

Representation of Disability – A Space of One's Own in Literature and Cinema

Aakash Sharma

*Kirori Mal College
University of Delhi
Delhi, India
about.aakaash@gmail.com*

Abstract

The extent of disability studies has indisputably augmented since the field's inception in the 1980s. The discipline has garnered profound academic traction and emerged as a distinct branch of socio-political exploration of the human condition. Over the years, the intelligentsia of disability studies has primarily acquiesced to the discourse of disability as a product of social organisation rather than personal limitation. While this notion has encountered its own set of challenges, it has given exploratory grounds for discerning the hitherto unexpressed individuality of a vast population that is categorised as disabled.

This paper will examine the role of literature and cinema in providing a social space to persons with disabilities. It will analyse how references about disability are hegemonically linked to unique health needs, chronic health conditions, and the resultant construction of identity and roles of people with disabilities. Further, the paper will refer to Raymond Carver's *Cathedral*, in which the "idea of blindness [disability] came from the movies". It will delve into the cinematic expanse acquired by the impression of disability and how its performance has helped humanise the often-overlooked nuanced realities of disabled people's lives. Indian cinematic compositions like the 2005 drama *Black* and the 2018 black comedy *Andhadhun* will be alluded to for examining the performance and representation of disability. The paper will also call for the expansion of institutionalised support for disabled people from health and education to the fields of liberal and performative arts.

Keywords:

Disability; literature; cinema; discourse

In a world connected with innumerable divisions and classifications, the most basic connection is rooted within the corporeality of human existence. The way one looks and performs their role in society is key to their placement in the social hierarchy. This 'norm' of

the human condition is a product of centuries-long discourses driven by normative ableist agendas. Stories and narratives about people who do not fit in the conventional social norms — the disabled people — have existed since the ancient era. They have been mentioned in some of the richest literary works in history, including the ancient Indian texts of *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*. In the *Rāmāyana*, Shravana Kumara is revered as the torchbearer of filial piety towards his parents, who were both blind hermits; they depended on their son's dedication for fulfilling their life's end goal. In the same text, Manthara, the disabled humpbacked servant of Queen Kaikeyi, became the primary villain persona due to her role in perpetrating the exile of Lord Rama. In the epic of *Mahābhārata* too, Shakuni, the disabled maternal uncle of the Kaurava princes, catalysed a deadly war to satiate his malicious thirst for revenge.

The conventional perceptions of disabled people have played a fundamental role in modelling the discourse of disability as a form of social maladjustment and a passage to evil. This view of disability has come down to the contemporary era almost verbatim. “Some view it as a punishment from God, or bad *karma* from past lives. Others view it as a state of suffering, contemplating whether a life with a disability is even worth living” (Adler 1).

Despite the tribulations, the extent of disability studies has indisputably augmented since the field's inception in the 1980s. The discipline has garnered profound academic traction and emerged as a distinct branch of socio-political exploration of the human condition. Over the years, the intelligentsia of disability studies has primarily acquiesced to the discourse of disability as a product of social organisation rather than personal limitation. While this social model of disability has encountered its own set of challenges, it has given exploratory grounds for discerning the unexpressed individuality of a vast population that is categorised as disabled.

This paper will examine how literature and cinema have (or have not) provided a social space to persons with disabilities. In doing so, it will analyse how references to disability are hegemonically linked to unique health needs and conditions, and the resultant construction of identity and roles of people with disabilities.

Representation of disability in literature

Artistic mediums play a vital role in shaping how we perceive disability and treat people with disabilities. Years of vexed representation of the disabled community in literature and cinema has created the binary of "us", the non-disabled, being different from "them". This discourse reflects a "system of representation that marks bodies as subordinates" (Santos et al. 3144). It primarily draws from the imperative medical aids and special arrangements that people with disabilities need to function. Such derelict reasoning renders disabled people subordinate to the rest of society.

The tropes of disability in literature are vastly misguided by the conventional treatment of disability in society. Their usage tends to do away with the fact that some of the greatest literary works have been produced by writers who were disabled or developed a disability later in life. One such prominent writer was John Milton. Milton produced his greatest work, *Paradise Lost*, after losing his sight completely. He dictated his verse and prose to amanuenses; Andrew Marvell was one such assistant of his. This allusion to Milton is necessary to counter the negative discourse associated with disabled persons and the magnitude of their works; it is undoubtedly difficult for anyone to claim that Milton's body of work is frivolous.

