

Disability and Hindi Cinema: Countering Detrimental Portrayals of Disabled Women within Media

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Abstract

Movies serve as a reflective medium that portrays occurrences within society. The technology facilitates the integration of the physical and digital realms, enabling the discernment between reality and fictional constructs. The diverse characters portrayed in films serve a purpose beyond mere entertainment and information dissemination. Additionally, they transport audiences to an alternative temporal and spatial setting. When a film effectively captivates its audience, it compels them to actively engage in critical analysis, develop personal viewpoints, navigate their emotional responses, motivate them towards societal involvement, and ultimately contribute to constructive transformations in the global context. Upon viewing films produced in India, it is imperative that matters, challenges, and perspectives pertaining to people with disabilities undergo a shift in prominence, transitioning from the periphery to the focal point. This article examines the inclusion of significant female characters with disabilities in a number of Hindi films spanning multiple decades, offering a comprehensive analysis of their thematic content. There has been a notable transformation in the portrayal of women with disabilities within the realm of Bollywood. The objective is to present an authentic portrayal of women with disabilities, aiming to avoid a superficial or symbolic portrayal of their lived experiences. Disabled women in Hindi cinema have undergone a transformation wherein they are portrayed not as mere recipients of excessive sympathy but rather as individuals who are the focus of comprehensive analyses. Filmmakers provide individuals with disabilities an opportunity to articulate their perspectives and personal encounters by incorporating them into their artistic endeavours. The primary objective of this article is to rectify the unrealistic expectations held by the general public by debunking prevalent myths and exaggerations surrounding disabled women in Hindi cinema. The objective of this article is to undertake a comprehensive examination of three Hindi films, specifically *Margarita with a Straw* (2015), *Hichki* (2018), and *Blind* (2023), that revolve around the experiences of women with disabilities.

Keywords: film analyses, mainstream cinema, discrimination, authenticity, accessibility, agency

I. Introduction

The application of film as a powerful instrument for cultivating tolerance and promoting respect for cultural diversity is widely recognized in modern society. Film as a medium has the capacity to depict an authentic and sincere representation that aligns with the expectations and criteria of its audience. This study centers around the examination of biases and misunderstandings that are subjugated during the portrayal of women with disabilities in the medium of film. Historically, actors who did not have disabilities would frequently portray disabled characters for the purposes of entertainment, monetary profit, or eliciting sympathy from the audience. “Why can’t Bollywood make these things normalized instead of giving it a comic twist. Bollywood used these cheap methods in order to get popularity” (Das and Bhattacharjee 823). One such callous and horrible representation of a mute person is found in Rohit Shetty's *Golmaal* series, which is presented as a comedy. The article *Cultural Representation of Disabled People* argues that inaccurate portraits often ignore “the way in which disability is a relationship between people with impairment and a disabling society” (Shakespeare 287). Filmmakers recognize disability as a distinct field of study and portray it in a genuine and accurate manner. However, the selection of both disabled and non-disabled actors for the portrayal of disability remains a subject of debate. This article assesses and interprets the representation of women with disabilities in films spanning multiple decades. The dearth of compelling narratives in Indian films pertaining to disabilities, particularly those centered around disabled women, exerts an adverse influence on societal attitudes towards diverse disabilities.

Since its beginning in 1913 Indian cinema has had a great impact on the Indian masses. Cinema has the power and magic to influence the society. While it is caught up between the real and reel life, Cinema still serves as an important medium of entertaining people, educating them and bringing a behavioral change in their practices and attitudes. Given the reach of the Bollywood industry in India and across the world, it has been

particularly effective in transforming people's perceptivity and deracinating societal cliché. In Bollywood, disability is either seen as symbolizing damnation or as a goofy or petrifying individual, and seldom do we have movies where it is realistically portrayed. The aspect of disability in the film is used mainly for a dramatic effect, rather than to familiarize and sensitize the audience about the disability. The disabled character is often used for a commercial gain, or for adding the element of fear or an object of pity. (Mukherjee 39).

