



REVITALIZING HEALTH THROUGH HUMANITIES: FOREGROUNDING UNHEARD TRENDS

Edited by
L. Santhosh Kumar and Barnashree Khasnobis





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**Dr. L. Santhosh Kumar
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Shifting Perspectives: Re-imaging Cinematic Representation of Disability, Sexuality, and Gender in *Margarita with a Straw* and *Peranbu*

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ABSTRACT: The depiction or the representation of disability is one of the contested topics in Indian cinema today. The earlier portrayal of disability in Indian cinema followed a normative path toward ‘fixing’ disability, which means showing that a disabled person needs an able-bodied person’s help to look past their disability and live life happily. In Indian cinema disability has been shown as a consequence for misdeeds done in the past; karma for the sins committed by parents or ancestors; and sometimes disability has also been shown as a punishment worse than death. In several Indian films disability is used as a comic interlude and many film-makers and script writers use disability as a narrative prosthesis to give a dramatic twist to their scripts with scant regard for the rights of the disabled. There have been some film-makers who have built narratives around the insensitivity of the society towards the disabled. But in Indian cinema only few film-makers like Shonali Bose and Ram have dared to venture deep into exploring the sensitive area of the representation of disabled people as sexual beings. This research paper is an outcome of the study of the movies *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) directed by Shonali Bose and *Peranbu* (2018) directed by Ram as counter-narratives for the dominant narratives of disability in the mainstream Indian Cinema. These movies emphasize the importance of the representation of the disabled as sexual beings with desires who are worthy of equal rights and opportunities to possess control, choice and access to their sexuality and sexual expression. These movies challenge the ableist, normative assumptions about disability and sexuality. The paper aims to draw attention on the need to address issues concerning the sexual health, sexual rights, and the sexual well being of the disabled community.

KEYWORDS: Disability, Sexuality, Films, Sexual health, Sexual rights, etc...

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1. Introduction

Throughout history, conversations within the disability community regarding the intersection of disability and sexuality have often been characterized by a medicalized, apolitical, and individualistic perspective. This individualizing focus tends to shift attention away from the complex sociostructural relationships between disabled and non-disabled individuals. It also neglects the symbolic meanings associated with disability and desirability within the broader cultural context. Additionally, this perspective fails to address the psychological implications of facing multiple barriers to sexual expression and the challenges of establishing meaningful sexual relationships for individuals with disabilities.

2. Review of Literature

Contemporary research highlights a growing trend in framing research on disability and sexuality with a more political perspective, emerging from both academic and advocacy communities. However, even with the advancements in critical scholarship, the sexual experiences or the intimate aspects of the lives of individuals with disabilities still remain concealed or obscured on various fronts. Topics such as education, employment, accessibility, economic autonomy, familial acceptance, social exclusion, stigma, stereotypes, and inclusivity within the disabled community have been substantially explored under the domain of disability in multidisciplinary research. Issues related to sexual health and sexual rights of the disabled, and the overall well-being of individuals with disabilities in the context of sexuality is often overlooked or sidelined or unapprised in the field of research highlighting a noticeable gap.

Despite advocacy efforts and policy development within the disability community emphasizing broad concepts of universal access, the aspect of equal access to sexual relationships and sexual activity has frequently been overlooked in these endeavors. The difficulties in accessing sexual expression and relationships for individuals with disabilities often parallel the challenges encountered in trying to integrate into mainstream society. These obstacles span various dimensions, including symbolic, economic, social, architectural, psychological, and interpersonal aspects. In the context of sexuality, individuals with disabilities face distinct challenges stemming from cultural views on attractiveness and desirability. These cultural perceptions, when intertwined with other obstacles, worsen the difficulties in attaining sexual access for people with disabilities.

Sexual health, sexual access and sexual expression not just mean physical intimacy itself. Instead, it broadly refers to access to the psychological, social, and cultural environments and support systems that recognize, nurture, and encourage sexuality in general or specifically for individuals with disabilities. "A basic need and aspect of being human, cannot be separated from other aspects of life, includes the physical, physiological, psychological, social, emotional, cultural and ethical dimensions of sex and gender, influences thought, feelings, actions and interactions and affects our mental and physical health" (Gomez, 2012). For instance, cultural support for the sexuality of people with disabilities might involve more positive representations of them in media, like films. Positive representation of people with disabilities in films can contribute significantly to cultural support for their sexuality. When films showcase characters with disabilities engaging in romantic relationships or expressing their sexuality, it helps normalize these experiences and promotes inclusivity. It sends a powerful message that everyone, regardless of ability, deserves love, intimacy, and fulfilling relationships. Such realistic and optimistic portrayals helps in reducing stigma, changing societal attitudes, and creating a more sensitive and supportive cultural environment for individuals with disabilities to express their sexuality without judgment. It may also prompt non-disabled individuals to perceive and understand them more positively better in a sexual context.

