

The Margin is the Mainstream: Differently-abled Individuals in Film, Some Novel Representations

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Abstract

This paper briefly discusses disability as a social construct, tracing the portrayal and treatment of disability in the social, cultural and popular context in India; and how that kind of treatment dehumanizes, robs differently-abled individuals of confidence and self esteem, and pushes them to the margins. Drawing examples of the same from a very democratic and the favourite Indian medium, the film, where they are mostly viewed through a stereotypical lens, while only rarely seen as truly 'differently-abled': by not dwelling upon and othering them by their challenges from an ableist perspective, but identifying their special abilities and including them into the mainstream. Followed by a study of three such characters from commercial Indian cinema with linguistic challenge, motor and learning disorders, in order to identify how their stories not only upset the binaries of able and disable, but obliterate the boundary altogether by aiding in the exposure of this socially constructed myth before the Indian audience. When the ableist point of view is removed these individuals look no different from their so called "able-bodied" counterparts. Concluding that through education and awareness of the masses, and disability mainstreaming a more inclusive society may be established.

Keywords: Disability, Ableism, Social Construction, Othering, Marginalization, Media Education.

Social Construction of Ableism and Disability

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines disabilities as, "an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions... 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."¹ In India a person certified by a medical authority to be suffering from not less than forty percent

¹ World Health Organization, "Disabilities", <http://www.who.int/topics/disabilities/en/>, (accessed on 15/May/2016).

The site also adds: "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 lives. Overcoming the difficulties faced by people with disabilities requires interventions to remove environmental and social barriers. People with disabilities have the same health needs as non-disabled people... Evidence suggests that people with disabilities face barriers in accessing the health and rehabilitation services they need in many settings."

of any form of disability is considered under the Persons with Disabilities Act 1995. Medical practitioners are human beings and thus medical science is not unbiased by any means, it is complicit with mythical constructs of the perfect body and its imagination and perception of disability as pointed out by Dani Cavallaro, who adds that myths are the “unexamined assumptions and opinions on which cultures found their belief systems.”²

The definitions of disability seem to refer to or label individuals with chronic difficulties alone, in which case they exclude the temporary, occasional, periodical, as well as age, nutritional, fitness and orientation related difficulties/ impairments that we all may suffer from time to time owing to infancy or old age, ailments and accidents and life-style choices and preferences. Like all definitions, therefore, the above examples also tend to generalize and simplify the term ‘disability’, which itself has been under scrutiny and efforts have been made to replace it by alternatives which are less discriminating and blatant like ‘handicapped’, ‘retarded’ or ‘crippled’ with terms like ‘individuals with challenge/s’, ‘people with special needs’ and ‘the differently-abled’. By deciding to call it by a particular name over another the cultural construction of those who are deviant from the accepted and normative models takes place over and over again. And by calling it by one name we create a generalization or a homogenous group of the ‘differently-abled’³. Whereas it is obvious that difference in ability is experienced differently by different social groups; women experience it when unable to perform nurturing activities, and men as the inability to sell their labour for men; the rich who can afford medical support, social acceptance and sympathy to live and flourish with their difficulties, and the poor who fail to avail sustenance owing to the absence of the same. Different racial and religious groups, depending upon their performative expectations in the specific context within which their condition is interpreted and evaluated experience their difference in ability differently. Generalization leads to discrimination and division of individuals into those who are abled or ‘normal’ or empowered as the mainstream and those who deviate from the norm as ‘abnormal’ or ‘freak’, hence othered into the marginal.⁴ Ableism is thus the discrimination in favour of the abled or the ‘normal’ individuals.

Prof Anita Ghai points out, “like other ‘-isms’, ableism can be insidious” and is so deep rooted or internalized by individuals that “people without obvious physical or mental disabilities might not even think about their ableist attitudes and the ableist structure of their society. The intolerant attitudes of society towards disability...results

²Dani Cavallaro, *The Body for Beginners*, Chennai, Orient Longman Ltd, 2001, p. 54.

³The term I prefer over others, because though ‘differently’, nonetheless, it includes individuals under its banner as ‘abled’ at the same time and rises over the power relation or the binary between ‘abled and disabled’ to some extent.

