

## Analyzing Narrative Structures in a Film: Exploring Disability Identity And Stereotypes

Dr. Geeta Chopra\* & Dr. Parveen Pannu\*\*

\*Associate Professor, Dept. of Human Development & Childhood Studies, University of Delhi

\*\*Associate Professor, Department of Communication & Extension, University of Delhi

### Abstract

Film analysis is the process in which film is analyzed to gain a deeper understanding. A film incorporates audio-visual elements and therefore introduces a new dimension to analyse – the analysis of visual elements. This paper presents a case of an Indian Bollywood film, *Margarita with a Straw* (2014). The film involves a unique plot where the protagonist is a woman with disability. It is a story of her exhilarating journey of self-discovery, a transition from a dependent young woman to a person complete in her own way. In this paper, narrative structure analysis of the film is undertaken to understand layers in meanings of the story elements, including plot structure, character motivations, and theme. It is through this story, that the audience gets a peek into what it means to live with a disability, and how similar are the needs and emotions of the ‘able bodied’ and the persons with disability. It throws open various myths and stereotypes existing in the society especially towards disabled persons. It gives new meanings to the process of self- discovery and finds relevance and resonance to the free spirits of youth.

**Keywords:** Narrative structure film analysis, disability, myths and stereotypes, self-discovery



*Margarita with a Straw* (2014) is an Indian film directed and produced by Shonali Bose and co-production by Viacom18 Motion Pictures. Based on genre' drama, its cast includes Kalki Koechlin as the lead role supported by Revathi, Sayani Gupta, Hussain Dalal, and Kuljeet Singh. It has a running duration of 100 minutes. Koechlin won the Screen Award for Best Actress and the National Film Award – Special Jury Award and it premiered at various film festival circuits and received praise for production, performance and direction. The censor board rated it as U/A, to be

watched with parental guidance. Pulver (October 16, 2014), the critic from *Guardian* praised the film and expressed it as an emotionally direct study of disability and sexuality.

### Methodology

The narrative structure analysis of the film is undertaken to understand layers in meanings of the story elements, including plot structure, character motivations, and theme. Narrative analysis is a genre of analytic frames whereby stories are interpreted, and stories are told within the context of culture and society. Although there are many methods which can be used to analyse a film, Syd Field's narrative analysis (McCarthy,2013), the three-act structure, is an excellent method of storytelling and one which the human mind appreciates, is being employed. The three-act structure is a model used in narrative fiction that divides a story into three parts or acts. The first act consists of exposition, the second the main telling of the story, and the third the conclusion. These are often called the Setup, the Confrontation and the Resolution.

The narrative analysis has been used for uncovering the underlying ideologies embedded in stories and the larger culture that creates the

narratives. It can be used to make diverse—yet equally substantial and meaningful—interpretations and conclusions by focusing on different elements of the chosen film.

### **Plot of the film**

Margarita with a Straw film has at the centre, a young woman with cerebral palsy. Cerebral Palsy is a disabling condition, which affects her lower and upper limbs as well as her speech. The central role of Laila is played by Kalki Koechlin. The film, though has a disabled woman as the protagonist, but it does not drill in lessons on disability, nor does it romanticize or demonize disability for dramatic results, but presents disability as one of the identities that the protagonist lives with, and that disability is not what defines her or limits her. The complex issue of disability, social perceptions about disability, disability identity and disability and sexuality are explored in an engaging way in this 2014 Bollywood film.

### **Detailed description of the film**

The film chronicles the journey of self discovery of a young woman Laila with motor disability. Laila, the protagonist played by Kalki Koechlin, has impaired motor functions and speech. She has a sharp brain, she is a music composer and writer, a student of Delhi University, but has this creative brain trapped in a body that doesn't obey and a speech that is laborious and painful. She lives with her parents and brother in Delhi. Malhotra (2015) points out that India is a challenging place to live in for a person with a disability.

The film does not shy from depicting the difficulties faced by Laila due to her disability. She needs her mother's help in self care, she has difficulty in independent living and mobility, has difficulty in cooking or dressing herself. She needs help in moving her wheelchair, especially when the physical environments are arranged in an inaccessible manner. In the film, it is clear that these difficulties have been embraced and negotiated by her.

The film portrays Laila very much as a regular teenager, but for her impaired motor skills. She has a need for peer acceptance, a need to be appreciated for her talents and skills and that too, she wants to see herself at par with her friends. Like any regular teenager, Laila is shown as someone with sexual needs which are a normal part of hormones playing up at this stage of life.

