

Autism in Indian Cinema: Cultural Representations of Disability

And Thank You for Your Service.

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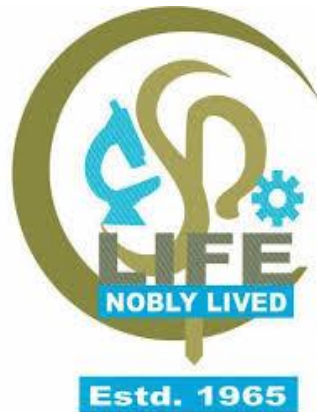
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Declaration

I do hereby declare that the project "*Autism in Indian Cinema: Cultural Representations of Disability and Thank You for Your Service*" is the record of genuine research work done by me under the guidance of Ms. Princy Dharmaj, Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Paul's College, Kalamassery.

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Certificate

This is to certify the project work “ **Autism in Indian Cinema: Cultural Representation of Disability**” is a record of the original work carried out by Sabira Beevi C S under the supervision of Ms. Princy Dharmaj, Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Paul’s College Kalamassery.

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Introduction

There is a common notion in the world to shun someone who is suffering from any kind of disability. It is the general psyche of human. One speak about disability. condensed disability is a concept which have different meanings in different communities. The term disability may be used to refer the physical and mental attributes. Disability is any condition that makes it more difficult for a person to do certain activities or interact with the world around them.

"Disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. Disability is thus not just a health problem. It is a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she(World Health Organization)

Some are confused whether autism is a disability or not Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurological and developmental disorder that begins early in childhood and last throughout a person's life. Autism cannot be defined as a disability. An autistic person may be worthless in some, but will be excellent in some kind of activities .still the society is denying them. They struggle to exist in the society as a normal person. This paper aims to decode and understand the difficulties of autistic people, about their own skills and how they struggle to live in the society who thinks in between abled and disabled and also aims to find the contribution of films on autism.

Autism is considered as a disability by the society. Because autistic people are different from normal person physically and mentally. They were being avoided by others. They are not been treated as a normal person. For example there are special schools in our world to include disabled children. These kind of schools make them feel that they are disabled. Like this there are special seats and arrangements in everywhere to make them feel happy. But All these are making them uncomfortable by saying that they are not normal. Through this paper ,analysis of the problems of autistic people and how it should be solved.

Children with autism are considered as angels who lost their way to paradise and fall on earth. They won't be perfect, but they are right. They go only with truth. A person can trust them since they go with truth. Autism cannot be regarded as a symptom. It is a future. Autistic people watch the world from different angle. Autism is about having a pure heart and being very sensitive. It's about finding a way to survive in an overwhelming, confusing world. It is about developing differently, in a different pace and with different leap. The person may be autistic in the eyes of society but they are perfect in the eyes of God.

Autistic people do not suffer from autism, they suffer from the way how society treat them. Sometime autism means the person is genius In their own way. They are different but they are not less. Though devastating at first, Autism isn't the end of the world. It's the beginning of a whole new one. All people on the autism spectrum are affected to some degree in two main areas: social communication and repetitive patterns of behavior. Autism is also often characterised by sensory sensitivities. Autism is a lifelong developmental condition.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) isn't always easy to understand for anyone who hasn't been immediately exposed to it. Like other phenomena, many people become familiar with ASD through the way the disorder is depicted in television and movies.

Of course, not all TV shows or movies are created equal. There are good and bad portrayals of both people with ASD and with the effects the disorder has on their families and lives. The bad portrayals verge on caricature and plant wildly misleading perspectives in people's heads. The good ones improve understanding and spread empathy for both those with ASD and the caregivers and family members who deal with the disorder.

