



Deviant Desires: Body Image and Sexual Autonomy of Differently Abled Women in Cinema

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Abstract

This paper examines the encapsulation of body image, desire and sexuality of differently abled women in Indian Cinema through *Barfi!* (2012), *Margarita with a Straw* (2015) and *Zero* (2018), where the female protagonists have developmental disorders. Subsequently, it inquires how body autonomy and agency are framed with respect to their “deviant” body. The paper also attempts to unravel the propagation of misconstrued notions about disability in the movies so as to match with the aesthetic expectations of the abled audience. Premised on feminist disability studies, which focuses on the intersection between gender and disability, the paper employs Feminist Content Analysis and digital ethnography for the study. The study observes that even though there are affirmative and mindful changes in the portrayal of women and disability perspectives in cinema over the years, the desire, body positivity and sexuality of the differently abled women (in fact, men too) are still predominantly unexplored. The representation of disability in cinema from the ‘unsexualised’, ‘deviant’ bodies to the ‘autonomous’, ‘different’ bodies that possess the same rights and integrity can mainstream and normalise the differently abled women in the social structure. This will not only erase the misconstrued notions of disability perpetuated through media from time immemorial, but also integrate the concepts of body autonomy and agency into the contents and creativity.

Keywords: Body image, cinema, Desire, Disability, Autonomy

Introduction

Ableism is a conspicuous characteristic of visual media and Indian cinema is no different. Ranging from movies where disability is portrayed as a punishment, a source of stigma and

mockery (Mahaseth) to inspiration, narration of disability varies in movies. Over a century, mainstream Indian cinema has been narrating disability in three different ways: 1) with pity (for the sake of sentiment), mockery (for the sake of joke) or contempt (for the sake for evility and brutality) from a highly prejudiced and discriminatory perspective (*Tom, Dick and Harry* (2006), *Golmaal* (2006), *Golmaal Returns* (2008), *Krazzy 4* (2008), *Golmaal 3* (2010), *Housefull 3* (2016), *Golmaal Again* (2017), *Zero* (2018) etc.); 2) peripherally addressing disability by romanticising it and thereby liberally altering reality to match with the aesthetic expectations (*Dosti* (1964), *Koshish* (1972), *Anuraag* (1972), *Khamoshi* (1996), *Fanaa* (2006), *Paa* (2009), *Guzaarish* (2010), *My Name is Khan* (2010), *Barfi!* (2012), *Kaabil* (2017)); 3) as an honest attempt to capture the real life of disabled people, this being an exceptional case (*Black* (2005), *Iqbal* (2005), *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), *Margarita with a Straw* (2015), *Hichki* (2018)). All these differently abled characters are predominantly created and casted by abled artists for the anticipated abled audience.

On the one hand, it can be argued that the portrayal of differently abled characters by popular actors bring more visibility to the disability narrative. On the other hand, as they lack the lived experience of the disability, they ‘perform’ the disability as a character trait which may not be steady, consistent and real. In the beginning of theatre and cinema, men used to play female characters and the representations were peripheral. Today, there are campaigns all over the world against transgender characters played by cisgender actors and homosexual characters played by heterosexual actors (like the backlash against Halle Berry and Matt Bomer). The arguments that they put forth are extremely relevant for disability narratives too. Since it is almost improbable for differently abled actors to play an abled character in a movie, already they are an under-represented community in the show business. This not only ostracises the representation of differently abled people in cinema, but also withholds them from telling their own stories. Besides, a differently abled character portrayed by a differently

abled actor could bring more sensibility and sensitisation among the people regarding the disability.

