

48 years on death row, a film tells it all

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Hakamada, having been recently released after spending 48 years in prison, back to boxing.



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By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Sadly, documentaries still cry for space and attention. Despite some brilliant films being made in this genre, they often languish in cans or play just in the festival circuit. I remember some extraordinary British documentaries capturing the pain and pathos of a London under siege as the city was relentlessly bombed by Hitler’s air brigade. I also remember some hard-hitting works on India’s social ills by the distinguished Anand Patwardhan. This list can be endless. One documentary movie which recently caught my eye is called Freedom Moon, directed by a South Korean, Kim-Sung Woong.

This film is an incisive documentation of a one-time Japanese boxer, Iwao Hakamada, who was jailed for 48 years for a murder he said he had never committed. The movie traces the man’s humiliating and torturous life behind bars in a country that still has capital punishment on its statute books. Most civilised nations have abolished the death sentence, terming it medieval and barbarous. But not Japan (and not India either).

Freedom Moon also features Hakamada's sister, Hideko, who campaigned tirelessly for all these decades to see her brother walk free.

Hakamada is now free of course, but years and years of solitude with none to speak to and the terrible fear of the gallows have left him with a badly deformed mental state. Often he walks up and down his flat and is unable to express himself with clarity.

Hakamada is 82 today, and he was sentenced to death in 1966 for murdering four members of a family in Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan. He was just 32 then, and kept saying that he was innocent and pleading for retrial.

In 2014, he walked out of the jail after the Shizuoka District Court decided to reopen the case, and suspended his death sentence. This legal move came after tests revealed that the bloodstains on clothes — used as original evidence — were not Hakamada's. How cruel could this have been!

However, even though the judicial process is yet to start all over again, he is technically on the death row. But mercifully, the court felt that keeping the man in prison would be "unbearably unjust". What a late realisation — and after the man's entire life is just about over!

Kim began shooting his documentary two months after Hakamada walked out of jail and in the flat at Hamamatsu, a city in Shizuoka Prefecture. The film shows him pacing up and down the room, a habit he must have picked up during those long years of isolation. At times, he behaves like an investigator, at times like a judge or even a poet — which merely indicate the imbalanced state of his mind brought about by a fabrication and a judiciary which failed in its duty.

Some of Hakamada's jottings in his diary during his early years of punishment said: "I keep asking myself renewed questions. When will I, who have committed no crime, recover my freedom?"

Today, there is some sense of normality in Hakamada, who has now begin playing his best-loved game, Shogi (Japanese chess), with Kim, and has even gone out alone to buy his favourite sweet bread. And sometimes, he gets into the boxing ring if only to recapture his glorious sporting days.

"I expect those who watch this movie to think about why Mr. Hakamada was forced to face death for decades under the judicial system and how such circumstances have made him what he is," said Kim. The helmer is a second generation Korean who has made Japan his home — as hundreds of his countrymen have.

Earlier, Kim produced another documentary on Kazuo Ishikawa, who was sentenced to life imprisonment for killing a 16-year-old high school girl in Sayama, near Tokyo, in 1963. Ishikawa had always maintained his innocence in what is widely known as the "Sayama Case." He was released on parole in 1994 and has since been campaigning to reopen the case.

The title of the documentary, *Until the Invisible Handcuffs are Removed*, conveys the fact that Ishikawa remains a parolee, whose fight to clear his name is yet to bear fruit.

It is clear from these two Japanese documentaries that this kind of cinema can be a powerful means of conveying societal displeasure and anger over what is perceived as injustices committed by the state.

Hopefully, a campaign to popularise documentaries would start, a campaign that will ultimately take this kind of cinema to the masses.

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Miruthan

Shakti Soundar Rajan's (Naaikal Jaakirathai) *Miruthan*, probably the first zombie adventure in

Tamil, is by no means anything novel in the world of cinema. As early as 1932, Hollywood popularised Voodoo magic through this genre with a film called *White Zombie*. There were several others in the following decades like *I Walked with a Zombie*, *The Plague of the Zombies* and *Night of the Living Dead*.

Japan was even better known in creating cinema of this kind of horror, and the roots of the zombie movies in the island nation can be traced to the classic ghost stories of the Edo and Meiji periods that actually became part of the folklore there.

But there was an essential difference between American zombie works and those from Japan. The Japanese fare was invariably infused with comic elements. So, this zombie produced laughs, not quite frights.

However, for an essentially Tamil-speaking population — most of which does not have access to Hollywood cinema, let alone Japanese, Miruthan may appear like a breath of fresh air, also because Rajan has laced his film with humour (mercifully not of the stupid variety I often see in Tamil cinema) and a hint of romance.

Otherwise, the film is quite gory with hideous faces, glazed eyes and blood smears — and a storyline that irritates our imagination. An accidental radio-active spill in Uthagamadalam or Ooty leads to a dog licking it and turning fearfully dangerous, exhibiting signs of rabies (hydrophobia, etc). When the animal, with red-shot eyes, bites a man, transforming him into a cannibalistic zombie, it sets off an unprecedented chain of unimaginably gruesome events. Dozens and dozens of men turn into zombies in hours and in as far and wide as Coimbatore, where a team of doctors is trying to develop a vaccine for the disease. And they want to do it overnight!

It is into this frame that a young woman doctor (played by Lakshmi Menon) walks in, collects samples from dead zombies in Ooty and tries to reach Coimbatore at the foothills. A traffic cop, Karthick, (Jayam Ravi), also at the hill resort and who has secretly been in love with the doctor, tries to help her reach Coimbatore — but the road is invaded by blood-thirsty zombies. And Miruthan offers ample opportunities for our policeman to indulge in heroics — shooting zombies dead as if he were another Bond with a licence to kill. And Karthick never seems to run out of bullets with hundreds of them flying out of his pistol and rifle.

Replete with a dhoti-clad politician — who fancies that he has enough clout to even command zombies — a sidekick for Karthick and a selfish fiancé (of the doctor), Miruthan, like many Tamil movies, tries to pack too many sub-plots into the main narrative, till the storyline begins to look cluttered and blurred.

And, the film's trace of fear, if at all, is projected through ear-shattering sounds and sudden thrusts of ghostly zombies on to the screen. What an outdated technique!

While Menon does present an above average performance as a medical professional who values the worth of a life, even it happens to be a zombie, Ravi, in all fairness to him, has little scope other than to play a hero in the traditional sense of the term — knocking down zombies with his bare fists or pump bullets into them. He appears bereft of emotion, except when his kid sister is in danger.

Miruthan has been passed with an UA, despite the producers' demand for an U, a rating that would have given Rajan's work an exemption from tax. But come on, surely Miruthan is NOT suitable for young children.

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