

## Kumbalangi Nights as a Cultural Mirror: Resilience and Adaptation in Dysfunctional Families

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### **Abstract:**

*Kumbalangi Nights* (2019) explores resilience within a dysfunctional family, reflecting shifting societal norms in India. This paper analyses the film through Michael Rutter's resilience theory, as outlined in his article titled "Resilience Concepts and Findings: Implications for Family Therapy", which views resilience as a dynamic process shaped by risk factors, protective mechanisms, and adaptive responses. The story follows four brothers facing emotional neglect and abandonment, yet seeking connection and purpose. Rather than portraying resilience as innate, the film emphasizes its development through supportive relationships, self-agency, and emotional growth. It also challenges traditional ideas of masculinity, mental health, and family, presenting alternative models rooted in empathy and mutual care. By aligning Rutter's framework with the film's narrative, this study shows how characters adapt to adversity through redefined identities and attachments. Ultimately, *Kumbalangi Nights* illustrates resilience not only as individual recovery but also as a reflection of broader cultural transformation.

**Keywords:** Kumbalangi Nights, Resilience theory, Dysfunctional families, Cultural adaptation, Michael Rutter.

### **Introduction**

Cinema has long served as a reflective medium, capturing the ethos, struggles, and transformations of society. In the Indian context, films often oscillate between portraying idealized family dynamics and exposing the fractures within familial relationships. *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), directed by Madhu C. Narayanan, breaks away from traditional narratives by presenting a raw and intimate portrayal of dysfunctionality within a family, while simultaneously offering a message of hope and transformation. The film transcends its local setting to resonate universally, reflecting evolving cultural norms and attitudes in contemporary society. Through the lens of Michael Rutter's resilience

theory, this paper explores how *Kumbalangi Nights* examines the interplay of adversity, adaptation, and cultural shifts, positioning the narrative as a cultural mirror.

Rutter's resilience theory, as discussed in his article titled "Resilience Concepts and Findings: Implications for Family Therapy," provides a comprehensive framework to analyse how individuals and groups navigate adversity. Resilience is not perceived as a fixed trait but as a dynamic process shaped by risk factors, protective mechanisms, and adaptive strategies. *Kumbalangi Nights* offers a fertile ground to explore these concepts through its vivid portrayal of the struggles and growth of its central characters. The story revolves around four brothers living in a dilapidated home in a picturesque coastal village, grappling with abandonment, emotional turmoil, and fractured relationships. These challenges, however, do not define them; rather, they illuminate pathways of resilience and adaptation.

The film's characters embody resilience in diverse ways, from forming secure attachments to redefining traditional notions of masculinity and family. The elder brother Saji struggles with emotional instability but finds solace and meaning in acts of caregiving and seeking professional help for his mental health. The youngest, Franky, despite his tender age, assumes the role of a mediator, striving to maintain harmony within the fragmented household. Their growth is not linear but shaped by supportive relationships, personal determination, and moments of vulnerability—hallmarks of the adaptive process Rutter outlines. Beyond individual journeys, *Kumbalangi Nights* challenges entrenched cultural norms, particularly those surrounding patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity. The film's antagonist, Shammi, epitomizes toxic masculinity—a man obsessed with control, dominance, and the outward display of perfection. In stark contrast, the brothers and their unconventional relationships redefine masculinity as a space for emotional expression, care, and interdependence. This cultural shift mirrors broader societal changes, where traditional constructs of family and gender are being questioned and reimaged.

Moreover, *Kumbalangi Nights* serves as a commentary on mental health, a subject often stigmatized in Indian society. By portraying therapy and emotional vulnerability as transformative, the film normalizes seeking help and fosters a dialogue around mental well-being. This aligns with the protective mechanisms highlighted in Rutter's theory, emphasizing the role of external support systems in fostering resilience. As a cultural artifact, *Kumbalangi Nights* does more than narrate a story; it reflects the evolving dynamics of Indian society. It portrays the dismantling of rigid hierarchies and the emergence of relationships rooted in mutual respect and understanding. By integrating Rutter's resilience theory with the film's narrative, this analysis underscores how *Kumbalangi Nights* offers a profound

exploration of adaptation within dysfunctional families, presenting resilience as a collaborative and transformative process.

