

FRAMES OF (AB)NORMALCY: REPRESENTATION OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN SELECTED THIRD MILLENNIAL MALAYALAM CINEMA

Athmaja M^{*1} & Krishnachandran M²

¹Independent Researcher

²PhD Scholar, Department of English, SSL Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, Tamil Nadu

*Corresponding author: *athmac16@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

A picture is worth a thousand words. Cinemas help us connect with life and our lives are connected with cinemas. They play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of this world. Moreover, it is necessary to understand how well these cinemas showcase the society. Malayalam cinemas, generally regarded as a role model for the Indian film industry, has always attracted a large set of audience. Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate the Malayalam cinemas that reaches the silver screen and directly to us. The portrayal of mental health in selected Malayalam cinemas is one of the key aspects that has been examined through this paper. This study will have primary texts including *Ormayundo Ee Mukham* (2014), *Hey Jude* (2018) and *Kishkindha Kaandam* (2024), which explore a wide spectrum of mental health conditions, including Anterograde Amnesia and Asperger's Syndrome. The characters depicted in these cinemas grapple with significant mental health issues that are frequently trivialized and mocked. In a society where standards of normalcy are already defined for mental well-being, these challenges faced by a few are sometimes considered quirky. The study also seeks to unpack the narrative strategies and cultural assumptions that enable this trivialization, exploring how they contribute to broader societal misunderstandings and inadequate support systems for those living with mental illness. Ultimately, a fresh context-sensitive perspective, addressing an area that has yet to be fully explored among the media representations is the motive of such a research paper.

Keywords: *Malayalam Cinema, Mental Health Issues, Media Representations, Cultural assumptions, Trivialization*

INTRODUCTION

Cinema serves as the true reflection of the triumphs, anxieties, and evolving consciousness of the society through its flickering images. Indian cinema, mostly from the Malayalam film industry has always served as a conscience keeper and has engraved a clear niche for itself through the commitment in authentic storytelling and character portrayals. Subjects that were once considered taboo or awkward to be presented in the mainstream are now given equal importance in the third millennial Malayalam cinemas. Among those subjects, one that demands a thorough examination of how it is conveyed to the audience is the theme of mental illness. Our paper tries to understand the portrayal of mental illness in three notable Malayalam cinemas from the third millennium: *Ormayundo Ee Mukham* (2014), *Hey Jude* (2018), *Kishkindha Kaandam* (2024).

Cinema does not exist as an autonomous entity, as it is shaped by cultural contexts from which it emerges. The societal views, understanding, and responses are the factors that come under discussion when we speak specifically of mental health representation. As WHO says, "Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize

their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community. It has intrinsic and instrumental value and is a basic human right.” (World Health Organization) and yet the stigma around people having mental health issues prevail globally. In India, where mental health infrastructure is severely limited and cultural attitudes toward mental illness are often marked by misunderstanding and prejudice, the role of popular media becomes even more critical. Films reach millions of viewers, particularly in Kerala, where cinema-going is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of society. The images, narratives, and characterizations presented on screen can either challenge existing prejudices or reinforce harmful stereotypes.

The three cinemas chosen for the study represent different approaches to various mental health conditions. *Ormayundo Ee Mukham* directed by Anvar Sadik, centres on the suffering of the female lead character Nithya from Anterograde Amnesia, a condition that prevents the formation of new memories. Rom-com elements are the important elements in the movie which raises the question of whether such a serious medical condition should be treated as such. Shyamprasad directed *Hey Jude*, which presents Jude, a young man with Asperger's Syndrome who faces difficulty in social interaction and romantic relation. This cinema, widely acclaimed as one of the most symbolic one for Asperger's Syndrome has been praised a lot for its sensitive handling of the subject, yet it too has some flaws to be noted. And, *Kishkinda Kaandam*, a more recent offering, explores psychological trauma and its manifestations within a family setting, providing yet another lens through which to examine contemporary Malayalam cinema's engagement with mental health themes.