Many children with autism and Asperger's due to severe disabilities and social struggles wish to be someone else. A child may dream of being a superhero, star athlete, actor, model, or just typical. Today one with autism consider themselves as a winner and they try to come over from the sufferings of autism. For examples we have Miss Montana of 2012, Alexis Wineman, receiving the People's Choice award; and Miss Florida Collegiate, Rachel Barcellona. By their extraordinary abilities and unique talents, these beautiful individuals are redefining the world's perception of autism as a debilitating neurological disability. There are many other people who tried to overcome their problems and became famous all around the world

The paper evaluates attitudes to disability based on representations in contemporary Indian cinema and examines the emergent perspective on 'understanding' autism initiated in the films *Anjali* (1990) and *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* (2005). problem of disability and the mentally challenged, as it will briefly go on to illustrate from two other recent Hindi films, *Koi Mil Gaya* (2003) and *Tera Mera Saath Rahen* (2001) is marginalized as an independent issue, on account of masculinist social structures that appropriate its visibility. 'Ability' itself is an implicit discourse

of masculinity. The preservation of the patriarchal Indian values within the institutions of marriage and family results (in these films), in the assimilation of the protagonist with disability, or the solution to the problem of the disabled, into the conventional masculinist gender model within these social structures.

Indian cinema from the 1960s onwards had made interventions in portraying disability as part of its mission of socially committed cinema, with a bias for portraying clearly identifiable disabilities such as vision, hearing or speech impairment.. *Dosti*(1964), *Koshish* (1972), *Sparsh* (1984),*Nache* *Mayuri*(1986) and *Khamoshi* (1996) were committed approaches in mainstream cinema, drawing attention to the day-to-day struggles of people with disabilities, their sensitivities, the difficulties they face in procuring jobs (in the absence of reservation policies), as well as their loneliness and need for companionship, friendship and marriage.

Filmmakers 'keen revival of interest in the lives of the physically and mentally challenged begun a decade ago, has resulted in films that attempt the cross-over from commercial to socially purposeful cinema, though not always successfully. In Hindi

cinema, (or 'Bollywood '), *Khamoshi* (1996) , *Tera Mera Saath Rahen* (2001) , *Koi Mil Gaya* (2003) , *Black* (2004) , *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* (2005) and *Iqbal* (2005) are films from the post 1990s that figure disability

Chapter 1

Autism on Indian cinema

A comprehensive interpretation of representations in cinema, that evaluates the strength of the patriarchal order and its alignment of power within gender roles, emerges when we apply a feminist approach to commercial Indian cinema (*See Jain and Rai 2000*).

As the deployment of such an approach to films on disability makes clear, (by sifting images, dialogues, voices, spaces, and endings of films), the appropriation and assimilation of disability in general by societal and family values reflects the construction of 'ability' itself as a normative discourse of masculinity. Just as much as women, who even in a changing Indian society, are largely sidelined as individuals, the disabled exist only as a *pre-text*, for they are denied value under their identity of 'people with disabilities'.

The implicit discourse of masculinity within mainstream cinema from Bollywood asserts itself through normative imaging of the male body (tall, handsome and with rippling biceps). These essentialist role models of masculinity, lauding aggressive masculine language and behaviour and the stereotyped encoding of male-female heterosexual relations, necessitate the projection of the submissive, self-sacrificing woman, whether in her role as girl friend, wife or mother.

In understanding and evaluating the overall context of social change in modern India , from gendered, patriarchal structures, to non-gendered depatriarchalized family and social formations, it is important to observe the extent to which women are given representation, voice and independent agency within narratives and social texts. As Sunder Rajan (2000) comments: "Change" itself may be more or less radical: when it is effected through processes described as "social reform", it finds accommodation within a paternalistic, not to say patriarchal rationale of protection, moral dicta, benevolence and, in the final analysis control of women."

The engagement of western and Indian critical theory with the concept of 'dominant' or 'hegemonic' masculinity and the theorizing of 'alternative' masculinities has opened up fresh perspectives for considering the masculine centre of power within the Indian socio-cultural configuration of class, caste, gender and history. The perception of "men's contradictory experiences of power" (*Kaufman*: 1994) is detrimental to the male identity, impinging on the desirable flow of energy and support that should be directed towards acceptance and support of specific disabilities like autism.

