

The Shifting Terrains of Disability and Gender: Investigating the Delineation of Women with Disabilities in Hindi Films

Shibu Gorai*, Shri Krishan Rai

Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology (NIT) Durgapur, West Bengal, India. *Corresponding Author's Email: shibugorai404@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper engages with the portrayal of women with disabilities in Hindi cinema, considering the diverse facets of representational strategies and structures of power. Addressed in the narratives as objects of derision, pity, and care, women with disabilities are drawn to the able-bodied gaze and patriarchal chauvinism. Films such as *Black* (2005), *Barfi* (2012), and *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) are incorporated into the study to foreground the interactions among the ableists and non-ableists. Efforts are underway to reposition the counter-discourse on disability narratives in 21st-century films, addressing the misrepresentation of individuals with disabilities in the hegemonic portrayal. Manifestations of the social model of disability would culminate in exposing the cultural tensions and reductionist ableism reinforced by normativity. To address, assess, and critique disability spectrum in films, the article moves forward to the intersectionality of disability, gender, and social reality to accentuate the lived realities of women with disabilities. By building on critical disability studies along with feminist disability studies as the theoretical base, the endeavour serves to permeate the arcs of representation, identity, and cultural synergy. Hence, the article seeks to unearth the dominant ideologies of normalcy and ableism in Hindi films while quantifying the amount of discrimination, stereotypical dissimulation interpolated and thus, counting insights into actualities in filmic narratives.

Keywords: Cinema, Disability, Feminism, Gender, Normalcy, Representation.

Introduction

One of the most effective and influential screenplay mediums for addressing social issues is Indian cinema. Since their inception in 1913, movies have served as a crucial medium for disseminating social thoughts and conditions and as a significant mass enjoyment. Indian film has been experimenting with various genres to develop a winning formula that appeals to people and succeeds at the box office, from mythology to love to comedy to thriller and horror. The film, according to Fraser, due to its influence on representational charisma, turns out to be “a reflective mirror, a productive expression or theoretical ground for the integration of perceptions and concepts that informs our socially negotiated understanding of disability” (1).

In India, disability is primarily viewed through the medical model, which tends to overlook issues of marginalization, subjugation, and social barriers. However, over the years, there has been growing discourse on the social model of disability, which examines the societal issues and cultural biases

that contribute to the challenges faced by people with disabilities. Among all the models of disability, religious comes first. According to the spiritual model of disability, people get punishment based on their past actions stemming from the previous sins or crimes committed by their forefathers. This model confirms disability as a Godly intervention where the wrongdoers are chosen and thrown into the dungeons. In this case, any form of disability is considered a punishment by the gods. It sees neither the social issues nor the medical or personal issues while considering disability. Conversely, the medical model of disability fails to differentiate between social problems and their religious aspects. Instead, it considers any form of disability as a personal loss or may be due to a genetic disorder. This model tries to cure the disease or malady based on medical interventions that consider the people as patients to bring a solution. However, the problem in this model lies in the overemphasis on a person as a patient and sees disability as a disease to cure through medical intervention only.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

(Received 02nd June 2024; Accepted 19th July 2024; Published 30th July 2024)

This pushes negligence of the social perspectives and the dilemma in which a person lives. The lack of focus on the social model of disability turns the medical model into a mechanical practice. A comprehensive understanding becomes more attainable with the social model of disability, which addresses societal problems and environmental issues that individuals with disabilities may face. Disability studies scholars regard this model as a more advanced and progressive approach to understanding disability. In this regard, film is regarded as one of the most effective mediums when it comes to influencing the audience. Given that Bollywood produces the most films in Indian cinema and since India has produced the most significant number of feature films overall, the way any problem is portrayed in Bollywood movies is very relevant. Thinking disability-related stories in film is crucial because they shape how people perceive, imagine, and stereotype those who are physically challenged in real life. Bollywood movies are regarded as the primary form of entertainment for the public, changing their habits and outlooks. The way that people and groups are portrayed in the media has the potential to reflect how society perceives them. This significance is underscored by the fact that the public heavily relies on media, particularly movies, for information and is deeply influenced by what is presented. In society, people with disabilities are typically perceived as “different” from “normal” people and are commonly given stereotypical traits. The way a disability is portrayed has the power to either alter or strengthen opinions. In this way, “Persons with disabilities are not understood as a mark of the plural. Rather, it indicates the cultural hegemony that strives to posit an autonomous, rational, and competent able-bodied subject as representative of a normal existence” (2).