“Our minds are far beyond us. The ingredients that our minds seek for sustenance are far removed from the superficial pleasures we attach ourselves to. The ultimate purpose of our lives is far beyond what we imagine the purpose of our lives to be. The motivational drives of the human mind are often deeper than what is visible on the surface and what we consciously recognize.” (Chathoth,8)

The study has not only been limited to just cataloguing how mental illness appears in these films. Moreover, it examines the narrative strategies used, the cultural assumptions embedded within the story telling, and the real-world implications of these representations. For that, this paper has been divided into three chapters, each focusing on various aspects of the perception around mental illness. The first chapter examines the representation of mental illness in these cinemas, to point out the accuracy of the portrayals. The trivialization of the characters with mental health issues will be analysed in the second chapter, while the third chapter addresses the stigmatization that may reinforce or challenge societal stigma around mental health and what messages the audiences might internalize about the people who suffers it. By blending such ideas under the film studies and medical humanities, this study solely tries to foster a more responsible understanding as well as the portrayal of mental health issues among the general audience.

The Representation of Psychological Conditions in Malayalam Cinema

Representation is never neutral. The cinematic frame picks a point of view, organizes space and time, and thereby assigns meaning. When it comes to mental illness and neurodivergence, representational choices include decisions about language, diagnosis, symptom visibility, sensory experience, and the balance between vulnerability and competence. Across the three selected films, one can identify a continuous push-and-pull between rendering interiority legible and

preserving the protagonist's difference as something not fully transparent to the neurotypical gaze.

Representation, when it comes to movies is tricky; this is because the perfect balance between the dramatic elements and portrayal of a character for itself is difficult to attain. If the dramatic element in a movie exceeds the levels, it might pave ways to stereotyping, which is most common in movies. *Ormayundo Ee Mukham* builds its narrative premise around anterograde amnesia. The heroine's near-term memory resets, she cannot reliably form new memories after a certain point, structure the story's rhythms. The romance depends on repetition becoming care: routines, recordings, visual cues, and daily rituals that re-introduce her to love and to herself. The camera often aligns with the male lead's perspective, inviting the audience to discover how patience and inventiveness can cocoon the beloved from a world that won't slow down. At its best, the film encapsulates what is at stake for people with memory disorders and their caregivers: the moral weight of repetition, the art of designing environments that are forgiving, and the ache of knowing that recognition is a moving target. The film's mise-en-scène, bright palettes, soft light, musical motifs, often romanticizes the condition, placing the disorder inside a gently whimsical world. That aesthetic decision makes the protagonist's life feel "movie-manageable," a choice that has two sides: it humanizes by refusing to make her frightening or monstrous (as some older cinema often did with "madness"), yet it risks minimizing the unpredictable severity and hazard that can accompany memory disorders, particularly outside the protective membrane of a love-driven routine. For instance, the opening scene shows the heroine being a charming woman, not disclosing any of her underlying mental disorder shifts the audience perspective from a woman full of life to sympathising with her tragic condition. The representation here is neat since the character is not loaded with any of the unnecessary dramatic elements during the character introduction.

The movie *Hey Jude* takes a markedly different path. The film invites us into the daily life of a young man on the autism spectrum, Jude, and shows us a mind organized by precision, pattern, and honesty. Rather than building the plot on the hope that he will be "fixed," the narrative focuses on how he can flourish when the world around him flexes a little and when he learns to negotiate social thresholds in his own time. Several representational choices matter here. First, the film lets Jude possess both strength and vulnerability without collapsing one into the other. His intense interests (numbers, the natural world, music depending on the scene) are treated not as mere compensations for "deficits" but as part of a different ordering of attention. Second, the film often uses sound and framing to convey sensory and social friction: the buzz of a crowded space amplified, the camera lingering on the overwhelm of multiple simultaneous cues, the quiet relief of order. Third, the script resists the "miracle cure" arc. Jude does not become neurotypical; instead, he gains tools and allies, and the people around him also learn to meet him halfway. The film's representational ethic aligns with contemporary neurodiversity principles: disability is a mismatch between person and environment rather than a solely internal problem to be solved.