The idea of disability as diversity – not as incapability – has been integrated into the movies very recently only. Here, diversity means the recognition, acceptance and respect of individual differences, which transforms into inclusion. The frameworks for disability inclusion in medical sciences, research, education, employment and civic engagements are being developed with the aim of translating disability as diversity. This representation is more integral in the popular media as it can reach out to people's psyche rapidly and effectually. However, diverse differently abled characters, especially female protagonists are negligible in number as compared to the gigantic figure of Indian movies produced every year. Even among these, many of them are depicted as damsels-in-distress, within the body of an ideal feminine stereotype, played by popular female actors in the industry. It is worthwhile to note that such characters are mostly having sensory impairments, which are not easily visually identifiable, and thus, in no way, disrupt the visual pleasure of the audience.

The visual narrative of desire is often that of 'male gaze' (Mulvey 14). This desire is mostly centred on the female body, or the *heroine* of the movie. Disabilities like developmental disorders (such as autism and cerebral palsy) that demand different physical features, body language and expressions, are supposedly in conflict with the desire invoked through a clichéd-abled-feminine body. Their bodily narratives, if approached as incapacity and when penetrating the formation of culture, create "deviant bodies" (Gomes, Lopes, Gesser and Toneli 1). While abled-women are sexualised through the male-eyed movie lens as desirable beings, differently abled women with deviant bodies are 'un-sexualised' as 'disabled' beings.

This disability as inability is transliterated into the absence of agency and subjectivity. Even though abled-women are often objectified and their agency is nullified, this happens distinctively for differently abled women. While desire is considered as a forbidden fruit for women (yet, it exists), the

bodily desires of differently abled women are invalidated or suspended (as non-existent or deviant) in reel and real life with this 'un-sexualised' attribution attached with their deviant bodies. If at all acknowledged, it is projected as either hyper sexual or asexual most of the times. This refrains from normalising the desires of differently abled people, especially women. The representation of the desires of these deviant bodies is not sexual deviance per se, yet they are deviant, and hence not considered 'normal'.

The movies for the study are purposively selected, since they delineate disability from three varied angles. *Barfi!* is a 2012 blockbuster as well as India's official entry into the 85th Oscar. Both the male and female protagonists of the movie are differently abled; the male (played by Ranbir Kapoor) being hearing and speech impaired and the female (played by Priyanka Chopra) being autistic. *Margarita with a Straw* (2015) is a critically acclaimed Hindi movie that limns the journey of a woman with cerebral palsy (played by Kalki Koechlin). A female directorial, this coming-of-age movie explores the intersectionality of gender, disability and sexual orientation. *Zero* (2018) gives an account of a troublesome relationship between the male protagonist with dwarfism (played by Shah Rukh Khan) and the female protagonist with cerebral palsy (played by Anushka Sharma), who is an independent, confident and free-spirited wheelchair-ridden prodigy scientist.

This paper examines the encapsulation of body image, desire and sexuality of differently abled-women in Indian Cinema through *Barfi!* (2012), *Margarita with a Straw* (2015) and *Zero* (2018), where the female protagonists have developmental disorders. Subsequently, it inquires how body autonomy and agency are framed with respect to their *deviant* body. The paper also attempts to unravel the propagation of misconstrued notions about disability in the movies so as to match with the aesthetic expectations of the abled audience. Premised on feminist disability studies, which focuses on the intersection between gender and disability, the paper employs Feminist Content Analysis and Digital Ethnography for the

study. The textual and audio-visual content analysis of the selected movies from a feminist perspective is carried out to understand and assimilate the representation of differently abled female characters in the movies. Digital Ethnography is used to analyse the trajectory, patterns and contents of movies released in the Bollywood film industry that depicts differently abled characters and its development over the time.

