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## Gendered Disability Discourse: Representation In Select Bollywood Films

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### ABSTRACT

**Imaginatively she is of the highest importance practically she is completely insignificant, she pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history;** this quotation from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, expresses the ironical paradox of a woman's life. These two issues of subjection and emancipation have often been the subject matter of filmmakers, both male and female, who are found addressing the central question of women's right as voiced by Feminist Simone de Beauvoir in her famous saying, (Sharma, Anshoo, *Films and Feminism*, 106)

**One is not born but, rather, becomes a woman; asserts that culture and not biology determines what it means to be a woman.**

Kim Q Hall evinces that Feminist disability theory engages several of the fundamental premises of critical theory. Regarding Gender she avers that representation structures reality, the margins define the centre and that gender (or disability) is a way of signifying relationships of power.

Like Gender, Race and ability systems intertwine in representing subjugated as a pure body, unredeemed by mind or spirit. Thompson (2003, 719-736) tells about Thomson, who showed how disability, like gender and race, is 'a category of analysis and a system of representation' and it has the potential of transforming feminist theory. He asserts it is important to understand how disability functions along with other systems of representation in order to appreciate how all the systems tend to intersect and mutually constitute one another. (Dawn, Ranjita, **Sameness and Difference**, 2021, 11)

If one goes by representation through Cinema which in its spectrum of fantasy, and a vehicle of public consumption has also adopted reductionist approach. Yet, in the last decade or so, one gets to see relevant social angle of inclusivity in these kinds of films, like *Black*, *15 Park Avenue*, *Margarita with a straw*, which undertake disability of the body with associated issues.

My paper will examine representation of Disability and Gender in two Bollywood films like *Thappad*, and *Badhai Ho*, that will interrogate the two recent Indian Hindi Films that evince the dichotomy of normal/not normal and of ability/disability in the conundrum of gender prejudices; *Thappad* raises question of ableism of women when the question of domestic violence comes. *Badhai Ho* contests the subject of a middle aged woman determined to announce news of her pregnancy whose 25 years old son too is seeing someone.

Both the films will attempt to create awareness on disability narratives, as the main protagonists confront family and social norms, break the stereotype so as to make the changes appear "normal".

**KEYWORDS: Feminist, disabilities, ability, gender, race, fantasy, ableism, Inclusivity.**

## Disability A Social Construct

Social Construction of Disability has often evinced isolation and oppression, mainly through the double layered hierarchical power relation between men and women, able and disabled bodies. Prevalence of such extremities challenges the very concept of inclusion. It subjects the prevalent social structures to critical scrutiny, urging the need to go beyond the pre-requisite norm of mere adaptation towards transforming the system itself which would instead acknowledge, accept and respect diversity. Prejudice in our society is associated with the recognition of difference and an integral part of it is normalcy.

The Foucauldian discourse of power –structure aptly justifies ‘authoritarianism’ of the society to uphold the formulation and execution of norms and hence imposing normalcy upon its citizens in order to achieve its intended social equilibrium. In the post-consumerist society, the bio-power of nation-state has apparently been replaced by bio-power, resulting in objectification of the biological or psychic deficiency of a person, especially women and the nuanced “differently-abled”.

Freud’s assertion in 1924 that biology is the key determinant of gender identity, for instance, was for years a hegemonic idea in both law and culture. Ever since Freud made this notion famous, critics have been objecting to body parts as central predictors of one’s professional and personal path. Many now believe that identity isn’t solely the domain of nature or nurture, but some combination of the two.

Still, ironically, Freud’s theory isn’t yet dead; enduring gender norms show us that the bodies we’re born into still govern lives of women and men around the world.

For one thing, the way we categorize gender is far too facile, explained Alice Dreger, a leading historian of science and medicine, in a 2010 TED Talk.

**We now know that sex is complicated enough that we have to admit nature doesn’t draw the line for us between male and female... we actually draw that line on nature,** she told the audience.

**What we have is a sort of situation where the farther our science goes, the more we have to admit to ourselves that these categories that we thought of as stable anatomical categories that mapped very simply to stable identity categories are a lot more fuzziy than we thought.**

Men and women have their own background and culture, and most of the world community assume men as superior and women as inferior, Apparently, feminist theory has proved itself as a tool for women to fight for their rights for freedom in the world of politics, social, economic and literature. Feminism is born because women are tired of being subordinated to everything, through feminism women are able to show themselves, they are also able to work and be productive with men. The major thrust is towards the realization that both sexes are different and that none is subservient to the other. The realization of this fact in society, law, religion and culture is the ultimate aim of the women’s movement.

