

From Representation to Re-Presentation: A Study of Disability in Literature and Cinema

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ABSTRACT

Representation of disability has always found its way in literature and cinema in one form or the other. The concept of Representation to Re-presentation of disability in literature and cinema stresses on the evolution of portraying the impaired characters in a positive light. It revolves around the breaking of all stereotypes and prejudices from the past to broadening the horizon of cultural mindset of people in the present. As reflected by numerous categories of written works, often disability is equated with negativity, where such characters are to be feared of and dehumanized in a subsidiary plot; presenting disability as catastrophic or a burden for the affected people and those around them. For example, Shakuni having contorted legs from Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, and the crippled Bijjaldev from the movie *Bahubali* depict the streaming of evil-impaired people responsible for massive bloodshed. Whereas, the character of Rani Mukerji in *Black* and Ranbir Kapoor in *Barfi* shares the optimistic life of deaf and dumb young people; breaking the barriers of evil portrayal of the impaired individuals. Similarly, in literature, Quasimodo with a severe hunchback is revealed to have a kind heart, as well as Auggie, with a rare medical facial deformity succeeded in proving that there was a lot more to him than what meets the attention of naked eyes. The idea of the paper through the above examples is to study the evolution of Representation of Disability with time –in which disabled people are now seen with a different lens, and are Re-presented as the 'specially-abled' or 'people with extraordinary bodies' in our society. With the understanding of the above swot, there will definitely be an acceptance and absorption of disables by the society, in general and literary community, in particular. It clearly shows the well-sighted Re-presentation of the formerly Represented mentality of society on Disability.

Keywords: *Disability, Representation, Re-presentation, Specially-abled, Cinema, Literature*

1. Introduction

Since ages, representation of disability and the disabled has always found its way in literary texts and cinema in one form or the other. The concept of this paper is 'Representation to Re-presentation of Disability in Literature and Cinema', which stresses on the evolution of the evil-portrayed impaired characters towards a positive role. It revolves around the breaking of all stereotypes and unwanted norms from the past to broadening

the horizon of a welcoming cultural mindset of people in the present so as to provide these disabled people with both moral and mental support in the society; where we can say that the beginning of modernity in literary text and cinematic pieces brought with it the scope of acceptance, understanding, rationality, consciousness and most importantly hospitality (Waldschmidt *et al.*, 2017).

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2. Definition

Disability can be considered as any physical or mental limitation that may be present at birth or emerge in later life as a result of any accident or illness. Categorized as physical and mental; physical disability is capable of limiting physical movement while mental disability is capable of affecting the cognitive activities carried out by a person's brain (Ginsburg & Rapp, 2013).

The organization of the society having an impaired mentality can be concluded as a social disability (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). Here the organization represents barricading the life choices of disabled people rather than focusing on one's impairment.

In other forms, the word disability can be considered as difficulty in accepting differences by the people. The word dis+ability literally means incapable or not able in the eyes of law and socially means unwanted in the eyes of the society.

3. Theory of disability literatures

The Disability Literature and representation of Disability is backed by numerous theories, statements and ideas.

- **The social model**

It is a theory that draws a fine line between being impaired and being disabled. According to this theory, being impaired refers to having a physical limitation, whereas being disabled defines social exclusion or isolation of a person from society. This theory stresses upon the fact that the problem doesn't lie with disabled people but with the society that fails to understand these deformed bodies. It is a fight between social vs physical discrimination and those with prejudiced mindsets largely contribute to this discrimination (Lab, n.d.). One can consider the Bollywood movie *Barfi* as a relatable example of this theory. The character Barfi was born deaf and dumb, but that never bothered his goofy and optimistic personality. However, his disability was a

mere inconvenience in the eyes of his lover's mother. She persuaded her daughter to leave Barfi devastated and marry someone affluent, believing that a disabled guy like Barfi lacked both the financial and functional ability to sustain her, which is a common belief among individuals in our community.

- **The normate theory**

Literature to some extent has defined the idea of being a normal person, and the word "normate" works just right to justify the idea. The word refers to a normal man which is the one who is unmarked by the social stigmas of any form of deformity and highlights the difference in body types (*Critical Disability Theory (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)*, 2019). The ideology of a novel such as *Wonder* emphasizes on the universal representation of a normal man, whose normativity distinguishes him or her from the people with deformities. The protagonist Auggie's rare facial abnormality makes him appear extremely unattractive, making it difficult for him to develop friendships, as those without impairments have a hard time understanding and accepting him.