Upon analyzing the historical trajectory of Indian cinema, it becomes evident that there has been a pervasive and problematic portrayal of disabled that can be deemed highly objectionable. In the annals of Indian cinema, it is evident that films depicting disability have predominantly gravitated towards two polarizing ends. The primary objective of these films is twofold: firstly, to evoke undesired sentiments of sympathy and compassion, and secondly, to derive financial gain from the cinematic productions. In cinematic portrayals, characters with disabilities were often depicted as uninteresting, submissive, and devoid of assertiveness. The representation of non-disabled characters in Indian films surpasses that of disabled characters in terms of numerical prevalence. In a significant proportion of Indian films, the antagonistic characters are portrayed as having disabilities as a direct consequence of their criminal actions, thereby rendering them vulnerable to the non-disabled protagonists. In order to address the challenges posed by disability in cinematic productions such as *Dushman* (1998), *Aankhen* (2002), and *Kaabil* (2017), filmmakers have employed the narrative technique of endowing disabled characters with heightened sensory abilities. The depiction of individuals with disabilities in an unfavourable manner has adverse consequences for the disabled community. Tom Shakespeare contends that inaccurate depictions frequently overlook "the way in which disability is a relationship between people with impairment and a disabling society" (287). In recent times, Indian filmmakers have endeavoured to portray disabilities in a manner that is reasonably accurate, if not entirely realistic. The films *Black* (2005), *Tare Zameen Par* (2007), *Iqbal* (2005), and *Paa* (2009) demonstrated a commendable portrayal of diverse dimensions pertaining to disability. These films serve the dual purpose of providing education to non-disabled regarding the lived experiences of persons with disabilities while also promoting awareness of diverse disabilities. The central figures in these films were persons with disabilities who triumphed over their physical or cognitive disabilities by successfully navigating the challenges inherent in their everyday existence. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that these films are not exempt from imperfections. They adhere to a customary narrative structure that aims to evoke empathy from viewers, depict characters grappling with their disabilities, and ultimately triumph over them by the film's conclusion. The work *The Creatures That Time Forgot: photography and disability imagery asserts that*, "The reformation of oppressive imagery is only important [or, at least, more than superficially] if it is linked to wider social issue, such as access" (Hevey102). The Indian entertainment industry still has significant progress to make in effectively and faithfully portraying disabled individuals in films, ensuring authenticity and accuracy. In order to genuinely foster inclusivity, it is imperative to portray disability as a facet of diversity rather than perpetuating the portrayal of people with disabilities as extraordinary or solely for the purpose of inspiring others. The aforementioned statement encapsulates the essential components necessary for fostering awareness and providing education to people without disabilities regarding the actualities of disabled individuals' lives. Article *Framing Disability in Contemporary Bollywood Cinema* asserts that, "The ways in which individuals and groups are portrayed in popular media can have a reflective effect on how they are viewed by society at large" (Singh and Pandey3).

The representation of disabled women characters in Indian films often fails to capture the multifaceted nature of real-life disabled women, thereby sacrificing realism. Throughout the course of time, a considerable number of renowned and aesthetically appealing female actors with no physical disabilities have portrayed a multitude of visually impaired female characters in the context of Bollywood cinema. In the film *Sangeet* (1992), Madhuri Dixit depicted the experiences of the visually impaired community. Similarly, Kajol portrayed this community in *Fanaa* (2006), Deepika Padukone in *Lafangey Parindey* (2010), Kajal Agarwal in *Do Lafzon Ki Kahani* (2016), and Yami Gautam in *Kaabil* (2017). Several films, such as *Chiraag* (1969), *Kinara* (1977), and *Choti Behn* (1959), depict the protagonist's accidental loss of vision, while others, including *Patang* (1960), *Sunayana* (1979), and *Jheel Ke Us Paar* (1973), portray their inexplicable recovery from blindness. The primary aim of filmmakers depicting disabled women is to present them as vulnerable individuals who succumb to the prevailing ableist norm, thus positioning them as damsels in distress. The filmmakers neglected to analyze the body language, facial expressions, and behaviour of real disabled women, opting instead to depict them according to their own preferences. Nevertheless, the cinematic works *Barfi* (2012), *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), *Hichki* (2018) and *Blind* (2023) exemplify a departure from the tendency to romanticize or patronize disabled women, instead presenting them in a more favourable and empowering manner.

