

Proceedings of the One-Day National Seminar



**Narratives of Change:
Espousing SDGs through
Indian Literature and Cinema
for Societal Metamorphosis**

Dr.Brinda P

Dr.B.Pavithra



Indian Council of
Social Science Research

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Narratives of Change: Espousing SDGs through Indian Literature and Cinema for Societal Metamorphosis

Editors

Dr.Brinda.P

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Body Image, Well-Being, and Inclusivity: A Cinematic Shift in *Size Zero*

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Abstract

This research paper attempts to analyze the Telugu-Tamil comedy-drama film *Size Zero* (2015) through the lens of body theory. The film *Size Zero*, directed by Prakash Kovelamudi, tackles body image issues and societal pressures surrounding weight and beauty ideals in India. The film challenges conventional ideals of thinness and celebrates body diversity, centering on a protagonist who defies the societal pressures to conform to a 'size zero' physique. By highlighting the consequences of weight-loss obsession and body-shaming culture, *Size Zero* critiques both the commercial beauty industry and social expectations that define self-worth through appearance. *Size Zero* also reveals how capitalist structures manipulate and exploit body image insecurities, turning personal appearance into a commodity while distracting individuals from addressing systemic social inequalities. By addressing these issues in a mainstream film, it opens up discussions about how society views and treats bodies that do not conform to specific ideals, promoting a message of self-acceptance and body positivity as a counter-narrative. *Size Zero* acts as a social commentary on the harmful impact of body image expectations on health and well-being (SDG 3) and the inequities perpetuated by exclusionary beauty standards (SDG 10). The film's progressive stance on body acceptance represents a notable shift in Indian cinema, where increasingly diverse body representations are challenging narrow beauty norms. Through this critical portrayal, *Size Zero* contributes to a changing cinematic landscape that reflects and promotes broader societal acceptance of body diversity. By bringing issues of body politics to mainstream audiences, *Size Zero* signifies a shift that may catalyze significant cultural change, encouraging viewers to embrace and celebrate body diversity. This research paper argues that such films can play a pivotal role in reshaping public attitudes, and fostering greater inclusivity dismantling entrenched stereotypes around body image.

Keywords: Body image, Indian cinema, body diversity, societal beauty standards

Introduction

Body representation in Indian society is a dynamic and multifaceted construct shaped by traditional values, global media influences, and socio-economic factors. Historically, Indian society has embraced a range of body ideals, with fuller bodies often symbolizing health and prosperity. The modern media and Western beauty standards have introduced an emphasis on thinness, fairness, and specific body types, which are now pervasive across Indian television, advertising, and Cinema. These ideals influence public perceptions of beauty and self-worth, contributing to growing concerns around body image, mental health, and social acceptance. The societal pressures to conform to these narrow standards of beauty align closely with the challenges outlined by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). SDG 3 advocates for physical and mental health for all, a goal hindered by the rising issues of body dissatisfaction, diet culture, and mental health impacts associated with negative body image. SDG 10 emphasizes reducing inequalities and promoting inclusion, which resonates with the societal exclusion and discrimination faced by individuals who do not fit to dominant beauty norms, such as being thin, fair-skinned, or fit. Media and cinema, as influential cultural institutions, reflect and reinforce these norms while also offering platforms to challenge and redefine them.

Indian cinema, particularly regional film industries, has a powerful role in shaping societal attitudes toward the body. The 2015 film *Size Zero* offers a notable example of this dynamic. Through its protagonist's journey, the film challenges stereotypical beauty standards

and critiques the commercialization of body image. By showcasing the mental and physical toll of society's obsession with thinness, *Size Zero* lines up with the principles of SDG 3 by promoting well-being through self-acceptance and health-centered body care and SDG 10 by advocating for inclusivity and reducing body-based inequalities. This paper argues that *Size Zero* not only highlights critical issues of body representation in Indian society but also serves as a catalyst for broader social change. Through a body theory framework, this study analyzes how *Size Zero* represents and critiques societal beauty standards, examining its potential impact on audiences and the evolving landscape of Indian cinema in promoting healthier and more inclusive perspectives on body representation. In doing so, this paper aims to contribute to the understanding of how cultural narratives around the body intersect with global health and equality objectives, offering insights into the role of media in shaping inclusive societal attitudes.

