

## Media Portrayals of Disability and Relationships: An Exploration of the Self and the Other

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*The present study aims to analyse portrayals of relationships of persons with disability in visual media. Media reinforces stereotypes attached with disabled people by portraying them as pitiable, non-sexual and incapable of being in a worthwhile relationship. It explores the understanding of self and other by analysing the relationships of those who have some form of disability, as projected in the visual media and see how the self evolves and changes in a romantic relationship. For a comprehensive understanding of media's depiction of the disabled, two movies were selected, namely Sai Paranjpye's Sparsh (1980) and Shonali Bose's Margarita with a Straw (2014). While Sparsh narrates the story of a blind man and his falling in love with a singer and the ups and downs of their relationship because of his apprehension about the relationship's fate given his disability, Margarita with a Straw traces the journey of a young girl with cerebral palsy embarking on self-discovery and searching for love and intimacy. The protagonists and their conception of self was studied in context of romantic relationships through the issues of sexuality, perception of society, personal inhibitions, companionship and foundation of relationships in the backdrop of disability. Media mirrors society but also creates a snapshot of accepted reality and perpetuates stereotypes. This study provides a critical appraisal of mainstream media in its ability to locate romantic relationships in the lives of disabled and examines the constructed images of self and other.*

**Keywords:** disability, media, romantic relationships, self, other

### Introduction

Disability as a concept is a historically, culturally and socio-politically variable phenomena which in terms of its meaning and form is not only dependent on individual bodies but also on the prevailing conditions and forces (Grue, 2015). Historically, "disability" has been used either as a synonym for "inability" or alluding to legal imposition of limitations on rights and powers. In addition to the discourse of abled bodies or non-disabled bodies, disability is defined as "A transient, temporary, or partial impairment; a host of barriers to optimal functioning and the social dynamics and life-course development of persons with disabilities interacting with their behavioural settings" (Zimbardo, 2002).

According to the disability policy scholars, there are four different models of disability. Moral model, the oldest model of disability associates disability to sin, shame and guilt. The medical model looks at disability as a problem residing within the individual, with the society having no responsibility to make place for persons with disabilities (PWD) along

with the rehabilitation model which acknowledges that PWD need services from rehabilitation professionals. However, this model also promotes the idea that PWD are very much capable of participating effectively in the society and the idea of institutionalising them is not correct or acceptable. A relatively newer model is the disability model, which regards disability and considers it to be a normal aspect of life. Further on, it completely rejects the stereotypical notion that PWD are in some way defective or responsible for their own condition. Most individuals encounter some form of disability over the course of their life, whether as a permanent or temporary form. However, if the environment and the system were more sensitive to disability it would not seem to be abnormal or deviant (Kaplan, 2000).

PWD respond to their disabilities in different ways. Their reactions range from those that are completely negative, in which the quality of life is also negatively affected, to being positive, in which these individuals continue to lead a positive and productive life. The experience of disability is influenced by

various factors like nature of the disability, the individual's personality, meaning of the disability to him/her and the support system.

Media is an extremely important part of our everyday lives and it plays a critical role in the dissemination of information about a variety of issues, not the least of which are attitudes toward disability. Barnes (1992) analysed the disabling imagery in the media and found that the majority of information about disability is extremely negative. Stereotypes that are disabling that tend to medicalise, patronize and criminalize disability and PWD are found in different forms of media such as books, films, television or the press. They play a key role in the discriminatory behaviour and exploitation that persons with disabilities have to deal regularly.

Media reinforces a view of disability that is synonymous with illness and suffering. The predominance of the medical approach to impairment and disability has diverted the public's attention away from the social factors that underlie disability. The language used in most media depictions creates a sense of sentimentality that patronizes and exasperates the PWD. The constant industry insistence on superficial physical perfection is responsible for the exclusion of PWD from advertising images. When PWD appear in advertising, the majority depictions are of those using wheelchairs or those who are deaf. The role of PWD as consumers is completely denied (Lyle, 2003).