The depiction of women with disability is viewed by the audience as burden to self, family and society. They were shown as dependent physically, emotionally as well as economically and hence requiring protection without which they succumb to vices or sexual exploitation. Wherein the hero as a central character of a film

was afflicted with disability, the respondents reported how such films showed them as superbrave, achievers against all odds being fighters and steadfast till the end of the movie. The respondent showed no amusement or unreality in portrayal of the hero at times using a ploy, ruse or alibi to pretend disability in order to win the heart, love or sympathy of the heroine in some movies. Wherein the heroine was shown as disabled, the respondents were impressed by the humility, simplicity, and sub-ordination of such roles to the caring and benevolent demeanor of their male protagonist. (Venkatesan 109)

The film *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) is a remarkable portrayal of the intricate experiences faced by disabled women. The central protagonist in the narrative is Laila Kapoor, portrayed by Indian actress Kalki Koechlin, who embodies a character afflicted with cerebral palsy. She is a member of a university-level musical ensemble and actively engages in the creation and arrangement of original compositions for the group. Laila's encounters with adversity exemplify the common challenges experienced by disabled women, thereby rendering her character emblematic. An illustrative example can be observed in the case of Laila, whose anxiety levels experience a significant surge when she relies on men to transport her across her college campus due to the absence of wheelchair ramps. The chief guest at the college fair also made a comparable public declaration, expressing her intention to present Laila's team with the award due to the fact that the songwriter of the song in question is a young woman with disability, putting her talents in jeopardy. The film explores the concept of the "body beautiful paradigm," which posits that women within a patriarchal and non-disabled society are expected to conform to societal ideals of femininity in order to preserve their sense of self. The movie also undertakes a comparative analysis of the accessible infrastructure in India and New York, aiming to identify similarities and differences between the two countries. Laila relocated to New York after being granted a scholarship to partake in a semester-long programme. She ultimately attained the liberty that had been withheld from her in India. In the film *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), the character of Laila is depicted as a woman who exudes confidence and displays a high level of competence. Khanum, a visually impaired individual with ancestral roots in Pakistan and Bangladesh, is also prominently showcased. In the film, the character Khanum serves as an example of the difficulties that people with visual impairments face on a daily basis. The film also presents a comparative analysis of the lifestyles of Laila and Khanum. Khanum's resolute commitment to achieving autonomy and maintaining a positive outlook in spite of her visual impairment stands in contrast to Laila's lack of freedom beyond the confines of her deeply religious household. In contrast to Khanum, she actively seeks to enhance her visibility within the able-bodied community. The individual in question exhibits a deficiency in the qualities of bravery and self-assurance demonstrated by Khanum. Consequently, she experiences persistent anxiety regarding the external perception of her vulnerabilities, both physical and emotional. Ultimately, Laila comes to the realization that external validation is no longer necessary, thereby granting her the freedom to fully embrace and celebrate her individuality.

An examination of the disfigured woman's position in the media could serve as a barometer for how society perceives her. The literal image of the disabled woman, on the other hand, may influence how disabled women are perceived and judged in real life. (Kent 48)