- **Medical or mental issue**

More than a theory, this is an observation. People tend to distinguish the disabled on the basis of their appearance, that it whether they look ugly or hunched, and why they do not fit within society. What people do not realize is more than a medical issue; deformity is a mental problem. It is the mind of a society that disguises a person; secluding him or her from others altogether. The exclusion and disgust towards a disabled person harms the mental health of a person making him/her extremely conscious of his medical deformity. One such example that justifies the theory is the character of Quasimodo in the novel - *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. He had a golden heart, but his goodness was usually overshadowed by his deformed appearance, forcing people to keep a safe

distance from him. In the face of his horrible, hideous looks, which even his mother couldn't adore, neither his purity nor his benevolence had a chance; which made him extremely conscious of his deformity time and again.

- **Stigma theory**

Having a trait that doesn't fall under the category of "normals" in the society makes one a stranger having an alien attribute. This "attribute" was denoted as stigma by (Goffman, 1986). However, certain attributes such as handicap, shortcoming, having and failing as portrayed by the character of Manthra from *Ramayana* and Shakuni from *Mahabharata* were only considered as the stigmas; thus categorizing the normals from the stigmatized people profoundly in the society.

4. Historical and mythological representation

Impairment was viewed as the punishment for the sins committed by the disabled in their past lives; usually denoted as 'Karma'. The people were considered demonic or sinful and were a subject of disrespect and hatred. Children with anonymous disabilities were either killed after birth or expelled from the kingdom. They were represented as someone who lacked morals and the ability to communicate with the society in a standard manner. They were categorized and deemed unworthy of personhood as well. Treated as an outcast, they were completely denied of the opportunities like education, communication, and independence.

Ancient Greeks and Romans believed that disabilities were similar to some contagious illnesses and they locked their disabled citizens away from the rest of the population to avoid more cases. Manthra from *Ramayana* and Shakuni from *Mahabharata* were some disabled characters from our Hindu mythological texts who were impaired and portrayed as sinisterly evil; responsible for one of the greatest wars of their times. Manthra from the Hindu epic *Ramayana* (Sattar, 2003) was a visually impaired

woman with a hunchback. Blinded by revenge, she was portrayed as sinisterly evil in our mythological texts. She was responsible for poisoning the mind of the youngest queen Kaikeyi, to convince the king for king Rama's banishment from the kingdom. She was responsible for king Rama's exile along with his brother, prince Lakshmana and his wife, queen Sita, for 14 long years which eventually resulted in a war between king Rama and king Ravana. The character of Manthra was portrayed as evil in both the mythological texts as well as in the cinematic appearances.

Likewise, Shakuni in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* (Menon, 2017) was the most devious man that ever lived. He was considered the main antagonist and the sole mastermind behind the great Kurukshetra war. Right from his birth, he had a contorted leg and was visually impaired as well. Even though he was a victim of the circumstances, he was portrayed as the main villain in both the Hindu texts and cinematic dramas. He was always portrayed as a revenge seeker and the igniter of one of the greatest wars in history.

6. Disability in literature

Literature is a form of art as well as entertainment and is capable of effectively transforming the mental ideology of a society. It plays a powerful role in influencing the minds of people to a large extent. The disabled were always considered a menace, or like an evil stalking beast that would devour the society. As reflected by numerous categories of written works, they are the characters to be feared of and to be treated less than humans in a subsidiary plot. The majority of fiction portrays disability as tragic, sad, or a burden for the disabled individual and those around them (Beauchamp *et al.*, 2010). Disabled characters have always played the second fiddle or sidekicks to able-bodied characters, entering and leaving the plot as and when the writer wants. Many literary villains are characterized as disabled, providing a metaphorical shortcut to ideas of aberrance, bitterness, anguish or, a desire for revenge.

“He left her. She was dissatisfied with him. He had preferred to incur her anger rather than cause her pain. He had kept all the pain for himself.” (Hugo, 2022).

