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Disability, Sexuality and Hindi Cinema

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ABSTRACT

Hindi Cinema is considered to be an influential means of reflecting the dominant view of society. With large majority of population understanding Hindi as a language, it has a wider reach to impact the mindset of society. The projection of persons with disabilities in Hindi cinema has undergone several changes ranging from being subject of pity, laugh to ridicule. Doctrine of Bad karma is still propagated through the Hindi movies. Review of the Hindi cinema shows the dearth of film portraying disability in general and sexuality of persons with disabilities in particular. Though the findings of the study reflect the change in the paradigm shift in the way subject of disability is treated in film, yet it is far away from openly bringing out the issues of sexuality and concerns relating to sexuality of persons with disabilities.

Introduction

Cinema is a powerful tool of creating an impact in the mind of an individual. It is believed to possess the power to change the world. Bollywood hero and heroines are considered as god-like and are role-models for millions of young people in the country. The messages sent by cinema which is a form of visual media is believed to have stronger impact than other modes like newspapers, magazines etc. Every now and then we get to hear the news of people engaging in acts (whether it is attempting to commit suicide failing in love or committing a crime like bank robbery) trying to imitate certain action of their favorite actor or actress reflecting the strong influence it holds in the minds of people. A lot of mindset and perception that an individual holds towards a particular thing is also a creation of what is shown in cinema. It plays a big role in a building perception particularly in Indian context primarily because of the fact that the message through cinema can be conveyed with much ease even to the people who are not educated (Batra, n.d.).

Portrayal of Disability as Penance of Wrong Deeds

Cinema has a peculiar feature of being disconnected from reality which is truer in case of Indian cinema. Most of the things shown in Hindi movies are fictional and bear marginal resemblance to the real world. For instance, a good number of the earlier Hindi film showed disability to be cured miraculously at the end of the movie which is a truth far from reality. The films like Arzoo (1965), Sadma (1983), Koyla (1997) and Vadaa (2005) are perfect example and testimony to the same.

The earlier portrayal of disability in Hindi cinema primarily hanged between two extremes. On one end it depicted pity, fun, caricaturing and awesome heroism and on other end it showed discrimination, coping-up, and aspirations of the human soul. The portrayal of persons with disabilities in Hindi cinema can be traced way back to the 1930s. In 1936, the film called "Jeevan Naiya" showed the lead character of the film getting blinded on account of desertion of his wife as she belonged to family of dancers. The early portrayal of disability focused on showcasing disability as penance for wrong deeds or outcome of Bad karma. These included films like Aadmi (1968), Koshish (1972) and Kasam (1988). These films predominantly portrayed disability to be the outcome of wrong deeds whether it was the a case of bad father-in-law played by Pran who gets blinded, Asrani, a wicked brother who tortures his deaf sister, Jaya Bhaduri and brother-in-law, Sanjeev Kumar and gets crippled or tribal chief played by Pran who gets disabled in attack by the police. Another pertinent thing to note in the portrayal of disability is that initially the disabled people were never shown as central character in the film. They were either shown as a sister (Farida Jalaal in Sachcha Jhoota) or a mother (Nirupa Roy in Amar, Akbar, Anthony) but never the lead.

Portrayal of disability worse than death

The treatment meted out to disability in Hindi films is also that of being considered worse than death. There are many Hindi films which have portrayed disabilities as a punishment; something which is worse than being dead. The most famous film of the decade, Sholay where Gabbar Singh (played by Amjad Khan) punishes Thakur (Sanjeev Kumar) by cutting both his arms rather than killing him is a testimony to this fact. Similarly films like Mehboob Ki Mehendi (1971) shows how protagonist Pradeep Kumar who, when finds his nemesis Iftikar on a wheelchair decides against killing him as he is already disabled and believes that living would be a worse punishment than death. Recently released film Haider (2014) also echoes the similar sentiment, where Shahid Kapoor decides not to kill his uncle regardless of his strong resolve to avenge his father's murder because he finds his uncle gravely injured with his legs amputated.

Portrayal of disability as Comic characters

Many of the Hindi films have also portrayed disabled persons as characters which are object of laugh. These include films like Pyaare Mohan, Tom, Dick and Harry and most famous characters played by Tushaar Kapoor in movie Golmaal Returns, Paresh Rawal in Golmaal and Upasna Singh in movie Judaai. Disability was never as a primary theme in any of these movies; however the disabled character in these movies were included just to invoke laughter reflecting the insensitivity towards persons with disabilities.