The film *Hichki* (2018), starring Rani Mukherjee, narrates the tale of Naina Mathur. Naina is diagnosed with Tourette Syndrome. Tourette Syndrome, a neurological disorder, manifests as a speech impediment characterized by the production of involuntary sounds during communication. Naina possesses a bachelor's degree in the field of education and has also attained a master's degree in the discipline of science. When faced with challenges in a society that does not accommodate people who have disabilities, Naina experiences apprehension, characterized by repetitive stroking of her fist against her chin, trembling of her legs, and emitting involuntary noises in public or during social interactions. The film portrays several instances that illustrate the emotional turmoil experienced by people living with disabilities. For instance, one scene depicts Naina's attempt to manage her hiccups by placing paper in her mouth, while another shows her resorting to chewing her finger as a coping mechanism for her condition. She manifests her frustration and lack of confidence through her pedagogical approaches. The film portrays the challenges faced by those who are marginalized in navigating their sense of self within dominant societal norms. One is Naina, who has aspirations of pursuing a career as an educator. However, her aspirations are thwarted as a result of being denied the opportunity due to her medical condition. Another minority group that aristocratic society and wealth have abandoned is the underprivileged children. Naina was given the opportunity to take on the role of a teacher by St. Notker's, contingent upon her commitment to instructing the student of 9F, who hail from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds.

The film's various segments show the prejudice that people who don't conform to the dominant cultural norms face. The film incorporates numerous allusions to students in 9F, suggesting that the socioeconomically disadvantaged children residing in this district experience enduring social isolation, criticism, and ridicule as a result of their disadvantaged position. The film sheds light on the attitudes and behaviours exhibited by people of privileged backgrounds towards those who are marginalized. In a classroom, there is a recurring occurrence of professors and students engaging in discriminatory behaviour towards 9F students, asserting their

unsuitability as participants in the academic community. The prevalence of discrimination necessitates selecting an option that is not factually right. A student in class 9F deliberately sabotages the scientific project of another student from a different class due to a history of facing ridicule and mockery. Due to the school's authority's perception that Naina's condition hinders her ability to teach students who are outstanding in other classes, she is afforded the opportunity to teach these underprivileged students. Naina's journey to attain a teaching position spanned a period of five years. As a consequence of her speech impairment, twelve out of the eighteen institutions to which she submitted applications rejected her. "Disabled people are often regarded as unproductive citizens and unable to perform their duties and responsibilities, affecting their rights to be ignored" (Humeira and Nurbaya 116). During her interview, administrators at St. Notker's questioned Naina's teaching abilities by asking her so many unsolicited questions. They were unaware of her condition and advised her to seek other employment because students would mock her in class if she continued to teach. "[Movie] can be used as a powerful tool for changing the chronicle and moulding the impression of multitude" (Mukherjee 39). These circumstances are a source of embarrassment for Naina's father, who is strongly encouraging her to pursue a career in banking. This profession is perceived to involve less public visibility compared to teaching, thereby potentially shielding her from possible social stigma. Naina and her family come together at a dining establishment to commemorate a special day. Naina's condition of Tourette syndrome was exhibited, resulting in the occurrence of hiccups. The guests of the restaurant directed their gaze towards Naina, causing her father to experience a sense of embarrassment. Upon the waiter's approach requesting the order, Naina's father assumed the responsibility and placed the order on her behalf, effectively rendering her inconspicuous. "We stare when ordinary seeing fails, when we want to know more. So staring is an interrogative gesture that asks what's going on and demand the story" (Thomson 3). In conventional society, disabled individuals often have their identities shaped by non-disabled individuals, resulting in a lack of autonomy for the former. Naina's inability to persist in her teaching position at St. Notker's was exacerbated by her calm and composed demeanour in the face of a notoriously disadvantaged ninth-grade class. The film introduces a parallel dimension that juxtaposes abnormality with normality, wherein Naina endeavours to assimilate into a non-disabled community while the underprivileged children of 9F encounter challenges in adapting to upper-class society.