⁴Anything departing from the norm is seen as outlandish...disabled people’s own productivity is ignored...common responses to disability have degenerated into mythical stereotypes: fear, revulsion, hostility, distrust, uneasiness, pity, and patronizing behaviour... The public just doesn’t know enough about disability... (and) it is easier to conceive of disabled people as threats to the ‘healthy’... as pathetic freaks. Ibid.

in marginalization and stigmatization of people who appear or behave differently.”⁵ Ghai adds in the same chapter that from the abeliest perspective any sort of difference/disability is always viewed as inherently negative and all possible efforts are made to ‘cure’ it or altogether rid the society of it or its carrier. This leads to internalization of ableism⁶ by individuals with disability as well. The inability of society to deal with it and find a place for it inside itself cannot be justified; as ableism and disableism are both constructed medically, socially and culturally.⁷ This does not mean that the trials and tribulations of the suffering are not real, neither does it imply that their conditions are neither challenging nor do they require attention. As is an exclusive and polarized society one kind of ability is accepted as the norm, while its lack is labelled as deficiency, e.g., where ability to take the stairs is the norm, requiring the ramp or to move on wheels instead of on legs is considered as a deficiency. Susan Wendell explains how this construction is carried out and re-imagined in private and public spaces constantly and that the assumed expectations of performance in the social organization and physical structures of society create disability, with the unacknowledged assumptions that everyone is healthy, non-disabled, young but adult, shaped according to cultural ideals and often male, create disability through neglect of what most people need in order to participate fully in them.⁸ Further, the constantly increasing pace of society pushes the people to keep up, creating disability in those who fail to do so for many reasons, observes Wendell; she remarks that increasing pace might soon force her to extend her disability leave from one third to half her time at University. She also reminds us how cultures omit disabled bodies from representation, and values fantastic representations over real ones, where differences are perceived as deformity as opposed to the idealised perfect image and is therefore stigmatized and often looked down upon as moral deficiency, aberration and abomination. A good example of this is the misrepresentation of age in cinema and television, especially the daily soaps, where generation after generation passes and the actors look youthful and pleasant nonetheless, as that is the image that pleases the gaze of the audience, which prefers fantastical images to natural ones. Though socially constructed, the individual is expected to deal with the disability as a private tragedy. Individuals in the subordinated groups do not even acknowledge their problem in public or demand care for fear of loss of work or displeasing their

⁵ Anita Ghai, “Discourses of Ableism and Disability”, *Gendered Bodies and Sexualities*, New Delhi, IGNOU, 2013, p. 91.

⁶ “Internalised ableism means...to assimilate into the norm the *referentially* disabled individual is required to embrace, indeed to assume an ‘identity’ other than one’s own – and this subject is repeatedly reminded by epistemological formations and individuals with hegemonic subjectifications of their provisional and (real) identity... disabled people often feel compelled to fabricate ‘who’ they are – to adopt postures and compartments that are additional to self.”

Fiona A Kumari Campbell, “Exploring Internalised Ableism using Critical Race Theory”, http://www98.griffith.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/handle/10072/21024/50540_1.pdf?sequence=1, (accessed on 15/May/2016).

⁷ Traditionally, disability has been of scarce interest for sociologists, who have preferred to see it as a medical and psychological problem rather than a social issue. This attitude is a by-product of the lamentable tendency to take as the standard object of study the ‘rational, ‘whole’ individual. Cavallaro, p. 54.

⁸ Susan Wendell, “The Social Construction of Disability”, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*, New York, Routledge, 1996, p. 35-56.

superiors. Especially women taking care of their domestic responsibilities are unable to take off even when they are sick, as the entire household is dependent on them, they are unpaid labourers who hardly ever get a day off, and have the added responsibility of bearing and rearing children. It has also been observed that women with disabilities have rarely figured in women's movements, until the Beijing declaration in 1995.⁹

Owing to this neglect of disabled women, as an effort to understand and represent them better, feminist disability studies have also foregrounded the ability/ disability binary as a category of analysis, questioning the notion of biological normality and highlighting the socially constructed image or idea of the nature of the body.¹⁰ In this context feminist disability studies have countered oppressive narratives that dominate the collective understanding of disability. This includes the bio-medical narratives, as already mentioned above, which look at disabilities as flaws that must be compensated for or in sentimental narratives where disabled subjects are lessons in suffering. They recognise Masculinity/ies as also a social construct, which is oppressive towards disabled men who are made to feel emasculated when their difference causes them immobility, lack of strength and agency; while recognising that all women are already considered disabled because they lack the male sexual organ, as per Freud! White races have often considered coloured races through their imperial gaze as disabled or lacking in intelligence, logic, rationality, and even morals; as beings too sentimental and emotional, naming these characteristics as 'feminine' thus 'mean' and therefore suitable for exploitation as labour capital and sexual objects.