As *Kaufman* (1994) argues: "In more concrete terms the acquisition of hegemonic (and most subordinate) masculinities is a process through which men come to suppress a range of emotions, needs and possibilities, such as nurturing, receptivity, empathy, and compassion, which are experienced as inconsistent with the power of manhood. These emotions and needs do not disappear; they are simply held in check or not allowed to play as full a role in our lives as would be healthy for ourselves and those around us."

The functioning of hegemonic masculinity, regulates the attitudes of the majority, encouraging a rejection of the speech and behavioural differences of the disabled / autistics. The projection of an alternative masculinity of the nurturing father in *Anjali* and *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* is a potentially liberating model for the future of welfare of the disabled.

P.K. Vijayan (Bose ed 2002) points out to a new history of "aggressive masculinization" in the post 1990s 'Hindutva' agenda of politics with mythologies of power and aggressive masculinities drawn from the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The new masculinities create a resistant current to the feminist thrust of women's organizations that are seeking to bring in values of openness, equity and justice. My reading of the narrative of the autistic in Indian cinema demonstrates the dominance of the forces of masculinity in the name of 'family', 'society' even magnified to 'nation' as Karen Gabriel (Bose ed: 2002), examining the issue of 'desire' in Bombay commercial cinema, argues.

The correlative of the endorsement of aggressive masculinities at the psychological level through imaging, is the construction at the discursive level, of an 'other', who is certified a mad person. People with disabilities are conveniently summed up under this discourse of madness as mad persons - 'pagal', threats to a stable social order. By overt statement and implied attitudes of condemnation and mockery, the disabled are thereby denied the right to society's concern. By implication, one is either 'male' and 'normal' or 'other' and 'mad', and therefore useless to society. Representations in films such as *Koi*

Mil Gaya or *Tera Mera Saath Rahen* show up consistent patterns of discursal formation for dissemination of destructive social attitudes to the disabled, resulting in a distancing of this group through fear or ridicule.

The above-mentioned attitudinal cultural paradigm, for relating to the disabled, runs across various sections of society. In cinematic representations, the older generation and the younger one, even children, disseminate this crippling bias, denying people with 'different' traits and abilities entry into an all-male bastion of 'heroes'. For schoolteachers, lawyers, upper or lower class representatives who are characters in the films that will be discussed, mental retardation, mental illness and autism are shameful aberrations of the human that they decide to look squarely in the eye and wage war upon.

The medical and rational discourse on disability autism in the films under consideration here, eventually become submerged, in my theory of disability film discourse, under the sentimental discourses of love, religious discourses of sin ('*paap* ') and punishment, and the judgmental social discourses of madness

The discourse of masculinity (implicit and explicit) that succeeds in alienating the mainstream population from the disabled, under the guise of the latter being mad persons, has another successful outcome. As women within family and social structures are constructed in these films as bodies, not intelligences, wherein they are expected to be physical providers and nurturers, sacrificial mothers and wives, the openness to a woman's involvement with disability on any other lines, professional, institutional or legal

Ultimately discouraged. The understanding of disability is thereby trapped within the patriarchal institution of family and marriage, overriding other areas of agency where women have proved themselves capable of working out more modern choices, reforming conservative attitudes to disability that are often marked by a 'passive' sentimentality.

When the institution of marriage becomes the nucleus and its stability the primal goal, any disruptions to its balance of normalcy and/or gender relations is resisted. It then becomes a foregone conclusion, as the films *Anjali* and *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* make clear, that the space for women and voices of women on disability will receive only a token acknowledgement. Though institutional care is depicted in the films illustrated from, the perspective on such institutions is hardly encouraging (given the sizeable advances in India in the area of day care, counseling and skills development for autistics). Such institutional spaces are projected as a poor, loveless alternative to the 'safe' spaces of home, calling upon once again, the woman in the patriarchal structure of home to take up the entire 'burden', the responsibility of care of the disabled.