3. Discussion

Filmmakers and public welfare associations are aggressively calling for more improved and authentic representations that reflect the diverse experiences of individuals with disabilities, including their romantic and sexual facets. There is a visible shift and a burgeoning recognition within the Indian film industry regarding the momentousness of creating more real, genuine and inclusive depictions. A small but dedicated group of independent film makers and creators of documentary have taken the responsibility of producing and distributing more authentic narratives related to the sexual dimensions of the lives of individuals with disabilities.

There are only few film makers today in Indian cinema that did not shy away from confronting and showcasing the difficult disability and sexuality issues with all its complexity in their films. Such films are a breakaway from the mainstream cinema which showcases misconception of such sensitive topics. *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) and *Peranbu* (2019) are such films that explore the intersection of disability and sexuality drawing inspiration from real-life experiences encountered by their respective directors.

Margarita with a Straw is a Hindi language movie directed by Shonali Bose and is inspired by the life of her cousin, Malini Chib and her autobiography titled *One Little Finger* (2010). In an interview Bose states that her aunt, Malini's mother Dr Mithu Ahir, asked her do something on disability which made Bose realize that she had a different perspective on disability which she could explore on screen. Then she started working on the script of *Margarita with a Straw*. The film follows the journey of a young woman named Laila with cerebral palsy, played by Kalki Koechlin, as she navigates her way through life, relationships, and self-discovery.

Perumbu, on the other hand, is a Tamil language movie directed by Ram and is loosely based on the experiences of a father and his disabled son whom Ram encountered. The film explores the challenges faced by a father named Amudhavan (played by Mammooty) in raising his daughter named Paapa (played by Sadhana) with cerebral palsy, delving into themes of love, acceptance, and the complexities of care giving. In an interview with Sindhu Sivalingam, Ram states that,

I've been involved in working with and for spastic children for the past 10 years. I was doing a phototherapy course for them and interacted with many parents who shared their experiences of raising a special child.... During one such conversation, one parent, a father, said something that sowed in me the idea of making *Perumbu*. He said, "Nature has created everyone differently, but treats everyone equally".

Both movies offer unique perspectives on disability and sexuality, drawing from real-life encounters to bring authenticity to their narratives. The personal connections of the directors to the stories add depth and emotional resonance to the films, allowing them to shed light on important and often overlooked aspects of the human experience.

"Current cultural ideology bombards us with beautiful body images that are virtually impossible for someone with a physical disability to attain" (Cole, 1993). In popular culture, like movies, TV shows, and books, people with disabilities are rarely shown as sexually attractive or active. Even though discussions about their public lives are accepted, their private lives, including sexuality and emotional needs, are often treated as taboo and kept out of public conversations. These negative portrayals in popular culture shape both public opinions and how individuals with disabilities see their own ability to be sexual beings and engage in romantic relationships. In *Margarita with a Straw* when Laila faces rejection in her romantic pursuits, it deeply hurts her. But things take a drastic change when

she moves to another country - New York, USA, denoting a cultural shift.

Contrary to the emphasis given to addressing discrimination in education or employment, the issue of ensuring equal access to sexuality and relationships lack the same level of priority on the equality agenda. This is despite the fact that it constitutes a fundamental human right and is crucial for both health and developmental aspects. In *Margarita with a Straw* Laila has access to education and is accepted by her peers. However, when it comes to expressing her sexuality and her interest in a relationship with an able-bodied person, she experiences discrimination and rejection. Nima, her crush in college, appreciates her company, even lends his voice to sing her lyrics but unfortunately he withdraws when it comes to a romantic relationship, rejecting her romantic advances despite their positive interactions.

As an 18 years old girl, Laila experiences typical hormonal changes and becomes more aware of her sexuality and desires. It's important to recognize that individuals with disabilities undergo the same changes during their teenage years as those without disabilities. An American sociologist and disabled woman, Finger (1992) states that it is easier for them to voice out discrimination in education, housing and employment than about their exclusion from sexuality and reproduction. She further adds that sexuality is their deepest pain and one of the greatest oppressions that they face. Considering someone's sexual desires as taboo simply because of their disability is a form of discrimination that society unjustly imposes on them. This type of discrimination constitutes a form of oppressing the sexual rights of individuals with disabilities. By stigmatizing or overlooking their sexual desires, society is unfairly suppressing an essential aspect of their personal autonomy and rights.

