

Aesthetics of Disability: The Growing Interest in Disability in Popular Hindi Cinema

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Abstract

Disability studies have emerged as an important field of critical studies. It has branched itself out beyond its limited medical and psychological sphere and has placed itself in the social, cultural sphere as well. As a marginalised 'body', disability has also inter mingled itself with theories of gender or post colonization. Especially in its representation in media and literature; Disability has posed a challenge against its traditional, stereotyped presentation and demands for a centralized representation of the disabled body. This article shall study the idea of representation of disability in the context of Indian cinema and the change of attitude towards Disability in modern Indian cinema. In this article, only hindi films have been used, keeping in mind the receptivity of the language and its reach. *Koshish*, *Sparsh*, "Black" and *Barfi* are the key cinemas that are dealt with, in the essay.

Keywords

disability, disabled body, marginalization, representation

Disability studies of recent have occupied an important place in the history of critical studies. Disability or the disabled “body” is not just a concern of the medical domain; it can be linked to the question of identity or challenging the definition of physical identity. Disability studies is an emerging field of study that has branched itself beyond the original medical scientific connotation. It has taken its place in tradition, history, politics and philosophy. The study emerged in Europe and America in the 60’s but gained its impetus in the 80’s and 90’s. It does not have any prescribed definition; therefore it is viewed by different scholars from different perspectives. Among the different definitions the one attempted by Arlene Kanter appears more complete for me. She states:

It is now well accepted that Disability Studies has emerged as a new and exciting field of academic inquiry. Disability Studies applies social, cultural, historical, legal, philosophical, and humanities perspectives to understanding the place of disability in society. It explores disability as a social and cultural construct and as a phenomenon reflecting and constituting identity formation by incorporating the “real-lived” experiences of people with disabilities. Furthermore, Disability Studies adopts a cross-disability perspective and explores differences and commonalties in the experiences of the diverse groups of people society have defined as “the other” based on their disability. (Kanter 404)

Culturally and politically, disability is a cornered or marginalized space against which the “able-body” is represented. Simi Linton in her essay “Reassigning Meaning” says that: “As rendered in disability studies scholarship, disability has become a more capacious category, incorporating people with a range of physical, emotional, sensory, and cognitive conditions. Although the category is broad, the term is used to designate a specific minority group.”(Davis 181)

This very marginalization has led disability studies to find inter relation with other social and critical issues like gender, race etc. The various representations of disability vary through countries and cultures but bear the same undercurrent of marginalization or third space. Though this minority group has much in common with other marginalized groups, yet there is a vast difference. It can be said that disability has posed a greater threat to the normative by creating an existence; a language of its own which is culture specific; that is it is shared by a particular minority group. For an example, the sign language used by the deaf

and dumb people can be an example of this observation because sign language is unique and universal against the diverse language groups of the speaking-hearing community.

History has represented disability as an obstruction; as a bounded space which is dependent on the non disabled body for its survival. It does not bear a separate identity for itself except being presented as an embodiment of what is lacking in the body. Disability has found representation in media and visual culture but the representation is often a discourse of pity or used as a foil to its bodily “able” counterpart. Very often the representation is far removed from reality. Such representation rather isolates the disabled by changing it from a subject to an object; an object of fear, weakness, pity, mockery etc. however this very objectification relates disability to other significant issues like gender, race, sexuality etc. Therefore disability can be referred to as a highly sliding term interconnecting with different domains and assuming multiple identities. This paper aims to study the changing perspective towards disability in Hindi Cinema.

Kanan and Batra (2012) argues that

[...] in the imagery surrounding disability in films swings between these two extremes – pity, fun, caricaturing, sympathy, lampooning 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. And the world over, cinema has either been charitable towards people with disabilities, pitying or laughing at them or portraying their concerns with real sensitivity.

It is a fact that over the ages, disability has found representation in various forms and fields of art; especially in painting, drama and cinema. However in all forms of art disability has been presented as a pitiable state, as something abhorring. The representatives of disability are generally belonging to low class of society, with no right of education, employment, marriage, rather an outcast in society. In Hindi cinema too traditional representation of disability is made through either condition of poverty or beggar hood. However the perspective has changed. Modern cinema does not merely sentimentalize disability it rather questions the binary “normal” and “not normal” or the “self” and the “other”. Disability is seen as a fulfilment in itself; as a power equation without having to depend on the system and the social structure.