In our next movie, *Kishkindha Kaandam*, its very title evoking a section of the Ramayana with fraught brotherhoods, exile, and a kingdom of vanaras, approaches mental health less as a diagnosable condition and more as an atmosphere: frustration, paranoia, restlessness, or compulsion entwined with social stressors. Without forcing a clinical label, one can read its protagonist's behaviour as an index of psychological strain that contemporary life precarious work,

fractured trust, crowded cities, atomized communities, both produces and then disavows. The film's representational strategy relies on oscillations: scenes alternate between heightened stylization and almost documentary everydayness, between the mythic register and mundane routines. Where the earlier two films anchor their protagonists' differences in explicit conditions (anterograde amnesia; autism spectrum), *Kishkindha Kaandam* keeps the mental health axis loosely defined. This ambiguity can be generative, refusing to reduce a person to a checklist of symptoms, and it can be ethically slippery, where audiences are asked to supply their own stigmatizing labels to make sense of a character's volatility or isolation. The very indeterminacy becomes a representational choice, one that mirrors how much "mental illness" in public discourse appears as a floating signifier that attaches to any behaviour that does not fit normative expectations.

Across these films, a few representational patterns emerge. First, interiority is often mediated through caretakers, friends, and family. We learn how to interpret the protagonist's behaviour by how others react to it: a father's exasperation, a lover's tenderness, a neighbour's curiosity. This is especially true in *Ormayundo Ee Mukham*, where the male lead's love-work scaffolds the heroine's world, and in *Hey Jude*, where supportive relationships provide frames but the practice also occurs in *Kishkindha Kaandam*, where the protagonist's social field tags him as odd, volatile, or opaque. Second, the films distribute credibility unevenly. The neurotypical or "stable" characters often hold expository power; they explain or translate the protagonist's mental life to the audience. Third, the films differ in how much they let the protagonist lead the narrative gaze. *Hey Jude* is the most generous in soliciting identification with the protagonist's sensory and cognitive perspective, while *Ormayundo Ee Mukham* and *Kishkindha Kaandam* more frequently solicit empathy through relational frames (the lover's patience; the society's misreading).

"Malayalam cinema is perhaps an example of how the most ingenious works of art are often fostered under conditions of rigid conservatism." (Chathoth, 15)

To represent mental illness ethically in cinema is to tread between two pitfalls: voyeurism and erasure. Too close a look can become prurience; too distant a frame can erase the reality of struggle. *Ormayundo Ee Mukham* avoids monstrosity and medical sensationalism; *Hey Jude* avoids the saviour-cure arc; *Kishkindha Kaandam* avoids reductive labelling. These are achievements. Yet each film must also contend with the limits of its chosen form. Romances tend to domesticate conflict into solvable problems; coming-of-age arcs tend to centre growth; allegorical thrillers tend to blur the social and the psychic. Representation is therefore never just about accuracy; it is about the affordances and constraints of genre, star persona, and audience expectation. The next chapter turns to how these representational logics, even when empathetically crafted, can morph into trivialization: difference becomes lovable oddity or comic ornament, and structural barriers fade from view.

The Stigmatisation of Psychological Conditions in Malayalam Cinema

Stigma is an age-old world which connotes a negative meaning surrounding it. Here we use the term to depict how the characters from the selected Malayalam movies are made to fit into a box which is labelled, mental disorders. Stigma operates as a social mechanism through which difference is marked, moralized, and marginalized. When applied to mental health, it transforms a

medical or psychological condition into a site of moral judgment and social exclusion. “Kerala which is in the forefront in literacy and development, has over 30 lakh persons affected with mental disorders, according to the report by the Kerala State Mental Health Authority. This figure would amount to 10 percent of the total Kerala population (Chathoth 23). Stigmatisation within cinema functions at multiple levels: textual, visual, and cultural. It begins with the scripting and characterization, the language used to describe and frame the protagonist, and extends into the *mise-en-scène*, the supporting characters' responses, and the ultimate moral of the story.