This paper argues that the film's power lies in its ability to juxtapose individual struggles with broader cultural shifts, offering a dual lens to understand resilience. In doing so, it transcends the boundaries of cinema, contributing valuable insights to discourses on family therapy, cultural adaptation, and the human capacity for growth amid adversity.

*Kumbalangi Nights* stars Soubin Shahir as Saji, Shane Nigam as Bobby, Sreenath Bhasi as Bonny, Mathew Thomas as Franky, Fahadh Faasil as Shammi, and Anna Ben as Baby in lead roles. The film tells the story of four brothers—Saji, Bonny, Bobby, and Franky—living in a rundown house in Kumbalangi. After their father's death and their mother's abandonment, Saji becomes the head of the family, grappling with anger issues and frequent clashes with the unemployed Bobby. Franky, the youngest, feels ashamed of Saji and Bobby but is close to Bonny, who is mute. Bobby falls for Baby, a local girl, and proposes to her. Baby asks him to seek her family's approval, leading to a tense meeting with her brother-in-law Shammi, who rejects Bobby and mocks their family's reputation. Determined, Bobby gets a job, while Bonny begins dating Nylah, an American tourist at Baby's homestay. Saji's struggles peak with a failed suicide attempt that tragically costs his friend Vijay his life. Guilt-stricken, Saji helps Vijay's wife, Sathi, deliver her baby and brings them to live with his family. Meanwhile, Shammi forces Nylah to leave the homestay, prompting Bonny to invite her to their house, strengthening their family dynamic. When Baby plans to elope with Bobby, Shammi turns abusive, imprisoning her and her family. The brothers come together to rescue them, subduing Shammi and freeing the women. Bobby and Baby marry, and the brothers, through love and shared struggles, find unity and a renewed sense of belonging.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper analyses *Kumbalangi Nights* using Michael Rutter's theory of resilience, discussed in his article titled "Resilience Concepts and Findings: Implications for Family Therapy." This is a seminal work that explores the concept of resilience, particularly in the context of psychological development and familial relationships. Resilience, as defined by Rutter, is not an innate trait but a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of individual, familial, and environmental factors. His work outlines key findings on how individuals adapt to adversity and the implications these have for family therapy. Rutter views resilience as the capacity to overcome risks and challenges while maintaining or regaining psychological well-being. It is a process that emerges from the interaction between protective factors and risk factors rather than being an inherent quality.

There are adverse conditions or experiences that increase the likelihood of negative outcomes, such as poverty, family discord, or loss. Rutter emphasizes that risk is cumulative; the more risks present, the greater the challenge to resilience. Protective factors mitigate the impact of risks and include positive relationships, supportive environments, and personal competencies such as problem-solving skills. Rutter highlights the importance of these factors in fostering resilience within individuals and families. His work underscores the importance of family as a crucial context for fostering resilience. According to him, family therapy should focus on strengthening supportive relationships, promoting communication and problem-solving skills, identifying and reducing risk factors within the family environment, and enhancing the ability of family members to adapt to challenges. Rutter's research bridges psychological theory and practical application, offering valuable insights for understanding and promoting resilience in both individuals and family systems. It emphasizes that resilience is a dynamic and multifaceted process that can be nurtured through therapeutic intervention and positive relationships.

Resilience is a term used to describe relative resistance to psychosocial risk experiences...The term refers to the phenomenon of overcoming stress or adversity...it means that there has been a relatively good outcome for someone despite their experience of situations (Rutter 119). According to Rutter, the family-wide experiences affect different individuals in the family in different ways. Resilience is strongly influenced by patterns of interpersonal relationships. Factors such as "economic disadvantage, maladaptive parent-child interaction, marital conflict, and parental separation" (Rutter 123) are responsible for uncomfortable living environments for individuals within families. One's attitude to oneself and self-confidence in one's ability to deal effectively with life challenges are major factors that decide how one copes with the challenges in his/her life. Rutter comments that the quality of one's peer group is also influential in developing resilience. Resilience involves a range of processes that bring together quite diverse mechanisms operating before, during, and after the encounter with the stress experience or adversity that is being considered, and it is necessary to appreciate how these need to operate (Rutter 135). This theoretical framework of resilience by Michael Rutter is the theoretical foundation of this study for analysing the film *Kumbalangi Nights* as a cultural narrative of resilience and adaptation in dysfunctional families.

