

Translating Stereotypes: The Semiotics of Disability Representation in Cinema

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Abstract

Indira Karamcheti posits that all acts of representation are perforce acts of translation from being to saying, experience to memory, presence to absence (Karamcheti, 185). Like translation, representation also is a twice-written discourse that transforms the original by supplementation. Unlike linguistic translation, it does not deface, displace, and replace but supplements it. To elaborate more specifically in the context of this paper, it can be said that representation is a kind of translation of identities, cultures; ideologies, etc. which are portrayed and constructed in cultural narratives such as literature, cinema, and other media. Thus, representation here does not involve just reflection but construction, negotiation and dissemination through narrative structure. Additionally, media narratives are shaped by the cultural, social, and historical contexts in which they are created.

Keyword: Disability Representation, Stereotypes in Cinema, Semiotics, Cultural Translation, Identity Construction, Media Narratives, Cultural Contexts, Ideology and Cinema, Representation and Translation, Disability Studies in Film.

In *Disabling Imagery and the Media*, Colin Barnes quotes disabled writer Paul Hunt: "We are tired of being statistics, cases, examples to the world, pitiable objects to stimulate funding" (Barnes 8). These kinds of representation not only contribute to reducing disability to

simplistic and mostly single dimensional narrative but also reinforce stereotypes by influencing public perceptions. In a way, they fail to capture the nuance of the complex experiences of disabled and sometime perpetuate such cultural biases that impact societal attitudes toward disability.

Based on the above discussions on representations and stereotypes, this paper explores how disability stereotypes prevalent in the cultural domain are translated into mainstream Hindi cinema through various elements such as dialogues, themes, plots and narrative techniques. By analysing characters with disabilities in selected films, it tries to identify common stereotypes associated with disability. Further, it analyses how these stereotypes have evolved over time and their impact on the changing cultural attitudes towards disability. By exploring various aspects of cinematic representation such as dialogues, characterizations, plotlines, and overarching themes, the paper aims to uncover how stereotypes surrounding disability are replicated and perpetuated in Bollywood films. Furthermore, it delves into how these representations shape societal perceptions and attitudes towards disability, contributing to the reinforcement or challenging existing stereotypes.

Stereotypes and (Mis)Representation of Disability in Bollywood:

Returning to Karamcheti's notion of representation as translation, it is possible to argue that when applied to the context of disability stereotypes in Bollywood cinema, this concept illuminates how prevalent societal biases and misconceptions about disability are translated into the cinematic narratives. Much like linguistic translation, where an original text is conveyed in a different language while attempting to capture its essence, cinematic representation involves translating societal attitudes and beliefs about disability into narratives, dialogues, themes, and character portrayals. This cinematic representation of disability doesn't necessarily obliterate or replace the original societal stereotypes. Instead, it supplements them, often reinforcing or perpetuating existing misconceptions.

The notion of “disability as a subject of philosophical interest in its own right” is a comparatively new concept. (SEP). Shifting from medical model of disability which considers it as the limitations resulting from the bodily differences (SEP) and social model which enforces that socially built environment disables the people to the cultural milieu in which disability acts as a as a social category of deviance. Within this cultural milieu, different stereotypes related to disability get operated. Discussing about different stereotypes of disability in the book “Disabled We Stand”, A. T. Sutherland says, “stereotyped views frequently act as self-fulfilling prophecies, forcing the person with a disability into a role that can then be used to justify the original treatment”. "Starting with the stereotype that disability is a consequence of past-life deeds (karma) to the belief that God or nature compensates a disabled person with a super-ability, there are many stereotypes prevalent in the cultural domain.

