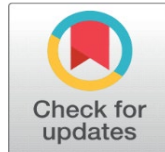
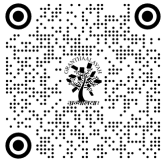


BEYOND THE ABLEIST-NORMATIVE BOUNDARIES: UNRAVELLING THE REPRESENTATION OF DISABILITY AND SEXUALITY IN MARGARITA WITH A STRAW

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ABSTRACT

Through the study of Shonali Bose's movie *Margarita with a Straw*, the paper examines the intersectionality of disability and sexuality. The research focuses on the character of Laila, a young woman with cerebral palsy, whose journey serves as the film's central narrative arc. Laila's exploration of her sexuality is intricately interwoven with her experiences as a person with a disability, which provides a unique lens to understand the complexities of disabled identity. The analysis delves into Laila's challenges and triumphs, considering the impact of societal attitudes and cultural norms on the quest for her self-discovery. The study employs a qualitative approach to analyze the film's narrative and character dynamics, seeking to unravel how disabled women are labelled as either asexual or hypersexual. This research underscores the significance of storytelling in fostering a more comprehensive understanding of diverse identities that opens avenues for discourse, challenging societal norms, and advocating for a more inclusive and empathetic approach to disability representation in films.

Keywords: Disability, Sexuality, Stigma, Hypersexual, Asexual Objectification, Rolelessness

1. INTRODUCTION

Bollywood plays a prominent role in the cultural production in India. Bollywood movies and Indian society are mutually reflexive as the subject matter of Bollywood films is mainly influenced by the everyday lives of the people in India. Bollywood significantly influences and transforms people's perceptions of society and culture in India. Likewise, Bollywood movies play an important role in highlighting the attitude and underlying bias of society towards disabled people. The dominant inbuilt perception amongst non-disabled people about disability is that it incites feelings of pity, humor, awe, and terror. Such societal perceptions also influence the disability representation in Bollywood movies. As Atanu Mohapatra

(2012) writes, "Portrayal of disability in films swings primarily between two extremes—pity, fun, caricaturing, sympathy, and awesome heroism are at one end of the spectrum while discrimination, coping-up, emotional swings and aspirations of the human soul are at the other end" (p. 127). The representation of disabled people in popular culture is primarily based upon how societal power structures operate, which consequently regulate the norms of social codes of conduct.

Disability representation in Bollywood has changed tremendously from the 1930s to the present day because of the gradual change in society. The conventional notion of 'karma,' where disability is generally perceived as retribution for sins of past lives, is a typical belief amongst the people about disability in India. This notion of disability as punishment has become a prevalent trope in Hindi movies. Bombay Talkies films *Jeevan Naiya* (1936), *Kashish* (1972), *Netrikkan* (1979), and *Dhanwaan* (1981) are some examples of the enduring portrayals of disability as punishment. This traditional concept of 'karma' and 'punishment' is so deeply rooted that it makes the disability a condition to look down upon. Apart from the portrayal of disability as retribution for sins of the past, there is also a portrayal of disability as comic relief in entertainment films such as *Golmaal* series (2006-2017), *Tom, Dick and Harry* (2006), *Mujhse Shadi Karogi* (2004), *Pyare Mohan* (2006), and *Judaai* (1997). However, disability is not the central motif in these movies, but sadly, the films emphasize the prevalent stereotypes to relate with the viewers. Such films mock the disability and present it as an offensive caricature, which in turn shows the insensitive attitude of society towards disability. Likewise, disabled people are impersonated as heroes and superheroes in movies like *Dushman* (1998) and *Aankhen* (2002). Although these two particular movies present the heroism of disabled people, they also misrepresent the identities of the specific characters and leave a limited space to understand them. It is a general misconception that disabled people are unable to live independently in society, and this notion stresses the charity model of disability. The movies like *Dosti* (1964), *Koshish* (1972), and *Khamoshi* (1996) present disabled people with the trope of dependence and mercy. It also harbors the idea that people with disabilities are a burden in society, which clearly shows the ignorance of the people about the concept of interdependence.

The representation of disability in Bollywood films until the early 2000s was a disturbing caricature; after this, there started a trend of presenting disability with some sensitivity in the movies. The disability activism in the 1990s, the PWD Act 1995, and the RPWD Act 2016 played a crucial role in sensitizing the perception of disability in India. This sensitization of disability has led to the production of numerous Bollywood films dealing with several conditions that seldom receive sincere deliberation amongst the people. Movies such as *Paa* (2009) deal with Progeria; *Thanmatra* (2005) and *U Me aur Hum* (2008) attends to Alzheimer's; *Tare Zameen Par* (2007) addresses Dyslexia; *My Name is Khan* (2010) shows a protagonist having an Asperger syndrome; and *Angel* (2011) discusses Cerebral Palsy. It is delightful to observe that Bollywood movies certainly going in the direction of an inclusive view of disability. In a culture where the majority of disabled people consider previous birth as a factor leading to one's disability, such films play a crucial role in promoting awareness of disability.