The concept of disability and gender comes close with the advent of feminist ideas in media and literature. The visual media has been a critical tool in the formation of disabled identity as well as awareness since “Disability has indeed become a part and parcel of film making, attempting to portray people with disabilities—their problems and potential” (3). It is a medium that has undergone a certain evolution. Thus, cinema plays a crucial role in reflecting the mindset of the general population towards disability and

shedding light on the underlying reasons behind it. The ablest notions and prejudiced attitudes towards disability could be dealt with well in this reading. The expectations of the audience in such films, be it a happy ending or maybe an open one, will be sorted out. The politics of representation is working hand in hand to promote and subvert the other voices in the narratives. The article also makes efforts to expose how misperceptions about disability are spread in films to satisfy the able-bodied audience’s aesthetic requirements. The select films from Bollywood are chosen to demonstrate the limitations and scopes of resistance through the voices of women with disabilities. The particular time frame for the study accentuates the early half of the 21st century to mark the changes brought over time from 1972 when, for the first time, a disabled subject was represented in the movie *Koshish*. The present study focuses on the portrayal of women with disabilities in Hindi films, seeing them as part of a marginalized community since they are labeled as others in an able-bodied society. Thus, to trace the representations of women with disabilities, the article attempts to demonstrate Hindi films through the lens of feminist disability studies, considering the myriad dilemmas prevalent in such depictions. *Disability and Cinema in India: Representation of Women with Disabilities in Bollywood since 1970* by Sadafsadat Tekyeh highlights how women with disabilities are represented in 1970 who have sensory impairments. It also positively analyses the changes in representation in Indian cinema (4). On the other hand, Connor David Ruse elaborates on the 1990s films based on physical disability to mark the progressive aspects observed in disability narratives in *How progressive was the representation of physical disability within mainstream film in the 1990s, given the increased awareness about disability during the decade?* This study focuses on the rehabilitation narratives of disability that aim at curing it through medical intervention only. The practice of mainstream actors portraying disabled characters is scrutinized in the discussion despite these actors being praised for such roles in the American film industry (5). Again, *Watching Disability: A Discourse Analysis of Representations of Disabled Characters in Scripted Television Programs* by Wilbur Martin positions the films *Speechless*,

Atypical, and *Breaking Bad* in the light of seeing if these do enforce medical or social model of disability as well as interrogates the classic stereotypes regarding disability (6). "The Politics of Representation: The Portrayal of Women in Malayalam Cinema" by Devika T.R. concentrates on the representation of female disabled characters who become victims of patriarchy, stereotyped gender roles, and ableism as represented in Malayalam Cinema. While Benjamin Fraser, in his "Disability Studies, World Cinema and the Cognitive Code of Reality," reads about disability cross-culturally and sees how it is perceived universally with the prevalent dynamics of able-bodied power (7), Ranjita Dawn, in "Role of Culture and Media in Disability Studies: A Medium of Social Construction of Disability," demonstrates the role of awareness regarding disability through Indian literature, religion and cinema (3).

Unlike the above studies, the present article attempts to relocate the voices of marginalized communities about the representation of the disabled population and their manifestation in filmic narratives produced in the early 21st century in India. The study unearths how the tropes of metaphorical narratives undermine identity, personhood, and values in the lives of women with disabilities to devise manipulations by populist notions such as normalcy and ableism. This endeavor is crucial in terms of understanding how women with disabilities were represented in the past and how they are being portrayed nowadays in visual mediums to unravel the embedded disability narratives.

Methodology

The study offers options for resistance and subversion through the representation of women with disabilities in film. As the theoretical framework, critical disability studies and feminist disability studies serve as the basis for analyzing, interpreting, and deconstructing the ableist stereotypes and rhetoric of normalcy. Textual analysis and deconstructive approaches are chosen in this study to see patterns of marginalization in the lives of women with disabilities and critically question the process through reading filmic narratives. In this way, grounded on textual analysis of the films, the study incorporates various strategies of representation to debunk the myths of

normativity embedded in filmic representation. Based on qualitative interpretation of the films, it also disembodies the several models of disability to emphasize and indoctrinate the social model of disability and its relevance in filmic portrayal while mapping the actual lived experiences of women with disabilities impersonated through screening in the visual medium.