In case of portrayal of disability, films have primarily shown two extreme trends. At one end of the spectrum are movies portraying characters who have a disability as those to be pitied, caricatured, to be sympathized and with awesome heroism, while at the other end are symbolisms of discrimination, coping-up, emotional swings and aspirations of the human soul (Mohapatra, 2012). The trends of media portrayals of characters with disability have been varied. While movies such as *Tom, Dick and Harry* and *Pyare Mohan* (2006) have used disability as a comic interlude, some others have used it to give a theatrical twist to their story with negligible regard for the PWD rights. A few films have meaningfully portrayed the insensitive ways of the society and discrimination faced by the PWD. The notion of "disability as a punishment" has been one of the most prominent and majorly displayed portrayals of disability in Bollywood (Pal, 2012), as seen a *Bombay Talkies* (1936). Movies have also depicted disabled characters as "heroes and superheroes" like *Dushman* (1998). Movies such as "*Koshish* (1972)" have also

shown disabled people in their true picture. Disabled people have also been depicted as "objects of violence", usually at the hands of able-bodied people. Some movies have represented disabled individuals as self-pitiers but have the capacity to overcome the challenges put forward by the society if they stand up for themselves and their rights. Another common theme that has found its place predominantly in literature and art has been around the presumptions of the society towards the sexuality of individuals with disability. Majority of these depictions are about male characters and images whereas there has been little exploration of disabled women's sexuality.

Conception of a unitary identity for PWD is impossible (and perhaps undesirable) to codify. The disabled body stands out as the most absolute figure of otherness in our culture evoking emotions like pity, repulsion, sympathy and disgust. Normality is not a self-evident label for the desirable or the natural state of the human body and mind, rather it is a social construct that came into being as late as in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The understanding of selves of those individuals who often find them at the other end of the society, excluded and separate from those who come under the purview of "normalcy" is often integrated into their weakness stemming out of their disability. The self-concept, self-understanding and self-confidence of those disabled bodies then becomes bound not only to the acceptance of others and their support but slowly integrates into the "others" and finally emerges to be fragmented and shattered by their weakness, inability to form meaningful relationships, impairments and the exclusion of the society.

Higher self-concept clarity has been associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction and commitment (Lewandowski, 2010). A strong and a loving relationship helps one to understand more about oneself with the beloved acting as a mirror portraying one's own character as a reflection. However, for many individuals with a disabled partner, it may be hard to imagine seeing their reflection in a disabled partner because of their impairment, and because of the difficulty in understanding how someone with an impairment can bring out the best in them or be a successful partner. Having any kind of disability reduces the chances of relationships moving beyond acquaintanceship; as in such relationships, disability tends to loom in a significant way in the minds of the nondisabled person (as well as the disabled person) obscuring other

features which may be more essential to establish a successful intimate relationship.

Even when they do form romantic relationships with others, the cultural stereotypes force them to more often than not be with “someone of their own kind” and if they do form intimate relationships with non-disabled people, they must consider the “real” reasons for being in such a relationship. Such reasons might range from being built on dependency, pity, etc. Societal prejudices perpetuate the view that PWD are incapable of participating in sexual relationships (Emens, 2009).

A complete sense of self makes one not only function truly as a healthy individual but also contributes positively to healthy and strong relationships in life. Especially in the case of romantic relationships, this understanding of “self” and the “other” comes from how strong and meaningful the relationship is. However, locating oneself and the other person in a romantic relationship that is built on the foundation of a fragmented self, emerging out of a disabled identity can be extremely challenging.

The present study aims to provide an insight into romantic relationships in the lives of disabled people through the lens of mainstream cinema. It focuses on looking into the various notions and images of self and the other that are created in these romantic relationships. The study will highlight the depiction of love and companionship against the backdrop of experiences of a person with disability. For the purpose of the present study, Sai Paranjpye’s movie *Sparsh* (1980) and Shonali Bose’s *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) have been chosen for analysis.

## Method

The present study is a qualitative, exploratory research with the objective to understand and gain an insight into the conceptions of self and the other in the lives disabled individuals as projected through cinema. *Sparsh* was chosen as the movie for analysis as it covers a broad spectrum of emotions that a disabled person goes through from the urge of having autonomy to the willingness of finding dependency and companionship. The film portrays the constant challenges and frustrating experiences that persons with disability have to often go through. It focuses on the theme of disability and romantic relationships and the stereotypes revolving around them. It highlights the viewpoint that people with disabilities too expect love and genuine concern in a relationship, and not charity. On the other hand, *Margarita With A Straw* portrays the story of a young girl with cerebral palsy

who moves to a new country and her journey of self-discovery and finding love.

After an extensive review and understanding of the topic, the literature review pertaining to the topic was studied and the source of media was finalised. After this, the two movies were seen multiple times and a detailed summary was prepared. Subsequently, important meaningful units were marked. Codes were derived out of meaningful units and themes were formed by clubbing the meaningful units. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data. Sub-themes were also created and specific instances and scenes from the movie were also added. Different aspects of the theme of “self and other” were highlighted such as the characteristics of self, the “other” in the relationship, the relationship with the other and disability and its experience.