### **Film Analysis**

The film begins from the point of view of Franky, one of the four brothers of the family, who is not interested in taking his friends to his house, which is in a poor condition. When thinking about home, he has a haunting memory of himself drowning in the river while his mother did not notice him. He reaches for his school vacations, and the first thing he does is call his mute brother Bonny to the

house, the only person with whom he is close in the house. At night, Bobby comes home and has dinner to which Franky says that it is their Father's Day of remembrance and that they should have eaten together. The first glimpse of the broken family is shown here. Bobby says that Bonny will not come as he is now with his friends, who are his new family. Saji and Bobby question each other for not going for a job, which results in a fight between the two. Franky comments that their house is nothing but hell, to which Bobby replies that he does not like their family setup and their surroundings, as he has now got admission in a well-known school. Bonny comes home, sees this fight, and leaves.

Each member of the family finds their comfort outside the family with different people. Bobby spends most of his time with his friend Prasanth, while Saji is with Vijay, a Tamil guy who has an ironing shop, on whose income Saji is thriving. Bonny finds his comfort zone in his friends, and Franky spends time playing football with his friends. Bobby falls in love with Baby, whose family he must convince. He asks Saji to talk to Shammi, Baby's brother-in-law, about the marriage proposal. When Bobby puts up this request, Saji first asks him to call him his brother, as he has never done so, and is so happy to hear his younger brother calling him brother. When the two go to meet Shammi, they are insulted in the name of their family background, unemployment, and their living conditions. Their house is said to be on an islet where people usually abandon cats and dogs. This is a comparison to their own lives, where they are living with no one else to inquire about their well-being. The road to their house is beside a yard which is called 'shit-land.' Shammi asks about Saji's work, to which he replies that he has an ironing shop in partnership, which is not true. He says that it is difficult to send their girl into a lodge-like house. He further insults them by saying that the law permits girls to marry any 'scoundrel' she loves and that the Ramayana was written by a forest dweller, and so people can change. Shammi asks Bobby to find a job first so that he may consider the marriage proposal.

Bobby feels that he should move into another house for things to work out. Saji replies warmheartedly that there is nothing wrong with their house, that they have a smoke-free kitchen and washing machine. He says Bobby can use his room if he wants to, and he does not even ask permission for it. Franky asks whether they have a toilet in their house, to which Saji replies that they have a European toilet, which is almost fully built, and asks Franky not to underestimate their family. He tells Bobby not to worry, to find a decent job, and that he is there for his brother. These are the first words of care and love spoken between the brothers. Franky again comments that theirs is the worst house in the village and that it lost its life when their mother walked out. He sees Saji as the reason for this. Hearing this, Saji slaps him. Bonny sees this and beats Saji with an oar. Saji leaves the house with a broken heart.

Saji shares his broken heart with his friend Vijay, reminiscing about how the boys were so happy to see the sunrise at the beach when they went to Kanyakumari. He still remembers Bonny's smile at that moment. He laments that Bonny has never said a word against him, and it is the same boy who has beaten him today. Saji recollects what Bobby said one day- Vijay is doing all the work, and that Saji is making use of his money. Vijay replies that it is true and that he can no longer afford to look after Saji anymore, as he and his wife are planning to move to the town as they are expecting a baby soon. On hearing this, Saji is shattered as he had considered Vijay as his own brother. He tries to end his life, but in the attempt to save him, Vijay loses his life. This pushes Saji into an abyss of guilt and depression. He visits Saji's pregnant wife, Sathi, and says that he is going along with her husband and that he can convey anything that she wants to tell him. Sathi replies that she had labour pains that morning and that it would be of great help if he could take her to the hospital. Saji rushes her to the hospital, and she delivers the baby.