Portrayal of Persons with Disabilities showcasing abilities

Recently there has been a paradigm shift in the portrayal of persons with disabilities. There are several films which have now shifted their focus in showcasing the abilities of persons with disabilities instead of showing them as an object of pity and being patronized. Several films in this genre include films like **Iqbal (2005) which focused on the abilities of the persons with disabilities against all odds. The lead character of the film, Iqbal (**played by actor Shreyas Talpade) **who is deaf and mute** overcomes all obstacles and goes on to make it to the Indian Cricket team. This was probably one of the first films focusing on the abilities of persons with disabilities. Film Aankhen (2002) depicted three blind people essayed by Paresh Rawal, Arjun Rampal and Akshay Kumar successfully completing a bank robbery. Similarly, the movie Black (2005) narrated the tale of a hearing and visually impaired girl played by Rani Mukherji who overcomes all her adversities being a person with disability and get triumph over all odds to finish her education. A commercial success **Taare Zameen Par (2007)** focused on the abilities of Ishaan (a dyslexic character portrayed by Darsheel Safary) who with his creative mind and imagination reaches great heights once guided by his new art teacher (Aamir Khan). The latest Hindi movie Lafangey Parindey(2010) portrayed Deepika Padukone winning dancing competition (Film) despite being blind.

Portrayal of Sexuality of Persons with Disabilities in Hindi Cinema

Sexuality of Persons with disabilities has been one of the ignored aspects by Hindi cinema primarily because of the taboo associated with sexuality as well as disability. It is only in context of suitability of lead characters (disabled) for marriage and child rearing that certain aspects of sexuality has been portrayed in Hindi cinema. This portrayal has been in a very subtle manner and is majorly regressive in nature.

Gulzar's *Koshish* (1972) can be considered to be one of the pioneer works in the portrayal of disability particularly their need for love and belongingness. The film deals with deaf and mute couple, Sanjeev Kumar and Jaya Bhaduri and educates on the life experiences of deaf and mute people; their meeting, falling in love, getting married,. It realistically depicts the hardcore problems encountered by deaf and mute including the social mindset of society with respect to marriage of persons with disabilities and problems encountered in raising children. The film like Sparsh (1980) tried to bring out the emotions and dilemma experienced by persons with disabilities in real life when somebody without disability shows interest in them. In the film the central character of blind principal, Anirudh played by Naseerudin Shah falls in love Shabana Azmi whose husband had died in an accident. However, the hero of the film, Anirudh cannot get rid of the suspicion that Kavita is marrying him out of pity. This is what actually happens in real life where many of the persons with disabilities feel that if a person without disability is marrying him/her, it is out of sheer pity for them or because of certain vested interests.

Films like Saajan and Mann regressively portrayed the disabled male and female lead characters (Sanjay Dutt and Manisha Koirala) pitying themselves and considering them as inappropriate suitor for the marriage on account of their disability status. Movie like khamoshi (1996) starring Nana Patekar and Seema Biswas as a Deaf-Mute couple could never bring out the issue of disability and sexuality. However, a very small portion of film definitely showed the difficulties experienced by deaf and mute couple in raising their children, one of who dies in the film.

The film Black (2005) however touched upon the issue of sexual desires and feelings for sexual intimacy among the hearing and visually challenged female protagonist Rani Mukherji when she asks her teacher (Amitabh Bachchan) to kiss her, who does, but later get guilt-struck and leaves her forever. This movie rises a bit in showing the female protagonist's desire for physical and intimate relationship,

The film Barfi touched a miniscule component of Sexuality. The film reflected the fact that persons with disabilities also experience emotion of love. It showcased a deaf character (portrayed by Ranbir Kapoor) and autistic girl (played by Priyanka Chopra) falling in love. The film also highlights the perception of general public towards marriage with persons with disabilities. It showed that how one of the lead heroins (played by Illeana D'cruz) says no for the marriage with male protagonist on behest of her mother who dissuades her from pursuing him as he could not take care of her on account of disability.

However, the major breakthrough film "Margarita with a Straw" can be considered to be a benchmark in the history of Hindi cinema to talk about the issue of disability and sexuality openly. The film revolves around the story of a wheel chair bound Cerabral Palsy character Laila played by Kalki Koechlin and her journey from being a student at Delhi University to getting admitted to New York University. It talks about her journey of sexual discovery to falling in love with khanum, a character played by Sayani Gupta. The film dares to explore the unchartered territory and explores Laila's sexual urges and a complete range of issues surrounding it. It brings out the fact that persons with disabilities have sexual needs. It is liberating and empowering film as far as portrayal of sexuality of persons with disabilities is concerned.

Discussion and Way Forward

The findings from the above discussion reflect the need for accurate and responsible portrayal of persons with disabilities in Hindi cinema. There is a need for more realistic portrayal of persons with disability their abilities, their needs, their concerns and the various issues experienced by them in everyday life. The discussion also reflects that addressal of the sexuality of persons with disabilities in Hindi cinema is an ignored aspect which needs due consideration. Barring the film Margarita with a Straw, none of the film had dared to talk about the sexuality of persons with disabilities explicitly. The issue of sexuality of persons with disabilities has been marginally touchedi n mainstream Hindi cinema and hence there is an urgent need of showcasing sexuality of disabled so that mindset among general public is changed.

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