

MEDIA REVIEW

Adolescence: what are adults missing?

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***Adolescence*, Netflix, Producers: Jack Thorne, Philip Barantini, Brad Pitt, Jeremy Kleiner, Dede Gardner, and others, Director: Philip Barantini, March 2025, 51-65 minutes, English.**

An initial understanding

The 4-episode miniseries, *Adolescence*, begins with the dramatic early morning arrest of 13-year-old Jamie for the stalking and stabbing of a classmate. It follows the police through the various procedures to arrest a juvenile, the statutory warning, the medical examination, and explanations to the accused child. A social worker and a lawyer are assigned to Jamie and his anxious and bewildered family, comforting each other that it's simply a case of mistaken identity — "We've seen it on the telly many times, haven't we, love?". The investigating officers collect evidence to prove his guilt, while a therapist works with Jamie to understand his psychological state. The series painstakingly and compassionately unravels the mind of a boy held in thrall to the internet, and the devastating consequences of his actions on everyone around him.

The opening credits are photographs of Jamie, reminiscent of any average family album – toddler, preschooler, young boy looking earnestly into the camera. This is no Calvin, the cartoon character who eternally rails and rebels against an incomprehensible adult world, just an ordinary boy growing up in a suburban town.

What becomes apparent is the utter normalcy of the family in which Jamie has grown up. The stay-at-home mother, content to take care of her house and her family, who understands that "he doesn't like needles" and needs someone with him when blood tests are done. The father, a plumber, with the values they hold dear enshrined in the tagline on his work van "Friendly, reliable and professional".

Some young adult viewers I interviewed said that they kept waiting for the denouement, that he had been sexually abused by his father, that he was a victim of sibling rivalry, of being emotionally traumatised by his elder sister, of exposure to damaging domestic violence. But there were no classic "adverse childhood experiences" on which to conveniently pin the blame for his actions.

The teen and the internet

The disconnect between Jamie's parents, even his elder sister, and his lived reality is sharply highlighted. They seem unable

to comprehend what it means for a young boy to negotiate adolescence, the desperate need to be liked and admired, his confusion with the attractions and desires of a developing sexuality.

Throughout civilised human history what we share with children about life and sexuality has been governed by embarrassment and rigid social values. Parents prefer the easier alternative of presuming that they will learn "as they grow up," "at the right time," "like we did". They have chosen to forget their own angst and fears, their fumbling sexual explorations, their transgressions, of being both victim and perpetrator.

But now there is a greater adversary, the algorithm. You press "Like" on one enticing figure and your feed throws a thousand images at you, each more titillating than the previous one. In a world run by social media, the young are being brought up by the internet, without any checks and balances, with no one to break it down to say: "This isn't the only way to be, these aren't the only essential attributes one needs to have..."

The teens are the time of a search for identity, often an anxiety-ridden struggle between childhood and the social push to "grow up", with a myriad expectations to be fulfilled.

The growing teenager wants a space away from parents and teachers, the adult world which seems to watch them and judge them constantly. Earlier, they hid in their rooms or in the spaces between school and home, in open grounds and along tree-covered roads. They spoke to classmates and friends who, being in the same boat, helped each other negotiate this roses-and-thorns path.

Now they have been given the perfect den, a tiny screen with the universe inside it where their parents cannot follow, but their peers can. But also an anonymous world of people, happy to pour out vituperative words stemming out of their own frustrations, and unwilling or perhaps unable, to see how it can destroy a person.

A deeper unpeeling of the film — an insidious call to misogyny

The film shows the casual way bullying and targeting is manifested, and how a thumbs up or down, or an icon, a casual "Go, off yourself" can set the seal on a young mind already feeling battered and isolated. Social media, unregulated and polarised, can have a devastating impact.

In a world which is increasingly moving towards a feminist view, there is a strong push back by some men and the internet amplifies this effect. The more they post their anger and angst, the more they are bombarded with reels and views which crystallise their beliefs. This is not just about Andrew Tate, the social influencer who spouts misogyny and hypermasculinity. These are millions of constant messages to feed their insecurities and harden their opinions.

The red pill icon is used by the girl victim to tell Jamie to get real about the illusions he holds about himself; and he discusses being an “incel” (involuntary celibate) with his friends. The parents I spoke to didn't know what “red pilling” meant, or the term “incel”.

