



Original Article

## **Intersectionality and Hindi cinema: A study on the representation of disability and bisexuality in the Hindi film 'Margarita with a Straw'**

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### **Abstract**

According to professor Kimberle Crenshaw, 'All inequality is not created equal'. She coined the term 'intersectionality' in 1989. This term elaborates on the oppression of women in society based on class, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and sometimes even on their political inclination. These individual characteristics overlap and intersect with each other. It can be the case where either one or all of them conjoin one another and create experiences of discrimination among women based on various systems of oppression. Crenshaw proposed that unjust behaviour based on intersectionality has an intense and personalised effect on the social structure of women. For instance, disability, which is marginalising, further narrows down the opportunities to be seen and heard by the female gender. Therefore, this paper attempts to study the representation of intersectionality through the social categorisations of disability and sexuality of women in Hindi cinema. Ahead of her time, director Shonali Bhose presented *Margarita with a Straw* in 2014, the story of a young woman with dreams, ambition, and a debilitating disease known as Cerebral Palsy. Laila, the protagonist here, accepts herself and the challenges life brings to her. She is on a quest to explore freedom and sexuality, defying the appropriation built around disability and genderqueer. The film also touches upon the supportive and special mother-daughter relationship throughout. To

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align with the narrative of the film, a qualitative approach using critical analysis and interview guidelines will be used as a tool to elicit empirical data. In conclusion, the study will open debates on the representation of the intersectionality of gender and identity in Hindi cinema and will open debates on the change in the representation among the masses.

### **Introduction**

Cinema is the art of storytelling through a medium that also holds the power to create a lasting impact

on its viewers. Cinema plays a significant role in entertaining and educating its audience on social causes. It ignites changes in the perception of the audience towards issues they're unaware of or are not directly impacted by. Cinema is a depiction of reality, and reality is equally influenced by cinema. It has become an essential part of society today. Cinema globally caters to the masses and has made a remarkable change in society.

Considering India, Hindi cinema, largely referred to as Bollywood, plays an important role in society. The dominant cinema in India is Hindi cinema, which rules over other films in the vernacular language. Cinema brings stories to life and has eventually taken a step towards creating awareness among the receivers. Media representations are influential in nature, and considering the extensive reach of Hindi cinema, it is imperative that these representations are accurate and sensitive. The stories depicted by films create impressions in the minds of the audiences and influence small to big decisions in their personal and social lives. For example, people plan their vacations by watching films; youngsters change their appearances after viewing a film or seeing their favourite actor on screen. Films set an ideal standard among their audience of how a particular thing should be (for example, a wedding) or how a relationship should be (say, mother-daughter). It also defines the roles of individuals in a family setting, which is often generalising in nature and misleads the audience from reality. The representation in cinema varies and has extremes to it, one, generalising and stereotyping of people, community, gender, roles, and responsibilities, and two, bringing to light the social issues or neglected & taboo topics. Unknowingly, media representations through films reinforce stereotypes among its viewers.

### **Portrayal of women and disability**

The representation of women in the cinema is by far marginalised. They have been objectified, and their value in a storyline is reduced to a love interest, appearance in item songs, a side character, or a supporting character. The representations in the film differ far from reality, which often deludes the audience. Women have been stereotyped as having certain character traits like being caring, nurturing, and giving, which limits the role of women to being good mothers or caregivers.

Generic representation of the female gender has also set an image among the people of how the ideal woman looks, dresses, talks, and carries herself. The screen has shown the extremes of representation which are black and white with no shades of grey. The representation lingers between the good or bad, heroine or villain, wife or the other woman, successful or gold-digger. Women are shown as having the highest of values, who can do no wrong to their families, prioritise families first, and can never step outside the institution of marriage and society. This has reinforced the patriarchal standards among the audience.<sup>[1]</sup>