## Discussion

The focus of the present study was to understand and explore the notions of self and the other in the lives disabled individuals as projected through cinema. The themes explore the notions of self, other, relationship between the self and other and the experiences of disability as experienced by the characters in the two movies. The following themes were identified:

**The characteristics of self.** It refers to the conception of self in the lives of disabled persons and their innate desires. Many people with impairments tend to distance themselves from being identified by others or identifying their own selves as disabled (Cameron, 2014) especially in the case of sympathetic gestures of others. The movie characters are also shown to have a desire to not be seen as “*bechara*” or helpless. Anirudh is of the view that PWD should not be viewed as those who are always in need of others but also who can offer a lot to others. While Laila wants the world to view her independent of her disability and thus tries to crop out the wheelchair from her profile picture on social media. Towards the end of the movie Anirudh calls himself disabled while denying being incapable in any way throughout the movie and exposes his sense of being valueless showing his insecurities and self-pity. This reflects the charity model wherein disabled people are considered as those in need of sympathy and pity from others and are dependent on the able-bodied individuals.

PWD experience a range of emotions including sadness, frustration, despair and even anger. Pierce (1998) found that among those individuals who are full time wheelchair bound, frustration can be

experienced very easily. Both characters in the movie experience frustration on account of their inability to carry out simple everyday tasks like wearing clothes or using a napkin. PWD often desire to be regarded as normal (Abberley, 2005). Laila has the inner desire to be identified as normal, while Anirudh has the fear of getting sympathy from others and their pity.

Both the characters are shown to be caring individuals, who have a strong relationship with either family or their students. While Anirudh is often found to be socialising and connecting with people, Laila finds happiness in small things of life and her music.

**The “other” in the relationship.** Women who have lost their husbands feel a sense of loss contact with others and a reduction in their association with others. This makes them a little withdrawn and somewhat inhibited (Fasoranti & Aruna, 2007). Kavita in the movie *Sparsh*, is a woman who has become lonely and socially withdrawn due to the death of her husband which is also a dark past that she lives with. She has thus, given up on all kinds of social interactions and prefers the company of her plants and music. In Khanum’s case her dark past was related to her “coming out” to her parents about her sexual orientation.

Cartwright, Archbold, Stewart and Limnadi (1994) emphasize the importance of relationships of positive quality so as to find a sense of enrichment from caregiving. In *Sparsh*, the scene where Kavita bakes a cake for Anirudh on his birthday when he was least expecting such a gesture shows how Kavita showers care and displays compassion towards Anirudh. While, in *Margarita with a straw*, Khanum comes to India with Laila for a holiday, however when Laila’s mother succumbs to her illness and Laila is shattered, Khanum stays back and is there for Laila through her difficult time.

**The relationship with the “other”.** Romantic involvement forms a significant event in the process of development of emerging adults (Arnett, 2000). Knapp’s (1978) dual staircase model explains the important stages in the formation of a relationship. It explains how a relationship forms, escalates, stabilizes and descends over time. The model explains the process of forming and escalation of relationships through five stages: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding. Initiating is explained as the initial interaction between two individuals that occurs immediately upon meeting someone including making a first impression. In both movies, the initial interactions played a key role in the formation of relationships. With Anirudh and Kavita,

their initial interactions were largely dominated by Anirudh’s appreciation towards Kavita’s music and Kavita’s curiosity to know more about Anirudh and his work. For Laila and Khanum, their initial interaction was based on asking about each other and getting to know about one another. In both cases, the initial interaction was accidental in nature.

In the experiment stage, couples try to gather in-depth information about each other with an aim to see how well they are compatible with each other. In both the movies, the characters were shown to spend quality time with each other and finding common interests.

In the intensifying stage, the relationship becomes less scripted. There is a spike in self-disclosure and relational commitment is seen (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009). Consistent with this, both Kavita and Khanum disclose their dark past to their respective partners as a sense of trust develops. Love starts to blossom between the partners.

Finally, couples tend to make a public announcement their relationship which finds its place in the formal also referred to as the legal bonding stage in Knapp’s model (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009). Though in case of Anirudh and Kavita this formal announcement was in the form of their marriage, but Laila and Khanum did not make a formal announcement of their homosexual relationship due to the fear of societal rejection. However, even they did take the next step in the relationship by moving in together. PWD are mostly expected to be with others of “their kind” and if the contrary is to happen by chance, they must meet with demeaning assumptions about the “catch” or the real reason behind an abled person entering such a relationship such as pity (Wasserman, et al., 2016). Anirudh and Kavita’s relationship hit a rough patch only when due to the societal norms and stereotypes Anirudh started questioning Kavita’s intentions of being with him as emerging out of a sense of pity or sympathy.