In *Ormayundo Ee Mukham*, Nithya's anterograde amnesia is presented through the lens of romance and tragedy. Her condition becomes a narrative obstacle that the male protagonist must lovingly overcome. While the film's tonal gentleness appears to humanize her experience, it subtly reinforces a hierarchical gaze: she exists primarily through the care and patience of her male counterpart. The cinematic framing thus reproduces a benevolent stigma, one that cloaks itself in compassion but nevertheless denies full agency to the person with the disorder. Her identity is defined by lack of memory, continuity, and autonomy and the film's sentimental resolution frames her condition as a source of pity rather than difference. In public perception, such portrayals reinforce the idea that individuals with neurological or psychological impairments are incomplete beings, dependent upon the moral labour of others for survival.

The rhetoric of love and care in *Ormayundo Ee Mukham* reveals a subtler stigma arising from romantic idealization. By aestheticizing amnesia, the narrative diminishes the disorder's medical seriousness and trivializes its daily challenges. The audience is led to view the illness as endearing rather than debilitating, transforming a psychological reality into an emotional metaphor for love's endurance. Here, stigma manifests not as overt ridicule but as containment, confining the mentally ill character to an affective spectacle instead of a realistic portrayal.

In contrast, *Hey Jude* offers a more progressive textual field yet cannot entirely escape the cultural residues of stigma. Shyamaprasad's portrayal of Jude, a young man on the autism spectrum, is widely celebrated for its authenticity and restraint. However, the very acclaim it received reveals how deeply entrenched ableist expectations remain in cultural discourse. Although the film grants Jude narrative centrality, his social acceptance still hinges on the intervention of neurotypical figures who mediate his entry into “normal” life. This dynamic, though compassionate, mirrors the rehabilitative model of disability, where the burden of adaptation falls disproportionately on the individual, and acceptance is contingent on behavioural modification.

The script's recurrent emphasis on Jude's “innocence” and “purity” contributes to a moralised form of stigma. Innocence, in such contexts, becomes a euphemism for infantilisation. His difference is made tolerable because it is harmless, a trope that allows society to empathize with neurodivergent individuals only when they conform to the ideals of docility and non-threat. Moreover, the film's aesthetic restraint—the clean visuals, the measured dialogue, the restrained emotionality—reflects an anxious desire to maintain respectability in representing mental difference. By making Jude a figure of moral exemplarity, the narrative neutralizes the discomfort of his disorder, translating neurodivergence into a digestible moral lesson rather than a lived social struggle. Stigma thus persists not as mockery but as moralisation: the neurodivergent subject is positioned as a moral mirror for the audience rather than a full participant in social life.

Hey Jude also exposes the intersection between stigma and social class. The family's middle-class respectability heightens their anxiety about social perception. The father's irritability stems less from ignorance than from the fear of social embarrassment a reflection of Kerala's modernity complex, where education and refinement coexist uneasily with the stigma surrounding mental difference. The narrative arc, which moves from concealment to cautious acceptance, mirrors Kerala's broader sociocultural attitude toward mental health: progressive in discourse but hesitant in practice. Shyamaprasad's film, despite its sensitivity, cannot entirely dismantle this ambivalence, revealing how stigma persists even within empathetic frameworks.

In *Kishkindha Kaandam*, the dynamics of stigmatisation shift toward a more diffuse, systemic form. The film's refusal to name or clinically categorize the protagonist's psychological turmoil serves both as a critique of psychiatric reductionism and as a risky aesthetic strategy. By rendering mental illness as an allegory for existential and societal alienation, the film opens space for critical reflection but also invites interpretive imprecision. The audience, accustomed to diagnostic clarity, may project their own stigmatizing assumptions onto the protagonist, interpreting his behavioural volatility as madness, aggression, or moral failure. This participatory stigma where viewers themselves become complicit in othering illustrates how ambiguity can inadvertently reinforce social prejudice. The lack of diagnostic framing, though intellectually ambitious, leaves the mental state vulnerable to moral interpretation rather than clinical empathy.

Moreover, *Kishkindha Kaandam* situates psychological distress within a socio-political framework. The protagonist's fractured psyche becomes a metaphor for a fragmented society, one plagued by economic precarity, familial breakdown, and political disillusionment. However, this metaphorization can also obscure the specificity of mental illness, transforming psychological suffering into a symbol rather than a condition. The use of mythological allusion the echo of *Ramayana's* Kishkindha episode reinforces this symbolic mode, displacing the conversation from psychiatry to morality. Madness here is coded as rebellion, introspection, or divine estrangement, thereby aestheticizing rather than humanizing mental suffering. The stigma persists in the form of mystification: mental illness becomes meaningful only when it serves as a metaphor for societal malaise.