She has her share of crushes, visits dubious sites on the internet, flirts and feels physical attraction and behaves very much like a teenager, except that she has a disability. She faces rejection when the lead singer of her college band, who is her heart throb, does not reciprocate her liking for him. Just when she is feeling dejected, she gets an offer to go to New York University to study on a scholarship.

Flying miles away from the safety and protectiveness of her mother and her home, this gives her an opportunity to live independently. She finds the new city more organised and disabled friendly. She uses the transport independently, struggles with cooking and makes friends. Here she meets a blind woman activist, Khanum, played by Sayani Gupta, with whom she gets into a same-sex relationship. While at New York, she also at the spur is shown as getting into a physical relation with her male classmate, which she later confides in Khanum. Laila is shown as bisexual.

She returns to India with Khanum to visit her family. Here she shares with her mother, played by Revathi, that she 'likes Khanum a lot'. The mother accepts it saying that yes, Khanum is so good, to which she conveys her romantic liking towards Khanum and hints of a serious affair. Mother is shocked and finds it very hard to accept this same-sex relationship. Later, we find the mother being diagnosed with advanced stage of cancer. The film dwells on Laila coping with the loss of her mother and how she emerges from this personal tragedy as an emotionally strong and a complete person.

### **Analysis of the film**

Persons with disability may have restrictions in functioning. These are presented at many points in Laila needing help with her wheel chair or in bathing. But 'disabled identity' is not all that there is. Life stories of people with intellectual disability in the study affirm the notion of fluidity and flexibility in terms of self-identities' (Gustavsson et al. 2016).

Laila, who has cerebral palsy, is initially left to us, to our devices. The camera lets us stare at her, like we would at any differently-abled, disabled person in our midst. As we stare, taking in her "abnormalities", the differences, one by one all the abnormalities dissolve and she becomes an embodiment of all that she is

capable of doing. Her physical identity has little meaning.

Stromso (2008) found that the lived experience of embodied self and identity formation is located in different social encounters and spaces in which the person is situated and a person can

have multiple selves and identifies according to the context. Lundberg et al. (2014) found that identity was negotiated on account of disabled people's participation in adaptive sports and recreation activities as these served as a setting for change in identity, enhancing self-knowledge of the participants as in to do tasks independently, development of social networks, and acquisition of skills that helped them in discovering themselves. Laila is a musician and composer and an individual who emerges as independent and someone who loves life. We find in the discourse that disability may limit her, but it can't constrain her free will and her life. It is her personality, her talent and her needs which are expressed as a young person, which sparkle in the film.

The film gives a key message through Laila that persons with disability do not want pity. Laila is a lyricist and a music composer. In an inter-college music festival, her team wins the first prize and the judge announces that they want to give her the prize that 'in spite of her disability', she composed so well. This hurts and offends her so much that she leaves the stage without accepting the prize, clearly giving the message that 'disability or no disability' she deserved that prize. In any case, the prize should not have been out of 'pity. At no point Laila is lacking in any way, and that is how she wants to be treated; with dignity and with 'No pity'. The disability rights movement in India and abroad, which has emphatically embraced the slogan of 'No Pity', is what Laila, the 'disabled' protagonist of *Margarita*, exudes despite her frustrating motor impairment. This message is clear and loud in the film.

Like any typical young adult, she wants to protect her privacy. When her mother, played by Revathi, discovers that Laila has been visiting pornographic sites, she questions Laila. Laila gets very upset and objects vociferously on this intrusion of her privacy. At the same time, she asserts autonomy and independence from her parental value system.

Laila is unapologetic and unashamed of her sexual needs and explores her sexual identity, and is ready to make a go of it. While the people around her scoff at her sexuality and express confusion at her 'cues' of sexual interest, she is secure in her identity as a sexual person. Laila expresses her attraction towards her co-musician friend. She doesn't find it strange at all to express her interest towards her able-bodied friend. But she faces his rejection.

On moving to New York for the purpose of her studies, she meets Khannum. Khanum, played by Sayani Gupta, is a blind woman, and a social activist who is independent and capable. An affair brews and they become lovers. The film puts on screen same-sex affair, and that too between two women who have a disability. In one go, lesbian relationship and disability and sexuality are put threadbare for the audience. The message that persons with disability too have needs like anyone else, is presented in a very matter of fact way, hence busting this myth that persons with disability are asexual.