The cultural narratives that disabled children encounter as they grow up often lack representations of their sexuality. Additionally, this crucial knowledge is not adequately integrated into their formal and informal education. In the majority of cultural narratives, including fairy tales and fables, disabled characters are seldom featured. When they do make an appearance, they are often cast in negative roles, such as witches or villains. Notably, there are hardly any stories that depict disabled characters experiencing love, getting married, and leading happy lives. These narrative patterns influence the perspectives of both disabled and able-bodied children from a young age, contributing to the notion that all disabled individuals are asexual and incapable of having fulfilling married lives.

Laila and Paapa would have never heard of stories which included characters like them to draw similarities with their

lives or have fantasies about their lives. For instance, when an able-bodied girl reads or hears stories like Cinderella, she may fantasize about the character and imagine herself in that narrative. She envisions a scenario where a prince charming comes to rescue her, leading to a happily ever after. This allows her to draw parallels and identify with the protagonist. On the contrary, when a disabled girl, like Laila or Paapa, seeks characters to relate to in stories, she often finds a lack of representation. Unfortunately, there are few, if any, positive and empowering models for her to draw similarities and fantasies from. Instead, the limited portrayals of disability in stories often feature negative characters, reinforcing a narrative that doesn't provide empowering or relatable figures for her. Disability Culture studies reveal that people with disabilities perceive and define themselves in relation to disablement in cultural context and not by their impairment. Different cultural representations, beliefs, and practices often make biological impairment difficult to define or to separate from disablement. This affects the ways in which disabled people perceive and define themselves.

Teenage and young disabled children have poor or no access to sex education and sexual information during a critical period of their growth and development. Scholars argue that differential mechanisms of surveillance and segregation contribute to the exclusion of disabled children from essential social processes and childhood socialization. Consequently, their opportunities to develop their sexuality, explore their sexual identity, and understand their bodies at the same level as their non-disabled peers are completely curbed.

In *Perambu* Paapa has no access to school, education, friends and a peer circle. She is kept under lock and key forcing her to spend most of the hours of a day in isolation. She doesn't have any chance to socialize with people of her age. The absence of social connections, friends, and educational opportunities in Paapa's life becomes even more impactful when she becomes aware of her feelings and desires. "By denying individuals with intellectual disability the opportunity to learn about their sexuality and develop social relationships with others, society has denied them the right to self-fulfillment" (Swango-Wilson 2008). Without anyone to share or express her newfound emotions and preferences, she faces the challenge of navigating this aspect of her life in isolation, further highlighting the importance of social support and friends or a peer circle during such formative moments.

There are several scenes in the movie where Paapa is shown to be exploring her feminine side. For instance, she paints breasts, which something she has seen on herself, on a doll;

she paints her lips with lollipops; she tries to apply makeup on her face. All these scenes allude to the inner urge of Paapa to be a woman and embody the sexual urges that comes with it. Later in the movie Paapa's sexual desires grow and when she becomes aware of it she starts showing interest in men who are walking down the lane and stares at half naked posters through her window. Eventually she starts stimulating herself sexually and kisses the heroes of the songs that she watches in the television in order to show her sexual desires. These scenes signify the development of the child who is coming of age, but does not know how to express it. When Amudhavan confronts the burgeoning desires of his daughter Paapa, he struggles to comprehend or cope with her evolving needs. This underscores a significant issue within the intersection of disability and sexuality, emphasizing the challenges faced by caregivers in navigating such situations.

Educators, parents, caregivers, and health professionals often find themselves unprepared and lacking the necessary knowledge and resources to educate disabled young people about matters related to sexuality. East and Orchard in their article "Somebody's Else's Job: Experiences of Sex Education among Health Professionals, Parents and Adolescents with Physical Disabilities in Southwestern Ontario" note that formal sex education is either completely absent or curtailed from the lives of physically disabled students. There is a common view that disabled people are innocent, child-like, naïve, and asexual and incapable in any form of sexual expression and exchange.