Results and Discussions

Disability on Screen

"Bombay Hindi cinema reflects the thoughts, aspirations, and attitudes of millions of Indians as it has larger outreach than any other cinema in India" (8). Films about disability often depict various disabilities to convey specific messages or perspectives. Many aim to foster inclusivity and raise awareness, helping to reduce the social stigma associated with disabilities. The portrayal of disability in these films spans a spectrum, from evoking pity, fun, and admiration for heroic efforts to highlighting sympathy, discrimination, and the challenges of coping (3). Several Indian movies have taken disability-related topics seriously from their inception. Nonetheless, there has always been much discussion and worry about handling this subject. The average man's livelihood in India depends on movies, significantly impacting how modern culture is changing. Like many other Indian organizations, the Bollywood film industry must advance the country's welfare by portraying societal issues more accurately. Prior to recently, most of the time, individuals with disabilities were portrayed in movies to elicit humour or sympathy. Many movie directors rely on dangerously simplistic perceptions of persons with disabilities. The viewers are driven to adopt unfavorable behaviours towards individuals with disabilities by these preconceptions, which do not accurately represent disabilities. Nonetheless, more and more filmmakers today focus their stories on characters with disabilities. Similarly, it appears that actors and actresses like to play characters that are impaired or disabled. However, this trend results from industry-wide survival constraints, as all participants must give their finest performance and offer something distinctive to win viewers' praise. Thus, the filmmakers exhibit that "Media representation can provide a

powerful and effective tool for changing people's perceptions and uprooting social stereotypes" (9). Disability studies have significantly contributed to the traditions of critical studies over the past decade. Disability is now more than just a medical science concern; it is also tied to identity crises or issues with the notion of bodily identity. Media and visual culture have shown disabilities, although these portrayals frequently engage in a language of sympathy or serve as a counterpoint to their physically 'able' counterparts. The portrayal often differs significantly from reality. The problems with how disability is portrayed in movies are significant because they have an impact on how people perceive, interpret, and stereotype individuals with disabilities in real life. How people and groups are portrayed in the media significantly impacts how the general public perceives them. As Anita Ghai puts forward, "Disability in most Indian films is used as a meta-narrative, thus allowing the viewer to create meaning within the larger, scattered, melodramatic filmic space" (2).

Critical Disability Studies and the Models of Disability

Critical Disability Theory (CDT) is an emerging framework for studying, analyzing and charting disability issues. As part of the critical theory family, CDT offers an approach to understanding disability that is explanatory, practical, and normative. Its purpose is to examine disability as a cultural, historical, relative, social, and political phenomenon. CDT seeks to identify the flaws in current social realities, pinpoint the agents of change, and offer clear standards for critique along with practical goals for social transformation (10). On another account, "Cinema continues to be a powerful medium to reflect the happenings in society which has transformed it into a medium caught between the real and the surreal" (3). Bollywood has made efforts to incorporate marginalized identities to foster a social front of disability advocacy. However, films and television seldom delve into the everyday realities of living with a disability. Instead, they often evoke emotional responses such as pity, horror, or a feeling of tragedy (2).

According to the medical model, a person's physical and mental limits contribute to disability. It emphasises a person's impairment and treats disability as a medical issue that can only be

resolved with medical assistance, omitting its social implications. This strategy assisted in developing specialized infrastructure for people with disabilities and numerous laws to guarantee their unique treatment. Three fundamental components of this approach are prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation. The prevailing medical model of disability suggests that a person's inability to engage in daily activities stems directly from physical or mental condition. This model often shapes how impairment is portrayed in the media. In other words, writers frequently use the disability itself as a hook. The audience is commonly cut off by these one-dimensional clichés, in which characters are primarily valued for their disability and not for who they are as people. The films, influenced by the medical approach, display the handicap as a form of social stigma that is being socially manufactured. For instance, the film *Koi...Mil Gaya* depicts the numerous challenges of raising an autistic child. The school's principal calls the youngster's mother and informs her that the boy cannot continue because he keeps failing exams (11). He also contends that having a youngster with autism in the classroom will hinder the education of the other students and that it would be better to send him to a specialist school. Yet, in *Taaren Zamin Par*, a teacher assists the parents in comprehending the challenges their unique child with dyslexia faces (12). An autistic character in the film *Koi Mil Gaya* conforms to the medical paradigm by amazingly overcoming his disability before being healed by an alien. These films visualise the dilemmas of society and the limits within which persons with disabilities live.