In India, there is a social marginalization of women because of the patriarchal dominance in the society. The intersectionality of gender and disability shows that disabled women are doubly marginalized as well as underrepresented and misrepresented. A similar sort of marginalization and misrepresentation of disabled women is present in Bollywood films. The history of Bollywood movies indicates that there are movies that represent women with various disabilities on numerous

occasions; however, not many of them have managed to convey the intersection of women's disability and sexuality. Disabled women are frequently seen as objects of men's empathy and also at risk of sexual abuse in movies such as *Insaaf* (1987), *Humko Tumse Pyar Hai* (2006), and *Imman Dharam* (1977). The discourse of gendered experiences of disability is present in movies such as *Black* (2005), *Fanaa* (2006), and *Angel* (2011). However, there is still an emotion of pity, which leads to the portrayal of disability in terms of subordination. The representation of disabled women has been devalued stereotypically, which restrains them from any individuality and autonomy. Eventually, it prompts their oppression in a world that operates on the rhetoric of ableism.

The present paper aims to illustrate the current societal demeanor towards disability and sexuality, and explores how society stigmatizes people because of their disability and sexuality, as evidenced in *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) by Shonali Bose. In three parts, the paper studies the distinct nuances of disability in the context of disabled women. The first section, "Theoretical Framework," discusses the terms such as 'normalcy,' 'ableism,' 'compulsory able-bodiedness' and 'compulsory heterosexuality' and also gives a brief plot outline of the movie *Margarita with a Straw* to provide an overview with its story and characters. The second section, "An Investigation of the Disabled Woman's Encounters with the Barriers," argues how the disabled and queer body of the protagonist throws a light on the ableist and heterosexual normative notions of society. While discussing these arguments, the study aims to facilitate an analysis of the complicated relationship between disability and performativity of sexuality and the types of exclusion experienced by characters with particular disabilities in the world built on the ideology of ableism. The third section, "Asexual Objectification: Construction of Disabled Women as Asexual, Hypersexual, and Undesirable," offers a discussion on the disabled body of the protagonist and its labeling as asexual and hypersexual because of ableist and heteronormative notions towards sexuality and disabled body. In a broader scenario, the paper aims to facilitate a perspective on the politics of the portrayal of sexuality of a disabled woman in *Margarita with a Straw*.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The discourse of Disability Studies centers on the deconstruction of the concept of 'normalcy.' Normalcy narrative is the hegemonic sociocultural discourse that subjugates those who do not fit within the normative norms. The primary argument in Disability Studies is that it is necessary to analyze 'normalcy' rather than 'disability' to comprehend the subtleties of the disability. It goes in line with Lennard J. Davis's (1995) argument that "the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (p. 24). Moreover, disability discourse also investigates the idea of an 'able' body, which is based on the ideology of ableism that glorifies as well as privileges the notion of ability and, in turn, of the able body. The ableism is an ideological structure disseminated through a system of portrayals, and its epistemology is "A network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical, therefore essential, and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human" (Campbell 2008, p. 44). It signifies a need to maintain a 'corporeal standard,' and any deviation from it makes a person an outcast. Campbell argues that "Corporeal Otherness is rendered sometimes as the 'disabled,' 'perverted' or 'abnormal body' instead of the more neutral designation 'variable' bodies" (2009, p. 18). Such labeling and exclusionary practice of ableism

are contrary to the idea of an inclusive society and lead to adopting an anti-social demeanor. Therefore, the ideology of 'ableism' posits an unnecessary burden on people to look in a certain way, and any deviation from the prescribed standard maintained by ableism makes a person an object of social exclusion in one way or another.