The term disability, as per the Americans with Disabilities Act, can be defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of an individual.<sup>[2]</sup> (Mutuma) In Hindi cinema, very few films have portrayed disability as a central theme of the plot, for example, Koshish (1972), Sparsh (1980), Black (2005), Tare Zameen Par (2007) Paa (2009), Barfi (2012), Margarita with a Straw (2014), etc. "The portrayal of disability swings primarily between two extremes - pity, fun, caricaturing, sympathy, 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".<sup>[3]</sup> The representation of disabled characters in Hindi films is limited to similar storylines that are detached from the real world. Disability has been shown to have many aspects, but none of them appeal to be real, sensitive, or relatable. The limited representation of disability focuses on select ideas of portrayal which revolve around disability as punishment - earlier films like Jeevan Naiya (1936), Aadmi (1968), and Koshish (1972) have portrayed the actor playing a negative role of becoming disabled as a punishment of their deeds, disability as comic relief - films like Tom, Dick, and Harry (2006), Golmaal (2006) have exploited disability to add comic relief to the plot of the story, disability as heroism or disabled person having a unique ability - films like Aankhen (2002), Iqbal (2005), Tare Zameen par (2007) showed characters having unique ability which helps them achieve anything they want without facing difficulties.<sup>[4]</sup>

Such representations in cinema bring out a wrong message to the audience and reflect the insensitivity towards disability. The representation

of disability is similar to the representation of minority groups. Films need to touch on a realistic approach to film-making on disability and not limit or narrow down disability or disabled characters to objects of pity.

### **The plot of the film**

The film *Margarita with a Straw*, 2014, directed by Shonali Bhose, is a film that touches upon the intersectionality through the social categorisations of disability and sexuality of a young girl, Laila (played by Kalki Koechlin), a university student in Delhi. Laila is a wheelchair-bound teenager with cerebral palsy and a speech disorder. She lives with her family and is cared for by her mother. Laila is an enthusiastic girl who enjoys her social life with her able-bodied friends, a differently-abled best friend, and a college band, of which she is also a part. Laila struggles through her feelings, rejection, parental supervision, and social pressure. Yet, she manages to experience freedom after moving to New York, where she makes decisions for herself, finds love, and discovers her sexuality along her journey.

### **Analysis**

The film takes the viewers on a journey of a differently abled young girl who is on a quest to explore life and her sexuality. Laila's mother, Shubhangini (played by Revathy), is her caregiver, who supports and understands Laila as a child and as a friend. Laila is a student at Delhi University with certain dreams and talent. She has Cerebral Palsy, a condition where she has a speech disorder and is bound to use a wheelchair. In the film, Shubhangini is shown making the decisions in the family, dropping her husband to work, her son at school, and Laila at college. It shows a woman taking the lead in the family, defying the presumed gender role. The family's portrayal in the film reflects their optimistic approach to life where they're not afraid of society, don't compare their son and daughter, support both of their education, and are unapologetically accepting of their daughter's disability. The film does not victimise the protagonist or doesn't call for pity or sympathy; rather, it shows how the protagonist and the family accept the challenge with an open heart.

The film normalises the need for desire and demonstrates how a person with disability explores

her life and sexuality without any over-dramatic romantic encounters. Laila is seen kissing Dhruv, her best friend, who is also a wheelchair-bound individual. Laila and Dhruv escape to the chemistry lab and can be seen making out with each other. Dhruv has romantic feelings for Laila, while she develops feelings for Nima, a guy from the band where Laila is the songwriter. Though Laila isn't restricted by her disability, she crops her photo before uploading it to social media, where she interacts with Nima. This shows that even though Laila accepts her life and reality, she gains a sense of confidence by cropping her picture and not being made feel like a differently abled individual on the screens of social media. When Dhruv finds out about Laila's interest in Nima, he is upset and angry with her for not choosing him. He says in anger, "Normal logo ke sath dosti karne se tum normal nahi ban jaogi", "You won't become normal by being friends with normal people". which suggests that Dhruv considered their mutual disability will keep Laila grounded with him. She is a fool to look for desire in people who are not like them. This is internalized ableism where, again, patriarchal standards of the man in context (Dhruv) are hurt. Laila is hurt by Dhruv's comments and reaction to ableism.