Treatment and Representation

This justifies why provisions are not made in public places like malls, shops and theatres for those who use wheelchairs, need special aids for communication, or need rest in between enjoying the services, all visitors are presumed to be adapted to the typically available ableist structure and amenities. Only premiere restaurants sometimes flaunt separate menus for children and diabetics, a rarity in India. The increasingly capitalistic structure of this country as well does not recognise and cater to the differently abled. Prof Anita Ghai herself was made to crawl onto the tarmac to board a passenger coach when Air India failed to provide her a wheelchair in spite of several reminders and a long wait on her part at Delhi Airport, earlier this year.¹¹ Jeeja Ghosh, a teacher at Indian Institute of Cerebral Palsy Kolkata was on her way to attend a conference in Goa on the rights of people with disabilities, when Spicejet forced her out of the airbus considering her unfit for flight, which caused humiliation, confusion and trauma to the much travelled activist.¹² It is a surprise that these ladies were thus discriminated against;

⁹ <http://www.independentliving.org/docs3/chp1997.html>, (accessed on 15/May /2016).

¹⁰ *Feminist Perspectives on Disability* <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-disability/>, (accessed on 15/May/2016).

¹¹ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-01/disabled-passenger-says-air-india-made-her-crawl/7128504>, (accessed on 15/May/2016).

¹² <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/spicejet-fined-10-lakh-for-refusing-to-fly-woman-with-cerebral-pal->

when they have already proved their exceptional abilities as teachers, philosopher and activist, empowering others in the process of overcoming their own limitations. This kind of othering has been a norm in India. Also, disability exemplifies the gender discrimination faced by women by exposing them to even worse physical, sexual and emotional abuse; they are often treated as burdens, locked up and tortured by family and acquaintances, they even have to pay for their care with sexual favours. They are obedient, passive and dependent, which make them easy victims.

No disability studies manual of the country has failed to point out the mythical Shakuni from the epic *Mahabharata*, whose limp is a clear indicator of his moral debasement and cunning, or the hunchbacked Manthara from the *Ramayana*, the evil shrew, who breaks up the household of Raja Dasharatha. These characters are eternal, and the popular/household nature of these lores has given them widespread currency since time immemorial. Therefore, the Indian populace has internalised the fact that disability or deformity is a marker of moral deficiency, a manifestation of inherent evil or a retribution for accumulated sins.

Popular culture and present day mass media plays to this stereotype, often associating the negative characters or the villains in the popular Hindi films with some kind of physical disability, or they are disabled at the end of the film, which is considered as a more severe punishment than death and hence appropriate for their sins. If not so, then they are depicted in their sorry states fighting their individual battles, as social burdens, to affect pathos in the audience. In either case, they are depicted as figures inspiring hatred or sympathy. And when these characters become old and established in popular culture they are used and reused to excite laughter in the audience by exaggeration of their 'flaws' and poking fun at their plight; as rightly pointed out by Joyojeet Pal in his article "The Portrayal of Disability in Indian Cinema: An Attempt at Categorization", which divides them up into sub types like: disability as punitive, disability as dependence, **disability as disequilibrium** and disability as maladjustment.¹³ Given the democratic nature, popularity and impact of Hindi Cinema in the country, this kind of representation of disability is extremely detrimental to the society as a whole as it reinforces the power relation or the existing binaries, and indoctrinates the public into a dangerous form of ableism which sanctions their ill treatment, dehumanization and marginalization of the non-abled. It is even more surprising that while frowning upon physical and intellectual differences in fellow human beings, a major portion of the country's populace, the Hindus, worship gods and goddesses with animal head, four to ten hands instead of two or an eye which is one extra to the norm. Supernatural beings are forgiven their imperfections, their aberrations or disabilities; they are even celebrated and venerated owing to their metaphorical significance. But imperfections in natural beings are not overlooked. This reinforces the fact that we prefer fantastical

sy-1405568, (accessed on 15/May/2016).