It is well known to all that study of Gender requires not only focus on women and their subordination, alongside it implies focus on men and masculinity, because men and women must change for gender relations to be just and equal. But masculinity even now is associated with male aggression that may culminate in being violent like slapping, domestic violence, rape or even marital rape.

Connell argues while recognizing diversities in masculinity,

**...it is also necessary to recognize the relations between these: relations of alliance, dominance and subordination. These relationships are constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit and so on. There is gender politics within masculinity.**

### WOMEN-CENTRIC FILMS IN INDIA

It is a common belief that realism is not dominant in Indian Cinema today. Andre Bazin, one of the greatest realist critics, mentioned that one of the basic criteria for a film to be realistic is that it must locate its characters and action in a determinate social and historical setting, says Ranjita Dawn in the book, *The Social Model of Disability: Politics of Identity and Power*, under sub-context, **Cinema: A Reflective Lens**, (Routledge, 2021, 2022, 50)

Elaborating on the use of convention within the cinema, Bazin mentions that such use may be made, where he suggests it is up to the director to decide how and what aspect of reality he intends to present.

Women’s issues are central to every society, primarily because they go on to define all human relationships and social constructs and Cinema as a medium, more than literature or political debate cuts across all social, religious, economic, class and caste boundaries to appeal to human minds.

On “Women’s Day Special”, *Delhi Times*, published veteran filmmaker of Bollywood, Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s interview regarding women actors’ scope in today’s time, (Kaushik, Divya, TOI, March 22, 2022, 6) the Director eulogised brilliant women-centred stories like *Bhumika*, *Mother India* to *Pakeezah* to *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Sujata*

and many more which have so many shades. When asked about hero industry dominating Bollywood, he answered,

**A handful of people have just unnecessarily muddled the mind, and constantly keep imposing it on people, on the industry over the years. Especially the 80s onwards. I haven't understood where this comes from. And I hope to do my bit to change it. *Padmavat* did great business, despite all the controversy. If *Gangubai* does well, as it is doing at the moment, more and more, then it will bring in a lot of those wonderful filmmakers who may today feel a little stifled about saying for a film that is centred around a female character- *kaise banayenge*?**

Bhansali endorses few women-centric films that have come in 50s by Bimal Roy as well as Mehboob Khan and later Shyam Benegal in late 70s, 80s, portrayed very strong actors like Shabana Azmi and Smita Patil in films like *Ankur* and *Bhumika*. Ironically such films in order to distinguish from commercial female actors, used for voyeuristic purpose, were labelled as Art Cinema. Bhansali not only acknowledges such beautiful female actors and of course the filmmakers, he is affirming willingness and courage to make good women-centric films; these two films, *Padma vat* and *Gangubai of kathiawad* bear testimony to his vision and desire to make such film. Recent Hindi film directors' role has been vital as they are seen quite vociferous in breaking the stereotype: the traits of femininity invariably believed to be submissive, adjusting. They are making films which are aiming at not just depicting strong, empowered women but they are creating men also who should take the lead to break the conventions; proving that the role of men is crucial in seeing empowered women.

### FILM, THAPPAD (2020)

Film *Thappad*, directed by Anubhav Sinha, produced in 2020, is not just a ranting about domestic violence, it brings to light the years of conditioning that a woman is subjected to by her own family and the society she lives in.

It is about a fairly good, modern educated family residing in Metro, where Amrita, played by Tapsi Pannu, is seen as a happy wife, who chooses to drop her desire to pursue dancing career and happily takes care of all chores. Her life gets a jolt when her husband Vikram, played by Pavail Gulati, in the heat of moment slaps her in front of his several office guests they had invited over.

Suddenly her world comes crashing down and then begins an ugly emotional battle that goes beyond the physical violence, it makes her delve deep into her life, their life, marriage while Vikram, conditioned by the patriarchal notions lives in denial and wonders how 'just one slap is turning out to be a life-changing moment.'

### MEDIA REVIEWS

*Thappad* is a silent slap on our society's age old belief that *shaadi main sab kuch chalta hai*, contends Pallabi Dey Purkayastha, at *timesofindia.indiatimes.com*. in the review entitled,

**'An Impactful social drama that questions the unsaid rules of marriage' (Feb 29, 2020, 1.35 PM IST)** She argues, 'but honestly, should it be that way? And that is what we need to start talking about.

