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## **Take a sad song and make it better: an alternative reading of Anglo-Indian stereotypes in Shyamaprasad's Hey Jude (2018)**

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TAKE A SAD SONG AND MAKE IT BETTER:  
AN ALTERNATIVE READING OF ANGLO-INDIAN STEREOTYPES IN  
SHYAMAPRASAD'S *HEY JUDE* (2018)

Glenn D'Cruz

ABSTRACT

*This Paper provides an alternative approach to understanding the function of Anglo-Indian culture in Shyamaprasad's Malayalam language film Hey Jude (2018). Drawing on his theorization of Anglo-Indian Stereotypes in his book Midnight's Orphans: Anglo-Indians in Post/Colonial Literature (Peter Lang, 2006), the author contests the reading of the film offered by Rajesh James and Priya Alphonsa Mathew in their recent article, 'Between Two Worlds: Anglo-Indian Stereotypes and Malayalam Cinema.' Rather than hastily dismissing representations of Anglo-Indians in Hey Jude as stereotypical and offensive, this critique of James and Mathew's argument underscores the importance of situating the film in a broader context and paying more detailed attention to the cultural work performed by its themes and tropes.*

INTRODUCTION

FADE IN:

INT. Number 13 Charles Street, East London. Early Evening.  
1968.

A deep red lamp illuminates a framed picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Thick trails of cigarette smoke waft into the frame from below, shrouding the ceremonial lamp in a fog that diminishes its glow. The deep, dulcet tones of Jim Reeves singing 'Yonder Comes a Sucker' can be heard over the sound of chatter, laughter, and clinking glasses.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT: Number 13 Charles Street. Front Room.

The Room is populated by a group of young men and women in their late twenties and early thirties. They are a mixed bunch, both literally and figuratively, for they are Anglo-Indians, mixed-race migrants from India. Some have very dark skin and pronounced sub-continental features. Others have the pallor of the working-class locals.

ANTO, a slightly portly man on the wrong side of 30, tries to stifle a guffaw. He's playing 7-card poker with brothers, sisters and in-laws. He breaks into a wide smile, a bit like a Cheshire cat, as he is dealt an ace by his brother-in-law, and some-time adversary, ADO. ADO, a man in his mid-twenties, takes a considered gulp from his glass of Black Label Johnny Walker Whiskey, and slams his glass on the table, sending a cube of ice into the air, as he completes his motion. His side-kick, and partner in crime, BAZ, is brooding. He's already tanked and becoming increasingly bored by the game.

ADO

What, men? I Pack. (ADO laughs as the other players follow suit and throw their cards into the middle of the table).

ANTO

You'll are worse than a pack of pariah dogs. Fatted buggers. (he takes the modest kitty off the table, as ADO deals a fresh hand).

CUT TO:

EXT: Wide establishing shot of 13 Charles Street. The house is shrouded in snow and ice. Christmas lights flicker and flash from its front window.

CUT TO:

INT: Number 13 Charles Street. Front Room.

ERIC, a tall, thoughtful man of about 30, sits next to a small coffee table, whose sole decoration is a green vase of plastic roses placed on a frilly white doily. Eric, hunched over an acoustic guitar, rolls a cigarette. He's lost in some private, wistful reverie.

As the Jim Reeves song fades into Elvis Presley's Jailhouse Rock, RITA and RAY, throw down their cards and start jiving. Rita's billowing skirt threatens to reach take-off velocity as

Ray, resplendent in drainpipe trousers, crisp white shirt and a thin black tie, expertly twists and twirls his dance partner in the middle of the crowded room. The camera lingers on the dancers' shoes before slowly tilting up and framing RITA's face tightly.

CUT TO:

A close-up of BAZ's flaring nostrils as he upturns the card table.

BAZ

I'll give that bloody bugger one rap!

CUT TO:

A medium shot of three children peering into the front room after they have pushed the door ajar. One young lad looks petrified, another child smirks while a young girl in pig tails tied with red ribbons begins to sob.