Later in the film, at an inter-university concert, Laila's university wins the competition. However, the judge ascribes their win to Laila's disability. This disappoints her, and in anger, she makes an offensive hand gesture towards the judge and leaves the stage. Nima meets Laila backstage to comfort her, where she expresses her feelings to him. Nima doesn't reciprocate with the same desire and leaves Laila heartbroken. Laila, upset by Nima's rejection, avoids going to college. She believes she cannot face anyone now that Nima has rejected her. Her mother, Shubhangini, finds Laila skipping college and confronts her, where she breaks down and confides in her mother. Unlike Dhruv, Shubhangini understands her daughter's emotions and doesn't make her feel wrong for having feelings for Nima. Her mother sees her beyond her disability. Shubhangini suggests that Laila should accept the offer at NYU and support her in taking the course. Laila's father is concerned about her mobility and limitations as a disabled individual. He disagrees with her moving to another country, but Shubhangini accompanies her to New York with no hesitation. She also has the same care and

concern for Laila, yet she wants Laila to pursue her dream and live life on her terms.

The film depicts an urban middle-class family setup where nothing superficial is shown to the audience. Throughout the film, Laila shares a pure, friendly, caring relationship with her mother, but as a young girl, she needs privacy. The need for privacy is an essential aspect of an individual's life, which Indian families fail to address. Similarly, as an Indian mother, Shubhangini doesn't recognize Laila's need for privacy and is disappointed in her when she finds porn on Laila's laptop. She is embarrassed and calls it morally wrong for Laila to engage in a self-pleasing act. Laila expresses her anger at her mother for invading her private space and is not ashamed to look for answers to address her sexual anxiety. Laila is not guilty of herself and of having desires, though she is a differently-abled woman. Her mother's reaction can be seen as something deeply rooted in the society that shames women who outrightly express their sexual needs and choose to live life outside the defined practices for women by calling them bold. Shubhangini isn't happy seeing Laila trading her chain for an iPad, whereas the same act makes Laila feel empowered. This is a refreshing angle of the film, which showcases the need for privacy, allowing women to make their own decisions and not keeping them under the continuous scrutiny of their affairs.

In New York, Laila meets Jared in her class, to whom she is initially attracted, who also assists her in writing assignments at university. New to the city, Laila doesn't hesitate and isn't limited to the boundaries of her room. Unlike India, where she was always accompanied by her mother, New York City allows Laila to wander around the city streets. She commutes by herself and attends college on her own. The city's infrastructure empowers Laila, which wasn't possible in India. For example, once, at the university in Delhi, when the elevator at her college wasn't working, she was carried to the stairs by the support staff, which was highly uncomfortable for her.

On the streets of New York City, she meets Khanum (played by Sayini Gupta) protesting in a police brutality march. Khanum is the third disabled character in the film. She is a blind woman from Pakistan who identifies as a lesbian. Both of them instantly become friends. These two girls

start living together and help each other in whatever possible ways. Laila, unaware of her sexual identity and who is still exploring, gets attracted to Khanum, and eventually, both of them get into a romantic relationship. Unlike Laila, Khanum knows and is sure of her sexual orientation. Khanum is a liberated individual, and although Laila is in love with her, she is also attracted to Jared. Laila cheats on Khanum and gets intimate with Jared, maybe because she feels seen, perhaps because she isn't sure of her feelings, or maybe because she is exploring and understanding her inclinations. This portrayal of Laila's character is necessary and a vital step in showing that disability doesn't make one asexual or that the concept of love, sex, and desire is not unusual or alien to disabled individuals.