¹³ http://www.phalanx.in/pages/article_i009_Portrayal_Disability_Indian_Cinema.html, (accessed on 15/May/2016).

images or bodies over natural ones. Hence the use of excessive make-up to cover up the perceived/ imagined flaws, the desire and the efforts to possess the perfect body and look young as our screen idols! Films have the power to transport us into a world of fantasy, induce willing suspension of disbelief and complete credibility; its ability and responsibility towards creating the idea of a fantastic future world without binaries by a more accurate, humane and unbiased representation of the 'others' may prove affective.

Alternative Approach

Not all the picture is bleak; there are certain films in this genre which propose to locate the identity of their protagonists in their 'different abilities' and not 'inabilities', in the plots they weave around these differently abled individuals. Not only do they succeed, but they even question the power relation between one kind of ability and another. From the way I look at them, they do so by mainstreaming their/protagonists difference in abilities rejecting the established myths around them. They do not look for and find a cure to their limitations and through the cure buy a ticket to ensure their social inclusion. But they claim both their inabilities and also their (different) abilities as their own and question us to claim ours if we have the courage to do so. After all, in today's reality we are all cyborgs¹⁴ as described by Donna Haraway! A lot of us need glasses to see and read, special shoes to ease pressure on our backs or even look tall, we use computer and phone memory to store information instead of cramming our brains, cars/wheels to travel, or prosthetic organs, the list runs long if we also count the artificially manufactured food supplements and drugs.

Let us focus on three specific types of socially constructed disabilities as represented in three Indian films:

The treatment of Linguistic disability in Gauri Shinde's *English Vinglish* (2012); Indians put a premium on the ability to speak English fluently, it is considered as a status symbol, and it is no secret that inability to speak English may cause an abrupt death to one's career, social exclusion and marginalization, no matter how capable one is. In a multilingual country like ours the inability to speak in the language of our erstwhile colonial oppressors is synonymous to being mute, having no language and therefore no voice, at least not one that will be heard.

The next type that we will discuss is cognitive or learning disorder like dyslexia, as explored by Amir Khan in his *Taare Zameen Par* (2007). Learning disorders are faced by a number of individuals, but is hardly recognised or accepted in the country, where stereotypical qualifications are all that the majority of the population aims for. Alternative careers in music, arts and sports are discouraged with vehemence no matter

¹⁴ Haraway uses the body of the cyborg to reject the boundaries between what is human, animal and machine, to manifest the fluidity of gender from a feministic point of view. The cyborg's identity is beyond the established binaries. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York, Routledge, 1991, pp. 149-181.

how creative or original a child's thought is; here one's inability to add two with two in junior class is a deal breaker. Yet history tells us that dyslexia did not prevent Einstein or Edison to make the mathematical calculations that they made to change the world.

The third type of disadvantage is the motor disorder caused by Cerebral Palsy, as depicted in *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) by Shonali Bose, the unforgivable physical disability that is often considered a punishment worse than death, retribution for heinous crimes, or the physical manifestation of one's inherent evil. I will attempt to bring out how these films force us to recognise that all human beings possess unique qualities as well as limitations, which have been prioritised as more important and less significant creating binaries, by recognising the presence of both in an individual the binary can be upset and disability exposed as a social construction.

Linguistic Challenge

In *English Vinglish*, Shashi Godbole, the protagonist is a middle aged wife and mother of two. Though an excellent cook and owner of her small catering business, her *laddus* (a special sweet dish required in most north Indian festivals) are absolutely sensational and the secret behind her success, she is regarded as a 'house wife', implying her dependence and considers herself the same, as her husband, who belongs to the corporate world is the acknowledged bread winner of the family. Shashi very efficiently takes care of her husband, daughter, son and a very empathetic mother-in-law, in running the household along with her business. Yet she does not have the same respect as that of the man of the house. In fact, her position in the family increasingly deteriorates as her children grow up receiving education in the preferred English medium schools. Her husband and daughter spare no opportunity to look down upon her or berate her for her inability to comprehend and speak English. Shashi feels humiliated over and over again, but forgives as an Indian wife and mother is expected to. To add insult to injury, her husband belittles her accomplishments as a desert chef publicly, and looks down upon her achievements as trivial, considering her only good for making *laddus*. Though Shashi tries her best to please her family her inabilities are magnified while her skills are overlooked. This is a classic case scenario in urban Indian families, where speaking English is valued over speaking the regional language or the mother tongue, and a corporate job, especially a man's job is considered more important than a woman's contribution; both elevate the performer's status over the other whose performance is not considered at par.

