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‘When the Heart Gives Out, the Body Gives Up. Let Her Go’

A moving film on Alzheimer’s disease

“We remember them when they can no longer remember.”

This defines the basic premise of the 50-minute film *I Remember*, written, produced and directed by Delhi-based Geeta Lal Sahai. It relates how a very successful, happily married, 56-year-old wife and mother begins to lose grip on her memory, and how her devoted husband’s and daughter’s lives are devastated by her terrible mental illness.

I Remember is about Adhira Goswami and the intense mental pain she suffers as she begins to realise that, perhaps, she is losing her memory. Her family - a husband who is a financial analyst in a corporate firm, a daughter Shivani who is a research scholar, and their maid Renu - also suffers as they grapple with the changed situation in their lives and the changing equations among them.

Adhira is diagnosed as an Alzheimer’s patient and this is just the onset of the ailment, the

doctor informs her. The very successful professional woman, who holds a high-powered job in a television channel, “struggles with the gradual loss of identity and lack of control over her own life,” says Sahai.

Husband Gaurav and daughter Shivani turn into near full-time caregivers, though they too are constantly troubled by the slow and steady “fading away” of the lady who loved her home so dearly.

Her husband takes voluntary retirement from his job to be beside his wife, and for him too, the changes in his wife who is slipping away bit by bit are extremely stressful and filled with pain. Hopes, ambitions and dreams too often fade away as their lives get disrupted in the absence of adequate institutional, social and emotional support.

“Often, these issues are swept under the carpet, more so if they are concerned with mental health. We love living in denial, and acceptance only means - getting labelled,” says Sahai, echoing the mindset of all of us who are afraid to face a victim of Alzheimer’s although we know the patient is helpless.

Adhira’s symptoms begin with apparently minor things: forgetting the rough draft of her award-winning speech in the washing machine; forgetting all about the award, the award function and the fact that she has to pick up her daughter; forgetting her way to the function venue.

She comes to find it difficult to perform the simplest of things, like crossing the road, or completing the edit of a new story, till she feels totally vulnerable even to close people like her husband, daughter and housemaid.

Sahai has structured the film very well, by beginning with the father and daughter packing up before leaving the apartment, and sharing memories of Adhira who is no more.

These scenes in the present are cinematographed or colour corrected with fading shades of white, where the visuals are slightly blurred but the voices can be heard. “How many times will you keep listening to this song?” Shivani jokes, and her father tells her that he has been hearing her mother sing the same song for 35 years and has begun to like it himself.

The camera stays focused on the packing and returns to it after visiting the past, and Adhira’s slow and steady collapse of memory, until, when the film ends, her husband and

daughter have packed up their strolleys and are pulling them out the door.

Gaurav sells the house to move to Bengaluru for good, to do organic farming, and Shivani leaves for London to work on a research fellowship she had almost given up on, until Adhira's passing away made it possible.

Other symptoms of Alzheimer's shown in passing are: Adhira having panic attacks when she cannot even remember what she is looking for, or pointing to a photograph of her husband and telling her maid that this man must have stolen money from her purse, or repeating the same question over and over till Shivani gets annoyed and walks away.

"The facts are shocking," says Sahai. "Approximately 50 million in the world have Alzheimer's, 4 million in India, and most striking - 2 out of 3 people with Alzheimer's are women. It was disturbing. Meeting caregivers made me understand the pivotal role they play in supporting Alzheimer's patients live a dignified life."

As Adhira loses control even over her physical mobility and is placed on a wheelchair or lying on the sofa, her husband visits her doctor, a school friend of Adhira's, for some advice.

She suggests he join their caregiver's group, but he asks her what she would have done in his place. She offers a wise answer. "When the heart gives out, the body gives up and the mind stops. Let her go."

Adhira's passing away is never shown, and that sustains the dignity of the protagonist and does not allow the film to reduce itself to cheap melodrama. You simply watch father and daughter packing, and you know she is no longer there, and all that is left of her are memories.

When Shivani is about to step into a pair of chappals, her father says, "Not that pair," and she pulls her feet away. That pair belonged to her mother.

Alzheimer's carries a social stigma. "It is this stigma that can only be removed if we, as a society, are free to accept that talking about mental health is alright. Many of us only associate 'forgetfulness' with Alzheimer's disease; while some do understand the encompassing tragedy of this ailment, few know that in the present scenario Alzheimer's is one of the most critical public health crises across the world," says Sahai.

The editing is sometimes a bit jarring, but the brilliant performance of Gayatri Sharma as Adhira undercuts all the negatives in the film. The characters almost always speak in English, perhaps because Adhira's and Gaurav's marriage is an inter-regional one, but references to their love marriage and their poverty, before they fought together to attain material success, are a bit out of place and superfluous.

"Along with Alzheimer's patient's internal struggle, I have also tried to capture the financial pressure for families, and the untimely death of the dreams and aspirations of caregivers," says Sahai.

"I strongly believe that visual storytelling is a powerful tool to begin a conversation, a campaign. My goal is to bring visual understanding and dialogue to a disease that has been in the shadows for far too long," she sums up.

I Remember was recently screened at the Jodhpur International Film Festival. The audience loved it. It has been screened at several other festivals in India and beyond. But the family is decimated forever...