With only a handful of films talking about Autism and its spectrum, much more can be done in this space, said Dr. M.Murugan, Consultant, Child and Adult Psychiatrist. "Films have spoken about other disorders (*Taare Zameen Par*, *Hichki* etc) but films haven't dealt with autism, per se, in depth, "he opined.. While it is a given fact that films have been extremely sympathetic in exploring the universe of disabled, it is nearly impossible to give a holistic understanding of a disorder through a film, say experts. There is such a wide range of manifestations that each person on the spectrum is different

"Some are verbal and some aren't; some are social while others are extremely not social when you put a character in a movie, there is no average person that they can show . What filmmakers

do and can do is to pick up one kind and portray what they can,” explained Gopinath Ramakrishnan, Trustee, Special Child Assistance Network. The organization is an assistance network based in Chennai that helps parents and caregivers of people on the spectrum.

Looking at these portrayals, it is easy to detect a pattern — what it would like to term ‘The Rain Man syndrome’. We tend to pick characters that display exceptional skills or act as an inspiration. From *My Name is Khan*, 2013 Tamil film *Haridas* to the latest on the list *Hey Jude* are some of the examples. In a trickle-down reaction, there is still a widespread notion that all autistic kids are gifted. “Parents are given an idea that because the children lack social or other such skills, they are or must be gifted creatively. Even parents do tend to keep searching for this gift,” revealed A.Sushila, founder and counselling psychologist, Help 2 Heal.

Creatively , this is a challenge that filmmakers can’t avoid, said director Shyamaprasad, maker of Nivin Pauli’s *Hey Jude*, which was widely appreciated for its portrayal of Asperger’s Syndrome. “This is a huge spectrum from extreme disability to someone like Jude, who looks normal and can be mistaken for someone having an emotional issue while it is a disorder. It is possible that people can take it as a kind of a symbol or an emblem typical of the category. But you can’t help it,” he reasoned.

Also , it is tough to completely avoid stereotypes when you introduce something entirely new to the audience, said Nirmal Sahadev, one of the writers of *Hey Jude* “After *Rain Man*, there have been many other films that showed more nuanced approaches towards autism. If only something like *Hey Jude* had come a few years earlier, we can do it a different way then when the same topic is dealt with again,” added Nirmal.

On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that films do give us relevant insights. *Haridas* showed us the role government schools, by law, play in inclusive education. *Hey Jude*

chose to venture strongly into areas of romantic acceptance and agency. Jude (played by Nivin Pauly) finds a romantic possibility with Crystal (played by Trisha). “The film was about the acceptance Jude receives — different kinds. Not that it makes sense, but somehow romantic acceptance has become an indicator of social success. We wanted to show that everyone is different in their own way and once we accept it, love finds us,” elucidated Nirmal.

In another beautifully-written sequence, Jude calls out Crystal and her father for invading his privacy, no matter how well-intentioned it was. “Jude is hurt in many ways — he feels violated, not just his privacy but also the emotional honesty as. We wanted an emotional outburst of a normal man but in the bracket of a person who couldn’t articulate himself emotionally,” said Shyamaprasad. It is noteworthy that it took one and a half years and 17 drafts to finalize the script for *Hey Jude*.

This is the kind of advice that we are trying to communicate to parents, said Murugan. “Since there is a communication issue, most parents and caregivers tend to do what they think is right. While well-intended, it might not always end right. We need to train them to be independent over time. The response is different when the child is three

from when he is fifteen and twenty-five so on. Again, this differs with each person but such portrayals do create awareness in similar situations that deem fit.”

