

Battle of beliefs

HARSHAL RUIKAR

Final year MPH student, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, VN Purav Marg, Deonar, Mumbai 400 088 INDIA, email: harshal.ruikar@gmail.com

***The Exorcism of Emily Rose*. Producers: Screen Gems and Lakeshore Entertainment, 2005. Director: Scott Derrickson. English, 119 minutes, 2005.**

The battle of religious beliefs is one of the oldest and bloodiest in human history. Some believe that our lives are controlled by the gods, angels, demons and spirits of varying benevolence; others follow an evidence-based scientific path. *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* attempts to question our deep-rooted beliefs about faith and our perception of reality.

In essence, this is a true story based on a courtroom drama where medical science spars with religious beliefs. Father Moore (Tom Wilkinson), a Catholic priest, is on trial for the negligent homicide of a 19-year-old, Emily Rose (Jennifer Carpenter). Emily, who thinks that she is possessed by six demons, entrusts her life to the devoted hands of Father Moore. The irony is that Moore is later prosecuted by a faithful Methodist while being defended by an ardent agnostic. The story attempts to present an unbiased understanding of these polar philosophies and the viewers are left to choose their sides. Emily's story is told during the trial through graphic flashbacks, a tape, and a letter.

The film is loosely based on the true story of a 'possessed' girl, Anneliese Michel of Klingenberg, West Germany. In the 1970s, Michel was believed by her devout parents to be suffering from multiple demonic infestations. When she started having seizures and exhibiting compulsions to publicly urinate and self-mutilate, the Roman Catholic Church permitted her parish priest to perform the ritual of "exorcism". Numerous orthodox exorcism rituals were performed for over 10 months, but to no avail. Finally, in July 1976, after enduring scores of brutal inflictions, Michel succumbed to malnourishment. Her parents and the priest who officiated over the exorcism were convicted of manslaughter and awarded six-month sentences in prison. Since then, Michel's grave has become a place of pilgrimage for devout Catholics. It is interesting to note that the Church later issued an official statement denying that Michel was ever possessed.

The trial as portrayed in the movie seeks to judge Father Moore's decision to advocate a spiritual, rather than a medical and evidence-based course of treatment. The prosecution (Ethan Thomas played by Cameron Scott) claims that Emily's symptoms accurately mimicked psychotic-epileptic disorder, a relatively rare type of epilepsy. Thus, by taking Emily off her

medications, Father Moore endangered her life knowingly and ultimately caused her death. The defence attorney (Erin Bruner played by Laura Linney) seeks to discredit the medical diagnosis and proposes that Father Moore's diagnosis of a spiritual disorder was, at least, a possibility. He argues that it may not necessarily be a fact, but it provides a potential and more importantly, a culturally acceptable explanation. After all, it is not the belief but the disbelief in the supernatural which is considered as anomalous. An anthropologist's testimony in this matter reveals the socio-cultural aspect of possession and argues that medical treatment is not the best answer to this state of mind, whichever term you use: possession or psychotic epilepsy.

The director explores the possibilities of this experience with balance and maturity. The well orchestrated screenplay makes this dramatic situation more vivid. Minimal use of special effects and makeup gives the film more credibility and thus succeeds in conveying its real message more effectively. This is one of a new breed of films populated by a bunch of extraordinary actors who have done justice to their characters and the values that they stand for. The courtroom drama that unfolds through the testimonies of various medical professionals and paranormal researchers raises several questions. Did the priest have any right to take Emily off her prescribed medications without understanding the medical consequences? Father Moore asks Emily her permission to perform exorcism when she is "out of the possessed state". Was Emily in the right state of mind when she entrusted her life to the Father's hands? Is a religious preacher the best judge of a person's so-called "rational" state of mind? Later, a neuro-psychiatrist ratifies that he would have subjected Emily to electroconvulsive therapy even without her consent, "for her own good". Many such thoughts on the moral and ethical implications leave their imprint on the viewer's mind.

The only thing that goes amiss is that we never really know anything about Emily's past, before the alleged possession. This makes it a bit difficult to empathise with her situation. The film also has deeper subtexts revealed at the climax, dealing with the validity of religion and the spiritual world itself, something that may terrify or fascinate viewers.

In conclusion, through this movie Scott Derrickson manages to nudge the chords of the mind and heart, a rare achievement among today's commercially oriented film-makers.