a long period of time.

We find the characters meaning to be giving joy to others by re-drawing their world and perspectives, to find love, to discover their true desire in life and service to others as key findings. Meaning of life when considered void leads to an end of life itself. A search and a positive outlook to the purpose of life gives us hope.

The paper does not deal with the element of curiosity in detail or the journey of other minor characters. The journey of character's like Kunjappan, Mary and their life are not taken for the study and was confined to the prominent three characters. The paper does not deal with the meaning and representation of songs and other themes in the film. The idea of curiosity and journey can be taken up for further study along with the analysis of the songs in the film.

Meaning of life is like colors of joy, sorrow pain, madness or curiosity that coherently makes us live. The paper hence gives an idea of the meaning of life to be varied to every individual but the meaning is derived from a driving force. This urge helps you make life creative and artful as in the study of the film *Charlie*.

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