The film portrays Naina, a disabled woman, in a positive light, challenging the perception of her as helpless and dependent. It suggests that individuals with disabilities can exhibit productivity when afforded opportunities. "The writer is firmly of the belief that movies, if portrayed well can truly re enforce the evocation of certain feelings which are realistic rather than merely confirming the cultural stereotype disabled people carry in society" (Boray 6). Naina holds the belief that her career path as a teacher was predetermined, and she posits that her Tourette's syndrome primarily impacts her ability to communicate rather than her cognitive abilities. The principal of St. Notker's expressed his belief in Naina's potential and willingness to take a chance on her due to her remarkable self-assurance. Naina uses her optimistic demeanour to foster a sense of inclusivity and belonging among students. The instructor facilitated an enjoyable learning environment, resulting in the children's increased comfort and decreased annoyance towards disruptions. Ultimately, all of the students demonstrated exceptional academic performance, as evidenced by their outstanding results. Notably, two students in the ninth grade achieved a flawless score. During their discourse on the subject of normalcy and abnormality, Naina's father openly acknowledges his inability to provide treatment for her Tourette's condition. The individual expresses their intention to rectify the situation. Naina expressed to her father that there is no need for any alterations as her identity is inherent and immutable. The film concludes with Naina delivering a thought-provoking speech in which she expresses her curiosity about the true nature of Tourette's syndrome. Could you please clarify if you are referring to a small number of tics or a brief duration of tics? Alternatively, could it be posited that our approach to life is the determining factor? The central focus pertains to the cognitive processes involved in thinking. Given the limited distinction between the phrases "why" and "why not," Following a quarter-century of teaching, she has made the decision to tender her resignation.

In India, given the potential of mainstream popular cinema to sensitize the masses to an awareness of the nature of specific disabilities and the challenges they pose, mainstream cinema must steer clear of replicating the conservative and normative values of Indian Society which go against the progressive liberation of minorities with differences. The role of the film maker will be to remove biases and stigma against the disabled, deconstructing superstitious and illiterate attitudes that show disability as a curse or as madness and finally correcting popular perceptions and stereotypes, by representing the disabled with understanding, sympathy, dignity, fortitude and conviction. (Boray 6-7)

The film *Blind* (2023), featuring Sonam Kapoor in the lead role, portrays the narrative of Gia, a police officer. Gia's life takes a tragic turn when she is involved in a car accident while accompanying her notorious stepbrother Adrian home from a music concert. As a result of the accident, Gia not only loses her brother but also her ability to see. In the subsequent sequence, the audience is presented with a visual depiction of Gia, who is visually impaired, as she engages in her customary activities while being accompanied by a service dog. Due

to the non-biological nature of Gia's blindness, she possesses extensive knowledge of the layout and details of the house. Tracing objects within her residence posed no difficulty. Presently, her faithful companion is dog, Elsa. The film depicts the narrative of Gia's encounter with a serial killer in a car and explores the subsequent effects of this encounter on the police department's efforts to apprehend the assailant. Gia's visual impairment did not hinder her abilities as a courageous and intellectually astute policewoman. Gia's visual impairment resulted in heightened sensory perception in her remaining faculties. She can identify the specific fragrance that the perpetrator has applied, for instance, thanks to her exceptional sensory perception. Additionally, Gia showed her hearing capability to perceive a knock emanating from the trunk of the car, causing the assailant to experience discomfort. In response, the assailant endeavored to inflict harm on Gia. Nevertheless, Gia's astute awareness and quick thinking enabled her to avoid unpleasant situations. The filmmaker portrays Gia's character as a resilient and empowered woman, avoiding any condescending or sympathetic portrayal. Upon Gia's mother's invitation for her to reside with her, Gia declined, asserting that her vision impairment did not render her reliant or deserving of sympathy. A serial killer, identified as a man, had symptoms of psychosis and depression and harbored a strong aversion towards women. As a means of retribution, the killer proceeded to abduct women, subjecting them to acts of torture until his own satisfaction was achieved, ultimately resulting in their demise. This finding highlights the vulnerability of women subjected to violence when they are unable to fulfill the expectations of the dominant male ego. Upon discovering Gia's visual impairment, the perpetrator erroneously believed that she posed no threat to him. However, Gia's exceptional intellect and indomitable fortitude ultimately disproved his assumption. The film *Blind* (2023) effectively portrayed the Blind Culture in an honest manner. The individual consistently received support from her service dog, Elsa. During the confrontation between Gia and the serial killer, it is noteworthy that the dog also had a tragic fate, as it was mercilessly slain by the perpetrator. Gia successfully navigated the adverse circumstances instigated by a serial murderer, ultimately prevailing through her exceptional hearing acuity and combat proficiency, resulting in the execution of the aforementioned perpetrator. The film portrays the empowered position of a visually impaired woman who, although facing numerous challenges, successfully regains her previous employment not due to sympathy or pity but rather due to her exceptional abilities and commitment as a female law enforcement officer. The significance of the movie *Blind* (2023) lies in the lack of sympathy for Gia and the admiration it evokes for her extraordinary bravery as she navigates her sightless existence and asserts her agency in a world where those with sight predominate.