Before we enter into a discussion of the presentation of disability in Hindi cinema, it is necessary to approach the term disability and understand it. Traditionally disability has always been associated with a negative implication; seen as a bearer of evil. It is since the classical period that disability has found representation in different field of arts bearing the same negative connotation. Disability has been viewed as a kind of abnormality or aberration and a strict distinction was drawn between what was majorly viewed as “normal” or “normalcy”. Gartner (1984) states: Just as whites have imposed their images upon blacks, and men upon women, people without disabilities have imposed their image upon people who are disabled. These images have told us not only what is beautiful-and right; they have also warned us that the image of disability is ugly-and evil. (Gartner 3)

Having considered these views, if we examine the traditional portrayal of disability in Hindi cinema, it can be said that the very temperament of disability in Hindi cinema is “either punishment or dependence.” (Pal 2010) A thematic study of the idea from the very beginning of the interface between Hindi cinema and disability would show not only the attitude of society on the specific idea but the point-of- view of the non-disabled towards disability. It would perhaps be apt to quote Morrison in this regard:

Disability in film has become a metaphor for the message that the non disabled writer wishes to get across in the same way that beauty is used. In doing this, movie makers draw on the prejudice, ignorance and fear that generally exist towards disabled people, knowing that to portray a character with humped back, with a missing leg, with facial scars, will evoke certain feelings with the audience. Unfortunately, the more disability is used as a metaphor for evil or just to induce a sense of unease, the more the cultural stereotype is confirmed.

The question of visual beauty or aesthetics no doubt plays an important role in this case. Disability has been made akin to ugliness that would evoke an immediate sense of repulsion and loathing. Along with that addition of a stereotype that physical disability or deformed appearance outward is a reflection of a lack of goodness inward. Tracing back the history of disability in Hindi cinema, disability can be seen to be presented as a punishment for disloyalty or debauchery. The earliest of the examples can be cited in films like *Jeevan Naiya* (1936) where the hero gets blind after having abandoned his wife unjustly; or *Aadmi* (1968) where Pran loses his eyes for his villainy. In the 1972 cinema *Koshish*, Asrani, the wicked brother loses his legs due his wild way of living and having exploited his own sister.

It must be noticed that in each case disability comes as a way of de humanisation as well; as the characters remain no more a part of the civic society. However it must be mentioned that it is a way of de- sexualisation as well. The characters are rendered without family or without any community.

The picture gradually changes with the 70's. *Sholay* is one of the earliest examples of disability as strength. Sanjeev Kumar is a representative of the angry young man genre, ends up with triumph of disability and righteousness over villainy and evil. A special mention of another variety of the presentation of disability can be seen in *Sparsh* (1984) an art house cinema with Nasiruddin Shah; the blind man and Shabana Azmi; a widow teacher. *Sparsh* for the first time addresses the issue of disability from an un-melodramatic point of view. A widowed woman is as marginalized socially as a blind man. Yet through the inter personal relation of the two; what apparently emerges is the uncertainty of a disabled man at being accepted by a able bodied woman. His inability to keep faith in the 'self' beyond the body and his overcoming of the social stereotype is what makes the cinema unique.

Dr. Atanu Mohapatra says in his essay "Portrayal of disability in Hindi cinema: a study of emerging trends of differently- able": One rarely finds the splash of realism, as the Hollywood is used to churning out at regular intervals in films like "Rain Man", "My Left Foot", "Scent of a Woman", "Born on the Fourth of July", "A Beautiful Mind" etc. Here once in a while, a sensitive director like Gulzar wakes up to make a touching *Koshish* (1972), Sai Paranjpe to make a poignant *Sparsh*(1984) or a Sanjay Leela Bhansali to make the ironically loud *Khamoshi – The Musical* (1996). These three movies releasing in an approximate gap of one decade have portrayed life of the disabled realistically with varying degree of success. With the changing perspective of society towards the disabled, I would specially concentrate on three cinemas- *Koshish* (1972), "Black" (2005) and to some extent *Barfi* (2012). *Koshish* is one of the earliest attempts of accepting the disabled within the society and accepting them as a part of society, allowing them an independent living. *Koshish* is the story of a deaf and mute couple who successfully live a family life and their inter dependence and fulfilment is a result of their disability. The theme of mutual dependence arising out of disability can be traced back in the *Rajashree* production cinema *Dosti* (1964) where a blind boy finds friend in a lame boy. *Koshish* presents an interesting relationship. The deaf and dumb couple finds alliance with a blind man. They live together happily without any verbal communication and only mutual understanding. The couple cannot understand the words of the blind man

Narayan whereas Narayan being blind fail to see the sign language of Arti and Haricharan. Their silence is their communication. The film for the first time presents disability from a positive angle. It implies a disabled body can intermingle successfully with the society. Unlike the traditional ideas, disability is not a weakness but strength of having never been exposed to the corruption of the society or to wrong hearing and wrong saying. Though *Koshish* is a sensitive portrayal of disability and in many ways an eye opening cinema; however, it being an early attempt, the story has not broken the stereotype completely. The aesthetic perception and sentimentalizing remain dominant. The problems of disability are (almost) easily overcome by mutual dependence.