FADE TO BLACK:

FADE IN:

INT. The measuring room of a Tailor's shop in the East End of London, 1970. A stooped old man wraps a measuring tape around the waist of Glenn D'Cruz, a young Anglo-Indian boy, Aged 10. A tear runs down the cheek of the young boy as he tries to stifle his emotions. His father, ANTO, is oblivious to his son distress as he chats to the craftsman.

ANTO

It's for his first holy communion. We'll need it in two weeks.  
I can pay a deposit if you like.

Dissolve to:

INT. A Study in a suburban townhouse. Melbourne, Australia.  
2019.

GLENN D'CRUZ, now an academic, and a former 'professional' Anglo-Indian, sits at his desk scrolling through a treatise on Anglo-Indian Stereotypes in Malayalam Cinema on his computer screen. He's struggling to formulate a meaningful response to the paper. As the monolingual son of Anglo-Indians who left India before he was old enough to walk, D'Cruz knows very little about the representation of Anglo-Indians in Malayalam Cinema, and despite being the author of a book and several articles about Anglo-Indians, he's painfully aware that he probably knows very little about Anglo-Indian culture beyond what he has managed to glean from books, movies, archives and

observing his family. He sighs, but decides to offer an opinion about the article, anyway.

He pours himself a double-shot of Chivas Regal, and takes a generous swig. He clicks out of Adobe Acrobat and fires up Spotify. He streams Engelbert Humperdinck's 'Man Without Love.' He turns up the volume on the stereo connected to his MacBook Pro, turns off the lights and dances, very badly, in the dark.

FADE TO BLACK

\* \* \*

## THE POLITICS OF STEREOTYPING

Let's cut to the chase. If I close my eyes and recollect *my* experience of growing up in an Anglo-Indian family, I will inevitably see, in my mind's eye, an array of objects that are commonly found in films about Anglo-Indians: a portrait of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, bottles of liquor, plastic flowers, doilies, rosary beads. I will also recall images of people jiving, strumming guitars, gambling, playing Housie and generally having a good time. So, if I decided to make a film about my Anglo-Indian family it would, as the above extract confirms, contain stereotypical characters and stock images like those found in the films Mathew and James (2018) find offensive. In what follows, I will claim that our knowledge and understanding of Anglo-Indian culture is diminished if we wholly condemn all works of art that include stereotypical representations of our community. Shyamaprasad's Malayalam film *Hey Jude* (2018) is a case in point since it exploits and confounds stock Anglo-Indian tropes. However, before engaging with this film, I want to frame my argument with an account of why I find the topic of stereotypical representations so compelling.

I could never reconcile my parents' strict observance of social protocols with their enthusiasm for jiving. Why was it so important to follow the rules, to dress to the nines, and to appear so 'proper' and 'up to the mark'? One explanation is that as Anglo-Indians born and bred in the subcontinent, my mum and dad were aware of the so-called 'sensationalist' stereotypes that marked them as morally lax degenerates. As many Anglo-Indian scholars point out, novelists and filmmakers persistently depict Anglo-Indian women as seductive whores and Anglo-Indian men

as incompetent 'wasters' (Anthony, 1969; Moore, 1986; Mills, 1996; Mathew and James, 2018). Consequently, these writers, whom I dubbed 'image critics' seek to correct and contest the veracity of these popular 'misrepresentations' of Anglo-Indians (D'Cruz, 2006, 40). Perhaps my parents felt compelled to counter the lurid stereotypes, apparently propagated by popular literature and cinema, by being vigilant about the way they (and their children) appeared in public. Regardless of their reasons and motivations for policing the family's comportment, I felt humiliated by having to dress up in a bespoke suit at formal occasions. I explored my antipathy towards suits (and jiving) in my book, *Midnight's Orphans: Anglo-Indians in Post/Colonial Literature* (2006) which provides an alternative way to thinking about the persistence and function of Anglo-Indian stereotypes.<sup>1</sup>