An important component of a strong relationship is the ability of the two individuals to find their weaknesses and strengths in each other. Both Anirudh and Laila were able to find comfort in their partners. In both the relationships, beauty was experienced through a sense of touch rather than visual appearance. In the scene where Kavita and Anirudh are sitting in the garden, Anirudh tells Kavita that he knows that she is pretty because he loves her smell and her “*sparsh*”, her essence. In the other movie, when Khanum and Laila are in the museum, Khanum holds Laila’s hand and tries to touch and feel

her hand and face and then tells her that she is very pretty.

In both the movies, the protagonists feared the societal reactions to their romantic relationships. In case of the movie *Sparsh*, Anirudh's fear was of marrying an abled bodied person. Disabled people who are involved in intimate relationships are constantly subjected to stereotypes and prejudices. They are only considered of being capable of forming relationships "with their own kind" (Wasserman, et al., 2016). The fear of societal reactions in the relationship between Khanum and Laila was based on the nature of their relationship as a homosexual couple. Consistent with this, Meyer's (2003) minority stress theory suggests that homosexuals are faced with distinct stressors owing to their sexual orientation.

At some point in both the movies there was an avoidance of the "other". In *Sparsh* Anirudh initially tries to avoid Kavita when he starts having mixed feelings about their relationship. In the other movie, when Khanum is standing naked in front of Laila, though she feels aroused, she stops herself and controls her urge for sexual intimacy and tries to avoid any such contact with Khanum as she is unsure of her sexual orientation.

A number of able bodied people consider disabled people to be inept with respect to maintaining fulfilling romantic relationships (Wasserman et al., 2016). Anirudh's character also portrayed such feelings when he thinks of the possible benefits Kavita could seek out of such a relationship with a disabled person. British Columbia Adolescent Health Survey (Saewyc, Poon, Wang, Homma, & Smith, 2007) reported that having confusion related to one's sexual orientation is not very uncommon. Laila also faced such an uncertainty when she realized that she was attracted to Khanum. This can also be inferred from the scene when she talks to Khanum and says "*I wish I could be that certain*".

The marriage rates of PWD are 41.1 per 1,000 which are significantly lower than for the general population (71.8 per 1,000) (Cohen, 2014). The inability of institutions to accommodate PWD on account of physical and communication barriers, fortifies people's views that disabled people and incapable of forming sexual relationships. PWD are often questioned when they decide to take the next step into marriage which is evident in a particular scene from *Sparsh*, when Anirudh asks Kavita about the kind of life they would have after marriage and says it would lead her to "*a sad life and emptiness*".

It is less likely for homosexual couples to raise kids than their heterosexual counterparts. However, this difference is declining particularly in the West (Gates, 2013). While societal attitudes towards homosexual relationships may be changing there is still some concern over the need for having children and their importance in an individual's life. Laila and Khanum's relationship was also questioned by Dhruv in the movie in a particular scene wherein he tells Laila that loving Khanum is an evolved choice and asks them on how they will ever have children. Laila also has some self-framed questions about how her parents would react and if they would ever accept her relationship and sexuality or not.

**Disability and its experience.** Both the movies portray disabilities of two different kinds. While *Sparsh* focuses on the visual impairment, *Margarita with a Straw* focuses on cerebral palsy. Significant scenes in the movie have brought out various nuances associated with the construct of disability. Certain covert symbols related to disability have also been identified in both the films such as Anirudh's "walking cane" and "the wheelchair" that Laila is dependent upon, "the ramp" that Laila's mother has to pull out every time she has to come out of the car.

Societal reactions to disability vary at great length from pity and sympathy to marginalisation and discrimination. Some people might also show genuine care and concern for the disabled individuals. In Laila's case she was subjected to the realization that she was "not normal" right from childhood and knew that her mother had to deal with sharp comments of the society. In Anirudh's case knowing that the visually impaired find it hard to find routes, the passer by changed the way he gave him directions and instead of visually telling him where the house was, he told him to rely on his auditory sensations. These concerns hold a worldwide relevance and are significant in contributing to the overall experience of disability and can be explained using the medical model as the society considers disability to be a problem within an individual and thus the effort to inculcate disabled people in the mainstream society. Thus, these children in Anirudh's school also remain at the periphery of the society waiting and hoping to become par with other "able-bodied" students.

For many PWD, access to aid and assistance are imperative to be able to participate in society. Both Laila and Anirudh were seen to be dependent on others for a number of everyday tasks. For instance, Anirudh was dependent upon his assistant to read out

letters to him, carry his things etc. and Laila was dependent upon her mother for everyday tasks such as combing her hair and giving her a bath.