Analysing disability in *Cathedral* by Raymond Carver

Raymond Carver's short story *Cathedral* can be analysed as one of the most important texts in dealing with the perceptions and prejudices held against disabled people. Blindness has a two-fold meaning in the story. It represents a lack of sight and the abstract failures of perception. In *Cathedral*, the narrator's worldview is sullen and prejudiced against disabled people. By carefully describing the narrator's encounter with Robert, the blind friend of his wife, Carver portrays people's general disposition in dealing with disabled persons:

"He also had this full beard. But he didn't use a cane and he didn't wear dark glasses. I'd always thought dark glasses were a must for the blind... I wished he had a pair. Without the glasses his eyes looked like anyone else's eyes. On close inspection only did they seem different" (Carver 216).

The narrator's peculiar observations of disability culminate from the long-drawn process of social marginalisation of the disabled and their image formation as the ones who look a certain way and need to be treated a certain way, i.e., differently and ignobly. These observations stem from the generalised discourse floated by non-disabled people about what persons with disability can or cannot do:

"I remembered having read somewhere that the blind didn't smoke because ... they couldn't see the smoke they exhaled. I thought I knew that much and that much only about blind people" (Carver 217).

Carver's realism in portraying the reaction to disability blatantly questions the stereotypes and prejudices associated with blindness. It challenges the social norms by stating the unfiltered thoughts of the narrator and his discomfort in encountering a disabled body, which he has been taught to treat as subordinate. Interestingly, the narrator's "idea of blindness came from the movies", and this speaks volumes about the role that literature and cinema play in enabling (or hindering) social discourses. The following section will explore the role of cinema in the representation of disability in society.

Representation of disability in Indian cinema

Black (2005)

The 2005 film *Black* is often hailed as a milestone in Indian cinema for representing a disability story with near accuracy. Starring Amitabh Bachchan and Rani Mukherjee in lead roles, the film is a bildungsroman story of Michelle McNally (Mukherjee), who loses her sight and hearing ability early in childhood. While the critical theme of the film is disability and how Michelle deals with it to proceed in life, it has several overtones that can be traced in its portrayal of a disabled girl child. An important theme is the class perspective in the film and how the experience of disability varies across classes. The story of Michelle portrays a disability experience in an upper-class setting. "Lack of social touch and numerous formal rules bind up the disability in an elite family where the struggle is mostly inward and confined to the person with disability" (Tracing 12). *Black* accurately portrays so.

Bachchan's role as an unconventional teacher-magician (Debraj Sahai) is representative of the pedagogical lacunae in understanding the needs of disabled students. The reference to him as a 'magician' hint at the special abilities needed to deal with disabled students, abilities that the mainstream social model very obviously lacks. His pedantic methodology to deal with a disabled child is clearly visible when he says:

"The alphabets of the world start with A, B, C, D, E but yours start with B, L, A, C, K -- Black."

Swagata Chatterjee notes that “the film maintains the Victorian patriarchal concept of ‘angel of the house’ as Sahai decides to turn Michelle into a ‘fine young lady’ by conditioning her” (Chatterjee 16). Such forceful experiences form relentless memories that remain firmly, and often wrongly, embedded in the conscience. While Sahai’s act of forcing Michelle in the fountain to make her feel the water is portrayed as a positive learning tool, it can also be construed as a symbol of the violence that people with disabilities are subjected to in their life and its lasting impact on them. “The life of Michelle before language can be said to be almost animal like, who is humanized” (Chatterjee 16). This can be related to the disability discourse where the animalistic representation of a disabled body appears frequently. The film powerfully articulates the struggle with the lack of accessible education. It captures a reality that continues to affect disabled people even today. In its entirety, the film helps us see how social problems shift shape, while enabling an understanding of the first-person perspective in a disability narrative.

Andhadhun (2018)

Another essential film to be discussed is the 2018 neo-noir *Andhadhun*. Screenwriter Rachit Raj in his critical praise for the film outlines that “*Andhadhun* is not a film on disability but a film that has a character with disability. It gives us a peek into the life of a visually impaired man without making the narrative about his condition” (Raj 2). In doing that, the film takes a bigger step in giving a new perspective to the performance of disability in Indian cinema.