The Depiction of Female Disability

When it comes to disability of the female protagonists in movies, most of the time, it is carefully framed in such a way that it doesn't compromise with the visual aesthetics and male gaze of the abled audience, even at the cost of its inaccuracy. For example, over the time, Bollywood movies have presented plenty of the visually impaired female characters, played by well-established and beautiful abled-female artists. Their eyes look beautiful, perfect and even heavily kohled, except the fact that they are visually challenged. Madhuri Dixit in *Sangeet* (1992); Kajol in *Fanaa* (2006); Deepika Padukone in *Lafangey Parindey* (2010); Kajal Agarwal in *Do Lafzon Ki Kahani* (2016); and Yami Gautam in *Kaabil* (2017), to name a few, have been represented in their characters with visually appealing colourful clothing, make-up and hairdo. In some movies like *Chiraag* (1969), *Kinara* (1977) and *Choti Behn* (1959), they accidentally become blind and in others like *Patang* (1960), *Sunayana* (1979) and *Jheel Ke us Paar* (1973), their visual impairment can be cured (Iyer). Some movies have 'happy endings' where they come out of their disability and attain a perfect and complete life; or, they are sexually abused or killed and the movie ends tragically (Khetarpal).

However, *Barfi!*, *Margarita with a Straw* and *Zero* are different from such genres in two significant aspects. One, the female protagonists of the movies are having developmental disorders and even though they are played by abled and visually appealing female actors, their disability is visible and vocal. The wheelchair clad Laila and Aafia and autistic Jhilmil have speech difficulties, impaired and/or involuntary movements and unusual postures that are unapologetic and at the same time empathy-

invoking (not sympathy). Second, not only the female protagonists of these movies are differently abled, but also their love interests because of which multi-lateral readings of disability (that of male-female disability, sensory impairment vs. development disorder etc.) are possible. While the narratives of the male directorial *Burfi!* and *Zero* revolves around the male protagonists, the female directorial *Margarita with a Straw* depicts the coming of age of the female protagonist Laila Kapoor.

In *Burfi!*, Jhilmil Chatterjee is autistic and her love interest Murphy Johnson, who is known as Barfi, is hearing and speech impaired. *Margarita with a Straw* portrays the complicated lesbian relationship between Laila Kapoor suffering from cerebral palsy and Khanum, a visually challenged lesbian activist. *Zero* narrates the story of Bauua Singh, a vertically challenged man and Aafia Yusufzai Bhinder, a scientist prodigy with cerebral palsy. In all the three movies, the relationship dynamics between these differently abled characters are central and well-established. In *Burfi!*, Jhilmil becomes Barfi's responsibility and without any visible romantic inclinations, they live together platonically. It is the re-entry of Barfi's ex-lover Shruti, who possesses an abled-feminine stereotypical characteristics and body language, creates tension and conflicts in Jhilmil. There is a peculiar scene in the movie where Jhilmil tries to compare her with Shruti looking at her belly in the mirror and trying to wear a sari. The re-entry of the character Shruti, after her leaving Barfi and getting married to another man, seems to convince the audience the possibility of love, attachment and romantic interests of Jhilmil and Barfi's commitment to her. On the contrary, till towards the end of the movie, Shruti confronts Jhilmil only with pity, doubt and jealousy.

Taking care of Jhilmil and accepting her as a partner transform the otherwise silly character of Barfi into a responsible adult and the hero. In the movie, Jhilmil's thought processes and perspectives are totally absent and out of sync with her character development. Jhilmil is a child caught up in a

woman's body (Kamath; Sharma, S). Throughout the movie, she is depicted as a deviant, undesirable, un'sexual' woman with child-like innocence and childish features. Autistic behaviour in the movie is portrayed equivalent to temper tantrums of a child and Jhilmil's character delivers the same outcomes with innocence. The audience might as well mistake her as physically and mentally 'retarded' (Shah). It makes the audience feel sympathetic to her and completely forget the fact that the role is played by Ms. Chopra, who is often identified as beautiful, sexy and desirable. She was highly appreciated for her stellar performance and approached by the Forum of Autism (FOA) to become the face of their organization (Newz Hook).