Another import film which deals with autism is *Athiran* written by pf Mathews and directed by vivek. The film gives important to vinayan(Fahad Faasil) who is suffering from a mental disorder. But still the film speaks about the autistic girl Nithya(Sai Pallavi).she was locked inside a cell in the mental asylum to remove her old memories. She forgets all her

memories about her family. But she won't forget the skill which belongs to her. The film gives a wonderful narration about autistic guys

Another important film that has a well-etched out autistic portrayal was Mani Ratnam's *Anjali*, quipped Murugan. "It took you through the whole gamut of emotions and the quirks that a moderately autistic child would have." But not all portrayals are done with such nuances. Murugan takes the example of *Deivathirumagal*, a film that, ironically, moved several people to tears. "As a lay person who saw the feeling, what was the emotion you came out with? Probably that Vikram is very cute and he was someone who needed to be cuddled and protected. It was an emotional plea rather than anything else," he explained.

Furthermore, he also added that the Vikram's friends, also with intelligence disorders, were shown as clowns. "My personal experience was that after *Deivathirumagal*, the stigma was fractionally higher. People who come with a child are basically looking for the future. So when they see a character that is completely left to the elements, they are worried and scared if that would be the case for their children after their lifetimes."

But at the end of the day, films are creating an awareness no matter what disability/disorder, remarked Gopinath. "When we do awareness programs, people recognize what we are talking about it. A person who is not part of this society is now going to be aware and ask a few questions." And, that's quite a beg

Chapter 3

***Anjali* (1990): Resistance to Discourses of Madness and Openness to the Unknown**

Anjali, a film by the film director Mani Rathnam, made originally in Tamil, was dubbed in Hindi and reached national audiences in 1990. Made in the year of the Girl Child, the film has been variously reviewed in web postings as a film about a young two-year-old girl child Anjali, who is sometimes described as having Down's syndrome, or being an autistic, or a mentally challenged child. I use the lack of clarity on the nature of the disability in *Anjali* to map historically, an early phase in the understanding of autism-like behavioural representations in Rathnam's film.

The film is an important intervention into disability, a significant attempt to rescue attitudes to disability from being caught in the discourses of 'madness' and the 'other', seeking to situate disability within the plane of 'the unknown'. Rathnam suggests in his choice of genre and technique that disability, like other areas of the unknown such as fantasy and sci-fi, is a terrain that we must discover, just as much as the groups of children, chorus-protagonists in *Anjali* who serve as pathfinders to society, discover gradually for themselves.

Rathnam's experimental film narrates the story of a civil engineer Shekhar, his wife Chitra and their two children – a son Arjun, and a daughter Anu. The family occupies one of the flats in a large complex of flats. The elders take the decisions at society meetings,

preserving discipline and a state of order, threatened nonetheless by the rebellions and interrogations of the gang of children constantly on the prowl for goings-on in the world of adults. A young pair of lovers from these flats, carry on with their romance, seeking to escape the

eagle eye of their two patriarch fathers, supported by the enthusiasm of the children who cast their vote in favour of love and freedom.

Halfway through the film, the 'dark secret' of Shekhar the father, (whose mysterious disappearances from the family have led Chitra and her children to conclude that Shekhar is in an affair with another woman), is disclosed. Chitra had given birth to a child- Anjali- but since the infant was brain damaged at birth, and in order not to put life-threatening stress on the life of Chitra, Shekhar perpetuates the lie that Anjali died at birth.

Anjali, now two years old has received institutional care, including regular visits from her father Shekhar. With Chitra's discovery of the dark and well-kept secret, a new phase opens for the family and for the inmates of the other society flats. Rathnam juxtaposes the conflicting attitudes and dilemmas of the inmates of the domestic spaces of 'home', alongside the vehement responses and homogenised behavioural patterns of 'society', in the representative microcosmic spaces of the complex of flats that is the 'public' sphere.

Patterns of fearful and withdrawn social behaviour, random and repetitive clapping of hands or slapping of her mother's face, characterise Anjali's autism-like behaviour. Anjali is adjusted only to her father, initially retreats from physical contact with her brother

and sister, and is virtually hostile to her mother. The complex swings in her moods and . behavioural patterns suggest- despite the film director's intention to come to grips with the disorder- a gap in comprehending mental illness, or retardation , or aspects of possible autistic behaviour .