Before responding to the paper on Anglo-Indian stereotyping in Malayalam cinema by Priya Mathew and Rajesh James, here's a brief summary of the argument I made in my book. First, I acknowledged, following Stuart Hall, that stereotyping is a signifying practice that 'is central to the representation of racial difference' (1997, 257) and one that 'reduces, essentialises, naturalises and fixes difference' (1997, 258). In other words, stereotyping reduces complex identities, cultures and lives to a few, usually disparaging, characteristics that come to pass as definitive truths. In accepting Hall's account of the function of stereotyping I recognized the importance of contesting the veracity and persistence of stock representations of Anglo-Indians in novels, films and the public sphere in general. However, I also pointed out that the desire to replace negative representations of the community with positive images has consequences for those Anglo-Indians who do not share a normative sense of identity. Put simply, there is no such thing as an essential Anglo-Indian identity. People from different socio-economic groups, geographical locations, and different generations may not share the same sense of what constitutes a positive image or identity. Further, individuals with different sexual orientations may feel marginalized

by 'positive images' that assume, for example, that all Anglo-Indians are heterosexual or Christian. Put another way, an uncritical form of image criticism runs the risk of merely imposing a different set of fixed identify markers that enforce impossibly rigid conceptions of morality and virtue.

My book also attempted to demonstrate that the most compelling works of fiction dealing with Anglo-Indian life tend to highlight difference and disagreement. Drama thrives on conflict between competing claims about what constitutes truth, virtue, courage and identity. I proffered Keith Butler's short story 'Sodasi' (2000) as an example of a work that engages with gender and generational dissension within an Anglo-Indian family without attempting to produce 'positive' images. The story represents the fraught relationship between an Anglo-Indian father and his Australian-born daughter with candour. In my view, exhorting artists to produce positive images works against the task of dispelling stereotypes. Positive images can only, I believe, produce bad art, which brings me, finally, to Mathew and James' analysis of Anglo-Indian stereotypes in Malayalam cinema.

## MATHEW AND JAMES ON ANGLO-INDIAN STEREOTYPES IN MALAYALAM CINEMA

As a monolingual Anglo-Indian who did not grow up in India, I have a slight and an embarrassingly inadequate knowledge of Malayalam Cinema. I depend on subtitles to understand these films and I am sure I miss most of the cultural nuances that shape the characters and dramatic situations depicted in them. So, what scholarly authority or expertise enables me to comment on Malayalam films? The obvious answer is that I have no such authority or expertise. However, I feel I can offer a

critique of the logic Mathew and James use to substantiate their argument concerning the function of stereotypes in Malayalam Cinema given my previous research into Anglo-Indian stereotypes. Before describing my misgivings about their work, I want to acknowledge that a key strength of their paper lies in providing a valuable catalogue of films with Anglo-Indian characters and themes. They also draw attention to important linguistic nuances such as the fact that the title of the film *Chattakkari* (1974) is a pun that ‘alludes to a woman who wears *chatta* – a ‘V’ necked top, the traditional garb of Anglo-Indian women of Kerala worn along with a checkered *dhoti*’ (2018). However, the indignant tone of the piece, while perfectly understandable given the status of Anglo-Indians in Kerala, could be tempered with a more careful analysis of the films they cite.

With respect to their general thesis that Anglo-Indians are marginalised and misrepresented by the dominant community in Kerala, I would find it surprising if this was not the case since minority communities throughout the world struggle for acceptance and recognition. Anglo-Indians constitute a tiny proportion of India’s total population, so it is not surprising that they are underrepresented and, arguably misrepresented in films made by upper-caste Hindus or the Syrian Christians. The fact that Anglo-Indians are represented at all is a significant fact, however. Their presence, even as caricatures merits comment and explanation. I will provide a provisional response to this question in my reading of *Hey Jude* (2018), a film that, in my view, represents complex and sympathetic Anglo-Indian characters.

As for the criticism that Malayalam films depict Anglo-Indians from the perspective of ‘outsiders’, I can only say, how can this be otherwise? Until Anglo-Indians actually



write and direct their own films, Anglo-Indian characters will appear from the perspective of so-called outsiders. The more important point, though, concerns the troubling belief that Anglo-Indians will necessarily provide a privileged insight into Anglo-Indian experience. Let me put it another way. It's possible for Anglo-Indians to tell stories that may be antithetical to the experiences of their peers. As I noted at the outset of this paper, the extract from the faux screenplay that appears at the start of this paper can, for example, be read ironically or as a compilation of deleterious stereotypes. It may or may not resonate with Anglo-Indians. In fact, a response to any film is conditioned by a complex array of factors, which are given short shrift in Mathew and James' article. There are many different kinds of Anglo-Indians, too. Who has a monopoly on truth? I also think it important to accept that it is not always possible to represent the often-unconscious forces that drive people to act as they do. After Freud, I think we must at least entertain the possibility that the 'I' is another.<sup>2</sup> We can be strangers to ourselves, and, sometimes an outsider's perspective can tell truths missed by insiders.

