

Critique

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## Preying Phoebes on the Prairie



*Family (Malayalam, 2023, 1H 51M) By- Don Palathara*

*“If a body catch a body coming through the rye.” “I keep picturing all these little kids playing in this big field of rye and all. And nobody’s around—nobody big, I mean—except me. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody .... I mean ... I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That’s all I do all day. I’d just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it’s crazy, but that’s the only thing I’d really like to be. I know it’s crazy.” – The Catcher in the Rye, J D Salinger.*

The above passage from Salinger’s eponymous classic could, very well, aptly apply to Malayalam film director Don Palathara’s Sony – the Man Friday – the Eternal Do-Gooder – the Rainmaker – of his Christian commune or the *Family*. Sheathed in sheep’s skin, conveniently hiding the predatory traits of a leopard behind the camouflage he so cleverly wears, winning the confidence, trust and goodwill of his unsuspecting community.

Unlike Salinger’s Holden Caulfield, who too is a hunter, hunting innocence—not to ravish or pulverise it, but to save it, to nurture it, and give it space. Sony, on the other hand, behind his naïve, chameleon façade he fronts, is actually a noxious and nefarious satyromaniac despoiling innocents led unto

his satanic acre in implicit faith he would deliver good education to them.

After all, this jobless, all errands man, is most sought after to tutor (he had been running a tutorial centre now shut down) those that are poor of poetry or weak in maths what have you.

Aided, abetted and assisted, of course, by the *Family* that constitutes the universe around him. Blinkered and ignorant of the blighted existence their benign hearted Sony lives, freely prowling and preying upon the Holy Innocents with impunity thrust unto his lair.

In fact, one could say Sony is Palathara’s hideous Holden, unlike Salinger’s, habituated to

satiates his lustful hunger preying on right before the righteous eyes of the Family that Sony comes from.

Through Sony's "instinctual, insatiable, paedophilic disposition" to "prey on pubescent children" Don Palathara starkly spotlights on the harsh realities of physical violence, sexual abuse, and societal corruption, in his latest directorial visitation in *The Family*.

With the church, and the community he comes from, blissfully brushing aside his felonies going against all Catholic precepts, taken in by his geniality, Sony scours, stalks and satiates his inner demon with wanton abandon.

Brushing aside any aspersions being cast on dear Sony says the man's aunt, a nun, "Sony is bit over friendly with children" assertively dismissive of sister Rani's misgivings about Sony's trespasses stating "you had your share of silliness" vainly observing "everybody makes mistakes."

It may be posited that Palathara's Family, coincidentally comes at a time when exalted Christian institutions the world over have been on the global scanner for all the embarrassing and wrong reasons.

From the hallowed, holiest of holy cities of The Vatican to God's Own Country – Kerala – nearer home.

So much so, The Pope himself, in the now famous documentary – *Amen: The Pope Answers* has had to face a barrage of disquieting questions from the young faithfuls, accepting "there is something rotten in the hallowed institutions of the Christian faith."

That the misdeeds of several wearing the cloak and habit have come to fore and faithfuls are seeking affirmative answers from the Vatican's Holy See speaks of the sordid state of affairs.

To a question by a victim that there is a lot of hypocrisy within the church, with its tendency to

siding with the predator, the Pope concedes the problem is serious. Moe so, cases involving the churches worse because people are destroyed exactly where they should be care for. The abuser destroys the child. If you are a church person hypocrisy and double living are horrible, laments the Pope.

True. Rightly taking a cue from recent incidents that have rocked the hallowed institutions, director Don Palathara has sought to shed spotlight on the malfeasance in Family.

However, despite his exalted intentions, where Palathara's Family falls short, while disclosing the despicable duplicity of adults and irreparable loss of innocence of children, is he turns Family more into an "architectural design construct" rather than haunting human drama with facile Deus ex Machina finish.

Palathara sadly sacrifices humanistic, socialistic, and accessible approach to the narrative, spicing Family with his panoply of trademark and recurrent Christian imagery, motifs, symbols he draws sustenance from.

His overt preoccupation with niceties of minimalism and sparseness of form, preconceived set piece design constructions and highly nuanced aesthetics turn Family is more of a cinematographic experimentation.

In the process Family comes across a complex film about the insidiousness of a community's self-preservation conveniently brushing aside the quotidian conspiracy under the umbrella of virtuousness and righteousness and hoping St Thomas would "protect them (the children) keenly, as they "roam" the wilderness in carefree abandon, as also with "showers of mercy" on the culpable wrongdoers.

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