Queerness and disability are othering to the centrality of heterosexuality and able-bodiedness. The inquiry into the marginalized identities uncovers the propaganda behind the dominant identities, which creates a position of power and authority for the whole discourse. The queer and disabled body of the protagonist of the select movie is analyzed through Robert McRuer's idea of Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Compulsory Heterosexuality. As McRuer (2017) asserts, "The system of compulsory able-bodiedness that produces disability is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness, that- in fact- compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness and vice versa" (p. 397). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines heterosexual as "pertaining to or characterized by the normal relations of the sexes; opp. to *homosexual*" (1971). This definition of heterosexuality illustrates that the relationship between homosexuality and heterosexuality is equal and opposite, but in reality, the relation is of subordination and domination. The framing of heterosexuality as the accepted relationship of the sexes permits heterosexuality to be normalized, while homosexuality and bisexuality are normalized through the continued subordination of both to heterosexuality (McRuer 2017, p. 398). Similarly, the definition of able-bodied in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is "having an able body, i.e., one free from physical disability, and capable of the physical exertions required of it; in bodily health; robust" (1971). The parallel scrutiny of both the definitions of heterosexuality and able-bodied is astonishing because an able-body signifies freedom from physical disability, and heterosexual means something contrary to homosexual. Robert McRuer (2017) makes an important point, "Like compulsory heterosexuality, then, compulsory able-bodiedness functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which actually there is no choice" (p. 399).

Generally, there is a pervasive apprehension in accepting the sexuality of women with disability. It means that the ableist world looks at disabled women as having only a single stigmatic trait and does not see them beyond their disability. There are fair chances of their marginalization and othering as they are contrary to the demands of the normative construct. The paper studies the role of a Bollywood movie in influencing the social perception and empowerment of a disabled woman. To examine the portrayal of disability and sexuality, the select movie, *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), tells the story of a disabled woman's sexual inclination and her quest toward self-recognition. It is a movie about a youthful girl with cerebral palsy living in present-day Delhi and New York. The film begins with the protagonist, Laila, traveling in a motor van that her mother was driving. Laila is a student at Delhi University; at the beginning of the movie, she starts developing romantic feelings towards the lead vocalist of her college band. Laila feels sad when the vocalist does not reciprocate the same romantic feelings. Nonetheless, Laila buried this chapter of her life before long, got a scholarship at New York University, and shifted to New York with her mother. In New York, Laila meets Jared, her American classmate in Manhattan, who smites her and assists her with typing. As the plot of the movie progresses, one day, Laila meets Khanum, a visually impaired girl and an activist of Pakistani and Bangladeshi descent. After meeting Khanum, Laila falls in love with her and recognizes herself as bisexual. Khanum is confident about her sexuality, but in contrast, Laila is a bit scared because she is worried about the reaction of her

family. Laila determinedly draws some audacity to open up about it to her mother. At first, Laila's mother responds with a certain amount of disdain, but eventually, both reconcile. The film closes with Laila ordering a mixed drink, a margarita with a straw, while out on a date with herself following the death of her mother from cancer.

3. AN INVESTIGATION OF THE DISABLED WOMAN'S ENCOUNTERS WITH THE BARRIERS

Margarita with a Straw portrays the everyday struggles that a disabled person endures in a world built on the ideology of normalcy and ableism. Laila's congenital disability is the result of cerebral palsy, due to which she lacks coordination in movement and speech. Laila is not a submissive disabled woman but possesses a sense of agency and questions the prevalent hegemonic oppression of disability in society. She rejects the sympathy directed towards her because of her disability and lives a life full of self-esteem. One of the reasons behind it is the accommodation of her disability by her family. In India, there is no state-sponsored caregiving, and hence, disability becomes a personal or familial issue.

Margarita with a Straw compares and contrasts the disabling social environments in terms of inaccessibility in infrastructure and the public spaces of the two capital cities, Delhi and New York. In New York City, Laila frequently uses public transport and moves around freely in many public areas; however, this is impossible in Delhi. In the movie's opening scene, Laila's mother drives a van to drop Laila at the college along with her son and husband in Delhi, insinuating the fact that for a girl, and notably for a disabled girl, to utilize the public methods of transport is essentially a futile decision in Delhi. Apart from the issue of inaccessibility in Delhi, there is also an issue of safety of women, especially disabled women in Delhi. One day, Laila is sitting in her wheelchair and is lifted through the steps when the lift in her college malfunctions. It shows the inaccessibility of infrastructure in India, which is not built in consideration of the needs of disabled people. Moreover, it also shows how stairs are oppressive for wheelchair users. Cherney (2017) argues about the oppressiveness of stairs towards disabled people:

Consider a set of stairs. An ableist culture thinks little of stairs, or even sees them as elegant architectural devices—especially those grand marble masterpieces that elevate buildings of state. But disability rights activists see stairs as a discriminatory apparatus—a “no crips allowed” sign that only those aware of ableism can read—that makes their inevitable presence around government buildings a not-so-subtle statement about who belongs in our most important public spaces (p. 5)

Laila's character is an adaptation of Malini Chib, a woman with cerebral palsy and an Indian disability rights activist. In her autobiography, *One Little Finger* (2010), Malini Chib discusses a similar exclusionary infrastructure in India and compares it with New York. Malini Chib, just like Laila, struggles to access her college building, and sometimes, her classmates have to lift her wheelchair to the classroom. The counter-narrative in favor of disabled bodies draws attention to the architectural barriers for disabled people and the need for a ramp or elevator to access the vertical spaces.