The claim that Anglo-Indian women are victims of sexist ideology is, once again, not surprising and one that is easily substantiated by the examples proffered by Mathew and James. However, it would have been useful for these scholars to provide a fuller account of the way the Malayalam cinema's representation of Anglo-Indian women differ from its treatment of women in general. In her article, 'From Objectification to Mansplaining, Malayalam Films Reek of Casual Sexism Even In 2017', Shalin Jacob writes 'a female actor, no matter how small her role, is nothing more than a 'piece' to ogle at. And quite honestly, it has made watching Malayalam movies a bit of a cringe fest' (2017). And Jacob is not the only person to comment on 'Mollywood's' sexism.

A cursory Google search will reveal that many other journalists are outraged by the way Malayalam cinema represents women. Anglo-Indians are not the only 'inferior others' in Bollywood.

Finally, the call for 'positive' Anglo-Indian characters is something that we need to think about more carefully. What is a positive representation? And to what extent are such representations compatible with serious, complex drama? Milan Kundera, in his celebrated novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), defined *Kitsch* as the denial or absence of shit (1984, 248). In other words, he suggests that a serious theory of existence needs to acknowledge abject matter. Novels and films also need to accept the abject and the unpleasant if they are to tell compelling, complex stories. Art needs to be gritty to avoid the cheesy, greeting-card platitudes implicit in the term 'positive images'. Having provided a general critique of Mathew and James' argument, it's time to look at their comments concerning a specific film.

### *HEY JUDE* (2018)

As I read it, *Hey Jude* (2018) is an offbeat rom-com that sympathetically explores mental illness and makes a case for accepting what we might call neurodiversity. Put simply, the film challenges the notion that people afflicted by psychological disorders need to be treated as outcasts. The film's protagonist, Jude Rodriguez, is on the spectrum, as they say. He is a portly, socially awkward computer geek with a savant-like facility for mathematics. He displays various obsessive-compulsive behaviours (especially with regard to his diet) and is diagnosed as suffering from Asperger's disease during the course of the film. He is especially anxious around women and tends to make blunt statements that people find offensive. Jude's father, Dominic,

owns a store that sells souvenirs to tourists in Kerala. He struggles to make ends meet and attempts to swindle tourists by selling them faux antiques. His financial problems are solved when he inherits a house in Goa. He leaves his 'normal' apparently high-achieving daughter, Andrea, in Kerala and moves to Goa with his wife and Jude. In Goa, Dominic discovers that a guitar-toting hippie, Dr Sebastian, lives in the outhouse of his newly acquired property with his daughter Crystal. Dominic finds that he cannot easily evict his tenants and hatches a plot that involves his son, Jude, winning the confidence of Crystal, an aspiring singer in a rock band that plays at a beach bar called the Beatles café. Crystal, we learn suffers from bipolar disorder. She experiences mood swings and her free, hedonistic spirit is tempered by suicidal tendencies. An unlikely friendship develops between Crystal and Jude, which is stymied by Jude's fear of sexual contact.

In his review of the film, Deepika Jayaram writes: '*Hey Jude* is a coming-of-age story, be it for Jude, Crystal, Dominic or the audience as it teaches us that there is an abnormality in almost everyone and life doesn't stop there' (2018). Mythili Ramachandran concurs when he writes: 'Drawing awareness to Asperger's syndrome and bipolar disorder in the most sensitive manner without subjecting the characters to ridicule, *Hey Jude* is a fun ride and not a story of pity and melodrama — rather a story of self-discovery' (2018). Most of the reviews on-line tend to be mildly enthusiastic and only mention the Anglo-Indian identity of Jude and his family in passing. Conversely, Mathew and James find the film offensive and claim that it perpetuates certain Anglo-Indian stereotypes by presenting:

Jude not as 'perfection' or as an autonomous person with 'agency', but rather as 'lacking', focusing not so much on his incredible knowledge of oceanography or his calculator brain but on his slipups and paucities, and presents him as a socially awkward being. (2019, 30)

While it is true that racial scientists claimed that mixed-race people were inherently unstable and prone to mental illness, as Lionel Caplan (2000, 867) among others points out, I think Mathew and James' indignation is misplaced. I might describe the paper written by Mathew and James as a variant on Screen Theory, which attempted to show the way ideological prejudices concerning gender norms are built into the narrative conventions that structure film form. This kind of analysis participated in what we might call the politics of suspicion by drawing attention to the way the surface features of a text often mask and normalise more sinister ideological norms that go unremarked precisely because they are taken as being natural and normal. For example, the point-of-view conventions that make women the object of the camera's gaze in narrative cinema reinforces patriarchal ideology, which normalises female characters as passive exhibitionists on display for the pleasure of men. This is more or the less the argument Laura Mulvey made in her canonical paper 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975).<sup>3</sup> The camera pan that Mathew and James describe with reference to the film *Chattakkari* (1974) is an instance of the way the camera functions as a form of the male gaze —the director repeats the shot in the Bollywood remake *Julie* (1975). This is as close as Mathew and James get to any kind of complex ideological criticism. Their dismissal of *Hey Jude* relies on identifying somewhat dubious tropes that they believe sustain the persistent prejudice against Anglo-Indians in Malayalam Cinema. The salient point here is that they do a disservice to their cause by failing to engage in detailed criticism. For example, their claim that the film represents Dominic as an incompetent miser ignores the character's transformation over the course of the film (he shows genuine concern for his son at several points, and even declares, 'in this world people have different

kinds of madnnesses [sic]. My madness is making money'). Indeed, Aradhya Kurup provides a contrary view to Mathew and James when he writes that,

the best depiction of Anglo-Indian must be Siddique in the recent *Hey Jude*. As Jude's quirky dad, Dominique Rodriguez, he strays away from all existing stereotypes associated with the portrayal of Anglo-Indian dads. He neither spoke broken/accented Malayalam, nor was he a loser, on the contrary he was a canny businessman (2018).

To sum up, I think we need to move beyond playing 'spot the stereotype' game, which can only lead to a form of banal critical practice that contributes little to understanding why stereotypes persists and how they might mutate and function in a variety of different ways in different contexts. For me, one of the most interesting things about *Hey Jude* lies in the way it raises several interesting questions about the place and status of Anglo-Indians in contemporary India. From the perspective of a non-resident Indian, I would like to know more about whether the most pressing ideological criticism we might make of the film lies in the way it integrates its Anglo-Indian characters into what I presume to be mainstream Anglo-Indian practices.

For example, I was intrigued by the way Jude's Anglo-Indian family ate their meals Indian style and spoke Malayalam punctuated by English phrases. Now, I understand that the film may be using English as a tokenistic signifier of Anglo-Indian identity, but there is also the possibility that Anglo-Indians in Kerala no longer speak English at home. It might have been interesting for Mathew and James to provide a more expansive account of the degree to which Anglo-Indians have integrated into mainstream Malayalam culture. In a similar vein, one of the film's cheapest laughs comes at the expense of an overweight young women who is 'matched' with the hapless Jude, who provides her with a calorie and fat analysis to discourage her from putting on more weight. One of the distinctive features of Anglo-Indian culture is

that the community traditionally eschews arranged marriages for so-called 'love-marriages'. Once again, from the perspective of an 'outsider', it is not clear whether the film's depiction of marriage rituals resonates with contemporary Anglo-Indian cultural practices in India today. The 'naturalness' of these signs of mainstream integration merits further commentary.