After coming to India, Laila confesses to her mother about her sexual orientation. She expresses to her mother that she identifies as bisexual, to which Shubhangini shows disregard and is unaccepting of Laila's choices. Laila's mother, who is initially fond of Khanum, is now unable to accept that her daughter is in a romantic-sexual relationship with another female. Laila also comes clean with Khanum about her sexual encounter with Jared, which breaks Khanum's heart, and she questions Laila with anger in her voice, "So by fucking you, he made you feel normal?", again this is similar to what Dhruv accuses Laila of. Khanum's reaction is valid, but it shows deep-rooted discrimination and pity for herself and other people with disabilities. Towards the end, Laila's mother, dealing with her ill health, accepts Laila's choices and is no more ashamed of her daughter. Instead, she apologises to Laila for her intolerance towards her relationship. Shubhangini passes away, and Laila plays her mother's favourite song in her memory. Khanum forgives Laila for cheating on her but ends their relationship and goes back to New York. The story ends with Laila in a saloon, getting a blow-dry and getting ready. She is seen accepting, understanding, and loving herself more than before and taking herself on a solo date ordering a Margarita with a straw.

The film is very reasonable and relatable in terms of the storyline, where at no point does it ask the audience to sympathize with the protagonist. In a very subtle way, it highlights the most critical aspects of what women face as challenges in their

own households and outside. Laila's life as a young teenager at college, her heartbreaks, and coming to terms with curiosity are as normal as any other teenager comes across.

The film is different and a step ahead of other films representing disability. It is an attempt at normalising queer identities, disability, sexuality, and the liberation of women in society. The film shows the warm relationship that Laila shares with her mother. Although Subhangini is Laila's primary caregiver, their relationship is not infantilizing. Instead, the mother-daughter duo share a loving and supportive bond. The film, in multiple instances, showcases Laila as a young adult in her mother's eye, who recognises her romantic interest in boys and her experiences with heartbreak. Shubhangini is portrayed as someone who doesn't shame Laila for having an interest in or liking able-bodied people, and neither does she treat Laila as a differently abled individual. She supports her in pursuing her dreams, even if that comes with uncertain challenges. The film depicts their bond evolving, showing a realistic and compassionate portrayal of a parent-child relationship.

The film also highlights how, at times, people with disability choose to see themselves through the lens of pity and unintentionally put down others who desire to be seen as normal human beings. The film is not discriminating against either of the disabled characters nor does it show pity or call for attention. The film encapsulates Laila's journey, coming to terms with her sexuality and the choices she makes in an attempt to discover herself. This is a classic example of intersectionality in the categorisation of disability and sexuality in cinema.

### Conceptual framework

For this study, the researcher has used the concepts of intersectionality, gender, and identity and their screen representation in Hindi cinema.

### Research questions

1. Does Hindi cinema include the idea of disability in the film?
2. Can you name a few films with the protagonist as a disabled character?
3. Does Hindi cinema incorporate intersectionality in its films?

4. Do you think the portrayal of disability creates sensitivity and awareness in the audience?
5. Have you watched the film Margarita with a Straw?
6. What are your comments on intersectionality with the categorisation of gender, sexuality, and ability of the protagonist?

### Significance

The study aims to understand the representation of disabled women on screen and how their basic need of love, desire, and freedom is portrayed. The idea of ability, alternate sexuality, and the impression it leaves on its viewers. As cinema has the potential to influence audiences, the portrayal of individuals or a group can be a reflection of how they will be viewed by society in general. Cinematic narrative either builds understanding or leads to stereotyping; thus, it's necessary to understand how the portrayal is being done.

### Objective

To understand the representation of disability in Hindi cinema with the intersectional category of gender, sexuality, and ability.

### Sampling size & method

The sample size of the study had two experts. Mr. Subair Kalathil, a gender studies expert & academician, and Dr. Vikas Rajpopat, a film expert, columnist & academician. A purposive sampling method was used.

### Tools of data collection

The tool for data collection was a semi-structured interview schedule.

### Data analysis & interpretation

The data was analysed using the narrative analysis method.

### Limitations of the study

The study is limited by the analysis of only one film, as there are no other films in Hindi cinema that are inclusive of both disability and alternative sexuality.



## **Analysis**

Two experts were interviewed for the study with expertise in their respective fields. Both experts have comparable opinions. Of the two experts, the first expert has not seen the film, and the second expert has seen the film.