Bobby starts going to work in a fish exporting company. Saji asks Franky to take him to the hospital as he has completely lost his mind and is unable to cry his heart out. The next few shots show simultaneous scenes of Saji talking to a counsellor at the hospital and Bobby talking to Baby about their family. These are the scenes where the real pain that is brimming inside their hearts is brought out in the film. Bobby compares their father to a murrel fish, which is easily caught when its offspring are around it, creating a bright orange colour. It dies because of its children, and this was the same fate as their father. He reveals that he and Franky were born when Saji's father and Bonny's mother got married, and even though Saji and Bonny are in no way related, they share a strong bond between them. Their mom entered religious service after their father died. Saji also talks to the counsellor about their father, who had a big dream of building a house, but he left them early. He says that it hurts when someone calls them fatherless. The next scene shows Saji and Bobby crying on their listeners' shoulders.

Bonny falls in love with Nayla, an American tourist who has come to Kumbalangi. He brings her home. Franky is surprised when she says that they have a beautiful house, and the film reveals that everything is a matter of perspective. When Bobby comes home after work, he sees Nayla, and is worried about his future life with Baby, as he is trying hard to lead a normal life and repair their family. It is then that he comes to know that Saji is bringing home Vijay's wife and his baby. One day, Bobby asks Saji and Bonny to move out with the women, as good families have a culture that they should safeguard, to which they do not agree. The next day, they go to meet their mother, requesting her to come and stay with them for a few days, as Bobby is planning to talk to Baby's family again. She replies

that she cannot come and that she will pray for them. When Bobby gets angry at her, Saji asks him not to curse her as she has gone through a lot for her children, she is not well, and that he and Bonny have seen her suffer.

Bobby leaves his job as it is not his cup of tea. He asks Baby to leave him and marry someone suitable for her. Hearing this, Baby is disappointed and asks him whether the concept of true love has gone out of fashion. Bobby realizes her love towards him at that moment. She asks him why he is not going fishing as he is an expert in fishing. She encourages him to do so, neglecting all the conventions of family status that keep him back. The next few scenes in the film show everyone in Saji's family having a good time together- having dinner together, looking at the photo albums, and sharing happiness, with the photographs of their father and those of Vijay in their home. Sathi plans to leave the house as her mother had cursed her when she eloped with Vijay. The curse would destroy their family, too. Bobby replies that she need not leave and that she has reached the right place, as their home is a dumping yard where all the lonely ones are left to live their lives, and that no one would ever come to torment her there. He says that she can stay with them as long as she wants, as their own sister. The film ends with Bobby and Baby getting married after a long struggle with the support of his brothers, and ends with a shot of the happy family with all the smiling faces.

Michael Rutter's resilience theory is clearly applicable in the film as each character journeys from devastation, broken relationships, and struggle into a resilient, jubilant, peaceful family life. The film becomes proof of how resilience is a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of individual, familial, and environmental factors. Family becomes a crucial context for fostering resilience in the film. It emphasizes that resilience is a dynamic and multifaceted process that can be nurtured through therapeutic intervention and positive relationships. The importance of interpersonal relationships in reviving one's life from ruins into one of peace and serenity is clearly depicted through the film.

## Conclusion

*Kumbalangi Nights* (2019) presents a raw and intimate portrayal of dysfunctionality within a family, while simultaneously offering a message of hope and transformation. The film transcends its local setting to resonate universally, reflecting evolving cultural norms and attitudes in contemporary society. Resilience is not perceived as a fixed trait but as a dynamic process shaped by risk factors, protective mechanisms, and adaptive strategies. *Kumbalangi Nights* offers a fertile ground to explore these concepts through its vivid portrayal of the struggles and growth of its central characters. The film's male characters redefine the concept of masculinity. Their growth is not linear but shaped by supportive

relationships, personal determination, and moments of vulnerability—hallmarks of the adaptive process Rutter outlines. Beyond individual journeys, the film challenges entrenched cultural norms, particularly those surrounding patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity. It portrays the dismantling of rigid hierarchies and the emergence of relationships rooted in mutual respect and understanding. By integrating Rutter's resilience theory with the film's narrative, this analysis concludes how *Kumbalangi Nights* offers a profound exploration of adaptation within dysfunctional families, presenting resilience as a collaborative and transformative process.

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