Body Theory and Resistance

Body theory is an interdisciplinary approach to understand the social, cultural, and political dimensions of the human body, examining how bodies are perceived, regulated, and represented within various contexts. The theory posits that bodies are not just biological entities but are shaped by and reflect social meanings, norms, and power structures. Body theory encourages a critical examination of how society shapes our understanding of the body, affecting our self-perception, social relationships, and sense of identity. It invites us to question how we view our bodies and others' bodies, advocating for a more inclusive understanding that respects the diversity and complexity of human embodiment. Broadly, Body theory examines the social and cultural constructions of the body and how it functions as a site of identity, power, and resistance. *Size Zero* delivers a critical reflection on body politics, beauty standards, and the societal pressures to conform to an idealized body type.

In *Size Zero*, the protagonist Sweety's (played by Anushka Shetty) body becomes central to her social identity, as her size dictates much of how she is perceived and treated. As body theorist Chris Shilling in her book *The Body and Social Theory* writes, "The body is... a vessel through which people present their social identity and status" (Shilling 5). Sweety's body, which does not conform to the socially desirable 'size zero' ideal, is often a source of shame and ridicule. This societal perception directly impacts her self-worth and social interactions, illustrating how bodies that do not meet specific ideals are marginalized or stigmatized. From the beginning, Sweety's body is seen as a marker of her worth and eligibility for marriage, aligning with societal expectations that equate physical appearance with personal value, especially for women. By portraying the consequences of this body centric valuation, *Size Zero* critiques how individuals, particularly women, are subjected to restrictive beauty standards that dictate their identity and acceptance within society.

Size Zero also explores how body image is commodified within a capitalist framework. In *The Imperative of Health* body theorist Deborah Lupton notes, "The body has become an object that can be manipulated, controlled, and bought and sold as part of a consumer culture" (Lupton 97). The film portrays how the beauty and weight-loss industries exploit insecurities about body size to profit from products and services that promise transformation and social acceptance. Sweety's engagement with the weight-loss clinic reflects how the desire for a perfect body is a manufactured need, driven by a commercial system that prioritizes profit over individual well-being. By highlighting the pervasive influence of these industries, *Size Zero* critiques the commodification of body image, emphasizing the dangers of promoting unattainable body ideals for economic gain. This commodification objectifies individuals, reducing them to their appearance, and creates a cycle where societal validation becomes tied to consumption of beauty and fitness products, rather than personal health or happiness.

In body theory, the concept of resistance is central, where individuals challenge the societal norms that dictate how their bodies should look or function. In *Unbearable Weight*:

Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body Susan Bordo argues, the body can "serve as a text of resistance... offering a form of social critique" (Bordo 165). Sweety's eventual rejection of the 'size zero' ideal and her embrace of her natural body size act as a form of resistance against the body-shaming culture and the commercial forces that exploit body insecurities. Her defiance of societal expectations subverts the norms surrounding beauty and self-worth, advocating for self-acceptance and body positivity. By refusing to conform to the size zero ideal, Sweety challenges the narrative that thinness equates to happiness or social acceptance, positioning her body as a site of empowerment and self-definition. This stance aligns with Bordo's perspective on resistance, as Sweety's journey becomes a counter-narrative that critiques cultural pressures and promotes an inclusive view of beauty.