Building upon the discussion of cultural discourse, Barnes’ work identifies several popular stereotypes prevalent in the media, such as portraying disabled individuals as pitiable and pathetic, as objects of violence, or as sinister and evil. Being an integral part of Indian popular culture, mainstream Hindi cinema plays a significant role in shaping and reshaping that culture. To examine how the representation of disability in cinema evolved over time, it is necessary to see how the portrayal of disabled characters has shifted across different time periods considering the influence of major socio-political events associated with disability. This necessitates an overview of the Disability Rights Movement in India. According to Martand Jha’s article *The History of India’s Disability Rights Movement*, the movement in India can be divided into three phases: the initial phase of the 1970s and 1980s, the phase of the 1990s, and the period after 2000. According to him, initial phase of 70s and 80s is not a favourable phase for disability rights as he writes,

Most of these people were either seen as beggars or in better cases they were associated with the field of music. Even the system thought of them as a liability; these people were considered to be of little use to society and hence their concerns were severely disregarded. Many people thought of disability as the result of someone's previous life's sins and thus held them responsible for their present condition. (Jha)

Jha's observations are reflected in the Hindi cinema of the time. Specifically, the stereotypes related to poverty and disabled characters as beggars are evident in the film *Dosti* (1964), which portrays two friends Ramu and Mohan, whose friendship is tested by their disabilities and impoverished conditions. The film screens how these disabled duo have to spend their night on footpath and further how their survival is dependent on benevolence of normal people like Sharmaji. "In one scene, Mohan's long-lost sister is ashamed of her disabled beggar brother and refuses to recognize him." Thus, the film reinforces the stereotypes of disabled poor who survive on the kindness of normal people. Similarly, disability as a result of past-life *karma* is frequently depicted in films such as *Kashish* (1980), where the villainous brother torments his deaf sister and brother-in-law, only to later become paralyzed—an outcome he perceives as *bure karmo ka phal* (punishment for his past deeds). However, some exceptional films dealing with disability issues are *Sprash* (1980) and *Koshish* (1972) where rejecting the above discussed stereotypes, the disabled characters were having dignified social status.

Despite the enactment of the Persons with Disabilities Act (1995), Bollywood cinema has not reflected a shift in disability representation. While films released after 2000 attempt to dismantle the age-old stereotype of disability as punishment or *karmo ka fal*, they simultaneously reinforce other stereotypes. Films such as *Black* (2005), *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), and *Iqbal* (2005) replace the older stereotypes with new ones, depicting disabled

individuals as inspirational figures. Similarly, *Koi Mil Gaya* (2003) and *Krrish* (2006) reinforce the superhuman stereotype, where disability is linked to extraordinary abilities.

Another stereotype that equates disability or any type of impairment with a fate worse than death (Ghai) is reinforced by films like *Guzarish* (2010) where the protagonist prefers euthanasia over his worthless paralysed body. Such representations reinforce the perception that life with a disability is inherently burdensome and worse than death. This A similar message is subtly conveyed in *Haider* (2014), where the protagonist spares his uncle, a murderer of his father, partly due to his disability, reinforcing the idea that disability is a punishment severe enough to elicit pity and mercy. So, both the films strengthen a stereotype that disability is a worse than death as Ghai in her essay mentions “it is truly the proverbial last straw on the camel’s back.

Starting with Shakespeare’s Richard III and extending to Mr. Hyde in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, literature is flooded with the impaired characters whose disability becomes indicator of their evilness and ruthless behaviour (Berns). Taking this further, Jessica Gibson raises an important point in her article “Why a Disfigured or Disabled Screen Villain is an Idea that Needs to Die”. Jessica Gibson explains that in Hollywood films, physical disability is often used as a visual metaphor for evil in disfigured or disabled villains. Giving few examples of such characters like Dr Poison from *Wonder Woman*, Voldermort from *Harry Potter*, Kylo Ren from *Star Wars*, she suggests that such stereotypes reinforce negative attitude towards disabled in the society.

Based on the above discussed stereotypes, Hindi cinema has a long history of portraying disabled or disfigured individuals as villains, where their impairments serve as metaphors for moral corruption. For instance, Langda Tyagi’s limp in the film *Omkara* is not just a physical marker but a metaphor for his "crooked" morality, drawing parallels to Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Similarly, Kaal in *Krrish 3* is portrayed as a wheelchair-bound genius whose bitterness

about his disability drives his destructive ambitions. The film showcases how his disability is framed as the origin of his bitterness and quest for revenge, reinforcing the trope that disability equals villainy. These representations not only reinforce ableist stereotypes but also perpetuate the dangerous notion that disability is synonymous with deviance.