Across these films, stigmatisation manifests through recurring cinematic patterns. First, mental illness is consistently externalized it must be seen, explained, or managed by others. The cinematic gaze privileges the observer over the sufferer, thereby reproducing social hierarchies of knowledge and control. Second, the narrative closure in all three films reaffirms social harmony through containment: the ill character either adapts to normative expectations or retreats from the social world. Third, humour and sentiment often function as mechanisms of distance. The mild comic undertones in *Hey Jude* and the romantic sweetness of *Ormayundo Ee Mukham* convert psychological distress into narrative charm, allowing audiences to sympathize without engaging with discomfort. Such strategies domesticate difference, transforming potential sites of critique into spectacles of emotional consumption.

The persistence of stigma in Malayalam cinema also reflects broader cultural paradoxes. Kerala, despite its high literacy rates and robust social development, remains deeply bound to notions of familial reputation and social conformity. Mental illness disrupts the collective ideal of the rational,

educated Malayali subject. Thus, cinematic representations often oscillate between denial and overexposure, between silence and spectacle. The social stigma attached to psychological difference is both challenged and reinforced through these cultural performances of normalcy.

To address stigma in Malayalam cinema, it is essential to move beyond sympathetic storytelling toward structural critique. Representation must interrogate not only individual pathology but also the institutional and cultural systems that produce and sustain stigma schools, workplaces, religious communities, and media industries themselves. Films such as *Hey Jude* and *Kishkindha Kaandam* gesture toward this direction, yet they stop short of dismantling the underlying moral hierarchies. The future of Malayalam cinema's engagement with mental health depends on its ability to reimagine the "abnormal" not as deviation from the norm but as an integral dimension of human diversity.

Stigmatisation in Malayalam cinema operates less through overt ridicule and more through subtle moral and aesthetic containment. Whether rendered as tragic romance, moral fable, or existential allegory, mental illness is often displaced from lived reality into symbolic or sentimental terrain. These films, while progressive in tone, remain symptomatic of a culture negotiating its discomfort with psychological vulnerability. The path forward lies not in erasing difference but in decentralizing the normative gaze allowing characters with mental health disorders to exist beyond the binaries of cure and catastrophe, sympathy and shame. Only then can Malayalam cinema transcend its frames of (ab)normalcy to envision a more inclusive, de-stigmatized cinematic imagination

The Trivialisation of Psychological Conditions in Malayalam Cinema

The depiction of psychological conditions in Malayalam cinema has often been situated within a precarious balance between sensitivity and spectacle. While recent decades have seen an increased willingness to explore mental health as a narrative theme, this exploration frequently succumbs to the mechanisms of commercial cinema romanticization, humour, and emotional exaggeration. Trivialisation, in this context, refers to the cinematic strategies that downplay, distort, or aestheticise mental disorders to make them palatable for popular consumption. Rather than offering a nuanced engagement with the lived realities of mental illness, many Malayalam films have converted psychological difference into an instrument for evoking laughter, pity, or facile sentimentality. This process, though subtle, has significant implications for how audiences internalize mental health discourse within the cultural domain of Kerala.

Trivialisation also manifests through genre conventions. Malayalam cinema's strong tradition of melodrama has historically relied on the oscillation between comedy and tragedy, where extremes of emotion are used to engage the audience. Within this framework, mental illness often becomes a performative excess. Even in films that avoid overt caricature, there persists a tendency to equate psychological abnormality with eccentricity or childlike innocence. *Hey Jude* (2018) ostensibly challenges this pattern by positioning Jude as a protagonist whose autism spectrum disorder is treated with dignity and insight. Yet, upon closer examination, even this film participates in subtler forms of trivialisation. Jude's Asperger's Syndrome is domesticated within a narrative of self-improvement and romantic discovery, culminating in a symbolic "completion" of his personality through love. The film's visual palette pastel tones, picturesque seascapes, and rhythmic musicality,

functions as a buffer that renders the disorder aesthetically pleasing. The viewer is invited to appreciate Jude's quirks rather than grapple with the structural barriers faced by neurodivergent individuals in real life. His difference becomes a source of endearment rather than alienation, transforming disability into cinematic charm.

