

Challenging Disability Stereotypes: Unveiling the Realities of Disability and the Caregiver's Trauma in Ram's Movie *Peranbu*

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Abstract:

Cinema serves as a mirror reflecting the unfiltered truths of our society. It is a universal medium that bridges cultures, exposes us to diverse art forms, and adds new meaning to our life. Cinema stimulates our imagination, offering multiple perspectives on the world and broadening our horizons. While it straddles the line between reality and fiction, cinema remains a crucial tool for both entertainment and education, capable of catalyzing changes in behavior and attitudes. Disability has emerged as a prominent theme in cinema, shedding light on an issue that remains widely misunderstood. Research consistently highlights the social exclusion faced by individuals with disabilities, as well as the lack of awareness and sensitivity in society. Films, as a form of media, possess the potential to convey powerful and lasting impressions of disability to the public. This research paper aims to spotlight the societal biases and discrimination experienced by disabled individuals, as exemplified in the movie *Peranbu*. It delves into the harrowing journey of Amudhavan, a single parent facing the daunting challenges of caring for his disabled teenage daughter in the film *Peranbu*.

Keywords: Disability, Cinema, Trauma, Stigma, etc...

Cinema has played a vital role in reshaping society's mindset and attitudes towards disability. Movies have the power to bring disability issues to the forefront of public consciousness. Through compelling storytelling and relatable characters, films can educate viewers about the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. Cinema has the ability to challenge and break stereotypes associated with disability. By portraying disabled characters as multifaceted individuals with their own strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations, films can counter preconceived notions. Watching a character's journey with a disability on the big screen can evoke empathy and understanding in the audience. This emotional connection can lead to greater acceptance and inclusivity in real life.

Disabled characters in cinema have often been portrayed in limited and sometimes stereotypical ways. These portrayals tend to fall into a few common categories, including stable characters that are typically presented as inspirational figures, villains or negative characters, or one-dimensional figures that lack depth. However, it is indeed rare for movies to accurately capture the true challenges and practical difficulties faced by disabled individuals and their caregivers. Many films tend to focus on disability as either a source of inspiration or a plot device. This oversimplification fails to capture the complexities of the disabled person's life and their day-to-day struggles. The "supercrip" or "inspirational" trope is a common one, where disabled characters are portrayed as exceptional individuals who triumph over their disabilities.

While these stories can be uplifting, they can also create unrealistic expectations and downplay the real challenges disabled individuals face. On the other end of the spectrum, some films depict disabled characters as villains or negatively stereotype them. This contributes to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and biases against disabled people. Disabled characters are often given shallow, one-dimensional roles that don't reflect the full range of their experiences,

emotions, and identities. Movies frequently miss the opportunity to delve into the practical difficulties faced by disabled individuals and their caregivers. These can include physical accessibility, healthcare, employment, and social inclusion challenges. There is also an issue of underrepresentation in cinema, where disabled actors and their stories are marginalized, making it even more challenging to depict their experiences authentically.

While disability has sometimes been portrayed as a negative aspect or a form of punishment, recent Indian films have tackled the topic of disability with a contemporary perspective. One such movie is *Peranbu*. *Peranbu* is an Indian Tamil-language film directed by Ram and was released at the cinemas in 2018. The movie features Mammootty as the lead character, Amudhavan, who is the father of a spastic cerebral palsy affected girl named Paapa, played by Sadhana. The film explores the challenges and complexities of her life, as well as the emotional journey of her father, Amudhavan, in caring for her. *Peranbu* is known for its sensitive portrayal of disability and the profound relationship between a father and his daughter. The film has been praised for its storytelling and performances.

The central narrative of the movie highlights the dynamics of a father-daughter relationship in the face of disability. Amudhavan takes care of his physically and intellectually disabled daughter, Paapa. The story unfolds as Amudhavan receives a letter from his wife, informing him that she is leaving him and leaving behind Paapa. Amudhavan's life revolves around caring for Paapa, and he struggles with the challenges of her disability. As he navigates this journey, he encounters various individuals and situations that shed light on the complexities of care giving and societal attitudes towards disability. The film also portrays Amudhavan's growing understanding of his daughter's needs and emotions. He embarks on a journey of self-discovery, attempting to provide the best possible life for Paapa.

This paper examines the movie from three distinct angles: disability within the context of family dynamics, disability in relation to sexuality, and disability within the broader societal framework.

Disabled individuals often experience differential treatment within their families, sometimes facing considerable resentment. In such cases, family members may struggle to comprehend the disabled person's condition and fail to embrace it as a natural part of life. This ongoing discord within the family not only affects the well-being of the disabled individual but also has a psychological impact on other family members. The movie *Peranbu* commences with Papa's mother's letter informing Amudhavan of her decision to leave their daughter behind and start a new life with someone else. She mentions that she has been caring for Papa for 12 years, now it is his responsibility to take care of Paapa. She writes to him that he rarely visited her (Amudhavan works in Dubai) after the birth of a disabled daughter. She explains that she has endured enough challenges within the household and from society and now she has found a partner who will accept, understand, and respect her feelings. This situation highlights the dynamics within a family dealing with a disabled member. Amuthavan's sister-in-law expresses concern that her typically normal child imitates Papa every day. She worries that her child might also acquire characteristics or behaviors similar to Papa's disability. As a result, she suggests either relocating Papa to a different place or completely abandoning her. Additionally, Amuthavan's own mother encourages abandoning Papa and starting a new life with someone else. This situation exemplifies how some family members view disabled individuals as burdens, stigmatized figures, or sources of social status concerns. Papa's family, ideally, should have provided her with significant support. However, in her case, she is viewed as a burden by her family. Her own mother abandons her, and other family members treat her as a stigmatized