In the context of the Indian film industry, it is common for able-bodied actors to assume the roles of characters with disabilities. Bollywood places emphasis on the exceptional portrayals delivered by renowned actors, who may possess limited awareness of the challenges associated with navigating such circumstances. In the film *Jalsa* (2022), Surya Kashibhatla, who personally experiences cerebral palsy, assumes the role of a child who is also affected by cerebral palsy, thus establishing a noteworthy precedent. The casting decision made by Director Suresh Triveni to include a child with a cerebral disability in the film is praiseworthy, as it demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity. Within the cinematic production, Surya Kashibhatla assumed the role of Ayush Menon, who is depicted as the offspring of a renowned journalist residing in Mumbai. The exceptional execution of Surya Kashibhatla's portrayal distinguishes his character from the other highly talented actors in the film. The child's cerebral impairment may foster a sense of relatability among the disabled audience in relation to his acting prowess. By incorporating disability discourse through inclusive representation and active participation of individuals with disabilities, the Indian entertainment industry has the potential to enhance its diversity and inclusivity. This minimal set of requirements is sufficient to enhance global productivity and enable individuals, regardless of their disabilities, to experience a life of satisfaction and accomplishment. It is imperative to recognize that disabled actors possess a plethora of personal experiences that they bring to the screen.

II. Conclusion

The narratives crafted by filmmakers pertaining to disabled women exhibit a pronounced tendency to undervalue the lives of these individuals, whom they claim to represent, while simultaneously highlighting the perceived superiority of able-bodied women over their disabled counterparts. Additionally, these narratives often explore themes that revolve around the erosion of human identity. Women with disabilities, a demographic that is inadequately represented in the media, experience emotional distress when they are depicted as reliant, subservient, and incapable rather than being portrayed as productive individuals. Filmmakers with an inclination towards disabilities and a desire to represent disabled women often fall short of accurately capturing the myriad challenges these women encounter in their everyday lives. The depictions of disabled women presented in an inaccurate and devalued manner fail to effectively educate the audience regarding the authentic experiences associated with living with a disability. The act of portraying disabled women in a pitiable manner not only lacked practicality but also became irrelevant within the Disabled Community. The critical assessments of *Blind*

(2023), *Hichki* (2018), and *Margarita with a Straw* (2015) shed light on the daily challenges encountered by women with disabilities as well as the societal prejudice that undermines their autonomy. The article examines the portrayal of disabled women in mainstream films, highlighting the discriminatory attitudes prevalent in non-disabled society towards this demographic. Additionally, it aims to challenge and debunk misconceptions surrounding disabled women. These films shed light on the potential for mainstream cinema and filmmakers to enhance the accessibility of accommodations for disabled women and foster diversity and inclusion among this demographic. It is imperative that mainstream filmmakers assume a proactive stance in portraying disabled women as commendable figures, thereby rejecting any inclination to dismiss them based on their gender and disability. It is imperative for filmmakers to refrain from presenting disabled women in a somber and sympathetic manner and instead actively strive to eliminate the negative societal perceptions and stereotypes surrounding them. In order to challenge prevailing misconceptions, it is imperative that forthcoming cinematic productions incorporate a greater representation of women with disabilities.

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