Under the charity or tragedy model, those who are disabled are viewed as victims of a particular condition whom the rest of society should pity. Many disabled individuals are typically left behind after calamities like war, starvation, earthquakes, etc., and many groups make an emotional appeal for donations to help them. Discrimination against disabled people, according to critics of this concept, is a major factor. The non-disabled, according to activists, cannot view people with disabilities as a symbol of sympathy. One of the fundamental human values and the foundation of many charitable trusts worldwide is the idea that people should care for people how the general public treats Laila in *Margarita with a Straw*,

where her band's music is granted first place exclusively due to lyrics written by a "disabled woman" at one point (13). She defeats everyone in chess, but instead of being sympathetic, she is praised for her brains.

The social model talks about the social requirements, positions, and challenges faced by people with disabilities in society. It contends that disabilities are social constructs that are primarily brought about by oppressive social norms, discriminatory practices, and hostile environments. Instead of attempting to correct the impairment, this approach focuses on lowering social obstacles and altering societal perceptions to provide the disabled person independence, freedom, and control over their circumstances. It takes a more inclusive approach than the medical model. The social model aids in our comprehension of the familial and interpersonal dynamics of impaired persons. Laila, the main character in *Margarita with a Straw*, expresses discomfort about being carried up the steps because the campus elevator is broken. This demonstrates that, given the proper infrastructure and access, people with disabilities want to work and function freely without being viewed as a burden. The character *Iqbal* in the film *Iqbal* represents excellent hope for persons with disabilities in that he can conquer all the challenges.

According to the theological perspective, disability results from prior transgressions and is imposed by an outside entity as punishment. According to research done in a few Indian states, more than half of the populace still thinks that disabilities are the result of evil deeds committed in the past. In India, a disability lowers the status of the family, stigmatises the entire household, and causes social exclusion. All traditional, underdeveloped, and illiterate communities worldwide use this strategy. This strategy used to be mirrored in the majority of classic Indian movies.

Locating Marginalized Voices through Feminist Disability Studies

The definition of disability varies from the Western theoretical framework to India and its subcontinent due to the socio-political scenario and geo-political notions. In her autobiography *One Little Finger*, Malini Chib depicts contrasting experiences regarding her treatment in both

Western and Eastern contexts; she mentions the better disabled-friendly environment in the West, which makes her comfortable in every sphere of her life than in India, where she has been looked down upon (14). Disability is a relative term that comes under the shadow of exploitation and subjugation. It reflects merely a restricted comprehension of the impacts of impairment on individuals with disabilities. The people who go through harsh and inhumane behaviour in society are not given the status of humans in society due to some physical or mental limitation. To understand disability, it is very much necessary to know the difference between impairment and disability. Impairment is the physical or psychological difference or restriction caused by some accident or may be genetic and which can be cured by medications. But disability has a more nuanced tone since it gets involved within the prejudices and exploitative nature of the able-bodied society where personhood is denied just because of some form of impairment. Disability comes when there is a societal limitation and cultural marginalization by the so-called dominant hands. Disability often becomes a point of confusion and intervention in the lives of individuals with impairments, posing a threat to their identities. They face myriad layers of humiliation and judgment. Certain feminist thinkers have emphasized disability as an identity, viewing it as essential for highlighting the challenges faced in confronting an able-bodied society. In this respect, the definitions and understanding of disability is a fluid concept that can cross the limitation to label itself as an identity and to mark dominance and subjugation. The able-bodied society has created a boundary and some rules to call a person human, and if someone denies that status, they will be labelled as "Other" within the boundary. Firstly, the "Other" is consistently seen as "not," "deficient," "void," or lacking the valued attributes of society, whatever those attributes might be. Secondly, in a society that prioritizes ability, the humanity of the "Other" becomes blurred. Thirdly, those perceived as the "Other" are often excluded from the human community, instead viewed as part of a nebulous, confused, and unnamed collective (2). The corporeality lies in the statement that the other is a category of marginalization and deviation. The deviants will be called off from the normative

category so that the myth of ableism can flourish and run high in society. The conflict arises when the other category tries to rise above and build an identity by escaping the forced notion of disability as something to get rid of.