With a subtle reference to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the narrative is coordinated early on for the tragedies that ensue. ‘Focus’, which heightens as a sense in persons with disabilities, is set as the film’s primary theme since the beginning. This departs from the conventional representation of disability in Hindi films, which often take stock either as comic relief or commiseration. Persons with visual disabilities developing enhanced ‘superpowers’ are globally used as a motif in cinematic compositions, like Marvel Studio’s *Daredevil*. However, *Andhadhun* explores the space where a non-disabled man ‘adopts’ blindness to find focus in life. The film explores the depths of its characters’ minds more than the actions they perform by shifting the focus away from their disabilities and towards their life as it unfolds. Yet, as far as the representation of disability goes, not only is Akash (Ayushman Khurana) written as a blind man, but the film’s anti-heroine Simi Sinha (Tabu), a modern-day Indian Lady Macbeth, is also shown handicapped by her circumstances. *Andhadhun* strikes a “smart balance between giving a realistic representation of disability and using it as a metaphor in the plot, never neglecting one over another” (Raj 2).

Reform and institutionalised support

While the space for representing disability has increased in literary and cinematic arts, people of the disabled community are not yet actively allowed to own their art, narratives, and performances. They are 'used' passively in behind-the-scenes roles, consulted loosely for the plotlines and copyright issues. In both the films discussed above, none of the actors come from the disabled community. The realistic portrayal of disabled persons and their stories is undoubtedly necessary for driving social change via cultural mediums. But their portrayal by conventionally and medically non-disabled actors counters the fundamental principle of the disability representation movement, which is to engage more people from the community.

Shonali Bose, director of the film *Margarita With a Straw* (2014), said in an interview that "if there is no institutional support from the government in the form of grants [for inclusive and truly representative films], things get very difficult" (Suri 5). Institutional support must be expanded from the existing medical model to the education and training of various segments of arts including literary, performative, and cinematic arts.

Conclusions

For actualising the representation of disabled people in arts and cinema, every avenue should be considered to cast a disabled actor. Radical steps must be taken from revisiting the casting processes to introducing auditioning spaces accessible for disabled actors. Serious efforts should be made to encourage participation by disabled students and faculty in schools and colleges. Institutions should ensure physical and intellectual access for everyone. They must prioritize leadership positions held by people with disabilities and create an environment that welcomes the participation of all who share their goals of equal inclusion and representation.

"A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Virginia Woolf).

Each people should hold their own narrative. Progress has been made in literature and cinema, as the portrayal of disability has started to move away from offensive caricaturisation to an inclusive view of disability as part and parcel of society. But there is a long way to go for realising the primary goals of the representation movement, and it may still be a while till everyone can have a space of their own.

Works Cited

- Adler, Lana. "Redefining Disability in Literature, Television and Film". *Soapboxie*. (2020):p.1
<https://soapboxie.com/social-issues/Redefining-Disability-In-Literature-Television-and-Film>.
- Santos, Tatiana Vasconcelos; Moreira, Martha Cristina Nunes; Gomes Romeu. "Performance and Disability: Ways to Health Reinvention". *Ciência & Saúde Coletiva*. 25(8):3143-3152 2020 (2018): p. 3144. Web.
- Carver, Raymond. "Cathedral". *Cathedral* (1983): pp. 216-217
- Tracing the portrayal of disability in Indian cinema*. (2015): p.12. Web.
- Chatterjee, Swagata. "Aesthetics of Disability: The Growing Interest in Disability in Popular Hindi Cinema". *postscriptum: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies*, Vol: 1 (January 2016): p. 16. Web.
- Raj, Rachit. "Disability and Deception". *The Recliner Seat* (2018): p.2
<https://thereclinerseat.wordpress.com/2018/11/05/the-journey-begins/>
- Suri, Rishabh. "International Day of Disabled Persons: Bollywood has had a tryst with representation of the specially abled, but are we still missing the mark?". *Hindustan Times* (2020): p. 5.
shorturl.at/iprGL

Author's bio-note

Aakash Sharma is an English literature major. He completed his undergraduate B.A. Hons. English degree from Dyal Singh College in 2019 and graduated with an MA in English Literature from Kirori Mal College in 2021. He has worked in the digital publishing sector and aims to join the academic fraternity in near future.
