

Movie Review

HEY JUDE

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Depicting mental illness in movies has never been easy. While they have portrayed the plight of the mentally ill, they are many a time negative and stereotypical.^{1,2} Given this scenario, *Hey Jude*, is unique in terms of the portrayal of mental illness in Malayalam cinema.

The protagonist, Jude (played by Nivin Pauly), is a young adult who is fascinated by all things related to the ocean and is a walking tome of knowledge related to marine life. He is a talented mathematician and has a keen eye to details of any given setting. In spite of his skills and talents, Jude finds himself the “odd one out” amongst his peers in his daily life. His lack of eye contact during conversation, restricted facial expressions, inability to understand social and emotional cues and empathize accordingly, makes him appear awkward and the brunt of personal jokes in his office.

Jude’s family understands he is intelligent but cannot figure out why he struggles to keep a relationship or his job. They battle every day with

his stubborn needs and rigid routines including having meals at a fixed time of the day, insisting a particular level of crispiness to his dosa or toast and avoiding certain food items based on their

colour. His high moral and ethical values are a bone of contention to his father (played by Siddique), an unscrupulous antique dealer, who is out to make a quick buck.

Jude and his family embark on a journey to Goa after they are named in his paternal grand aunt’s inheritance. While there, Jude meets Crystal (played by Trisha Krishna), a free-spirited woman and her father, Dr. Sebastian (played by Vijay Menon), a psychologist. The movie then deals with how Jude and his family comes to understand that he belongs to the milder form of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) known as Asperger’s syndrome and the relationship he builds with Crystal and Dr. Sebastian.

This is the 3rd film, as per this author’s knowledge, that has portrayed ASD in Malayalam cinema, with the previous other movies being *Alexander the*

Great (2010) and *Aby* (2017). The latter had been reviewed by this author in the previous edition of this journal.³ The protagonist in *Aby* also displayed similar social deficits and talents in arithmetics as in Jude. In *Aby*, the portrayal of the protagonist’s social deficits and his struggles with society are used as a trope to make the audience root for him in the pursuit of

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his ambitions. In contrast, the focus of *Hey Jude* was more grounded in the portrayal of autism. The movie focused on Jude's struggles due to his social deficits for which he gets ridiculed by the society in spite of his intelligence and hard work.

Dr. Sebastian explains to Jude's parents about why Jude belongs to the autism spectrum disorder. Jude's family is able to make sense of his past behaviours and accommodate his wishes and needs. Dr. Sebastian and Crystal help Jude build his social skills by training him to maintain eye contact during conversation and improve his interview skills. In spite of their efforts, Jude continues to struggle with his interviews and socializing with people. This makes them realize, it is not Jude but our society that has to change to understand and integrate him as a part of the same. This is the key message of the movie and this author commends the makers of *Hey Jude* in successfully conveying it.

In spite of its sensitive portrayal of autism, the film does have its flaws. In the movie, Crystal is described to be suffering from bipolar disorder. The depiction of bipolar disorder is limited to mood swings and occasional bouts of low mood following personal stressors. Dr. Sebastian's portrayal is also stereotypical of psychiatrists/psychologists in cinema. He is shown to be funny and eccentric in his ways similar to Dr. Sunny in the Malayalam movie *Manichithrathahzhu* (1993). Schneider has described such comical representation of mental health providers with their own eccentricities as "Dr. Dippy" in his classification of portrayals of psychiatrists in cinema.⁴

Jude does not have to go through larger than life situations and defy odds to achieve his dreams as has been the many portrayals of autism in popular media including *Aby*.⁵ By chance, he gets recognized for his knowledge of marine life and lands a job as a research assistant at National

Institute of Oceanography. In the end, we see Jude leading a life where people who matter to him are able to understand him and accept him for who he is. Just like *Aby*, *Hey Jude* also embraces the core principles of psychosocial rehabilitation including utilization of one's full capacity, understanding the needs and environmental approach in managing persons belonging to the ASD.⁶

During the past decade, Malayalam cinema has produced films that have portrayed a range of topics related to mental illness from Obsessive Compulsive disorder (*North 24 Kaatham*, 2013), alcoholism (*Nee-na*, 2015), Charles Bonnet syndrome (*Jawan of Vellimala*, 2012), dissociative fugue (*Alice, a true story*, 2014), etc.. The sensitive portrayal of them has been promising in building awareness of mental illness in our society. With ASD having been included in the Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, it is high time we take measures to integrate them according to their needs and strengths while being mindful of their social deficits.⁷ *Aby* and *Hey Jude* have been, in spite of their minor flaws, excellent examples of how psychiatric disorders can be portrayed in different ways in a positive and humane manner. These are exciting times for psychiatry in Malayalam cinema.

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