Tanul Thakur on *Wire* while giving the movie review, puts the caption: '*Thappad*' shows Us a Reality Hidden in Plain Sight All Along'. He contends,

**Director Anubhav Sinha delivers another movie that tries to disrupt Bollywood's status quo-reverential stories.; and adds**

**'Hindi Cinema has been in love with status quo and Bollywood has protected, showcased and celebrated it, mainly through the stories of affluent, Hindu caste....'**

Thakur further adds,

**Sinha is not just telling stories; he also seems to be telling a story about telling stories. These are not moves as much as confessions, an act of self-exoneration.**

### 'THE SLAP' AND 'AMU AND

### VIKRAM'

The film very incisively portrays the trauma and despair of a woman slapped by her husband, she is shown watering her plants, taking care of daily chores, seeing off the husband, checking mother-in-law's blood sugar; it continues the next day too. Everything is "disconcertingly normal". Vikram's only response is, "You know how things have been. I was too stressed last night."

But what is required of him, just a "sorry", he does not speak throughout the film. Sinha is not depicting domestic violence and its crudity, he is depicting Vikram, like all men in the patriarchal society, who sees nothing wrong in pouring out his frustration on his wife. It is a society conditioning that men have the right to be tolerated, listened to and understood as well as forgiven in all circumstances. Women, their limited agency as disabled

creatures are to expect not the same; the society makes men the superior and women the subjected, “weak halves” (not the better half, as generally said).

Vikram expresses his anxiety regarding his job,

“Amu, I don’t want to stay in a place where I am not valued” while he cannot ever imagine if Amu might be thinking the same.

At Amu’s decision to leave that house, Vikram is unable to see any rationale in her doing so, so retorts,

“Amu, I tell you, put down your bloody foot down in life” Such suggestions look so cynical and abrasive in the light of his callous, indifferent even obstinate attitude towards her feelings and expectations, that are too normal in a loving married life.

Vikram’s stereotypical notion about working and independent women gets reflected when he sarcastically comments at Diya Mirza (their neighbour, a widow) seeing her grand car,

“New car? What does she do?”

## OTHER MALE CHARACTERS IN

### THE FILM

There are other men, while Vikram represents Patriarchy, it is not surprising that his father and brother, will carry the baggage of patriarchal authority and boorishness.

Amu’s father is different, she shares great understanding with him, who stands like a rock in her hours of misery, self-doubts, Kumud Mishra plays the role of a very sensitive and a very understanding father.

A conversation between father-daughter is worth mentioning:

Amu asks her father,

*Sahi to kar rahi hoon naa papa?(Am I doing the right thing Papa?);*

Father’s reply comes apt, and so rightly;

*Kabhi kabhi sahi karne ka decision happy nahi hota (sometimes what we consider right, may not have a happy end).*

### CHARACTERS

Amu’s mother-in-law, conditioned by societal norms is unable to give her the support that she needs, although she loves her.

Admitting her mistake,

*Galti meri hai ki maine bete ko nahi sikhaya women ko respect karna.*

Sinha undertakes the most important issue that gendering, that is ‘packaging’ of gender roles happen early on, in households where boys are not encouraged to help in household work but girls are subtly, yet surely, trained to hone their gender specific skills and fortify their femininity.

Amu’s mother and brother are shown following stereotypical notions regarding femininity, hence they are unable to see rationale in her refusal to return to that home; but they get to understand eventually.

Interesting angle is when Amu’s female advocate is stunned to learn that she wants to file case for divorce just because he slapped her once; and confirms several times if she was sure; Amu tells her decisively,

*Nahi maar sakta wo, ek baar bhi nahi (he cannot slap even once).*

Sinha advocates clearly that a daughter needs support of the male members to seek justice and dignity and that any kind of violence is not trivial that gets validated when Amu says emphatically, “no, he cannot, not even once”.

Thappad film also gives a lesson to the mothers to stand for their daughters and daughters-in-law and not reinforce age-old norms of keeping their marriages alive at any cost.

Amu also becomes an example for that advocate who is ironically caught in a suffocating marriage, but cannot summon courage to walk away; but finally does so. Another interesting parallel story is that of Amu’s maidservant whose ultimate bold step in teaching her husband a lesson by hitting him back which in return inspires Amu; thus Sinha undertakes woman’s oppression across different sections of the society.