In *Margarita with a Straw*, when Laila's mother discovers that her daughter is bisexual and is in the process of exploring her sexuality, she becomes perplexed and unsure of how to comprehend her daughter's needs. In *Perambu* when Amudhavan is confronted with his daughter's desires, he experiences shock, confusion, frustration, and anger. These scenes are very impactful because they highlight the lack of knowledge, education, awareness and understanding among the parents of the disabled children. In *Perambu* Amudhavan's struggles spotlights the sensitive issue of gender that can arise for parents of opposite gender. Director Ram in an interview with J Rao notes that Amudhavan is unable to handle the situation anymore, so he decides to end their lives. But before doing it he wishes to fulfill her desires which include wearing a uniform, school bag and her sexual urges. Amudhavan is confused and tormented with thoughts of fulfilling his daughter's sexual desires which makes him go around the city looking for a male sex worker. This shows that he lacks clarity, knowledge and insight in matters like these. Ram notes that he has come across parents who deal with such issues in their day to day life which he has reflected in the movie.

Both the movies end with the formation of a new family. In *Margarita with a Straw* after Laila's mother's death her father takes up the role of both the mother and father. In the final scene of the movie we see her father dropping her for a date, a role previously fulfilled by her mother. This scene is indicative of the importance and role of family support system in a disabled person's life. In *Perambu* a strange but a strong family is formed consisting of Amudhavan – a failed husband and a father, Paapa – a spastic teenager, and Meera – a transgender sex worker. These three characters represent sacrifice, resilience, and unconditional love embodying family as a greatest refugee system. Amudhavan, Paapa, and Meera are portrayed as reflections of the diverse qualities inherent in nature. The narrative of the movie suggests that despite societal rejection, these characters find solace, acceptance, and familial bonds within the intricate tapestry of nature's diverse manifestations.

Social exclusion is one of the most harmful pervading forms of exclusion faced by individuals with disabilities. The themes of abuse, victimization, exploitation gains more prominence in the movies dealing with disability and sexuality. These movies fail to represent the pleasurable aspect associated with sexuality. The sexual desires of the disabled people are often ignored overlooking the sense of well being associated with it. Works that are considered prominent and foundational in the field of disability studies fail to address the aspects of sexual culture and often treat sexuality and disability as incompatible.

But the narratives of Laila in *Margarita with a Straw* and Paapa in *Perambu* emphasize the crucial role played by personal sexual desires in molding one's character and contributing to overall emotional well-being. Shonali Bose and Ram's narratives emphasize the importance of moving beyond the celebration of individualistic triumphs against seemingly insurmountable adversities. Instead, they advocate for understanding disability and sexuality as a socio-cultural and political phenomenon. This perspective challenges the notion of disability and sexuality as an inherent and unchallengeable trait located solely within an individual. By framing disability and sexuality in a broader context, these narratives invite a more comprehensive understanding that considers the societal, cultural, and political factors contributing to the experiences of individuals with disabilities.

A slow but a growing shift in the cinematic representation of the disabled can be seen in these movies. These movies move away from the stereotypical depiction of the disabled and show more personal and authentic representation of the lives of the disabled within the social and cultural

context. Rather than focusing primarily on physical or cognitive impairments, these directors document everyday relationships, prejudices, friendships, and cultural representations that contribute to a nuanced sense of identity within a wider social framework. While majority of Indian movies on disability focus on inspiring narratives of heroic battles against adversity, prejudice, stigmas, and stereotypes faced by disabled individuals, along with their determination to succeed and search for identity in an indifferent, unsympathetic world, *Margarita with a Straw* and *Perambu* consistently highlight barriers, discrimination, negative imagery, and a lack of opportunities that shape the experiences of the disabled. Indeed, Shonali Bose and Ram offer much more than simple stories of triumph and overcoming adversities.

4. Conclusion

The movies *Margarita with a Straw* and *Perambu* taken up for study for the research paper highly emphasize the significant role played by personal sexual urges in molding one's personality and contributing to an overall sense of emotional well-being. The movies consistently affirm that the internal experiences of individuals with disabilities are similar to those of others, like anyone else they too possess needs, dreams, and desires. As the outcome of the study this research paper spot lights the limited attention devoted to examining the sexual health, sexual expression, sexual agency and sex education of disabled individuals within their socio-cultural and economic milieu. Additionally the paper also highlights a notable absence of efforts to comprehend the disablement experience from the viewpoint of disabled individuals. Furthermore, this paper advocates for the incorporation of the study of sexual rights, sexual agency and sexual culture of people with disabilities into the disability studies agenda.

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