With the emergence of feminism, disability studies got a new edge and assistance. Historically, feminism did not include people with disabilities in the few waves, which were primarily Western and white, but later on, disability activists and scholars found an innovative way of reiterating their selfhood through feminism, which is called the sitpoint theory of feminism. This particular theory of feminism, as it implies, is against the mainstream standpoint theory because of its limitations and exclusions. So, with this, the lived experiences, the corporeal reality, and the social functionality have an advantage in marking the unheard voices that come behind.

The Modalities of Representation and the Represented

Cinema is an audio-visual medium that can reach the audience with great success. It shows the role of cinema in empowering men and women and spreading awareness in society. Learning and understanding in or about society come closer to the interconnectedness of literary and non-literary texts. The literature on which movies are based, especially in this case, films based on disability, gets a better appeal by joining hands with the visual representations. Considering the effects of ableism and normalcy in society, such representations must be taken carefully. It can be said that "Representation holds significant importance for various reasons, primarily because it serves as a potent means through which marginalized groups can secure visibility in our media-driven society" (15). Michel Foucault makes us aware of the politics of representation in Bollywood films since "the categories of disabilities are constructs and the exclusion of the disabled body are forms of social control. Like portrayals in the West, disability in Bollywood cinema is used as a device to move the narrative forward or as an icon within a specific mise-en-scene to compress information about a character" (1).

Throughout the years, the representation of persons with disabilities has changed in movies, be they Hindi or Bengali. To have a massive

appeal to the audience, films have a crucial role to play in terms of their thematic representation. It is the visual medium that made the concepts and the themes more appealing. Persons with disabilities are generally seen as devoid of human characteristics. The ablest society has created the so-called normalcy, which has its set of rules and regulations, and a person with disabilities is not within it. So, a disabled person becomes "Other" in such cases and confronts marginalization. Cinema as a genre helps to flourish such narratives to give them a voice in society so that people become aware of such maltreatment. Mostly, the narratives of disabled people get approved and modified by the hands of the ablest society. It is the able-bodied people who decide the filming, narration and portrayals. Are they free from bias? We may think that the representation varies from text to text. When the director of the film himself or herself is a person with a disability, we expect less bias, though not entirely. In most of the movies, references can be seen where people with disabilities become victims of the notions of ableism. Cinema has a lot to do with the masses. Recently, the portrayals have been altered, and disability is being transformed as a form of identity despite the force of putting it into some negative aspects. This can visualize the forms of violence and subjugation experienced by people with disabilities through the help of audio-visual mediums realistically. To reach a large number of people, cinema, along with the OTTs, are getting popularized nowadays, where people can watch content on their mobiles and personal computers in any space, giving the maximum chance of thinking and having a mark on cinematic representations of the characters involved. It provides a world full of characters and stories to think and ponder over such narratives with a calm and quiet mind. The evolving face of disability and its cinematic representation is essential to note the changes and progress made in recent years with such portrayals.

Normalcy and Disability: Critiquing the Films

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film *Black* was released in the first decade of the twenty-first century, specifically in 2005, marking 48 years since India gained independence (16). *The Miracle Worker's* portrayal of Hellen Keller's life profoundly affected the entire Indian audience, transcending

barriers of gender, class, location, and community. The friendship between Michelle McNally, a student of Debraj Sahai who is both “deaf” and “blind,” is the focal point of the entire movie. Amitabh Bachchan, arguably the most recognizable star of the contemporary Indian cinema industry, and Rani Mukherjee, a successful heroine of a later generation, are shown in two lead roles in this movie. The film opens with Michelle, who is shown as a grown woman, visiting her former instructor, Debraj, who has been admitted to a hospital as an Alzheimer's patient. Hence, it employs the flashback technique to show how their relationship developed over Michelle's formative years. She is depicted as a small child who, due to some disease, experiences a rapid change from her “regular” life to a world designed differently for vision-handicapped girls, which causes her to become an unmanageable nuisance for her parents, Paul and Catherine. At this point in Michelle's life, her tutor, Mr. Sahai—an elderly man described as an eccentric, alcoholic magician—arrives. The film's constructive attempt to depict a young woman emerging from her dual marginalization—both as a woman and as someone with a disability—involves the deliberate intervention of an experienced guy as “This is a common trope found in popular Hindi films where the film revolves around the narrative of finding a ‘cure’ for the female protagonist and the film ends with ‘overcoming’ the disability narrative” (8).