Talking about the inclusion of disability in Hindi cinema, the first expert says that Hindi cinema does include disability, but it is limited to certain forms of disability, generally limiting it to blind, deaf, or mute characters. It doesn't represent all types of disability because the filmmakers do not want to deform the characters and maintain the beauty that appeals to the eyes. Also, films sometimes show characters with certain syndromes, which are not a complete representation. The experts say that regional films portray disability more realistically than Hindi cinema.

The second expert says disability is shown but not with the sensibility required. The portrayal till now has been very narrow and not authentic, but the time is changing, and the representation will also change in the future. The representation in the films in earlier times was not in the right light & direction, but in the future, one can expect the correct representation of disability soon.

The first expert on intersectionality in Hindi cinema says that it can be seen in multiple films and different frameworks of intersectionality can be seen like class and gender, caste and gender, alternative sexuality, etc.; therefore, intersectionality exists, but they have not gained popularity like other entertainment films. A few films that include intersectionality are *Masaan* (2015), *Parched* (2015), *Article 15* (2019), *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020), etc.

The second expert comments on intersectionality, saying that it exists in the cinema, but earlier, the films were made for entertainment, and the makers did not take the portrayal seriously but rather just served insensible content. With the apparatus film theory in place, it is evident that films also psychologically affect the viewers. Plus, media literacy is growing as well, and now people question back on misrepresentation, and thus, a reasonable representation of intersectionality will be seen.

Both experts held similar opinions on the lack of sensitivity and zero awareness created by films in society. These films do not create any positive awareness among the audience, and neither are they relatable as the films are superficial and, on the surface, ignore the real-life struggles of disabled people. The films with the protagonist as a disabled person are less preferred to watch and will not be chosen over an action/ comedy/ drama film. They do not create sensitivity as disability is always looked at with pity and something that is not normal.

About the film, the first expert says there has been a good representation, but society is not ready to accept what cinema shows them. The intersectionality demonstrated in the film is of gender and sexuality, not influenced by caste intersection, which is a different attempt. The concept of gender in the Indian context coexists with caste, an inevitable aspect that people purposefully ignore.

The second expert says that the film is very balanced and has a realistic approach. The protagonist in the film is seen beyond her disability; she is portrayed as an individual, and her actions, thoughts, and emotions are well showcased. The film attends to the protagonist as a person with how a person should be attended to without any pity or sympathy.

## **Conclusion and the way forward**

To conclude, the researcher wants to applaud the bold step of director Shonali Bhose for bringing a film that holds authenticity and doesn't beautify, dramatize or victimise the disability. Instead, it shows a genuine, life-like, and relatable representation of the Indian family setting and people with disabilities.

Hindi cinema and its portrayal of disability have not created much awareness or sensitivity among the audience, and neither is the representation of disability or disabled characters have been sensible on screen. Media and films have a high reach, and they hold the power to change, create, or destroy perspectives or notions that people hold. Media has brought people together for common causes and should do so to make a positive and accepting

environment for differently-abled individuals and their needs and desires.

Hindi cinema is progressing with its representation, and thus, the portrayal of people with disabilities and their sexual needs should not be put in the wrong light. A genuine and realistic portrayal is necessary to normalise sexuality as well as alternative sexuality. The worst that can be done to people with disability is objectification, adding a comic scene on screen, or creating a larger-than-life, heroic image of a disabled character. These representations are artificial and don't replicate reality. The representation of disability should not be through the lens of pity, and they should not be othered in the representation. For a long time, the cinema has been beautified and has put the idea of femininity and masculinity first, even when portraying disabled characters. This creates a false understanding among the audience.

Margarita with a Straw opens discussions on responsible representation in the future of Hindi cinema. It brings forward the need to normalise people with disability, portraying them not just as characters with challenges but as individuals with basic needs, desires, and dreams. The film upholds

the dignity each individual deserves, showcasing a justified portrayal of the diverse experiences of people with disabilities.

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