At one instance in the movie, there is a musical competition at Laila's college, and she writes lyrics for it. The woman delivering the first prize to her team says they deserve this prize because of the song lyrics composed by a disabled girl: “This occasion is an achievement. At the point when I was informed that a disabled young

girl had written the verses of the song, we needed to give honor to her school. Your advancement must have been distinct from ordinary kids; would you need to impart something to us?" (Bose, 2014). The attitude of charity has just not gone well with Laila, and the insensitivity of the college and the woman commentator towards her disability infuriates her. Such an event in the film shows the usual absence of awareness about disability in the public. Notwithstanding the muddled issues featured before, the ideas of perceptions towards the disabled embodiment and sexuality show a network of social and cultural forces that impair persons with disabilities. In a developing country like India, the architectural and attitudinal barriers are high because of the resource crunch to accommodate those with disabilities, which is not the case in a developed city like New York.

4. ASEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION: CONSTRUCTION OF DISABLED WOMEN AS ASEXUAL, HYPERSEXUAL, AND UNDESIRABLE BEING

The myth of the asexuality of disabled people is firmly complicated and works in various manners in disabled women's lives. There is an overlooking of disabled women as sexual beings, which leads to their categorization as a marginalized and ignored class. Addlakha et al. (2017) mention, "While women with disabilities are either de-sexualized or labeled as hypersexual, the sexual rights of women with disabilities are considered superfluous at best, and a complete non-issue at worst" (p. 138). The movie elucidates, through the reaction of Laila's mother towards her sexuality, that there is an ignorance towards disabled people's sexuality, which in turn leads to their disregard as asexual, hypersexual, and undesirable beings who have no right to bodily integrity. Disabled women suffer from dual systems of inequity and, hence, become 'doubly deviant.' As Robert McRuer (2014) argues, "through complex processes of conflation and stereotype: people with disabilities are often understood as somehow queer (as paradoxical stereotypes of the asexual or over sexual person with disabilities would suggest), while queers are often understood as somehow disabled" (p. 400).

Disability and sexuality and, in turn, the performativity of sexuality and ability are social constructs, and it shows how the societal structures of hegemony function, which, in turn, regulate the norms of the social code of conduct. Moreover, disability and its complicated relationship with the performativity of sexuality reinforces the patriarchal ableist gaze. In terms of Laila's sexuality, there is a gradual process of self-realization. Her journey of discovery of her sexuality is contrary to conventional fetishism; even during the depiction of same-sex intimacy and love, the movie presents Laila's sexuality and her sexual relations with other characters with some aestheticism and does not show the disabled sexuality with some disgust and disgrace. In the film, Laila asks Khanum, her girlfriend, about the history of her sexuality, "When did you recognize you are gay? I mean you have an ideal body and you could conveniently become a mother" (Bose, 2014). Here, Laila shows concealed and contradictory views of herself because of the ableist discourse that makes a perception of a disabled woman as an indecent spouse and an indecent mother. Khanum answers, "I knew I was gay since 14 years of age," and sarcastically remarks, "Perfect body? How does it matter have you ever seen a blind model? When I told my family I am gay, they took me for counseling to doctors and hakims as if I had a disease or I am under some spell which needs to be treated!" (Bose, 2014). However, Khanum, who is highly confident and comfortable about her body and sexuality, further says, "For me, I like to be who I am!" Laila, at that point, answers, 'I hope I could be as convinced as you of my sexuality. It is remarkable, however very

terrifying. My family will die because of heart attack if they come to know!” (Bose, 2014). Anita Ghai proclaims this understanding about the notion that disability and sexuality are incompatible with one another, and consequently, disabled people are denied “sexual desires and refuses them recognition as sexually typical despite their differences” (Ghai 2002, p. 55). It highlights the fact that a disabled person does not have an identity other than being disabled. It resonates with Robert McRuer’s extension of Butler’s queer theories of gender performativity to disability studies, which foregrounds the concept called “ability trouble” and argues that the problem is not with disability but with the expectation of having a compulsory able-bodied identity, that is inevitably impossible (2014, p. 400).