Biopolitics and the Docile Body

Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics and the docile body offers a compelling perspective on how societal forces regulate and control individual bodies to conform to specific norms. Foucault's theory of biopolitics examines the relationship between power and the human body, and his concept of the docile body describes how bodies are disciplined and shaped to meet societal expectations, provides a framework for understanding the film's critique of body standards. In *Size Zero*, the protagonist Sweety faces immense societal pressure to conform to an idealized body type, emblematic of the 'size zero' physique. Foucault's concept of biopolitics explores how institutions and social forces shape and regulate bodies, essentially treating the body as a site for enacting power and control. In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault argues that biopolitics is a mechanism through which society uses "a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (Foucault 137). In *Size Zero*, these mechanisms of control are represented by the weight-loss industry, the beauty market, and the media, all of which promote thinness as an ideal and impose this standard on individuals. Sweety's initial journey through a weight-loss clinic epitomizes how institutions leverage societal norms to control bodies. In a Foucauldian sense, the clinic represents an institution of biopolitical power, enforcing bodily conformity by promoting thinness as a means to achieve social acceptance and self-worth. Through her engagement with the clinic, Sweety experiences how societal values define her body, leading to stress, shame, and a deep sense of inadequacy when she cannot conform to these ideals.

Foucault's idea of the docile body refers to how power shapes bodies to be compliant and useful within a social framework. In *Discipline and Punish* he writes, "A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved" (Foucault 136). This concept aligns with Sweety's experiences in *Size Zero*, where her body becomes a site of constant surveillance and judgment. From the perspective of her family, her potential suitors, and society at large, Sweety's body is expected to conform to a controlled, idealized version of femininity. The societal forces around her implicitly and explicitly encourage her to transform her body through diet, exercise, and self-discipline, all aimed at producing a 'docile' body that meets the beauty standards of her culture. Through advertisements, social comments, and family pressure, Sweety is coerced into seeing her body as an object to be disciplined, improved, and ultimately made socially acceptable. This connects with Foucault's observation that docility is achieved by "subjecting the body to exhaustive and regular disciplinary practices" (Foucault 137). In the film, these practices are embodied in the clinic's extreme regimes and societal expectations that prioritize thinness over well-being. Sweety's eventual rebellion against these norms symbolizes her refusal to let her body be entirely subjected to this discipline, challenging the control exerted by these societal structures.

Conclusion

A cinematic shift can be observed in *Size Zero* that challenges conventional narratives around beauty and body image in Indian cinema. *Size Zero* stands out as a dynamic cinematic work that critiques deeply ingrained beauty standards and societal pressures, offering an insightful exploration of body politics. By exposing the commoditization of body image and addressing the detrimental effects of weight-loss obsession and body-shaming, the film promotes self-acceptance and celebrates body diversity. It aligns with global developmental objectives, particularly those emphasizing health and well-being (SDG 3) and inclusivity and equity (SDG 10), situating its narrative within a broader discourse on the impact of societal beauty norms.

Anushka Shetty's decision to gain weight for *Size Zero* was both a bold and challenging choice that underscored her dedication to bring authenticity to the role of Sweety. In an interview with *The Times of India*, Shetty explained her commitment to the role, saying: "I wanted to make the character as authentic as possible. I could have easily used prosthetics, but I wanted to feel what it would actually be like for a person who is overweight and faces body-shaming. It was difficult, but I learned a lot from it" (*The Times of India*, 2015). Gaining weight for the role, she explained, gave her insight into the societal judgments and biases individuals face regarding body size, enhancing her empathy for people who are often unfairly stigmatized. She noted that the experience was challenging and affected her both mentally and physically, especially considering the intense expectations surrounding physical appearance in the entertainment industry. By choosing this path, Shetty contributed to the film's message on body positivity and self-acceptance, bringing visibility to the pressures women face to conform to beauty standards. Her commitment to the role reinforced the authenticity of *Size Zero*, setting a precedent in Indian cinema for taking a raw and realistic approach to body representation and creating a powerful impact on audiences.

Size Zero places a fuller-figured woman at the center of the story and frames her journey as one of self-acceptance rather than transformation to meet societal standards. This shift reflects broader societal discussions around body positivity and inclusivity, as well as a growing willingness in Indian cinema to address the negative impact of body shaming and unrealistic beauty ideals. As a cultural milestone, *Size Zero* not only mirrors but actively drives a shift in Indian cinema toward greater representation and inclusivity. This analysis highlights the film's capacity to challenge stereotypes, ignite discussions, and foster cultural change, underscoring its role in advancing a more inclusive and equitable understanding of body image.

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