

Multi-layered & complex: Ayush Menon in Jalsa

Much has been written about Vidya Balan's newest release, Jalsa. The movie has attempted to complicate ideas of motherhood, morality, domestic power dynamics and so much more. But amidst its gripping storyline of a journalist's complicated life and choices, the movie has another star. Ayush, a young boy with cerebral palsy and son of Vidya Balan's character Maya Menon's son.

Our introduction to Ayush portrays him as a teenage boy just the same as many others. He is trying to shoot a video for social media even as his grandmother keeps getting in the way. She comes in the frame, looks at the camera and interrupts his shot. Ayush snaps and complains. That his speech is unclear and his movements jerky are a mere footnote to a scene that plays out in so many of our own households. Shortly after, Vidya Balan is seen checking in with her son, asking if he has completed everything he needs to do for the day. Have you done your homework, she asks. What about physiotherapy? Have you showered? Ayush's physiotherapy is just like showering – one (rather uninteresting) part of his day - and the young boy treats it exactly like that. "I don't like it but I did it," he tells his mother. As viewers, we find ourselves chuckling at the adolescent honesty.

Throughout the two hour running time of the movie, director Suresh Triveni and his writing team have done what we so rarely see in mainstream Bollywood cinema. They created a layered character who just happens to have a disability. In Jalsa, Ayush is a cricket fan, a video game enthusiast and loves the beach. He is proud of the 700 followers he has on social media and dislikes doing his homework. That he has cerebral palsy is besides the point. In one of the most powerful sequences of the movie, Ayush is seen playing a video game with Imad, his non-disabled friend. Ayush has the upper hand in the game and Imad is trying to make excuses for his loss – he got hurt playing cricket, he says. Immediately perking up, Ayush asks if he can by for the next match only to have Imad scoff at him. "You cannot bat, bowl or field," Imad says without taking his eyes off the video game. "What will you do there? Circus?" The comment catches the attention of Ruksana, Imad's mother and the cook at Ayush's house (played wonderfully by Shefali Shah) who immediately ticks him off. Apologies are offered and accepted and the script moves on.

The first time I watched the scene, I caught myself wondering if the movie had done enough. Did Imad know why he was apologising? How would the need for inclusion be communicated without a conversation with the young boy? Would Imad invite Ayush for the next game? Yet, only ten minutes later, the movie quietened my concerns. Ayush is shown arguing with his father over a wicket in a game of cricket inside the house. He can bat, no matter what Imad thinks. The message has been conveyed loud and clear.

As the movie progresses and drama unfolds, Ayush plays a key role in keeping the plot moving. His relationships, his personality, his empathy, his morality – all come to the fore. While the characterisation of Ayush is noteworthy, what truly deserves celebration is the casting. In an industry where characters with disability are often played by non-disabled actors, Ayush's role is played brilliantly by Surya Khasibatla, a teenager with cerebral palsy. Much like the character he plays, Surya too is a multifaceted young man. In a recent interview with [BBC](#), he is described as a vegetarian foodie who plays the piano, loves cricket and is a "nifty coder." On his own [website](#), Surya says he dreams of becoming a tech entrepreneur who will make an open-source voice-based operating system and programming language using artificial intelligence and machine learning. But the goal does not stop with software. "I want to make my company the best disabled-friendly employer," Surya writes.

Off screen and on screen, Surya Khasibatla and Ayush Menon are important to the conversations around mainstreaming disability and inclusion. It must be reinforced that persons with disabilities too are multi-layered and complex individuals with different facets to their personality. That these complexities are finally being reflected on screen is a significant step forward. We hope we see many more Jalsas on the big screen.