Crisis occurs when Shashi is obliged to fly to New York all by herself at the behest of her elder sister to make arrangements and prepare for her niece's wedding. When hungry during a casual stroll around the city Shashi is unable to place an order owing to her inability to communicate in English. The African-American lady at the cafe counter is impatient to cater to her long line of customers, which is held up because of Shashi, and is very rude and unnerving, causing Shashi a traumatic experience and public humiliation. Shashi is a paying customer here, but she does not receive the expected

service.¹⁵ The African-American lady, belonging to a marginalised section herself, in a predominantly white country, here has an upper hand over Shashi, as unlike Shashi she is fluent in English. Driven out of the shop and into tears she forgets the food that she has paid for, leaving it behind in the claustrophobic cafe, she sits in a park bench to deal with her tragedy all by herself. She finds a friend in a French chef, Laurent, who brings out the coffee for her, empathises with her as he himself struggles to speak English, calling the lady at the counter rude. The dynamics between these three characters is important, as all three are from non English speaking backgrounds and all are in food/catering industry. From Shashi's personal delivery of sweets at the outset of the film, to her subsequent conversation with Laurent (more like monologues in their own native tongues), we are made aware of the fact that both consider love and creativity as important ingredients in cooking and catering; which clearly the lady at the counter lacks. Who is disabled here, the ones incapable of speaking a language, or the one who does not know the first thing about being polite or customer friendly? Both or none; given their individual constraints at that moment?

Shashi decides to take up Spoken English classes, and she has the means to pay for the course in dollars, thanks to her profit from her small business, which had never merited much recognition so far! In the class, sitting among a motley crowd of aspirants: chef, nanny, cab driver, from all over the world, trying to realize their American dreams, the first step to which is learning to speak English, instructed by a gay teacher, all marginalised beings, in the absence of a mainstream entity, the individuals are given a chance to rise over the shame and internalised ableist prejudices working against themselves. Shashi finds her self-worth here, feeling for the first time that she is no less than the others. Her confidence is boosted when she is recognised and applauded as an 'entrepreneur' by her teacher and fellow mates. Empathy and nurturing the emotional intelligence plays a key role in making our protagonist feel empowered. Shashi also finds appreciation and respect in the eye of a man other than her husband, which is absolutely genuine and valid; though flattered by the fact that Laurent finds her very attractive, she chooses their friendship over any kind of development in their relationship. On the wedding day Shashi is held back because of an accident, which is also the day of her final Language Test. But her very accommodating teacher, aided by a sensitive niece, conducts the Language Test during the ceremony which Shashi qualifies with flying colours, with a speechless husband in the audience who is left to reconsider his value system privately, while the party celebrates Shashi's triumph.

¹⁵Wendell gives us a similar example, citing the case of actress Terrylenc Saccheui who sued Burger King under the ADA for refusing to serve her when she had attempted to place a hand written order instead of using the pickup window intercom. She quotes Stan Kyker, executive vice-president of the California Restaurant Association, who said that "people (with disabilities) are going to have to accept that they are not 100 percent whole and they can't be made 100 percent whole in everything they do in life." Wendell points out how the restaurant association blames the individual and her personal obstacle to perform the activity of ordering food like everybody else, and does not consider their own inability to serve her as discriminatory. Susan Wendell, "The Social Construction of Disability", *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*, New York, Routledge, 1996, p. 35-56.

She does not set out to find a cure to her condition for social inclusion, but merely wants to overcome a socially constructed challenge thrown her way. Gauri Shinde based her character on her own mother, and inspired countless Indian mothers in the process, who are not respected, and ridiculed in their own homes. Like them, Shashi is and was always capable, one more proof of that is her need in her sister's household. Her widowed elder sister is a fine example of a single successful mother in a foreign country. In spite of that she needs Shashi, as Shashi is the right person to arrange for the wedding, which was supposed to be officiated by a Hindu priest in Indian style with all the rituals and paraphernalia, though they were in the west, with an American groom. She flies alone a month ahead and arranges everything as desired without speaking a word in English. It is those who are incapable of understanding her worth and respecting her are the ones who lack proper judgement.