Such portrayals illustrate how Malayalam cinema, despite its claims of realism, often mediates psychological complexity through emotional simplification. The sociocultural framework of Kerala deeply informed by moral conservatism and middle-class ideals encourages depictions that prioritize social harmony over discomfort. Thus, the characters with mental health conditions are rarely allowed to disrupt the normative moral order; instead, they are rehabilitated into it. In this sense, the film both resists and reproduces the trivialisation it seeks to critique: it grants visibility to autism yet absorbs it into the sentimental grammar of the mainstream.

Kishkindha Kaandam (2024) on the other hand, presents a darker, more ambiguous engagement with psychological disturbance. The film's refusal to label its protagonist's mental condition can initially appear as a rejection of medical reductionism. However, this indeterminacy also risks trivialisation by making psychological distress a symbol of social decay rather than an embodied, lived experience. The protagonist's erratic behaviour, paranoia, and alienation are stylised into visual metaphors for modernity's fragmentation. While this abstraction invites philosophical reflection, it simultaneously erases the specificity of mental illness. The absence of context therapeutic, medical, or interpersonal renders suffering an aesthetic surface rather than a human condition. The trivialisation here is not through humour or romance but through abstraction: the mental becomes a narrative texture, not a reality.

Another significant dimension of trivialisation in Malayalam cinema emerges through linguistic and performative registers. The Malayalam lexicon surrounding mental health remains deeply stigmatized, with colloquial terms such as *pitham*, *madakkan*, and *mental* retaining pejorative connotations. Even when filmmakers attempt to challenge these notions, the performative excesses of acting exaggerated gestures, tonal shifts, and musical cues—often undercut the seriousness of the condition. The audience is trained to read eccentric behaviour as either comic relief or as a mark of tragic innocence. This binary leaves little space for the ordinary, functional lives of those with psychological conditions. Cinema's insistence on dramatizing mental difference transforms it into spectacle, thereby trivializing the mundane struggles of coping and adaptation that constitute the real experience of mental illness.

The commodification of mental health within cinematic discourse also deserves attention. Malayalam cinema, particularly in the post-2010 period, has developed a penchant for psychological themes as markers of sophistication. Filmmakers employ psychiatric vocabulary and clinical imagery not for diagnostic accuracy but as aesthetic signifiers of depth and modernity. The result is what scholars of disability studies term “aesthetic psychiatry”, a mode in which mental illness serves as an artistic metaphor rather than a social reality. This strategy contributes to the trivialisation of psychological suffering by displacing it from the socio-political field into the realm of poetic symbolism. The audience is encouraged to admire the “mad genius” or the “innocent sufferer,” but rarely to confront the institutional failures that perpetuate mental health crises in Kerala.

CONCLUSION

Being able to be one's true self is one of the strongest components of good mental health. This is one among the many ideas this paper suggests. Cinema as a medium of proper representation, without any trivialisation or stigmatisation. While it is true that the Malayalam film industry choose such topics of high seriousness, it is also necessary to handle them effectively as opposed to just choosing them. Up to an extent, there are good examples of proper representation in these selected cinemas, but as a part of the study we have pointed out things that are a bit off. The whole idea of this paper was never to defame or spread hate against the casts or directors of the mentioned movies, but to make the audience think of the seriousness of mental health issues around us. Trivialisation which leads to the exclusion or alienation of those suffering and the stigmatisation that sets off stereotypical approach towards them are also highlighted in this work. Our theories always float around in the society and its implementation to a level of hundred is quite impossible, therefore we find the accessibility and reach of such a study limited. Another limitation would be the lack of precision in the separation of dramatic elements from those of narrative. Above all, a genuine effort was made to convey the idea of handling the themes of mental health issues carefully.

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