Mathew and James claim that Dr Sebastian and Crystal are Syrian Christians. I assumed they were Anglo-Indians since there was nothing I could detect in the film that indicated otherwise. However, on closer inspection of the film's credits it is clear that the characters do not have typical Anglo-Indian surnames. However, they do appear to engage in many of the stereotypical cultural practices associated with Anglo-Indians (I wonder how many spectators took these characters as Anglo-Indians). Like the figures in my faux screenplay, Dr Sebastian and Crystal love music. Dr Sebastian is rarely seen without an alcoholic beverage or guitar in his hand. In short, he gambles, smokes and sings like an Anglo-Indian. He is also down on his luck. He is a trained psychologist but can't get a job in the local Goan hospital. His speech is punctuated with English phrases like 'be cool, man' and he is not afraid of having a good time. Similarly, Crystal expresses similar sentiments when she declares, 'we are on the earth for a short time, so we should do a lot of nonsense and enjoy it thoroughly' (Hey Jude, 2018). She also takes on the stereotypical role of a seductress, replete with bright red lipstick and a figure-hugging dress when she instigates a kiss with Jude who flees in panic. It is as though Dr Sebastian and Crystal are trying to teach Jude how to be a stereotypical Anglo-Indian. At one-point Crystal says to Jude: 'You don't know music? What kind of Anglo-Indian are you?' (2018, 1.04.40). However, in the context of the film this gesture is, I think, meant to

be life-affirming rather than degrading. Put differently, it's possible to see Dr Sebastian and Crystal as the embodiment of a particular kind of Anglo-Indian modernity that Jude and his family have lost, perhaps by being more closely integrated into mainstream Malayalam culture.

To sum up, I think the film is more complicated and nuanced in its treatment of Anglo-Indians than Mathew and James would have us believe. Certainly, people are more complex than stereotypes imply, but manufacturing 'positive images' cannot capture the diversity of all Anglo-Indians. It is crucial that we acknowledge that stereotypes are embedded in a deeper cultural fabric, which contains the ounce of truth we can, on occasion, find in stock representations. My lack of access to most of the other films cited in by Mathew and James prevents me from commenting on the value of their general argument about the function of Anglo-Indian stereotypes in Malayalam cinema. However, I think they should have a closer look at *Hey Jude*, which takes up the Beatles' invitation to take a sad song and makes it better, which is not such a bad idea in the current political climate.

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**Glenn D'Cruz** is an Associate Professor in Art and Performance and teaches drama and cultural studies at Deakin University, Australia. He is the author of *Sarah Kane's 4:48 Psychosis* (Routledge, 2018) and *Teaching Postdramatic Theatre: Anxieties, Aproias and Dispositions* (Palgrave, 2018). He is the co-editor of *Contemporary*

*Publics: Shifting Boundaries in New Media, Technology and Culture* —with Katja Lee, David Marshall, and Sharyn Macdonald (Palgrave, 2016). He is also the author of *Midnight's Orphans: Anglo-Indians in Post/Colonial Literature* (Peter Lang, 2006), and the editor of *Class Act: Melbourne Workers Theatre 1987-2007* (Vulgar Press, 2007) which was short listed for the Victorian premier's prize for best community history. His work has appeared in journals such as *New Theatre Quarterly*, *Australasian Drama Studies*, *Thesis 11*, *Southern Review*, *Meanjin*, *Celebrity Studies*, *Media International Australia*.

He has been a visiting scholar at the Australian National University (2005) and City University New York (2018). His creative work has been performed and/or exhibited at Federation Square, Melbourne, the RMIT Gallery, Walker Street Gallery, Federation Hall, VCA and the Gertrude Street Gallery in Melbourne.

He is a senior member of the AusStage project. AusStage provides an accessible online resource for researching live performance in Australia. Development is led by a consortium of universities, government agencies, industry organisations and collecting institutions with funding from the Australian Research Council and other sources.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I also make a similar argument in my paper, 'Anglo-Indians in Hollywood, Bollywood and Arthouse Cinema' (2007) which Mathew and James cite, but use a selective quotation that does not represent my argument concerning the function of Anglo-Indian stereotypes in *Julie* (1975)

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, famously remarked '*Je est un autre*' ('I is an other') in a letter to Georges Izambard, 13 May 1871. The salient point is that we cannot assume self-knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> For a more recent commentary on the strengths and weaknesses of Mulvey's argument see Thornham (2015).