The red pill and the blue pill come from the movie *The Matrix* where taking the former makes you aware of harsh truths while the latter keeps you oblivious of the world around you, cocooned in a carefully manufactured reality. The red pill concept has been steadily co-opted by various groups to demonstrate that democracy, equal rights, affirmative action, liberal views, feminism, to name but a few, are all warped ideas and that these are the cause of people (read, themselves) being unsuccessful or deprived or rejected by women. That becoming an “incel” is forced on boys and men because women believe themselves to be superior and entitled, rejecting ordinary guys and seducing rich handsome men with their charms. The fact that women want caring and communicative partners, not hyper masculine men, and equity not dominance, has no place in this world.

Has Jamie converted to this new ideology? Jamie asks for his father rather than his mother as his appropriate adult companion. Does he hope that his father may understand better what transpired? Or is he too ashamed to have his mother sitting beside him when he has to speak about what he has done? Jamie is still within the mesh of *what* he has done, the *why* is still a distant and nebulous incomprehension.

His interactions with the female psychologist further portray his views on women. Jamie is chatty and happy to be with her when she is comforting or supportive, getting him his hot chocolate with sprinkles. But the moment she asks tough questions he gets aggressive, raising his voice and physically threatening her.

There is no place for introspection, no place to ask for help, no place to empathise with the victim's family or acknowledge the pain that he has caused in snuffing out the life of his classmate.

Some more insights

What makes a family into a unit? Or adults into capable parents?

Most parents spoke about their fear of being in the same situation as Jamie's parents. Were they too missing something going on with their children? Would they be able to pick up signals if their child was going through a similar experience to

Jamie's? Would parental controls on screen time be sufficient to help prevent a similar tragedy? Is that even possible in India where parents proudly speak of their two-year-old who “knows how to put on the i-pad even if I switch it off”, their four-year-old who can re-enact anything seen on a reel?

Siblings often help each other demystify their own gender with its contrasting ideas, values and behaviours. Notwithstanding sibling rivalry there is also a camaraderie, a joint opposition to parental control. But as Jamie's family deals with the consequences of his action, one notices that his elder sister was completely unaware of what he thought or felt or wanted. It was not just his parents, from a different generation, but his sister barely a few years older than him who was uncomprehending of who and what he had become. Is Jamie's family so disconnected or are most families thus, the disconnection hidden in social niceties till a crisis lays them bare?

Can the internet be made safer?

Brilliant engineers develop newer programmes, algorithms devour data to become more personalised; polarised content is developed to entice more viewers, and AI-generated chatbots can verbally seduce people, or push them to commit suicide or murder. How do creators bring in safeguards to protect growing minds and vulnerable emotions? How do they develop regulators? Who creates models of guidance for parents and friends who want to help but don't know how, while the internet denigrates, desensitises and decimates? Who will take that responsibility?

Can we have police procedures like these?

The early morning action by the police is one of controlled violence, armed officers of the law breaking down the front door, forcing everyone on to the floor, picking up the boy and leaving with him within a short time of entry. But this is tempered by the strict protocols of police measures to protect a child accused of a crime, the appropriate adult and the social worker and the lawyer immediately assigned, and even the sensitivity of the lead investigator asking if he wants his father to help him change his clothes as he wets his pants in fright.

Can these be incorporated into our Indian police systems, at least in our POCSO case management where the child is a victim not an accused? Even more so when the child is in conflict with the law, particularly the adolescent from a poor family, uncomprehending and vulnerable to the traumatic exposure to the hostile criminal justice system.

Why some saw the series and some didn't

Many young adults chose to see the series because they heard that the cinematography was excellent. Each episode is a one-shot take. There are no cuts to tighten the narrative. The silences during the questioning, during the therapy

sessions stretch out organically, the goings and comings at the police station continue at their own pace, while Jamie is one of many players in their own private dramas. The viewer feels as if they are present inside the story, a bystander involved in every interaction. They share the feeling of heaviness, the frustrations and the sadness of each actor.

Some said that they chose not to see it because they heard it was "heavy". And yet, anyone who began watching the series had to stay till the end, mesmerised by the narration and the portrayal of every character. None, whom I spoke to, left midway.

Ultimately there are no heroes or villains, just ordinary human beings trapped in extraordinary circumstances. The series closes with Jamie's incarceration. His parents and sister start to move beyond the year of trauma. To pull their life together. To

dare to joke and laugh a little. The message is clear, life can go on.

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