The father Shekhar, (part of the conspiracy, along with the lady doctor who delivered Anjali, to protect Chitra from the trauma of a disabled child,) is projected as the gentle, nurturing, stoic new masculinity, glorified by the doctor and by Chitra herself. The implicit discourse of masculine heroism for Shekhar results however in the reduction of Chitra to an emotional, hysterical prototype of a weak femininity. I cite a sequence in the film that shows us Anjali tugging her father's tie, as he bids goodbye to her before setting out for work. Chitra repeats the action, by holding onto his tie, suggesting an equivalence between the young child and Chitra in their dependence on Shekhar.

Chitra's entire thrust after Anjali is brought home, seems to be on getting Anjali to call out her name- '*amma*' (mother), that the child finally does in a prolonged, melodramatic sequence. Chitra's reactions to her child are fearful and the behaviour of Anjali seems specially programmed by the filmmaker to torment the mother and heap guilt upon her. The normative construction of motherhood within patriarchal Indian society is pertinent to an interpretation of Chitra's internalization of guilt, her extreme protective attitude, the single-handed isolating way in which she relates to Anjali, without reaching

It is one of the drawbacks of the film that all the women in other flats are tarred with the same brush, as insensitive voyeurs and judges, with not a friendly word or positive intervention. The same holds true for the men, with the sole exception of the male operator of the flat who asks Chitra to ignore the discourse of 'madness' coming from the inmates of the society flats, or of the male 'criminal' living in one of the flats, whom Anjali takes a liking to. The masculinist construction of binaries in the film upholds a centrist middle-class ideological formation.

Anjali nonetheless opens doorways for a more sympathetic approach to the realm of the unknown- be it the mind of the criminal, madness, disability, or the remote other undiscovered worlds that the children aspire to make a magic journey to, conveyed in the lyrics of one of their songs in the film. It attempts to rectify a mindset of the masses in Indian society by encouraging the acceptance of disability rather than a dismissive approach to it as madness.

However the film makes certain concessions to popular entertainment criteria for Indian cinema by amply adding on suspense, hysteria and fear in close-up sequences that illuminate Anjali's behaviour and in shots of the doctors who deal with Anjali's illness, echoed in their grim, doomsday pronouncements about the uncertainty of her living on at all. The possible link between the institutional care for autistics and family care is eliminated, magnifying a world without alternatives and possibilities.

The abrupt end of the film has drawn uniform comment from viewers and reviewers, as Anjali dies suddenly at home, foreclosing the film's potential to bridge the barriers between the adult masculine world (that holds power) and the margins (the world of disability) The children have meanwhile closed the yawning gap between them and Baby Anjali through acceptance conveyed through the sense of *touch*, as they exchange exuberant expressions of bonding.

Chapter 4:

Main Aisa Hi hoon (2005): Fighting the Cause of the Autistic

A film that is an Indianized version of *I am Sam*, *Main Aisa Hi hoon* directed by Harry Baweja is a film that brings in other issues into the masculinist framework for cinema on disability in India, making imperative the problematisation of the circulation of Western cinema into India through cable TV networks and videos available for viewing by English audiences. *Main Aisa Hi hoon* is the first film in mainstream Hindi cinema to explicitly use the word "autism", and make it part and parcel of legal proceedings, defending the rights of the autistic father.

The plot line for *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* delineates the struggles of Neel, an adult autistic capable of leading a semi-independent life, holding a job in Café Coffee Day for the last fifteen years. Neel lives on the ground floor of a house owned by Ritu 'didi', (sister) who takes care of his creature needs and showers him with affectionate care. On the lines of *I Am Sam*, the film opens in the narrative voice of Neel's seven-year-old daughter (by Maya), Gungun, who takes on the pressures of having an autistic father who is laughed at, but whom she dearly loves. The shared bond between father and daughter transcends the obstacles created by the disability, until Maya's father from London, returns with right royal villainy, to take custody of his granddaughter Gungun.