## BADHAI HO, FILM: COMEDY

### AND GENDER

Indian Cinema has taken up hard-hitting themes like *Thappad* or *Damini* that hammer audiences’ minds long after watching them, leaving an indelible impact on their sensibilities. At the same time, some very serious and socially important subjects are such that Directors prefer to treat them in a comical manner, such as *Biwi*

No.1(1999) which undertakes subject of husband's adultery and the wife who decides to win over her husband back from the *Other*. Of course, one would argue if, forgiving the erring husband is the right way or what Mahesh Bhatt had concluded so admirably years back in the film *Arth* (1982) women may not necessarily need men to survive, the kind of issue we are seeing discussed today. This is where the serious/ comic treatment differs. Classical Comedy discernible in Roman dramatist Plautus's comedy *Menaechmi Brothers* which is believed to have inspired Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* in English, and further Hindi Film *Angoor* (1982).

The paper attempts to critique and interrogate *Badhai Ho* against the notion that woman sexuality is passive, and mothering is the key factor in gender development of children, against the male exemplifying the aggressive and active role. The film deconstructs the notion of Gender as it critiques and even draws conclusively on the intersectionality; even as it buttresses the wide acceptance of such new ideas undertaken by films gaining momentum.

Beyond doubt, Hindi Cinema has had the potential to wield influence on people, its opinion on topics like female empowerment and female representation, it is likely to have effect on people. Director Amit Sharma takes up the subject of love of Kaushik couple who discover pregnancy in the age while son too is ready to get married. In *Badhai Do*, the film explores society's warped relation with sexuality, with the pregnancy as a mere catalyst and not the actual subject of the film as it enables the director, like Anubhav Sinha to explore the inter-personal relationship through it.

*Badhai Ho* film, a 2018 film directed by Amit Ravindernath Sharma and produced by Sharma, Aleya Sen and Hemant Bhandari came as a huge surprise for the audience for the most unusual subject; and more surprising is the number of awards bagged by the film that goes to prove wide acceptance of this subject.

## IMPACT ON FAMILY

### MEMBERS

Nakul, a 25 years old man is shocked to discover that his mother is pregnant. Coming to terms to such a fact was certainly going to be difficult for a young man who has a girlfriend and is planning to start his love life. It is the story of Kaushik family. The cast of film is superb, and success of the film owes to this brilliant star-cast especially for a subject like this, intelligent directors choose comedy form.

Ayushman Khurana plays the role of son, Father is Gajraj Rao, he is a T.T, an extremely adorable character who balances his love, his wife, Neena Gupta, a woman with beautiful heart and his aggressive, boorish mother, Surekha Sirki, all these characters do great justice to a sensitive subject, or the film would have fallen apart. Ayushman's girl Friend, Sanya Malhotra, and her mother, rich and single, portrayed by Sheeba Chadha too are no less.

Film is about Kaushik, they lead a very humble life and are a loving couple. Their son, Nakul suffers from complex of being born in middle class family. Hilarious scenes follow, as his mother Neena Gupta goes for check-up. Kaushik's are tensed and so is Nakul; they have been told she is pregnant. But she is determined, she will not abort, it is a sin. Mr. Kaushik tries to make her re-consider but seeing her determination he tells her, *It's your body, you have the right to decide.*

This kind of understanding from a husband is a shift from the patriarchal notion of woman being denied of right over her body, her pregnancy.

The situation is very embarrassing for the couple, to override the embarrassment, situation has to made comical. The father is urged to announce the big news to the two sons, elder, an adult and younger an adolescent; the embarrassed expression on both mother and father is extremely conspicuous; but the father bravely breaks the news,

"Little guest is to come., tells the father"; unable to understand the implication, the younger naively says, "I am not ready to share my room, there is already scarcity of space."

Father with great effort explains,

Little baby is to come in our family.

Sons are shell-shocked, unable to believe. Nakul (role played by Ayushman Khurana) is completely puzzled, angry. He is way too embarrassed for what his parents have done, just as he has been of his father's small job.

The response on every member is quite revealing and it is handled with classic humour.

Nakul doesn't talk to his girlfriend. He avoids meeting his friends.

His younger brother gets inquisitive about birth control pills, and looks around the house for it, their mother on the other hand, instructs her husband to refrain from using romantic lines or bolt the bedroom door from inside as if she holds him responsible for this incident. (evinced as a crime)

Most interesting impact is shown on Kaushik's mother, who makes fun of her son that he didn't give chance to his son to become father, as expected in Indian homes, she accuses her bahu squarely, for a mother will hardly ever accuse her son. She is obviously concerned that what will people say.

Kaushik's elder brother gets the news who is rather peeved that his younger brother has done it again: his younger brother's fertility even in 50s makes him rave at him.

Masculinity gets reinforced here concerning male virility; hence he does not raise eyebrows.