Autistic spectrum is wide and diverse, and each individual may vary. There are many gaps and loopholes in the movie with respect to Autistic behaviours. However, some common traits such as lack of social skills, difficulty in communication (*ibid.*), avoiding eye contact and indirect expressions (Duara) are found in Jhilmil. On the contrary, as Dr. Rubina Lal, who has doctorate in Autism, points out, an autistic person will not be able to communicate a phone number to a stranger or make a call, let alone possess jealousy, which is an advanced emotion, as opposed to what is shown in the movie (Desai). Even though Chopra is highly praised for her portrayal of an autistic woman, the film did not delve deep into autism nor pay attention in bringing in the disability perspective. The movie is unravelled through an abled woman, merely showcasing disability as a content.

In contrast, *Margarita with a Straw* imparts the honest depiction of life of a young girl with cerebral palsy. This coming of age movie doesn't disengage romantic and sexual explorations of the female protagonists just because her body is differently abled. In fact, the movie delves deep into the sexual urges, experiments and orientations of Laila from a feminist perspective. Neither has it chained Laila into the innocent-sympathy worthy girl portrayal nor raised her into an extraordinary achiever beyond her bodily limitations. There are many occasions where we see Laila as a flawed and confused human

being. Laila is not depicted as “that poor thing, to be pitied and patronized” (Gupta). For example, when Laila confronts to her visually challenged girlfriend Khanum that she had sex with a man, she justifies that he could see her (unlike Khanum). Another scene where Laila cries to her mother in the college after the lead singer of the college band rejects her indicates how much she longs for a normal romantic life. Her curiosity towards porn films and masturbation are something which mainstream Indian cinema conventionally rejects for even its abled heroines themselves.

Thirty years old Koechlin, for playing the nineteen years old Laila, had practiced her role by using wheel chair in her daily activities before shooting the film and she admits that she felt infantilised (Parmar). However, the movie does not infantilise/romanatise/sympathise Laila (Sharma, P; Pal; Vembu; Kaushal; Johanson; Parmar). In fact, “Bose stays away from the everyday difficulties of being differently abled as well as the overcompensating heights of achievement suggested by Hindi movies on the subject” (Ramnath). The movie subtly, yet unmistakably, bi-furcates two cities, New Delhi in India and Manhattan in New York, in terms of public infrastructure available for differently abled (Pal; Sharma, P). However, at times, it felt like “everyone in America treats Laila like a regular person” (Pal; Kumar) which is a wrong notion about the country. Another issue the movie ignored was Laila’s physical issues and lack of muscular control during sex (Pal) and “in her sexual encounters, her disability never comes into play” (Kumar). Also, in a detailed observation, it seems like her bodily functions improve towards the end (Pal; Kumar). The scene where Laila needs support for using the bathroom and the following sex scene, is shot without “titillation and prurience” (Gupta). However, S. E. Smith, a disabled writer has pointed out that, “in an extremely troubling sequence, the film sexualizes a toileting scene in a way that made me, as a disabled viewer, extremely uncomfortable, given the exceptionally high rate of sexual assault and abuse endured by women in positions like Laila’s, women who need assistance with day-to-day activities”

(Smith). This depicts how the visual narrative of the movie holds an ableist perspective.

On the contrary, *Zero* presents dwarfism of the male protagonist as a curious, comical content rather than exploring its various facets, while cerebral palsy of the female protagonist is celebrated and set to mark a binary. The movie begins with monologue from the female protagonist where she tells that this story is hers as much as it is his', but she herself is disappearing from the movie while the most traumatic events were happening in her life. She is rejected at her wedding, she carries and delivers a baby as an unwed-mother, falls in love with her fellow scientist and working on a life-altering mission to send humans to mars; all of which are narrated in a few minutes in the movie. Here, disability of the female protagonist is used as an added advantage and none of her struggles as a woman/mother/mathematician/differently abled person are portrayed in the movie. If disabilities of the characters are removed from the plot, nothing significantly changes in the story line as well. Disability as an instrument of social discrimination is unaddressed and Aafia is often treated as a celebrity in the movie. The movie heavily compromised on her character illustration beyond the hero's love interest. There is another male character in the movie who is partially visually-challenged and comically represented. Disappointingly, *Zero* illustrates disability for the sake of jokes and sentiments, by overlooking the scope of the concept.