Bollywood's concern with disability and attempt to normalise the disabled can be found in *Black* by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. The movie is inspired by the life of Helen Keller¹. About *Black*, it can be said that “every frame of which shows his passion and intensity. Bhansali's strife for perfection in his craft comes out in the meticulousness with which he tells his story without making you feel pity for the leading character of the blind-mute-deaf girl (Swaminath and Bhide 2009). There are obvious differences from the life of Helen. A difference (perhaps due to cinematic reasons) is that the teacher of Michelle is an old man and not a woman. Secondly, Helen never communicated through sign language; rather Anne Sullivan² was against the use of sign language and used oralism³ and manual method⁴. Michelle communicates through sign language. Finally Michelle never learns to speak and can only express through the written language. It is interesting that the film does not try to portray disability as beauty; or present the disabled child from an aesthetic point of view. It rather, in lieu of realism verges on to violence in its first half through the way Devraj Sahay takes up the task of disciplining the wild Michelle McNally. Disciplining the wild child Michelle with multiple impairments (blind, deaf and mute) is almost like taming a wild lioness into a domestic cow. However, the Victorian patriarchal concept of ‘angel of the house’ is maintained as Michelle’s teacher decides to turn her into a “fine young lady” by conditioning her free spirit. The life of Michelle before language can be said to be almost animal like; who is humanized. This can be related to the disability discourse where the image of the animal or animal like representation of a disabled body appears frequently.

Stone wrote that the uneducated deaf were reduced “to the level of mere animal life” because the “great facts and truths relating to God and a future state” are unknown to them.

What “makes us differ from the animals and things around us” is the possession of a soul and an understanding of what that possession means. Without this understanding, deaf people were capable of nothing higher than “mere animal enjoyment.”(Stone 29)

The importance of “Black” lies in the fact that one does not feel pity for Michelle but wonder at her extraordinary journey from her wordless sightless world towards enlightenment. The cinema too portrays interdependence based on disability as Michelle’s teacher succumbs to Alzheimer. Michelle takes up the role of teaching language to her teacher in the same way as he had once educated her. However, the projection of the entire teaching process is inspired by William Gibson’s *The Miracle Worker* (1962). *The Miracle Worker* concentrates on the single moment of miracle: the moment when Keller learns the first word of her life “water” and *Black* too not only has the climactic water-scene but also ends with Michelle’s attempt to teach her teacher the word “water”.

It can be seen that Indian Cinema, rather Hindi film industry has turned its attention to the portrayal of rare diseases and in each case the differently able character triumphs over disabilities by the sheer power of will. It has been seen that they possess some extra ordinary quality which differs them from the ordinary people who claim they to be “normal”. *Tare Zameen Par* (2007) is the story of an 8 year old boy who suffers from dyslexia and yet he possesses an extra ordinary sensibility, sense of imagination which he expresses through his paintings. *My Name is Khan* (2010) is the story of an autistic Muslim man who “suffers from the disease Asperger’s Syndrome which is a kind of autism illness and is a neurobiological disorder. This disorder is characterized by difficulty in social interaction. The person suffering from this has normal intelligence and language development, but exhibits autistic-like behaviours and marked deficiencies in social and communication skills.” (Mohapatra, 7) his disability has gifted him with an inherent innocence and a strong sense of humanity to better the world around him. *Paa* (2009) is about a rare disease Progeria which ages the body much faster. Auro (Amitabh Bachchan) is an intelligent twelve year old who looks like a man almost five times older. All the movies may differ in their portrayal and disability- type but they have something in common. The movies present the disabled as an extremely sensitive and intelligent “individual” with an inherent sense of innocence.

Finally, I would briefly like to analyse an Anurag Basu venture *Barfi* (2012) where disability is finely made palatable by presenting an ideal life which the so-called “normal”

fail to achieve. The fine portrayal of mutual relationship among the disabled is achieved through a message that only a differently able person has the ability to understand each other and share their life with each other with a simplicity and beauty. *Barfi* does not follow the serious presentation of disability as in other cinemas. It focuses on the humour element implying how a disabled can live his life freely and create a world of their own which the power of love and honesty. The plot centres on the deaf and mute Barfi, who has a very simple happy go lucky living. The beautiful Shruti is in love with Barfi but gives in to family pressure. Barfi restarts his life freshly with the autistic Jhilmil who has been abandoned by her parents except for her property. They form a bond together and understand each other's soul. Their silence becomes the medium of their rich communication; their relationship is pure and innocent free from any weariness of the worldly life.

In each case the character with disability finds an independent living for themselves, with the society opening up to associate with them and not the other wise. In this era of consumerism, corporate and corruption, it appears that the people with disabilities have turned their handicaps into their strength in a world of pure beauty made perfect through simplicity. Unlike the traditional idea of disability as a sin or evil; representation of disability in Bollywood can be said to be more varied and contemporary. It allows a place for disability where life without any dependence is possible out of mutual love and understanding. They form a micro-society within the society, self-sufficient in itself yet not aloof from the whole. This paper has tried to portray within a short space disability is not a lack of ability in itself. Such perspective is a socio-political stereotyped imposition; however disability has been able to create a free independent "room of its own."⁴

Notes and References:

1. Helen Adams Keller(1880-1968) was an American author, political activist, and lecturer. She was the first deaf and blind person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree.
2. Johanna "Anne" Mansfield Sullivan Macy, better known as Anne Sullivan, was an American teacher, best known for being the instructor and lifelong companion of Helen Keller.
3. Oralism is the method of education for deaf children through oral language by using lip reading, speech, and mimicking the mouth shapes and breathing patterns of speech instead of using sign language.
4. Title modified from Virginia Woolf's 1929 extended essay "A Room of One's Own".

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