Neel's journey of understanding takes in the loss of Maya who deserts him (as she is a confused, unhappy individual from a loveless home), his daily struggles to provide

companionship and support to Gungun for her schooling and the time spent with his other mentally challenged friends. The ridicule Neel encounters as an autistic comes from schoolchildren too, who dismiss him as a mad person. A fully drawn, warm and lovable character, Neel plays the guitar and sings and performs. Maya loves him for his simplicity and honesty.

Neel's empathy for those who suffer whether it is Maya, Gungun, the female lawyer Nidhi Khanna, a lonely divorcee, or her son, is consistent. Despite the projection of a simple idealization of the autistic as hero, the film pursues the complexity of Neel's positive and negative emotions by framing gestures such as hand-clapping, closed or open gestures of body language, that communicate his hurt, anger, exhilaration and concerted effort to comprehend new situations.

In the conversations between Ritu *didi* and Neel, we find the concept of the 'normal' being deconstructed, as Maya with her emotional baggage was certainly not normal. Neel opens up the concepts of normalcy and the abnormal, in conversations with Nidhi and his two male friends. Neel's mentally challenged friends are humanized as the trio puzzles out the grey areas of 'normal' human communication and behaviour.

The court proceedings for granting custody over Gungun to either her grandfather or to her father Neel, are polarized between the values of 'human intelligence' on the one hand and 'human love' on the other. The representations of Neel's behaviour are inconsistent as he often draws inferences and processes questions put to him cognitively and on many occasions displays below average intelligence. The message of the film conveyed through the autistic Neel, a

suggested role model for a heartless, materialistic, deceptive social order is, in Nidhi's words that "we need to think through our heart."

Main Aisa Hi Hoon introduces a new, nurturing masculinity of the autistic Neel, who resists denigrating discourses of madness, depicting the dedication of young Gungun to her father's problems, encouraging the viewer to reject conservative and aggressive patriarchal mindsets that function through authoritative, closed discourses. Despite this opening of ideological frames, a closer analysis of the three prominent adult women in the film- Maya, Ritu didi and the top notch lawyer Nidhi Khanna makes clear the denial of voice and space, and the slotting of women under a common Indian stereotype of the guilt-ridden, self-effacing, altruistic female. Maya is crippled by her father's failure to love her, and dies of a drug overdose, after writing him a loving last letter wishing that he reclaims her family i.e. Gungun and Neel. The overbearing father, makes a selective interpretation of her letter and comes back (as an NRI recovering family and nation) to reclaim only Gungun, his granddaughter, spurning Neel as a half-wit.

Ritu *didi* , about whom we learn through a public exposure of her 'crime' in court, cannot live with the guilt of being responsible for her young son's death, that had occurred years ago, when she had left him in a closed car parked wrongly on a busy street. She most often conveys a mute sympathy for Neel, without anger at the way he is treated by society at large.

The firebrand defense lawyer Nidhi Khanna, who has pushed the case for the rights of the autistic father to custody of Gungun, does a volte-face, by taking a split-second decision to marry Neel and thus present to the court the 'logic' of one 'normal' parent. Her capitulation to masculinist norms is a sad betrayal of the need for lawyers to put pressure on the law, to ensure

dignity of rights for the autistic. The film, in line with the argument I have presented all along, upholds the patriarchal powers of family, cementing the absolute value of marriage in tiding over crises, thereby obstructing emergent processes of change. Finally, the film endorses Neel's capacity for love as a supreme value rather the autistic's propensity to accelerate learning 'ability' under the instrumentality of love.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

A *homogenized* understanding of disability in the Indian context must necessarily precede the *specific* interpretation of the representations of autism in Indian cinema.