Some of the major problems associated with disability are the negative attitudes of people and limited accessibility to the built environments (including public accommodations) transportations and information networks. Despite having laws in place which mandate buildings to be more PWD friendly, compliance is often very low. Both movies also address a very important concern when it comes to understanding the needs of disabled, that is lack of accessibility. In *Sparsh* various scenes in the movie portray how children who are visually impaired have access to very few textbooks that are printed in braille. *Margarita with a straw* also shows a particular scene when the college lift is not working and Laila along with her wheelchair has to be lifted by men. This can be explained using the social model of disability according to which the society creates barriers for the disabled.

PWD are also the recipients of unwanted attention. This attention is often not appreciated by them and often makes them realize that they deviate from the normal. When the anchor announces that the victory of Laila and her band was on account of the lyricist (Laila) being disabled, Laila is absolutely crushed, annoyed and shows her middle finger to the anchor. This scene signifies the sheer disappointment that she feels when she gets to know that she has won something not because of her talent but because she is disabled. This sympathy and pity is provided to disabled people can be explained using the charity model and both Anirudh and Laila display an innate need to be self-sufficient which can be explained using the disability model as independent living is fostered through it.

## Conclusion

After the data was analysed and common themes were identified, commonalities were observed in the way the “self and other” were depicted in both the movies. However, there were also significant differences that were observed in these portrayals. While Anirudh is seen as an older man working for an institution for the visually impaired, who has established himself well and is doing well in life. Laila on the other hand is a student in an inclusive institutional environment who is still finding her niche in life and wants to explore more in terms of relationships and love. Anirudh’s character is shown to be acknowledging his disability and the impairment

caused by it in different parts of the movie even though he does not like to be dependent on others, Laila does not openly acknowledge it throughout the film even though she is dependent on her mother for most things. The foundation of Anirudh and Kavita’s relationships lies on their mutual affection and love towards the children of the school, while for Laila and Khanum both are disabled and share the common experiences of disability which could be the founding stone of their relationship. Anirudh and Kavita’s relationship is clearly based on a relationship between an abled and disabled body, while Khanum and Laila’s relationship is of two disabled individuals. While for Laila, family is her support system, Anirudh finds himself in the company of a few supportive friends and his friendly assistant. Doubts and questions about Kavita’s intentions of marrying a person with disability often empower Anirudh’s mind but Laila, she doesn’t feel that Khanum who has a less severe disability than her is with her because of any compromise. Anirudh feels that Kavita treats him like a child whereas Laila openly says that Khanum will take care of her. Laila explores her sexuality and experiences relationships with various people, Anirudh, on the other hand does not hold any prior experiences of having any romantic relationship with someone else before meeting Kavita. While in the case of Anirudh, intimacy in the relationship is initiated by Kavita, in Laila’s case Khanum makes the first move. Anirudh and Kavita’s relationship is based on respect and understanding and maturity however, Laila and Khanum’s relationship is based on a lot of sexual intimacy and blooming love.

The study has helped in understanding the general discourse of disability in the context of marginalisation and exclusion. The study also provided an understanding and a hope for achieving a positive view of relationships in the lives of disabled portrayed in media. It provides an optimistic image of depictions of love and successful relationships possible in the disabled person’s life. It also gives us a positive view about the possibility of having a meaningful relationship between able bodied and disabled individuals.

Through this research an understanding was gained towards the various conceptions love and relationships of disabled people as portrayed through media. Various aspects of the ability to form and maintain relationships under the purview of disability were explored. Challenges and obstacles provided by one’s disability and how they interfere in the ability to love and be in a loving relationship were also

uncovered. Therefore, the findings demonstrate how then the understanding of oneself, other, and the relationship between oneself and the other contribute to the understanding of “self”. While disabled individuals may experience turmoil and conflicts in their experience of being with the “other” but this can also provide them the much-needed view of oneself that they were avoiding. Such explorations and findings can help in contributing to the understanding of disability in a holistic way and can help to uncover the importance of love and relationships portrayed by media. These portrayals are fraught with and reflect the stereotypical thinking of the society to some extent. However, they also bring about an understanding of how much the society has progressed and how much it still has to achieve.

Due to the paucity of time, only two movies could be included in the analysis and only Hindi movies were analysed and characters portraying the roles of disabled individuals living in the east could be studied. Paucity of relevant literature and specifically in the context of relationships among disabled people and the qualitative nature of the study affect generalizability of the results.

Including movies that display people across various cultures could help in a greater in-depth understanding of the topic. A greater number of movies could also be analysed which would help in a greater understanding of the experiences of disability. Movies with protagonists suffering from various kinds of disabilities can also be included for greater depth.

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