Dramatically, the film connects questions of corporeality and other forms of marginalization to education, one of the main priorities of post-colonial democracy. The instructor in *Black* hints at a new kind of personal awareness opposing the social policy of exclusion as he struggles to help his student realize her latent potential by awakening her differently functioning senses. In response to the public world of conventions, the instructor and learner in Ravi K. Chandran's cinematography built a private domain. Several sequences demonstrate the teacher's nearly desperate attempts to familiarize Michelle with the set of signifiers in the outside world. Even the girl's parents are terrified by his technique, which includes throwing water in the girl's face. Significantly, he stresses that “light” rather than “darkness” should be the primary signifier. Yet, the teacher-student relationship only reveals its

radical potential when it reciprocates, like in the snowfall scene where his student pushes him to experience and comprehend nature in all of her untamed vigor despite the teacher's attempts to hide under an umbrella. As Michelle claims in her graduation address, which offers her twelve years of effort fulfilment, the signifier “black” gradually loses its negative connotations and starts to symbolise “courage” and “dream” in her life. It also denotes her effective admission into the informed knowledge-institutional system's setting. In this regard, the movie successfully exploits Michelle's stick to establish a connection with the outside world. As Swagata Chatterjee contends that “The movie upholds the Victorian patriarchal ideal of the ‘angel of the house’ as Sahai seeks to transform Michelle into a ‘fine young lady’ through conditioning” (17).

Michelle, however, changes the normative world and makes it more inclusive through the entry above, as suggested by the sign language she employs to communicate. Given that an interpreter is required for this reason, one can question whether the audience, primarily made up of so-called “regular” people, is “capable” enough to comprehend Michelle's speech. When Michelle assumes the role of her ill teacher, Michelle's path completes a circle: she goes from being the student to becoming the teacher of her former teacher. Education is, therefore, designed to fulfil its humanist goal of exposing the independent, compassionate self. Though the movie somehow attempts to portray disability realistically, it reinforces patriarchy as the film tries to “... highlight the dauntlessness of a male character... thus, caring for or curing a disabled woman becomes the means to re-enforce the heroic character of the male protagonist” (18).

Anurag Basu's 2012 film *Barfi*, which starred Ranbir Kapoor as the hearing- and speech-impaired Barfi and Priyanka Chopra as autistic kid Jhilmil, included both actors (19). This movie, which has a 2-hour and 31-minute runtime, is about the relationship between disabled people Jhilmil and Barfi and how they live their lives. However, Shruthi, Barfi's ex-girlfriend, unexpectedly enters their lives, and everything changes. According to the movie, Jhilmil has liked Barfi since she was a young girl, and she is still looking forward to meeting him. As Barfi threw his shoe into the air, she could see it from her

window and come out; that was how they communicated. She had formed an affection for him because she smiled and blushed every time he did that.

The movie, however, makes a significant turn when it is shown that Jhilmil does not indeed object to staying with Barfi for the first time when he brings her to his residence. She moves closer to him as they sleep and twists her little finger around his to show her attachment to him, just like she did with her grandfather. The fact that she has no trouble leaving home and spending time with the man she likes is a weakness in this scene because research shows that persons with autism need time to become attached to another person. She enjoys his company, as evidenced by the song sequence when he plays with her and grabs her attention in the mirror, making her ecstatic. She still follows and rushes after him whenever he puts her off somewhere safe, such as at her or her nanny's house, since she does not want to be anywhere without him. Although it is unrealistic for an autistic person to do so, she refuses to go back. When Barfi accepts a flower that Jhilmil hands him while strolling across a rice field, it becomes clear that they want to be together. The fact that they do not experience any issues while being disabled is also a little challenging to comprehend after they move to Kolkata and tour numerous locations. She expresses her desire to spend her life with Barfi in scenes where she imagines him wearing a wedding outfit or when she mimics another woman's husband-fanning gesture. They touch foreheads as a sign of their affection for one another. This romanticises them, and they go about their daily lives and try to live like any other couple. It is important to remember that all of this is unlikely but not impossible for people with impairments.

