

Journey of Portrayal of Disability from Mother India to Margarita with a Straw: A Critical Review

Abstract

Cinema is an effective medium that portrays, mirrors, and influences the society all at same time. Moreover, Indian film industry is the largest in the world in terms of number of films produced per year and so is its influence. Hindi cinema has had various trends i.e. the Lover Boy era beginning with Rajesh Khanna, Angry Young Man started with Amitabh Bachchan, romance came into it with films like 'Kayamat se Kayamat tak' and 'Ek Duj Ke Liye', then there has been a season of action films. Interspersed in-between have been films that took up disability as one of their themes. But there is a difference in the way disability has been portrayed in Hindi cinema over the years. It has changed from portraying the disabled characters in stereotyped roles to taking them up as the central theme and focus of the film.

The purpose of present study is to analyse the gradual and drastic change in portrayal of disability in Hindi Cinema.

For this purpose, the researcher has taken up two movies which are representative of two polarities of depiction of disability viz., Mother India (1957) and Margarita with a Straw (2014).

Keywords: Portrayal, Influence, Disability, Trends.

Introduction

Cinema is an effective medium that portrays, mirrors, and influences the society at the same time. Moreover, Indian film industry is the largest in the world in terms of number of films produced per year and so is its influence. Hindi cinema has had various trends i.e. the Lover Boy era beginning with Rajesh Khanna, Angry Young Man started with Amitabh Bachchan, romance came into it with films like 'Kayamat se Kayamattak' and 'Ekdujekeliye', then there has been a season of action films. Interspersed in-between have been filmsthat took up disability as one of their themes.Disability, as per WHO guidelines, is an umbrella term covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. It means inability to function optimally due to an impairment i.e. loss of a body part or loss of function in a body part or problem in body structure. But there is a difference in the way disability has been portrayed in Hindi cinema over the years. It has changed from portraying the disabled characters in stereotyped Roles (like object of pity)as in 'Mother India'to taking them up as the central theme and focus of the film (like in 'Margarita with a Straw').

The concept, understanding, and dealing of disability has changed over the years. It has journeyed from segregation (keeping persons with disability [PWD] away from the mainstream) to integration (keeping PWD in the mainstream but in a separate identified section) to inclusion (keeping PWD in and encouraging them to be an element within the community). It has come a long way from asylums to rehabilitation (i.e. to reach the fullest potential using available resources). Similarly, the treatment meted out to people with disabilities by the society has undergone change. This attitudinal change and handling of disability has brought about a significant change in the way PWD view their own disability and themselves. It has shifted from 'Apaahij hone se toh mar Jaanaachchahai' to 'I have rights to equal opportunities and full participation'. This journey has been portrayed in Hindi cinema as well. From 'Mother India' where female protagonist's physically disabled husband prefers to leave his family behind rather than to depend on his young wife for day-to-day living to 'Margarita with a straw' where the main character is wheel-chair bound due to cerebral palsy but is portrayed as an independent individual with her own needs. Many researchers have noticed, researched, and published about this change.



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Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to highlight and to bring awareness about people with disability and how they are being portrayed in popular media. The portrayal influences the way society perceives and treats them.

Review of Literature

Jain, Jayana (2018) has written about the representation of disability and sexuality in selected Hindi films in her paper titled, '*Bit of barfi, Sip of margarita: Disability and Sexuality in Hindi Films*'. Gawande and Kashyap (2017) write about the impaired heroes in, '*Discovering Impaired Superheroes in Hindi Movies: A Study of Characterization of Disabled in Movies and its Impact on their Social Life*'. Bairagi (2017) summarizes that disabled are no longer treated as 'human oddities' but as normal individuals with certain kind of different abilities in her paper, '*Reflection of the Disabled Concept in Indian Cinema*'. Shrimati C. Das (2015) has explored the powerful role Hindi cinema plays in shaping and changing cultural perception of people in her work, '*Cultural Correction of Negative Perceptions through Bollywood Diaspora, Cinema, Identity*'. Banerjee and Sarkar (2014) focus on the responsibility of cinema as a powerful social media has towards the well-being of the society in their work, '*The Ongoing Trend of Portraying Disability in 21st Century Hindi Cinema: An Overview*'. Dawn (2013) in her paper, '*The Politics of Cinematic Representation of Disability: "the psychiatric gaze"*', concludes that the idea of disability in contemporary cinema has been created and perceived as a fantasy for public consumption. '*Portrayal of Disability in Hindi Cinema: A Study of Emerging Trends of Differently-abled*', by Mohapatra (2012) attempts to identify variation of portrayal of disability in earlier days and in present trends with the conclusion that filmmakers today are trying to make disabled people differently abled and are creating awareness in Indian audience. Mukerjee (2007) explores the way disabled are presented in Hindi films lead to formation of stereotypes which creates representational meaning of disability in, '*The Formation of Stereotypes: The Disabled as the "Other" in Hindi Films*'.

The purpose of present study is to analyse the gradual and positive change in the portrayal of disability in Hindi Cinema using critical review (a detailed commentary on and critical evaluation of a text). For this purpose, the researcher has taken up two Hindi films which are representative of two polarities of depiction of disability viz., *Mother India* (1957) and *Margarita with a Straw* (2014). The review begins with *Mother India* and ends with *Margarita with a Straw*, in-between exploring the portrayal of disability other films. She has seen both the films and read film reviews as well as journal papers to work on the current paper.