Anushka Sharma mentioned in an interview that she worked with an occupational therapist and audiologist for conceiving the characteristics of Aafia and practiced in wheel chair for three months to do justice to the character. However, Sharma was criticised for her inconsistent portrayal of cerebral palsy in the movie (Masand; Chopra; Desai). Some reviewers highlighted the unparalleled performance of Kalki Koechlin as Laila Kapoor, in contrast to Anushka Sharma's enactment of Aafia. Disability is the only common trait of Bauua and Aafia in *Zero* and they are seen to openly mock each other's disabilities (Desai). An accidental pregnancy convincing a world renowned,

American mathematician to marry a 38 years old, family-dependent, under achiever, seems farfetched.

However, none of these characters are played by disabled artists and the abled-artists disguising their abled-bodies as disabled become problematic. The movie *Margarita with a Straw* is inspired by the director Shonali Bose's differently abled cousin and initially Bose looked up for actresses with cerebral palsy for the lead role. Due to their reluctance to play the sex scenes, Kalki Koechlin was approached. Even though she is unanimously well-praised for her acting as Laila Kapoor (IMDb user reviews; Rotten Tomatoes; Pal; Kaushal; Sharma, S; Ramnath; Vembu; Harvey; Das; Brussat & Brussat; Parmar), that grabbed her National Award for Best Actress, this had casted a shadow of "overcoming-disability narrative" (Anand 142) into the movie.

Body Image, Desire and Sexuality

In *Burfi*, there are two prominent female characters, Jhilmil and Shruti, who are depicted as antithesis to each other. On the one hand, there is Shruti, a beautiful, desirable woman, rich and educated with supportive family, who leaves Barfi for her fiancé, possessing an abled feminine body and features, in modern and traditional attires alike. On the other hand, Jhilmil is an autistic, child-like woman, taken for granted by her parents, who leaves everything to be with Burfi and shares a platonic bond with him, seemingly like that of a play-mate. Jhilmil is bob-cut, wears skirt, shirt and hairband like a school going child. There is a scene in the movie where Jhilmil uninhibitedly seeks Barfi's help to undo her pants for urinating. However, the re-entry of Shruti into Barfi's life invokes possessiveness and jealousy in Jhilmil which results in her leaving Barfi. Even though Jhilmil is depicted as an extremely de-sexualised character, there are some instances in the movie that demarcates her desire towards Barfi. The scene where she witnesses a marriage makes her visualise Barfi as groom in her imagination. This is the only scene in the movie that exposes Jhilmil's perception to the audience. She also tries to imitate a wife who is fanning her husband while serving food and examines her

waist in front of the mirror after looking at Shruti's narrow waistline.

On the other hand, *Margarita with a Straw* delineates disability as one of the identities/traits of Laila (Kaushal; Johanson). The movie is about "Laila's inner journey, not her disability or the actor's portrayal of disability" (Sharma, S); or the "sexual self-discovery" (Vembu) of a teenager with impaired motor skills, and yet, we see Laila struggling to fit into the abled world. In fact, she tries "to seek out the company of able-bodied friends, apparently to feel 'normal' herself." (*ibid.*). For example, even while Laila is sexually exploring her friendship with Dhruv, another disabled classmate of Laila, she is very particular in the relationship boundary not extending to romance, in spite of Dhruv's longing (Brussat & Brussat; Harvey). In turn, her love interest for Nima, the lead singer of her music band, reinstates "Laila's belief that she can fit into the world of able-bodied people" (Brussat & Brussat).