figure. This condition reflects the dysfunctional dynamics within the family when it comes to dealing with a disabled person. Instead of being supportive and accepting of Papa's condition, they exhibit strong bias. If Papa had been born without a disability, she would likely have received much fairer treatment from her family members.

Societal prejudices against disabled people are deeply ingrained and can manifest in various forms. Disabled individuals are often stigmatized, with their disabilities viewed as something negative or shameful. Prejudices can result in limited opportunities for education, employment, and social inclusion for disabled individuals. Disabled people may be stereotyped as helpless, dependent, or burdensome, which oversimplifies their diverse experiences. Inaccessible infrastructure and services can be a manifestation of societal prejudice, as it excludes disabled individuals from participating fully in public life. Disabled individuals may face bullying, harassment, or discrimination, perpetuating negative stereotypes. Prejudices can lead to social isolation, as disabled individuals may be excluded from social events and activities.

These prejudices can be harmful and unjust, reinforcing barriers that hinder the full participation and inclusion of disabled people in society. Advocacy, education, and awareness are essential to challenge and change these biases and create a more inclusive world. In the film *Peranbu* the family members, relatives, and neighbors are aware of Paapa's condition, but they attempt to distance themselves from her. Eventually, Amudhavan makes the decision to take Paapa away from home for her well-being. They settle in an isolated house far from the town, with a lake serving as a natural boundary. To cross to the other side, they must use an old wooden bridge or take a country boat or coracle boat. Amudhavan appreciates this house for its isolation, away from the judgmental society on the other side of the lake. Despite his efforts to provide care and companionship, he realizes that Paapa, as she approaches her sexual maturity,

needs a female caregiver. This frustrates him, as society refuses to accept his immobilized daughter and forces them to live in a place devoid of human interaction. When they are eventually compelled to return to the city, he reluctantly conforms to the way society views his unique teenage daughter.

The topic of sexuality and disability is an important and often overlooked aspect of the lives of disabled individuals. Disabled people, like anyone else, have diverse sexual orientations, desires, and identities. Disability does not determine one's sexual orientation or preferences. Society often stereotypes disabled individuals as asexual or desexualizes them, assuming that they are not interested in or capable of having sexual relationships. Amudhavan takes Paapa to Chennai where he locks her in, in a hotel room. She watches TV all the time. She then comes of age and grows more aware of her own sexuality and personhood. Amudhavan's fears of his daughter being subjected to sexual assault or other forms of abuse are not misplaced. In his inability to deal with these complex issues that are traditionally dealt with only by women, Amudhavan feels lost. He moves her to a shelter while he works as a driver. But the problems seem relentless. He finds that the caretakers at the shelter hit her because she touches herself. He immediately moves her out of there. The film indeed does deserve credit for talking about sexuality in this context. Amudhavan breaks into tears when he comes face-to-face with Paapa's desires. Few filmmakers have touched the theme of sexuality as delicately as Ram, and he deals it with respect. The film unblushingly talks about a young disabled girl's sexuality and sorts us apprehend that there is nothing mistaken in deliberating as it is quite usual. "One needs to understand that persons with disabilities are mostly denied their sexual rights. But their biological needs are same as others. Sometimes, they do not know where and how to behave.... we need to teach them when and where this is acceptable." (Sengupta 7).

“Caretakers for children with special needs are ought to provide much of their time and kindness. Circumstances such as autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, cancer, and cerebral vascular accident are amongst the categorized severe illnesses that roots immense stress among caregivers reliant on the rigorousness of the condition.” (Hack 15). In the end of the movie, we find the trio - Amudhavan, Meera, a transgender and a sex worker and Paapa in a house surrounded by verdant green landscape. Paapa is pulled out of the urban surroundings and is once again replaced in the warmth of nature all over again. In the case of Amudhavan and Meera, there is never an occasion where we find them sexually attracted to each other. So, the refuge the trio discovers, a final shelter, is an asexual, one that is unadulterated by sensual desires and bound by unconditional love and sacrifice.

Some filmmakers and disability advocates have worked to change the narrative on disability by promoting more authentic and inclusive portrayals of disability in cinema. *Peranbu* is a poignant exploration of love, sacrifice, and the resilience of the human spirit. It delves into the challenges faced by caregivers of disabled individuals and the need for empathy and understanding in society. The film shows Ram's sensitive portrayal of disability-related issues. While there has been some progress in portraying disability more authentically in cinema, there is still much work to be done to ensure that movies accurately capture the practical difficulties, challenges, and diverse experiences of disabled individuals and their caregivers. More inclusive and authentic representation in film can help break stereotypes and promote greater understanding and empathy.

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