In the movie *Mother India*, produced and directed by Mehboob Khan and released in 1957, the character of Shamu (played by Raaj Kumar) is crippled when both his hands get crushed under a boulder leaving him dependent on his young wife. Shamu is taunted by the village money-lender who

puts his feet on his chest and tells him he is not man enough for living on the earnings of his wife. His self-esteem is destroyed. Later in the film, Shamu feels extremely helpless when he sees his son smoking cigarette, but he does not stop him out of self-pity. Finally, one day Shamu decides to leave his family behind and vanishes in the dark of the night. Though the character of Shamu has been played very effectively by Raaj Kumar but the portrayal of the character's disability and reaction towards it is such that the societal norm and attitude of the day gets re-affirmed in the minds of the audience, namely, it is better to die than to live the life of a crippled especially if the crippled person is man. This was a trend setter film and was sent for Oscar nomination.

Arzoo (1965) and Hum Dono (1958) are on similar lines where the male protagonists, Rajendra Kumar and Dev Anand respectively, are crippled and decide that living the life of a crippled is not conducive. In *Khamoshi* (1969), the nurse in psychiatry ward (played by Waheeda Rehman), loses her sanity because she pours her love and affection in treating her patients. As a result, she is admitted in the same psychiatry ward towards the end of the movie. Similar is the story of *Khilona*, 1970 film, in which the woman care taker (played by Mumtaz) is left heart broken when the male protagonist suffering from PTSD (played by Sanjeev Kumar) gets well and doesn't recognize her. '*Sadma*', starring Sridevi and Kamal Haasan, came in 1983 portraying amnesia due to traumatic brain injury. The girl is abducted, sold in brothel, rescued by male protagonist, regains sanity and memory till the time of the accident with help of village doctor, goes away with family and remains indifferent to her rescuer who is left behind heart broken. '*15 Park Avenue*' a 2005 film could not justify its theme of schizophrenia. Till recent years, entertainment has been the focus of Hindi cinema. Very few directors took the risk of making 'out of league' movies.

But the trend in Hindi cinema has changed and the film makers are trying to educate and change the attitude of the audience towards disability. One such film is '*Margarita with a Straw*' for which Shonali Bose was inspired by real-life incident wherein her own cousin (affected by Cerebral Palsy) wanted to experience sex as gift for her birthday.

'*Margarita with a Straw*', directed by Shonali Bose, released in India in 2015. It is a movie that deals with inclusion, empowerment, self-acceptance and acknowledgment of sexuality by the Cerebral Palsy affected wheel-chair bound female character Laila (played beautifully by Kalki Koechlin). The parents, especially the mother (played by Revathi) make sure that Laila doesn't waste her life, rather, she is encouraged to complete her education. She is a successful writer and composer for her college band in India and goes to New York University for semester study on scholarship. In New York, Laila meets Khanum who is blind but is, at the time, independent with a positive attitude towards and acceptance of her own disability unlike '*Barsat Ki Ek Raat*' (1981) and crime thriller *Kaabil* (2017), where blindness becomes reason for rape and torture of the blind woman. The

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blindness has been used just for twist in the plot so that the hero (Amitabh Bachchan and Hrithik Roshan respectively) can play the superhero.

The professor asks a boy from Laila's class in New York University to help her write the assignments. Though she is capable of writing with help of laptop still she accepts the offer because she finds the boy handsome and sexy. Laila acknowledges and explores her sexuality, first with Khanum and then with this classmate. Laila's mother accompanies her to New York and Laila is shown massaging her mother's back who is enjoying this luxury without guilt. Margarita with a Straw is one of the finest films depicting disability without any sympathy, pity, villainy, or cure (Gawande & Kashyap, 2017).

This transition in Hindi Cinema has been slow but steady nevertheless. Gulzar's 'Koshish' (1972), Sai Paranjpye's 'Sparsh' (1980), and Sanjay Leela Bansali's 'Khamoshi – The Musical' (1996) have portrayed the life of people with disability with sensitivity. Hearing and speech impaired couple create happy life together in Koshish, hearing and speech impaired parents deal with able bodied daughter in Khamoshi whereas Sparsh is about inclusive education for visually impaired.

Other films followed suit like 'Black' (2005) 'Taare Zameen Par' (2007), 'Paa' (2009), 'Guzarish' (2010), 'Barfi' (2013), and 'Hichki' (2018). The trend in Hindi Cinema now is to take up different and rare diseases such as progeria (accelerated aging disease) in Paa and Tourette syndrome (disorder characterized by repetitive, stereotyped, involuntary movements and vocalizations called tics) in Hichki. Barfi deals with Autism as well as Speech & hearing impairment whereas TaareZameen Par is about dyslexia, the reading impairment.

Previously, the people with disability were treated as side characters or were for twist in the plot but now their stories are being taken up seriously and made into full length feature film (Banerjee & Sarkar, 2014). In a country like India, where people idolize film stars and are markedly influenced by cinema, it is very important that human emotions and mental illness are portrayed accurately and responsibly (Mohapatra, 2012). The way the disabled are presented in Hindi cinema leads to the stereotypes which in turn contribute to the formulation of cultural meanings of disability (Mukherjee, 2007). Films play significant role in communicating characters which have deep impact on peoples' perspective of persons with disabilities and films need to focus more on the potentialities rather than the shortcomings of people with disabilities. (Dawn, 2014)

Hindi cinema has undergone a transformation wherein young directors and producers are looking at disability as a novel hit subject, but the portrayal has become sensitive, positive and delicate. The stereotyping of characters has reduced as well. The relevance of the paper being presented is to

highlight the fact that persons-with-disability are becoming persons-with-different-ability. Also, each person with disability is unique with needs similar to those of so-called normal population. What more can Hindi cinema do is to stop viewing people with disabilities as objects of pity, include persons with disabilities in mainstream media discussions, and stop portraying them as super heroes.

Finally, in the words of Robert Frost, 'Woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, miles to go before I sleep'.

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