The character of Quasimodo in the novel- *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, written by Victor Hugo, was portrayed as a deformed person. He had the physical deformity of having a hunched back, was deaf, and had a wart covering his one eye when he was born. Because of his deformities, he was left alone in his childhood and was hated by the people surrounding him. He was considered a nice person trapped inside a deformed body by the lady he fell in love with. He was shown to have a kind heart, but his kindness was always ruled out by his ugliness, which compelled people to maintain a healthy distance from him. His character justifies the theme of the novel of efficiently portraying a difference between one's inner and outer beauty and makes people realize the lack of love for those suffering from a disability or a deformity. The novel narrates the lack of respect for the disabled and how people judge each other solely on the basis of their outer beauty. Neither his purity nor his kindness stood a chance in front of his evil, ugly looks, which even his mother couldn't love. It shows that even if a person had a heart of gold, he would not be given a chance to prove it because of his disability or, correctly speaking because of the prejudices (Abrams *et al.*, 2010) fitted in people's minds through the ages.

Augustus Pullman, or Auggie, is the main protagonist character of the novel *Wonder* (Palacio *et al.*, 2022) written by R.J. Palacio. He has a rare facial deformity which can be explained as having no ears, no cheekbones and, no chin. It makes him look very ugly and thus makes it difficult for him to connect with people. The deformity in the first place acts as his weakness, which ends up with him getting bullied by others. Even though he feels well inside, people outside with no disabilities find it difficult to understand and accept him. A child of a pure heart is portrayed as an ugly evil character when viewed from others perspective. However,

the child neither gives up nor lets his disability stop him from shining. He makes true friends in school and even wins an award for having courage and kindness at the graduation ceremony. With winning this award and receiving a standing ovation from the people present at the ceremony, he succeeded in proving that there was more to him than meets the eye. Following is a dialogue of Auggie which shows his love and kindness towards the people who treat him badly or bully him for his disability:

“What's cool about really little kids is that they don't say stuff to try to hurt your feelings, even though sometimes they do say stuff that hurts your feelings. But they don't actually know what they're saying.” (Palacio *et al.*, 2022).

Here are some revolutionary examples to understand the re-presentation of disability in literary texts.

“I thank God for my handicaps for, through them, I have found myself, my work, and my God.” (Keller, 2015).

The depiction of disabled gray or victim characters continued through centuries until Helen Keller's autobiography: *The Story of My Life*, made a difference in people's perspective. Helen Keller was the first deaf-blind person to acquire a qualified Bachelors of Arts degree and was extremely outspoken in her convictions. Her autobiography narrated her hard life as a child with sickness, the guidance of her teacher; her journey of overcoming her disability and marking an identity in the world of literature. The autobiography was later adapted for films and stage as the miracle worker, where she was portrayed as the main positive character. With her autobiography, she became an inspiration for millions as well as a source of transforming the perspective of society towards the disabled. Her work brought a change in the vicinity of cinema and literature, with more and more disabled characters breaking through stereotypes by holding the centers as well as the attractions of many.

Another revolutionary moment was seized in history in the year of 2001 when the

autobiography *Seize the Day* by Tanni Grey-Thompson was released (Grey-Thompson & Broadbent, 2001). She was born with Spina Bifida and thus is a wheelchair user. She changed the face of Paralympic games and the fate of wheelchair racers as well. She is one of the most successful Paralympic athlete with a record of winning 16 Paralympic medals, setting 30 world records and winning six times the London marathon between the years 1992 and 2002. Throughout her competitive career, she has been a part of various national councils and television broadcasts. While preparing for her retirement from the Paralympic track, she extended her career as a television presenter as well as a politician. Her autobiography made a difference in the mentality of people regarding the disabled. It made a difference in the mindset of the disabled as well. The book describes her long journey from picking herself from the state of self-pity to the stage of honours and awards. Her achievements in the Paralympics changed the people's attitude towards the Paralympic athletes and winners providing the athletes and aspirants with more support and enthusiasm.

There are abundant examples of characters with physical, cognitive, psychiatric and sensory impairments in literary portrayals, the most often cited being William Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Dickens' *Tiny Tim*, and Melville's *Captain Ahab*, Adelson's *Vengeful of Disagreeable Dwarf* (2005), Jojo Moyes' *Me Before You* (2012), Kriegl's *The Demonic or Charity Cripple* (1987), Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1880); restricted growth, sensory impairments, crippling conditions and leprosy as commonly used fictional traits.

