

MOVIE REVIEW: ABY

Badr Ratnakaran

Resident in Psychiatry, Dept. of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences, Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine, Roanoke, Virginia, USA

Correspondence: 2017, South Jefferson Street, Roanoke, Virginia, USA- 24014. Email: dr.badrratnakaran@gmail.com

Characters with mental or physical disabilities have been popular in cinema. Many such portrayals have been critically appreciated and have won numerous major awards. From *The Miracle Worker* (1962) to *The Theory of Everything* (2014), many of these films tell the real-life inspiring stories of people who suffer from a disability who defy all odds in fulfilling their ambitions in spite of their limitations. The movie in review in this article, *Aby* (2017), tells a similar inspirational story.

Aby is a feel-good motivational drama that tells the story of Aby (played by Vineeth Sreenivasan), set in a village in Idukki, Kerala. He lives with his mother (played by Vineetha Koshy), a housewife and his father (played by Sudheer Karamana), a life insurance agent. In the movie, when we are introduced to Aby in his childhood, we find him unique from his peers. He prefers to play by himself and does not talk or make eye contact during social interactions.

Aby would spend his day preoccupied with his fascination — A fascination with the concept of flight. He would be captivated by objects that would fly, animate or inanimate. Chasing butterflies and dragonflies in the fields and staring at birds and planes, his obsession would lead him to attempt to fly on his own from the top of trees and buildings. This would lead to accidents, though he escapes them unscathed. Eventually, his fellow villagers come to know about his obsession. Some of them become advocates for his dream to fly while others

would sneer at it. With his mother's efforts, Aby would later attend a special school for children with disabilities that would help him speak. However, his schooling gets terminated due to his mother's premature death. His father, an alcoholic, does not support any further education of Aby and he ends being a helper to the local automobile mechanic.

Growing up, Aby would display an extraordinary grasp for scientific knowledge, in spite of his lack of formal schooling. He is extremely talented in mechanics and electronics and would make innovative inventions out of scrap. He never lost his obsession of flying and dreamt of flying one day. The remainder of the movie deals with the trials and tribulations of Aby in achieving his lifelong dream. The movie also stars Dr. Siju Jawahar, a psychiatrist from central Kerala, in an important supporting role.

In the movie, Aby is depicted to display awkwardness in social interactions, singular or restricted expressions on his face, difficulties in empathizing with his peers, monotonous voice, clumsy gait, and intense preoccupation with his dream of flying. It can be argued that Aby displays features suggestive of autism spectrum (AS) disorder, especially Asperger syndrome, as per the 10th revision of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems. Early in the movie, we see a doctor who examines Aby and calls him a "special baby",

alluding to the Hans Aspergers' seminal description of savants in the AS as "little professors".¹

Many mainstream international films have portrayed their lead characters belonging to the autism spectrum, the most recent ones being *The Accountant* (2016) and *Roman J. Isreal, Esq.* (2017). The portrayal of autism by Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man* (1988) is considered to be highly influential in raising awareness of autism at a time when it was an unknown entity to the common man.²

The awareness of autism in the Indian community has only been recent. AS disorders had been a recent addition to the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act in 2016.³ Only a few Indian films have portrayed its main characters belonging to the AS, including *My Name is Khan* (2010), *Barfi* (2012) and *Haridas* (2013). *Alexander the Great* (2010) is a Malayalam film with its lead character belonging to the AS.

Aby does stay away from making a diagnosis of its protagonist's unusual behavior. This can be argued to be a lost opportunity to introduce the Kerala audience to the milder end of AS disorder. By avoiding mentioning a diagnosis, the makers of the movie also avoid labeling of persons with unusual social behaviors and interests, including personality disorders like schizotypal, schizoid or avoidant personality disorder which share some characteristics that overlap with AS disorders.⁴

It should be understood that *Aby* is a mainstream film with an exaggeration of some of the events depicted when compared to real life. But the movie should be viewed on the strengths of its narrative. First, the initial part of the movie portrays how special education can help children overcome some of their disabilities. Second, the story focuses on the strengths and talents of the protagonist as described above into achieving his life-long dream of flying. Achieving that dream provides meaning and purpose in Aby's life. Belonging to a low socioeconomic background and having minimal social support only compounds the difficulties faced

by him due to the oddness in his social behavior. In the end, it is only due to his single-minded determination and a helping hand from some of his friends that Aby finally flies after he develops a glider on his own. Utilization of one's full capacity, equipping with skills, self-determination, understanding the needs, and care and environmental approach are some of the core principles of psychosocial rehabilitation.⁵ The story of *Aby* embraces these principles along with supporting the theme of accepting mentally disabled people for who they are. This is particularly important when the concept of "Neurodiversity" has gained movement among autism rights groups where various neuropsychological conditions like specific learning disorder, autism, ADHD, etc. are considered as variant presentation of the human mind, just like biodiversity in general.⁶

Maich et al., in their review on the portrayal of autism in popular media, found that many of the heroes belonging to the AS prevail challenges in larger than life situations.⁷ This may lead to the viewer to believe that people belonging to the AS may have heroic capabilities that the average person might not have. *Aby* might fall into this fallacy. But, the film should be given due appreciation for the messages conveyed in its narrative as explained above. For this, the makers of *Aby* should be applauded.

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