In the movie, Laila and her mother share a firm mother-daughter bond that is materialised into friendship. Laila’s mother exhibits progress and liberal thinking compared to the Indian social system, as she is enthusiastic about letting her girl study in a foreign country. Despite being a liberal mother, the film presents the restraint and discomfort of her mother towards Laila’s sexual identity. There was a powerful sequence in the movie when Laila came out to her mother about her sexual orientation. Laila tells her mother: “You know that thing I was saying about bi (which her mother hears as bai, which translates to maid)?”. Her mother quips in a lighthearted manner, “Now you’re well and truly a bai because of me.” Laila corrects the homophone, causing a ruckus: “I meant bisexual” (Bose, 2014). Her mother asks for clarification since she cannot comprehend what it means. “Mom, I love Khanum. She is my girlfriend,” Laila acknowledges. Her mother becomes enraged by this, looking concerned and bewildered. All she has to say is, “Chee!” (Bose, 2014). It is a crucial instance in the movie as Laila settles on a fundamental choice about herself by confessing her relationship. It shows an ignorant and myopic view of Laila’s mother toward her daughter’s sexuality and, in general, towards queer sexuality. Moreover, it also depicts a susceptible and arousing imagery related to a woman’s disability and sexuality. Addlakha et al. (2017) proclaim a paradoxical situation that Indian women struggle to claim their sexual rights and defy patriarchal expectations of their sexual behavior, but when it comes to the sexuality of disabled women, “non-disabled women are perpetuating some of the same attitudes when it comes to disabled” (p. 138). The main reason behind such attitudes of people, even of non-disabled women, towards disabled women’s sexuality is the underlying notion of ableism and heterosexuality, which is so deeply rooted in the culture that it makes an able-bodied unable to look beyond that.

The film shows how Laila’s mother seems to be intolerant of Laila’s sexual preferences because Laila’s sexuality is contrary to the conventional understanding of sexuality or heterosexuality prevalent in culture. Her sexuality posits numerous questions about the virtue and holiness of a woman. It foregrounds the fact that for a disabled woman, there is a denial of access to the sexual culture. It manifests Foucault’s idea of power and domination, which determines the norm and creates a ‘deviant,’ unfit for the system. Even though the movie moves away from the myopic vision of disability, at the same time, it highlights a consistent battle with social constructions where there is a perception of disabled women as asexual or hypersexual beings.

Margarita with a Straw also throws light on the fact that there is mostly a consistent apathy towards the acknowledgment of a disabled person as a partner in society. Laila’s interaction with the opposite sex highlights that non-disabled men are okay with having an intimate relationship with a disabled woman in private but are reluctant and disassociate from them in open settings. Consequently, it poses a question of how there is a sense of shame internalized in the able-bodied patriarchy towards women with disability. It means women with disabilities are perceived as

undesirable, broken or damaged, not woman enough, or even fully human. However, the movie makes frequent attempts to normalize disabled women's lives in India, but at the same time, it addresses the binaries of normal/abnormal, able/disabled, and heterosexual/homosexual that function based on the ideology of normalcy and ableism. The discussion around the sexuality of a disabled woman is taboo, and it spins around restricting a disabled person from having the 'normal' practice of intimacy and sex.

5. CONCLUSION

Margarita with a Straw ends with Laila sitting in a restaurant. A waiter brings out a dish with a margarita, and Laila places a sippy cup on the table, fills it up, and inserts a straw into it. Glancing into the distance, she gives the go-ahead for an accomplice, as she is having a date with herself as the camera pans to a mirror. This ending underlines Laila's autonomy and independence from a partner and a caretaker. Laila focuses on herself, as she does not wish Khanum to do penance for her disabilities. It means she discards the ableist idea of disabled people as dependent individuals. *Margarita with a Straw* is among the few Indian films that revolve around a woman and focuses on her disability and sexuality. At the same time, it also examines the architectural and attitudinal barriers. The movie also draws attention to the intricate relationships between characters at intersections and avoids showing queerness or disabilities from a sympathetic perspective. Without any doubt, the movie is crucial for people who identify as queer, disabled, or who have intersectional identities. Yet, it is similarly powerful for the majority audience who want to investigate queer and disabled characters. It shows that queer and disabled individuals are no less human; they compose music, write lyrics, drink liquor, have flings, infatuation, and fall in love. In other words, a Disabled/Queer person is more than a mere synecdoche, where a part represents the whole; instead, persons with disabilities are more than the reductionism caused by their disabilities and are fully human like non-disabled counterparts.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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