Moments in which Jhilmil is envious when Barfi brings Shruthi home are more genuine because such emotions are common in humans. From her perspective, it seems normal to her that she would go to such lengths as dressing in a saree like Shruthi to please Barfi. She expresses her affection for Barfi and displeasure at seeing him with another lady when she becomes enraged and hides from him. In the final scene, she calls out to him, and when they finally come together, she touches his face to show him how much she loves him. She stands before Barfi to indicate that he is

hers and that Shruthi must avoid him when she finally sees Shruthi. This demonstrates how possessed she is of him. This movie unequivocally proves that women with disabilities have feelings or are attracted to someone sexually. Although this movie does not fully explore the practical side of how a crippled couple might spend their lives, the message it delivers is quite natural. Although Jhilmil's acts and existence are exaggerated and glorified, they unmistakably show that people with disabilities may feel love. This is how Jhimli assumes the role of an abject figure, as described by Julia Kristeva. The abject is distinguished not by a lack of cleanliness or health but by its capacity to disrupt identity, structure, and order. It defies borders, positions, and rules existing in the in-between, the ambiguous, and the composite (2).

Once more, *Margarita with a Straw* is an Indian Hindi-language drama directed by Shonali Bose in 2014. The film is based on the life of Malini Chib, whose autobiography shares the same name and depicts her struggles in India and abroad as a person living with cerebral palsy. A young girl with cerebral palsy is realistically portrayed in this film. The female protagonists in this coming-of-age story are nevertheless allowed to explore their sexual and love desires, even though their body is physically disabled. The film takes a close look at Laila's sexual inclinations, experiments, and orientations from a feminist perspective. Laila has neither been transformed into an incredible achiever who is above and beyond her physical constraints nor has it bound her to the innocent, sympathetic girl stereotype. On numerous times, Laila is depicted as a flawed and perplexed person. Laila is not shown as that helpless, despicable creature. For instance, when Laila confronts Khanum, her vision-impaired lover, about having sex with a man, she argues that he could see her (unlike Khanum). Laila also expresses her desire for a typical love life in a moment where she sobs to her mother while at the college after the lead singer of the college band rejects her. Her interest in pornographic movies and her penchant for masturbation are things that mainstream Indian cinema typically forbids, even for its strong female leads. For her role as the 19-year-old Laila, Koechlin, 30, practised using a wheelchair in her daily activities before the movie's filming, and she admits that it

made her feel childish. Laila is not romanticised in the film, in any case. In corporeity, Bose avoids both the overcompensating heights of achievement implied by Hindi films on the subject and the day-to-day struggles of being differently abled. Regarding the accessibility of public infrastructure for people with disabilities, the movie subtly divides two cities: New Delhi in India and Manhattan in New York. However, there were times when it seemed that everyone in America treated Laila like a regular person, which is an incorrect perception of the nation. The movie also did not address Laila's issues with the physical body. Though the movie establishes disability narrative quite efficiently, Simi Linton contends that rather than simply celebrating these narratives as individual triumphs over significant obstacles, it is vital to perceive disability as a socio-cultural and political issue. This perspective challenges the notion that disability is an immutable trait inherent to an individual (20, 21).

Conclusion

The movies such as *Black* (2005), *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), *Barfi!* (2012) and *Margarita with a Straw* (2015) have contributed, to some degree, to reducing the stigma surrounding disabilities in India. But years of problematic portrayals of the disabled community in literature and cinema have established a binary distinction between "us," the non-disabled, and "them," the disabled. This narrative perpetuates a representation system that labels disabled bodies as subordinate. Given the resonant cultural and political implications of physical and gender-based portrayals, such films often fail to articulate the transformative potential of disability. For instance, in *Black*, Michelle is brought up again and again, yet it does not accept the sexualised woman's body. The challenge lies in encouraging the audience to interpret Michelle's impairment as a political statement, even as they acknowledge her personhood and provide space for disability. In this regard, patriarchy and able-bodiedness are positioned below disability representation in society. It would be noteworthy if the characters with disabilities would reject the binary. The disabled community does not embrace the miracle concept employed in movies since it does not occur in reality. Their social life is made worse by such a film. Hence, the portrayal of women with

disabilities in Hindi cinema is contentious as both a non-disabled and patriarchal viewpoint influence it. Consequently, films become a crucial cultural medium for spreading ideas that contribute to the discrimination against individuals with disabilities.