The response of the girlfriend is better, she tries to reason and takes the situation quite normally. She explains this only proves his parents' love for each other, there is nothing to hide or feel shy of.

There's a scene, where Nakul and his girlfriend make love, but suddenly the possibility of a child in that process, makes him question his girlfriend,

**'Are parents meant to make love?'** almost sums up the film, and apparently becomes the director's concern.

1. Prejudice regarding love being normal in young age, but an embarrassment has been shown very vividly, in the elder son who is ashamed to imagine his parents could still love.

The film focuses on acceptance and assimilation of such facts by children and older people alike as indicated by the title, *Badhai Ho*; it focuses on director's insistence on accepting this reality.

Firstly, the film challenges the society induced bias that parents having attained particular age cannot be imagined romantic, as their role needs to be changed. What however, has been hinted at, is the efficacy of love in a couple relationship that evinces different shades of the persons, capable of loving; a fact that Neena Gupta's mother-in-law accepts when she praises Babli for being such a loving and caring daughter-in-law, unlike her other daughters and daughters-in-law.

The film clearly subscribes to a very traditional Indian marriage as evinced by Sudhir Kakar, Katharina Kakar in their book, *The Indians: Portrait of a People*;

**In spite of her inner ideals and conscious resolution to be a good wife and an exemplary daughter-in-law, a bride comes into her husband's family with heightened anxiety and feelings of loss. There is a wariness bordering on antagonism toward her mother-in-law who has usurped the place of her own sorely missed and needed mother.....And then there are the ambivalent feelings of hope and fear towards the usually unknown man who is now her husband and claims her intimacy.**

Adding to it the critics mention how this bride normally occupies a low rank in the social hierarchy.

Obedience and compliance with the wishes of the mother-in-law are expected as a matter of course. Any mistakes or omissions on her part are liable to incur sarcastic references to her abilities, her looks or her upbringing in her mother's home.

We therefore see in the film Surekha Sirki's sarcastic remarks on daughter-in-law on many issues, especially the subject of her conceiving as if she alone was responsible for it.

Her anger and remorse on being attacked by her is comically brought in her walking out and the husband Giriraj very meekly following her outside in the car drive, trying to appease and comfort her with his words of love. Quite obviously, the car drive of the couple serves as another romantic rendezvous for a couple living in scarcity of space which however, tends to give them a solution and a respite from pressing day-to-day problems.

2.Secondly, the film very subtly and strongly refutes the stereotypical notion of women being overtly submissive and subordinated to male in addressing sexuality or expressing their desire to love; this gets evidenced in her strong objection to abort.

The Director of the film and the Producers have together made a wonderful contribution to today's society for whom all achievements have surpassed one major phenomenon, ie; love; true love should be the central form of happiness, which however, is depicted symbolically through a Baby coming to middle-aged parents, and the initiative of Neena Gupta to keep the child; she insists, is a sign of love and not a sin; this seems to be the real message.

The turmoil that comes in the family at the reception of the news by different members is shown as inevitable as the incident is not usual but unusual, but the couple's wonderful understanding and respect for each other evens out the situation and the film concludes happily.

## CONCLUSION

The world we inhabit is a world of representation, and constructions of disability have no essential, fixed or true meaning against which coverage and distortion can be measured, said Hall, in his book entitled, *Representation : Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, (1997).

Rey Chow (*Ethics after Idealism: Theory, Culture, Ethnicity, Reading*, 1998) remarked,

**If there is a metanarrative bashing, it is that of ‘resistance’.....** She does not deny actual forces of oppression and resistance in the world, but she highlights the crucial notion of a mediating apparatus, a specifically defined public space that would serve the relationship between those who have and those who do not have power. Cinema thus has the potential to illuminate issues pertaining to powerful and powerless concerning the social hierarchies. Sensitive filmmakers like Bimal Roy, Satyajit Ray, V.Shantaram have showed way to Basu Bhattacharya, Hrishikesh Mukherjee and the likes of Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Anubhav Sinha, and films can do most to address the subjugation and oppression especially in the field of Gender and Disability, whatever the form may be. Disability in Gender norms is as serious as any other social problems and it is admirable that certain Indian filmmakers with ignited, youthful minds are engaging in such brainstorming, path-breaking subjects; interestingly, these directors that I have undertaken are men, who have so incisively undertaken different gendered biases pertaining to resisting, and acceptance, which are social constructs and addressing them will eventually take us to eradicate disability at least in the field of Gender; once this is taken care of, rest too can be fought.

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