Filmmakers' in India have already begun to engage more seriously with the issue of disability as the recent films in Hindi cinema such as *Koi Mil Gaya*, *Tera Mera Saath Rahen*, *Main Aisa Hi Hoon*, *Black*, and *Iqbal* illustrate. Given the potential of mainstream, popular cinema to sensitize the masses to an awareness of the nature of specific disabilities and the challenges they pose, mainstream cinema must steer clear of replicating the conservative and normative masculinist values of Indian society that work against the progressive liberation of minorities with differences. The filmmaker's role will be to remove biases and stigma against the disabled, correcting superstitious and illiterate attitudes that read disability as a 'curse', or as 'madness', correcting popular perceptions and stereotypes, by representing the disabled with understanding, sympathy, dignity and conviction.

The understanding of the specific cognitive disorder of autism as a disability is only in an emergent stage in India, as far as mainstream cinema is concerned. As such, its representation in cinema is mediated through the agency of Hollywood, as the Indian cultural adaptation and remaking of *I am Sam* in *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* manifests. Despite the film maker's attempt to highlight autism through the physical, behavioural and communicative dimensions of Neel, the framework of masculinity that governs attitudes to the autistic, limits the impact of the film.

Both Rathnam and Manjrekar's films reveal the emotional damage to the autistic when the world '*pagal*' is reiterated, or when the person with a disability is treated like a lunatic who can

therefore be ridiculed, spurned, victimised and finally rejected as a human being. Through the effort of the two film makers to write back a new text of more open social attitudes through counter-discourse and the agency of songs is a beginning, the need to create 'heroes' out of the autistics or the disabled subverts the real social agenda of creating awareness about the range of disabilities that cluster under autism.

Anjali and *Main Aisa Hi Hoon*, both bring to the foreground depictions of the developmental 'lag' in the mentally challenged and the autistic in the areas of cognition, communication, social skills, and dysfunctional behaviours (including repetitive behaviour). Given a stimulating environment and consistent support through the love of family members the films project the enhancement of social skills and the improvement in cognitive functions (but not necessary learning skills). Anjali graduates from forms of behaviour marked by fear and withdrawal, to bonding with family and the children's 'gang' largely due to the affection and acceptance of her siblings and their role as facilitators for her passage into the wider world. The transition is two-way, with the children ceasing to treat Anjali with contempt as a 'pagal', (a construction of madness evident when they tie empty tin cans to her foot), making her part and parcel of their world. Anjali too breaks out of her closed self and temperamental behaviour to respond to their love, initiating connection with each one of them.

The proliferation of the new social discourse about disability needs to be preceded by an uprooting of the conservative attitudes and stereotypes of madness. Labelling a person with disability who does not fit into norms of physique, intelligence or communication as a '*pagal*' in the Indian context is the way most ready-to-hand, to reject the disabled and make them outcasts. Since there is no clear picture of the nature of autism, representations of the autistic tend to

overlap with other categories of the mentally challenged such as the mentally ill or mentally retarded. This assimilation of the autistic is a further threat (along with the problematic of the disorder itself) to the representation of autism in Indian cinema.

Films on autism, an only partially understood mysterious developmental disorder, need to carry a responsible referentiality to current medical and scientific researches, inducing hope rather than fear in the viewers. Representations of the autistic, their families, doctors and institutions need to consciously steer clear of sentimental and melodramatic populist projections.

In this context, the influence of Hollywood on 'Bollywood' in contemporary films on disability need to be critiqued – both for a masculinist culture being propagated and the fact that these films may lead to alienating fantasies of ideal solutions within the more affluent settings and resources of the developed world. More in-cultural depictions of disability spanning various social classes, homing in on the challenges and attitudinal biases to be resolved in specific situations, would be the desired intervention of the humanities and arts in the sphere of reinscribing ability.

In a society where many Indian males (according to specialists in the field of disability) continue to find great difficulty in accepting a child with disability, regarding it a visible projection of the 'failure' of the father's masculinity, all forms of disability can gain greater acceptance only when a critical mass of the educated is created. It is this mass that can interrogate the limitations of a patriarchal perspective on disability and an intellectual 'closure' on the subject.

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