The idea of representation of disability through literature has evolved with time and scale. From being portrayed as symbolically evil, it has broken free from all the stereotypes; changing the attitude and reactions of the society towards disability. What was previously associated with negative beliefs in literary texts and movies is now accepted and considered as a unique part of society. Hence, in order to give respect and equal

status in the society, the term "especially-abled" or 'the people with extraordinary bodies' was coined for the impaired people. Following this perspective, Snyder, Brueggemann, and Thomson (2002) suggests that disability in literature is a ubiquitous, unspoken subject which maintains an absolute state of otherness. Disability is not absent in its portrayal as other minority groups have been in the past, but it is silenced, and left without address (Truchan-Tataryn, 2007).

7. Disability in cinema

The films and texts can be used as an appealing means for teaching children about disability as they can have a profound impact on their perception and beliefs on disability. Films are considered as an illusion of reality; acting as a backbone for generating ideas and building a concept of various aspects of life in young people. Positive films can also help the disabled to overcome their traumatic experiences and live their life enjoyably. They can help people broaden their mental horizon and promote a more social acceptance by the society for the disabled.

Inspired from the story of Helen Keller, *Black* is an Indian film of 2005 revolving around deaf-blind girl (*Black (2005) Amitabh Bachchan and Rani Mukerji-Sanjay Leela Bhansali*, 2015). The character of Michelle McNally was played by the actress Rani Mukherjee and the story is about her relation with her teacher played by actor Amitabh Bachchan. Michelle lost her sight and ability to hear at an age of two after recovering from an ailment and that is when her story begins. Being trapped in an isolated dark world, she grows up into a frustrated and violent child whom her parents were unable to control. She develops a highly insolent behavior and becomes more irritated as the day passes. However, with the entry of Debraj Sahai, her teacher the story takes a different angle. Michelle starts taking lessons with Debraj and she finally understands the world around her. After a lot of struggle, she finally transforms into a relaxed women with expressive nature and reconciles with the people around

her. The story shares the experience of the girl living in a blind spot who overcomes her shortcoming and becomes a desirable lady when she grows up.

Another example of a positive disabled cinematic character is the role of Barfi played by actor Ranbir Kapoor in the movie named *Barfi* itself (*Barfi Full Hindi FHD Movie | Ranbir Kapoor, Priyanka Chopra, Ileana D'Cruz (Movies Now, 2019)*). The boy was born deaf and mute, but that never became a weakness for this fellow who went around laughing and joking. He is portrayed as a charming man full of optimism and a heart of gold. However, this story also narrates another side of the story which resembles to the real life events. While goofing around, Barfi comes across an exceptionally beautiful girl named Shruti Ghosh, played by actress Ileana D'Cruz, whose marriage was due in three months. While accompanying each other, they get smitten and eventually fall in love with each other. However, reality hits Shruti when her mother asks her to give up on her love and stop pursuing him. She convinces Shruti that a disabled man like Barfi has neither money nor the normal functionality to support her, which is the actual mindset of the people around us. Shruti takes up her mother's advice and flees to Kolkata after getting married; breaking all ties and leaving Barfi brokenhearted. Apart from the sudden turn of events, Barfi continues his optimistic life as a happy deaf and dumb young man; breaking the barriers of evil portrayal of the impaired individuals all across the world.

Next comes the analysis of the character of Bijjaldev from the movie *Bahubali* (*Bahubali: The Beginning (2015) Full Movie Hindi Prabhas, 2019*). The movie was released in the year 2015 and was related to the historical context. The story revolved around the rift between the two brothers for the throne of the kingdom and how it ended up in mass destruction on both ends. The character of Bijjaldev was played by actor Nassar, Bhallala Deva was played by actor Rana Daggubati, and Amarendra Bahubali was played by actor Prabhas in the movie. Bijjaldev played

the part of instigating his son Bhallala Deva to head into a destructive fight with Amarendra Bahubali for the throne of the ancient Kingdom of Mahishmati. He is portrayed as a selfish evil character, surrounded with negative attitudes and loaded with tons of bad habits. He was a negative influence on the people around him and took his deformity as a reason for people's hatred towards himself. He was a person with dysfunctional brain; drowned in anger and revenge.