Abbreviation

CDT: Critical Disability Theory

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the researchers and activists working in the field of feminist disability studies and filmic representation.

Author Contributions

Shibu Gorai conceived the idea, interpreted the primary and secondary materials and composed the paper; Dr Shri Krishan Rai edited the final draft and supervised the whole process.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no direct or indirect conflict of interest.

Ethics Approval

Not applicable.

Funding

No funding has been received for this research.

References

1. Fraser B, editor. *Cultures of Representation: Disability in world cinema contexts*. Columbia University Press; 2016 Dec 31. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.7312/fras17748>.
2. Ghai A. Disability and postcolonial theory: 'third space' and the possibilities of transgression. *The JMC Review*. 2017; 1(1): 74-101.
3. Dawn R. Role of culture and media in disability studies: a medium of social construction of disability. *Journal of Disability & Religion*. 2019;27(1):1-22. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2019.1673872>.
4. Tekyeh S, Molaei H, Falarti MM. Disability and Cinema in India: Representation of Women with Disabilities in Bollywood since 1970. *Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies*. 2022 Oct 1;6(4):743-776.
5. Ruse CD. How progressive was the representation of physical disability within mainstream film in the 1990s, given the increased awareness about disability during the decade? United Kingdom: University of Plymouth. 2021:7-109.
6. Martin W. *Watching Disability: A Discourse Analysis of Representations of Disabled Characters in Scripted Television Programs*. United States: PhD thesis, The University of Southern Mississippi; 2020. Available from: <https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations/1819>

7. Devika TR. The Politics of Representation: The Portrayal of Disabled Women in Malayalam Cinema. *Teresian Journal of English Studies*. 2023 Oct 1;15(4):62-8.
8. Grover M. Problematizing sight: interrogating the representation of women with blindness in a select few Hindi films. *Rethinking Inclusive Education, Accessibility and Employment Policies in Relation To Persons with Visual Impairment*. 2022. P. 12-21.
9. Mahaseth H. The Disability Narrative in Indian Cinema. *Film Matters Magazine* 2019 Apr 5; 6.
10. Tekyeh S, Molaei H, Falarti MM. Disability and Cinema in India: Representation of Women with Disabilities in Bollywood since 1970. *JWSS*. 2022; 6(4): 743-76. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.22059/wsps.2023.359298.1351>.
11. Koi... *Mil Gaya*. [Film] Directed by: Rakesh Roshan. India: Filmkraft Productions; 2003. Available from: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0254481/>.
12. *Taare Zameen Par*. [Film] Directed by: Aamir Khan. India: Aamir Khan Productions; 2007. Available from: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0986264/>.
13. *Margarita with a Straw*. [Film] Directed by: Shonali Bose. India: Viacom18 Motion Pictures; 2014. Available from: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2929690/>.
14. Chib M. *One little finger*. SAGE Publications Ltd; 2011 Jan 6.
15. Dey D, Tripathi P. Media representations of dis/ability in sports: review of the film *Ghoomer*. *Media Asia*. 2024 Jan 12;1-7. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2024.2304972>.
16. *Black*. [Film] Directed by: Sanjay Leela Bhansali. India: Applause Entertainment; 2005. Available from: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0375611/>.
17. Chatterjee S. Aesthetics of disability: the growing interest in disability in popular Hindi cinema. *An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies*. 2016 Jan;1:11-21.
18. Khetrpal A. So, how has Indian Cinema Portrayed Women with Disabilities. *Feminism in India*. com.
19. *Barfi!* [Film] Directed by: Anurag Basu. India: UTV Motion Pictures; 2012. Available from: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2082197/>.
20. Linton S. Disability studies/not disability studies. *Disability & Society*. 1998 Sep 1;13(4):525-39.
21. Deo T. Changing representation of disability in Hindi cinema. *Ad Litteram: An English Journal of International Literati*. 2023; 8:91-105.