Sexual explorations of a disabled teenager itself is unconventional in nature. As veteran film critic Anupama Chopra mentions, "In our movies, the sexuality of able-bodied women is a startling idea, so imagine the shock you get when Laila masturbates, watches porn, openly lusts and experiments with men and a woman" (Chopra). In fact, "disabled sexuality is so stigmatized that disabled people are typically desexualized in media, which makes the depiction of actual sex onscreen, let alone queer sex, revolutionary, whether you're in India or America" (Smith). "The film also handles intimacy without any romantic illusions, in the sense that it demonstrates how 'normal' desire is, even for the disabled" (Sharma). The movie can be termed as an "emotionally direct study of disability and sexuality" (Pulver) and the audience doesn't get stuck with Laila's disability (Ramnath). In fact, Laila wants to go beyond her body and finally accepts her body as it is.

When it comes to *Zero*, the female protagonist is neither infantilised nor desexualised, but sex being a turning point in the movie is not well represented. There is a scene in the movie where Bauua, a mere stranger at that point of time, assisting

Aafia to the bathroom. The movie nowhere explores the struggles of Aafia. Also, sexual intimacy happening between Bauua and Aafia is not adequately explained in the movie. Since the movie lacks Aafia's perspective, her desires are unexplored. Similarly, body image of Aafia varies in varied occasions. Her lips seem twisted and normal, so is her voice. Her range of physical movements also varies throughout. When she is wearing the bridal attire towards the end of the movie, the movie captures her like an abled woman. It seems that, at many points, the creators of the movie have not let Aafia's disability disrupt the clichés of the love story.

Body Autonomy and Agency

Body autonomy and agency of a disabled woman is a multi-dimensional concern. In a system where abled women are denied of body autonomy and agency, it becomes extremely difficult for a disabled woman to exercise her bodily rights, as she is infantilised and incapacitated further more with her disability. Studies suggest that many autistic people "are hindered to be(come) autonomous due to unjustified interference, unreflected assumptions about their self-determination, or by paternalistic actions" (Spath and Jongsma 73). The same applies to women having cerebral palsy. Her movements are already restricted by the physical condition, which further more will be socially restricted as a disabled woman. The alarming number of physical and sexual assault experienced by disabled women "is related to both gender and disability-based discrimination and exclusion" (UNO). However, the topic of body autonomy and agency associated with disabled women is often limited to teaching them consent and physical boundaries to protect them from sexual abuse.

While Jhilmil and Barfi travel in a truck, a man voyeuristically gazes on the legs of Jhilmil who is sleeping. Even though she doesn't let strangers cross physical boundaries with her, she is unable to identify such instances uncomfortable. In addition, Jhilmil's innocence is highlighted in the movie with an intention to desexualise her. However, it is not true that autistic people are non-sexual beings. Like most of the autists,

Jhilmil doesn't exhibit physical intimacy or feel emotionally connected with people, except with whom she is very comfortable. When her mother beats her, she helplessly cries and when she was kidnapped, she screams at the stranger. Though very unlikely and implausible, she even gets away from Barfi when she feels neglected by him. Even though she develops feelings for Barfi, it is largely unexplored in the movie and the life after their marriage is not specifically exposed as platonic or romantic and/or sexual.

While many Indian women still see their body with shame and fear, *Margarita with a Straw* depicts Laila's bodily desires unapologetical and organic. The same body that doesn't obey to Laila in terms of her motor skills "brings Laila enjoyment." (Johanson). It is also very clear at some moments that Laila "is secure in her identity as a sexual person" (Smith). Masturbation, sexual explorations, experiencing bisexuality and "standing up" for herself exemplify this. It is her bodily autonomy that makes her point out to her mother that she is invading into her privacy (Anand 143). There is no shame or guilt that prevails when it comes to her bodily desires. The mother-daughter bond (Sharma) is painstakingly pictured in the movie. Disability of the child mostly becomes a mother's problem and responsibility. The functioning of the family, especially that of the mother is "intertwined with Laila's needs and accommodating them to such an extent that her mother's connection with her seems to transcend the limits of an emotional bond in becoming an aadat (a habit)," (Anand 142). The mother has reluctance to accept Laila as an adult woman. Laila has to share bedroom with her 10 years old brother in Delhi (Johanson; Harvey) and her mother gets furious knowing that Laila surfs porns in the internet (Anand 143). It is not a surprise that a middle class Indian mother cannot accept her disabled daughter's bisexual orientation.