If we dig in the genre of animated movies, the Walt Disney movie *Finding Nemo* (*Watch Finding Nemo, 2017*) is another positive production for the children to learn and get inspired. Nemo is a young cheerful clownfish who resides on the Great Barrier Reef with his overprotective father, Marlin. However, this overprotectiveness of Marlin comes from the fact that Nemo has an underdeveloped fin, which can be considered as a sort of disability for the young fish. Marlin feared that Nemo would not be able to survive by himself because of this disability, which frustrated Nemo. This fear of the Marlin and the burden of unacceptance by the society relates to similar events in real life. Nemo's willingness to explore the world one day gets him being captured by some scuba divers and transported to a dentist's fish aquarium. However, this incident showcases his remarkable confidence and leadership qualities at the time of danger which helps him in overcoming his deformity. The movie also focuses on the message of achieving promising success when you are willing and determined to achieve something; even your shortcomings never come in your path of success. The movie was a positive influence on children and a conveyer of a deep, inspiring message in a creative form as well.

The character of Naina Mathur, played by Rani Mukerji in the movie *Hichki*, can be considered as a latest example that came to be seen under a positive light. The movie showcases the step-by-step journey of Naina, who is a sufferer of Tourette syndrome; a kind of deformity that includes multiple movement and vocal tics, towards her success. She dreams of becoming a

teacher and is faced with hurdles at every single step of her journey. Throughout the movie, one can see her getting insulted by her co-workers, humiliated by the students, being made fun of by the society, and getting mocked for her deformity by the people around her. However, she never loses hope and keeps on moving forward towards her dream. The movie also showcases the other side of the story; the story of the poor students who were thrown to be taught by Naina. Because of the lack of resources, they were discarded to be taught by a disabled teacher; both having the least chances of succeeding. The students were disabled because they lacked opportunities by society and Naina was the one who helped them out. We witness a transformation in the confidence and ability of those students at the end of the movie, with Naina happily serving the school for the past 25 years; living her dream every day and enjoying every moment of the journey.

Disability doesn't really disable a person, but discrimination does. The issues of poverty and social stigma have always existed in the society, marginalizing the disabled people and thus preventing them from fully participating in mainstream society.

Malnourishment and unhealthy living conditions are the key causes of disability that can be witnessed in the poor slum regions of any country. Poverty-stricken mothers often end up malnourished, thus giving birth the children with several diseases that further fuel up disabilities. The unavailability of proper medical facilities and knowledge add fuels to these conditions. The discrimination of poor families from the well-off people in the society often results in lack of opportunities for those below the poverty line. Other constraints are lack of rights awareness, education, needs and care of the disabled; medical facilities, rehabilitation services and centres; employment and skill development training of the disabled which pushes back the poor disabled people of a country to the outskirts.

The vicious circle creating a two-way link between disability and poverty is contagious for

the poorer, for they lack nutrition, wellness, sanitation and the support of society. The ratio of people becoming disabled and eventually dying without being treated is higher in the illiterate poor families as compared to the educated families living in society. The feeling of pity, hatred and disgust has been a major contribution by the poorer sections of society because they are at first discriminated against for being poor and then again for being disabled. They are continuously suppressed and hated by the people leading to bitterness and uprisings in the slums.

Even though their pathetic conditions are witnessed and talked by all, we still lack the full support of the society so as to uplift their conditions and secure the future of the slum children as much as possible. Thus, we can say that disability can't be restricted to having a physical deformity; if one lacks opportunity, acceptance, knowledge and support from society, then that person is a disabled person as well (Babik & Gardner, 2021).

Cinema has been an indispensable part of people's lives and cultures all across the world, wielding considerable influence as well as power. Usually the reel scripts are inspired by the real life events, which means that they are a duplication of reality. The idea of showcasing the disabled as unsupported poor can be seen to be derived from the pathetic living conditions of these differently-abled people in slums and the outskirts of the cities. The portrayal of disabled as beggars in Indian cinema can be considered as the pitiful representation of disabled people in the society.

8. Conclusion

With an understanding of the notion of evolution of the ways in which disability has been represented over time, it may be viewed as reforming. These deformed people are no longer considered a thing of pity or disgust but are now treated with respect, and are Re-presented as the 'specially-abled' or 'people with extraordinary bodies' in our society. With the new generation, categories of discrimination and social support for individuals with disabilities are on the rise.

The upcoming generations can be seen as torchbearers that can lead representation of disabled towards positivity by neutralizing prejudices of the deformed mentality of the society as well as by helping the disabled people in fighting to overcome their shortcomings wholeheartedly.

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