The sexual self of the people with disabilities is either not recognized or restrained by societal attitudes (Sakellariou, 2012). Disabled sexuality is so stigmatized that disabled people are typically desexualized in media, which makes the depiction of actual sex on screen, and bisexual explorations, revolutionary.

Another important point that emerges from the film is comparison of her life in Delhi and in New York. While Laila is in Delhi, her family is shown taking care of her. But when she moves to New York, she is on her own, and she manages independently pretty well. The way the city is organised, her hostel room is arranged, her professors and her peer group respond and interact with her, bringing out a difference in the evolution of the two modern day societies in the way we respond to disability. The American society not just takes care of arranging her physical world as she has motor restrictions, but the emotional tone of the people and the acceptance as a society bring out a palpable difference and the long way off that we in India still are as in terms of physical and attitudinal barriers that we impose.

Laila grows in many ways, not just as a person with a disability. She crosses continents literally, from Delhi to New York and back, and emotionally, from a sheltered teenager living at

home with her parents to a formidable, independent individual. Laila copes with the grief of losing her mother with great dignity, and comes out of it as an emotionally independent adult.

The film highlights Laila being unperturbed by her disabled identity. It is about 'normalisation' of disability. The character takes disability as one of the aspects of her life and lives with the disability, her life to its full. In the end of the film, she declares she is going for a date. She is happy to hit a bar, while on a date with her own self, and requests the cocktail of 'a margarita with a straw'.

### Conclusion

The on-going tendency to reclaim a person ' and keeping aside the label of disability is reported in

the study of a person with Down syndrome 'The Down''s is a nickname. I put it on one side, and then, I am me. "The Down''s is another. I am Rafael". (Almendros and Almendros 2015, 108). Malini Chib, disability rights and author, who has cerebral palsy, asserts strong disability identity. She says that she wants to celebrate disability rather than reject. The film presents a very normalised character in Laila. She has embraced her identity completely and the shades of disability as perceived otherwise, do not get reflected in her character. Laila may be limited by cerebral palsy, but she isn't constrained by it. She is able to be heard, become accomplished and be a complete person, because her body doesn't define her identity.

### References

- Calderón-Almendros, Ignacio, and Rafael Calderón-Almendros. "I open the coffin and here I am": disability as oppression and education as liberation in the construction of personal identity." *Disability & Society* 31, no. 1 (February 12, 2016): 100-15. Accessed March 21, 2017. doi:10.1080/09687599.2015.1133400.
- Chib, Malini. "Celebrating Disabilities: Author Malini Chib Sheds New Light on Disability through Her Book. The Better India (web log) Retrieved from <http://www.thebetterindia.com/77745/malinichib-discuss-why-celebrate-disability/>
- Gustavsson, Anders, Catarina Nyberg, and Charles Westin. "Plurality and continuity— Understanding self-identity of persons with intellectual disability." *European Journal of Disability Research* 10 (October 15, 2016): 310-26. Accessed February 23, 2017. doi:10.1016/j.alter.2016.06.003.
- Lundberg, Neil R., Stacy Taniguchi, Bryan P. McCormick, and Catherine Tibbs. "Identity Negotiating: Redefining Stigmatized Identities through Adaptive Sports and Recreation Participation among Individuals with a Disability." *Journal of Leisure Research* 43, no. 2 (2011): 205-25.
- McCarthy, Ashlee (October 6, 2013). *Syd Field's Narrative Theory*. Retrieved from <https://ashleeyear2.wordpress.com/2013/10/06/explaining-three-act-structure/>
- Malhotra, Nipun. (April 15, 2015). *Disabled people are subject to ritual humiliation all the time*. Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/article/720582/sipping-margarita-with-a-straw-disabled-people-are-subject-to-ritual-humiliation-all-the-time>
- Pulver, Andrew. (October 16, 2014). *Margarita, With a Star Review – emotionally direct study of disability and sexuality*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/oct/16/margarita-with-a-straw-review-disability-and-sexuality-shonali-bose>
- Sakellariou, Dikaios. "Sexuality and Disability: A Discussion on Care of the Self." *Sexuality and Disability* 30 (July 01, 2011): 187-97. Accessed March 21, 2017. doi: 10.1007/s11195-011-9219-3.
- Strømsø , Mette. *Places of Participation – The Lived Experience of Persons with Disabilities in Kampala/Uganda*. Master's thesis, Norwegian University of Science and Technology - NTNU, 2008. Trondheim, 2008. 1-131. Accessed May 27, 2016.