It is often common that abled people "disregard the sexuality of disability...labeling them as asexual or hypersexual beings who do not deserve privacy or bodily integrity." (Sinha). However, it is to be understood that "individuals are not

disabled by their impairments but by the way society fails to cater to their physical, emotional and intellectual needs” (Jacob). When Laila is appreciated with sympathy on the stage, she shows the woman her middle finger and wheels out (De Bolt). It is somewhat revolutionary that Laila longs for an abled partner. This is evident when she falls for Nima (overcoming Dhruv) and Jared (overcoming Khanum). She also implies to Khanum that “her need to be made love to by Jared, is her desire, as a person with cerebral palsy, to be validated by a sighted person.” (Anand 144). Another instance where she appreciates Khanum’s body and expresses her wish to possess such a ‘perfect’ body also “presents a disabled young woman’s yearning for a non-disabled body.” (*ibid.*).

Intersectionality, is in many ways addressed in the movie. Parents of Laila are inter-religious while parents of Khanum are inter-national. Laila-Khanum relationship—more than a same sex relationship, it is also a complicated one between an Indian Hindu Brahmin and Bangladeshi-Pakistani Muslim. Even within the binaries of abled and disabled, homosexual and heterosexual, men and women, development disorder and sensory impairment, *Margarita with a Straw* characterises disability as diversity. In *Zero*, Aafia is an empowered woman who does not want disability to define her. She takes every single decision in her life and her parents are supportive of her. She doesn’t consider herself inferior because of her disability. Even she asks Bauua, whether his romantic gestures towards her are for sex. However, Aafia engaging in unprotected sex with a person she barely knows, brings in an element of surprise in the movie. The character Bauua could not grow beyond the “heartthrob”, “superstar” image of Shah Rukh Khan, which has in fact blown the real life narration out of proportion in the movie.

Disability is undoubtedly a feminist issue. It is one of the intersectional aspects that further marginalise women. It is very likely for a disabled man to have an abled partner so that she can nurse him to maintain his functioning, since care work is expected out of her. In turn, it is very difficult for a disabled

woman to get even a disabled partner. She may remain unmarried if she cannot fulfil the “feminine” gender roles in the family as perfect as an abled woman. Therefore, her disabled body becomes a double burden and vulnerability point to the natal family that may further suppress her body autonomy and agency, bereft of desire and aspirations.

Conclusion

The paper explores and problematises some significant concerns. The first and foremost concern pertain to the abled actors ‘enacting’ disabled bodies and the resultant misrepresentation of disability as an act rather than a condition. Specifically, when the actors point out that they have observed differently abled people and practiced and incorporated the disability traits into their act, it reduces the specificity of being differently abled as a mere bodily performance. For the abled actors, it is primarily an exciting and challenging assignment that helps them achieve certain milestones in their careers rather than the social cause through which the issue of disability is addressed and discussed in the popular media. Overturning the ableist casting, behind and in front of the camera, could bring in a radical transformation to the existing narratives on disability. Even though there are affirmative and mindful changes in the portrayal of women and disability perspectives in cinema over the years, the desire, body positivity and sexuality of the differently abled women (in fact, men too) remain predominantly unexplored. The representation of disability in cinema from the ‘unsexualised’, ‘deviant’ bodies to the ‘autonomous’, ‘different’ bodies that possess the same rights and integrity can mainstream and normalise the differently abled women in the social structure. This way, cinema, as a popular medium, can address and reform ableist presumptions, institutionalised marginalisation and discrimination faced by the differently abled people.

Note:

The inclusive terminology, ‘differently able’, is used to denote their condition and the term ‘disability’ is used to indicate the issues,

discrimination and marginalisation faced by the differently able people.

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