Contrary to the negative portrayal of disability, there exists another extreme representation of disabled individuals as 'superhumans with almost magical abilities' (Barnes), which is also a stereotyped depiction in Hindi cinema. From the Krrish series, where Rohit from *Koi Mil Gaya* gains superpowers from an alien, to its sequels like *Krrish*, these stereotypical representations reinforce problematic tropes about disability in various ways.

Reinforcement of Normativity:

According to Anita Ghai, disability implies a lack or flaw within Indian cultural context and thus marked by negativity and stigmatization. Further, in the introduction to the book *Aesthetic Nervousness*, Ato Quayson argues that when disability makes the person invisible, the problem is not one of not being seen but of "being a framed within a discourse of stereotypes and expectations that serve to efface a person's identity". Mainstream Hindi cinema often perpetuates harmful stereotypes about disability by portraying it as a blockage gets removed or cured or the happy ending of the film poses disability as a trouble. By doing so, such narratives not only strengthen various disability related stereotypes but also celebrate the normativity. For example, the widely celebrated film *Koi Mil Gaya*, often regarded as India's first science fiction film, narrates the story of a young scientist's son whose brain is damaged in a prenatal accident. The child, named Rohit, grows up to be a young man who falls in love with a woman named Priya. The narrative implies that it is incongruous for a person with cognitive disabilities to engage in a romantic relationship with someone considered "normal." To resolve this, the plot introduces an alien who intervenes, enabling Rohit to achieve "normalcy." Consequently, the film portrays disability as a temporary flaw that must be rectified for the disabled character

to become acceptable and "fit" for a normative romantic relationship. The film like *Bhoolbhulaiyaa* also deals with a character of a woman who is suffering from dissociative identity disorder. The film portrays the character of Avni as pitiable to her husband especially while her disorder is revealed to him. The husband persistently implores his psychiatrist friend, Aditya—played by Akshay Kumar—to "cure" Avni and restore her to "normalcy." The resolution of Avni's disorder at the film's conclusion not only sets a celebratory tone but also reinforces societal norms that prioritize conformity to conventional notions of mental health. In doing so, the film perpetuates the idea that deviations from normativity must be corrected to achieve a desirable and harmonious outcome.

In his article, "The Disability Narrative in Indian Cinema" Harsh Mahaseth argues that films such as *Barfi* and *Margarita with a Straw* help to change attitudes toward disability. However, it is important to notice here that the films like *Barfi* which on the one hand attempts to draw us into the world of the disabled without carrying the weight of pity ultimately showcases that disabled person cannot choose a normal person as a life partner and the two disabled partners are ideal for each other as both are proven as unfit for the normative society. Moreover, the film also represents disability marked by a complex amalgam of class issue which is visible in many of the scenes of the film. One more example in this category is the film *Margarita with a Straw*. The movie is about the protagonist, Laila, a young woman with cerebral palsy, who navigates her desires and relationships while dealing with the challenges posed by her disability. Even while the film on the one hand constantly attempts to reinforce the idea that Laila is just like anybody else at the same time it fails to make disabled Laila find a normal partner. Her search and exploration of her desire seems like ending with her lesbian partner Khanum who is again a visually impaired girl. So, all these movies celebrate the normalcy by bolstering the stereotype prevalent in Indian culture that deviation from normalcy is never desirable or seek at least for the perfect match making. In order to fit into the normal

structure or to get the normal partner, either the disability has to be cured or the disabled has to compromise.

Cinema and Societal Attitude:

