

Movie Review

The Orphan

Sana Shaikh¹, Meghna Basu Thakur²

^{1,2}Department of Psychology, R.D. National College, Bandra, Mumbai.
E-mail – meghnabasuthakur@yahoo.com

Orphan is a 2009 American psychological horror movie directed by Jaume Collet-Serra from a screenplay by David Leslie Johnson. The film stars Vera Farmiga, Peter Sarsgaard, and Isabelle Fuhrman in leading roles. It was produced by Joel Silver and Susan Downey of Dark Castle Entertainment, and Leonardo DiCaprio and Jennifer Davisson Killoran of Appian Way Productions. It was released theatrically in the United States on July 24, 2009. The film received mixed critical reviews, although Fuhrman's performance as Esther was acclaimed.

The plot centers on a couple, Kate and John Coleman, who are experiencing difficulties in their married life after the death of their unborn child and Kate's battle with alcoholism. In the opening scene of the movie Kate can be seen taking anti-depressants which show how adversely the death of her 3rd child has affected her. To overcome these predicaments, the couple decides to adopt a 9-year-old girl Russian girl named Esther from a local orphanage. When they bring her home, their deaf and mute daughter named Max embraces Esther immediately however, their son Daniel is less welcoming.

Esther appears to be a sweet, innocent girl of her age with a peculiar taste in fashion. However, things appear to happen around her which led to Kate being suspicious of Esther's past. She says things which are not usually expected from a 9-year-old, and engages in deviant behavior such as pushing a girl who bullied her at school from a slide and having a temper tantrum in school. She later murders Sister Abigail from the orphanage when she tries to warn Kate that the last family who had adopted Esther died in arson. This can be considered as a rising action in the movie as it sets in motion the chain of events.

Daniel comes to know of Esther's crime and decides to expose her guilt. However, he is subsequently overpowered by her. Esther then tries to murder Daniel three times in the following scenes but does not succeed in any of those attempts. Kate realizes Esther's intentions, but she is restrained and sedated by the hospital staff. Also, Esther breaks her arm in order to frame Kate as an abusive parent.

In the following night, Esther dresses provocatively in an attempt to seduce a drunken John. He rejects her advances and threatens to send her back to the orphanage. This enrages Esther, and she destroys her room in a fit of anger. She then takes off all her makeup, prosthetic dentures, bandages which she uses to cover her breasts, and the ribbons on her neck and wrists. Without all the makeup, it is revealed that Esther is not a little girl but a grown woman. Meanwhile, Kate gets a call in the hospital from Saarne Institute of Mental Health informing her that Esther is not a 9-year-old girl, but a 33-year-old woman named Leena Klammer who is a serial killer and a psychotic. She had a medical condition called hypopituitarism which stunted her growth and hence, she appears to be child-like. She has spent most of her life posing as a little girl and had people adopt her, with the goal of seducing the father and having a sexual relationship with him. The doctor also reported that Leena is extremely violent and has murdered at least seven people. She killed her last family because the father rejected her sexual advances.

Kate rushes home to prevent her family from suffering a similar fate, however, Esther had already stabbed John multiple times and was attempting to kill Max. Kate intervenes and saves Max, and a fight ensues between Kate and Esther. Kate gains the upper hand and kills Esther in a lake by breaking her neck.

Although her illness has not been specified in the movie, Esther/Leena can be considered as a classic example of antisocial personality disorder. She is highly intelligent, extremely manipulative, superficially charming when needed, and lacks remorse. She can induce emotions in others through her actions. She can be extremely sweet and loving, or she can be a deluded psychopath. Along with this, she is extremely violent, has a raging temper, as it was apparent in many of the scenes, and likes things to happen according to her way. Her modus operandi suggests that she is a thrill-seeker, and is very impulsive. Her attraction towards the “father” of the adoptive family stems from a history of child sexual abuse at the hands of her biological father who had abused her from infancy. From a Freudian perspective, Leena hasn't resolved the conflicts which arise due to the Electra complex. She yearns for a “normal” human relationship, in the only form that exists for her, a father figure. As she suffers from a medical condition called hypopituitarism, she couldn't develop into a physically grown woman. This was the reason why her biological father took a new sexual partner. This pushed her into insanity and she killed both her father and his girlfriend. She was subsequently caught and eventually placed in the Saarne Institute of Mental Health. She was Saarne's one of the most violent patients, and to restrain her staff had to keep her in a straitjacket. Leena struggled constantly to get out of the straitjacket, which caused scars on her wrists and neck, which she would later cover with ribbons.

Eventually she managed to escape, and became a prostitute for wealthy pedophiles for years. When the police caught her, she pretended to be a child to avoid jail time and was sent to the orphanage, where she found her first family of victims and later moved on to the Colemans. However, when the father of the first family rejected her sexual advances, she murdered him and his family and set fire to the house. From there, she was put in another orphanage and eventually, she was adopted by the Colemans.

Although she was not overly religious, she was a believer of Christianity and carried a Bible with her wherever she went in which she kept pictures of her male victims. Her refusal to go to a dentist in the movie stems from the fact that she wears prosthetic dentures. Repeatedly lying, manipulating and having sheer control over Max, numerous murders supports the theory that LeenaKlammer/Esther suffered from antisocial personality disorder. It can also be possible that hypopituitarism could have triggered some symptoms in Leena. The underdeveloped pituitary gland may have caused the reckless behavior. However, no significant relationship has been found between hypopituitarism and behaviour in existing researches.

For intervention and treatment, cognitive behaviour therapy along with neuroleptics would be the appropriate aid for Leena/Esther. However, practically speaking, her personality is too far impaired for therapy.

Acknowledgements – Nil.

Source of Funding – Nil

Conflict of Interest – Nil