Adding humour through disabled character is a recurring trope in Bollywood films. Many movies feature disabled characters either in lead roles or as minor figures introduced solely to provide comic relief to their audience. For instance, the film *Pyare Mohan* tells the story of two friends, Pyare and Mohan, one is blind and other is deaf. The plot revolves around their adventures and misadventures as they navigate life, relationships, and a series of comedic situations. Much of the humour in the film stems from their inability to perceive their surroundings, resulting in slapstick comedy and awkward social interactions. For example, Pyare, one of the leading characters is shown wondering on the road without facing any challenge but at the same time his action causes accident between two cars or pushes another blind man into the open gutter. Similarly, the film incorporates some minor characters whose deformities such as dwarfism or blindness are often used by the film to exploit comic relief. This form of humour, which exaggerates the disabilities of characters to depict them as inept in everyday scenarios, reinforces stereotypes about disability by undermining their capabilities. As Barnes indicates, with such representation where disabled individuals are ridiculed, disabled not just loses the opportunity to be taken seriously by the non-disabled society but also it negatively affects their self-confidence and self-esteem. Moreover, many other scenes of this film also stereotype its characters that are also depicted as being somewhat naive or gullible, especially in their interactions with others, which again simplifies their condition to a trait of ignorance. Similar to *Pyare Mohan*, *Tom, Dick, and Harry* is another film that portrays the friendship of three disabled characters—one deaf, one blind, and one mute. The narrative relies heavily on the protagonists' disabilities as a source of humor, often using their impairments as the foundation for slapstick comedy and absurd situations. For instance, scenes where the deaf

and mute characters attempt to watch a film together or communicate over the phone are designed to amuse the audience but simultaneously highlight their helplessness. The representation of disability in the film often lacks respect for the individuality and dignity of disabled people. This is evident in a scene where Dick who is visually impaired tries to understand what is happening in the room and while getting no response, he comments, “Abe chhod, yaha kaun batayega? Ek gunga aur dusra behra. Sala, kaha pango ke bich main atak gaya sala” (Forget it, who’s going to explain here? One is mute, and the other is deaf. Damn, where have I ended up stuck among the disabled?) These kind of dialogues in the film reduces the individuals with disability to their impairment reinforcing the already prevalent stereotype that they are incapable of doing their routine things also. Specifically the use of the word ‘pango’ further dehumanizes the characters, positioning them as burdens or obstacles rather than individuals with agency. In another instance, Dick comments “be andhe ko chain se nahane to do yaar sala vaise bhi double time lagta hai” (Let the blind guy take a bath in peace, man. It already takes him double the time anyway). The line which highlights the blind character’s slower pace for creating humour also sets the notion that disability is synonymous with inefficiency. Moreover, these characters often stumble into humorous yet demeaning predicaments due to their disability, for instance, the scene where Dick due to his blindness mistakenly interprets condoms as balloons and brings them as a birthday gift for the child. This incident makes him “akkal ka andha” (blind in intelligence) along with “ankho se andha” (blind in vision). Such insensitive representation reinforces the inability of the disabled to function smoothly in their daily life which announces them unfit for the normal society. Moreover, these derogatory remarks refer to the insensitivity with which societal prejudices are reinforced.

Overall, the paper attempts to understand how the stereotypes prevalent in the Indian cultural milieu get translated into the films and foster the celebration of normativity. This paper has explored the translation of disability stereotypes from Indian cultural narratives into Hindi

cinema. It has highlighted how Bollywood has historically reinforced ableist narratives—either by portraying disabled individuals as burdensome, tragic figures or as extraordinary beings who must overcome their disabilities in unrealistic ways. Although some films have made progressive attempts to dismantle these stereotypes, the persistence of tropes such as disability as punishment, villainy, or comedic relief continues to shape societal attitudes toward disability in problematic ways.

Moreover, it is important to understand that cinema being a significant part of cultural domain, plays crucial role in shaping the public opinion. The way disability is represented in films influences how disabled are perceived, treated and integrated in the society. There is a possibility to see further how the audience as well as the critics perceive such narratives.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Films Mentioned:

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- Koi Mil Gaya*. Directed by Rakesh Roshan, 2003.
- Black*. Directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2005.
- Iqbal*. Directed by Nagesh Kukunoor, 2005.
- Krrish*. Directed by Rakesh Roshan, 2006.

Tom, Dick, and Harry. Directed by Deepak Tijori, 2006.

Pyare Mohan. Directed by Indra Kumar, 2006.

Omkara. Directed by Vishal Bhardwaj, 2006.

Taare Zameen Par. Directed by Aamir Khan, 2007

Bhool Bhulaiyaa. Directed by Priyadarshan, 2007

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Haider. Directed by Vishal Bhardwaj, 2014.

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