Learning Disability

Next we have a little boy, Ishaan, with dyslexia in the second case that we will analyse from the film *Taare Zameen Par*. Ishaan Awasthi is an eight year old boy who is constantly compared to his topper elder brother by his parents who aggressively want their children to succeed in the competitive world, in the process they become ruthless towards their wards. But Ishaan fails to realize their dreams time and again as he dislikes school, is inattentive and the recipient of numerous and incessant invectives and punishments from his teachers in class. This further causes passivity, dependency, isolation, low self-esteem and complete loss of initiative on the part of Ishaan. He is unable to tell the difference between 'b' and 'd', often misspells, writes inverted or mirrored letters, and is poor with numerical as well. Digits and letters scare him; they swim up before his eyes not making any sense. Ishaan's highly creative mind has an escape mechanism of its own which allows him to lose himself in colourful adventurous fantasies under stressful examination conditions. While colours and shapes attract him, painting is his refuge from the ceaseless attacks and harangues of his parents and teachers, as he is unable to make friends as well and bullied by peers for being different. Painting and release of creativity can often have a therapeutic affect on distressed minds, it is used in treatment of trauma patients successfully, thus Ishaan is naturally attracted to it. His brother does not paint, but is a tennis player, hence better than him both physically and intellectually.

Compared to the constant comparison and bullying inside the class rooms, Ishaan prefers getting thrown out of the class as that gives him the freedom to dance and fool around in the corridors, free from the prison house of the class room, or on occasions missing school altogether he ventures out alone in the city, free as a bird, observing and collecting experiences of sights, sounds, shapes, colours and mannerisms, which inspire his compositions on canvas. The teachers are neither able to educate him nor contain his pranks. His headmistress calls him unfortunate and recommends his parents to send him to a school for 'special' children. Undeterred by this misunderstood need for

special attention, his father considers him too pampered and spoilt at home so decides to send him to a premier boarding school where he hopes the competitive environment will teach his boy to take his studies seriously. Separated from home and thrown into an alien environment Ishaan spirals down further into a misfit with an amplified inability and resistance to conventional class room learning, gaining worse reputation in the process. Though unable to articulate his fears and convince his parents against his separation from them, he leaves behind a flip book that graphically records the painful moment of his exile.

The only friend he makes in the new school is a boy called Rajan, though he is the topper of their class, Rajan is also often at the periphery of school activities as he is unable to walk without his crutches. Ishaan gets a fighting chance only when the new Art teacher, Ram Shankar Nikumbh, joins his school. Since his earlier experience was in a school for children with developmental problems, Nikumbh does not teach in conventional methods, but often uses play-way method, or surprises and inspires his students who not only learn but enjoy the process of learning in his classes to the fullest. He recognises from observation that Ishaan is dyslexic, but when he confronts his parents about it they once again deny that their kid may have different needs. There is very little knowledge regarding cognitive and learning disabilities like dyslexia among the masses. Any hint at such problems gets blown out of proportion due to ignorance, and parents feel defensive and incredulous towards such information as they feel it's equal to their child being mentally retarded and ruined for life. Nikumbh also discovers Ishaan's exceptional abilities as an artist and creative genius during his visit with Ishaan's parents; he holds them up as proof to his parents that their child is not mentally retarded but brilliant and intelligent, which they are unable to accept, as intelligence and brilliance for them is translated only through high marks. Therefore, though he fails to gain the support of the boy's parents, he returns with an idea to tackle Ishaan's deteriorating condition in school, as the child is now scared of painting too. He is also perceptive enough to understand that Ishaan's parents' denial is not a denial of Ishaan's special condition, but of their own failure as parents and the dashing of their ambitious dreams. To Nikumbh Ishaan is never in the category of the disabled, maybe he derives his sensitivity and perspective from working with children like Ishaan at a regular basis, and empathises with the boy as a fellow victim of society, misunderstood, marginalized and othered. By informing the parents about him he mainstreams Ishaan's brand of needs.

He confronts Ishaan and makes him feel better about himself by informing him about famous personalities like Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Alva Edison, the Indian film actor Abhishek Bachchan, Pablo Picasso, Walt Disney, Agatha Christ and Neil Diamond, all of whom suffered from learning disabilities. Nikumbh tells his class that though these people had difficulty to read and write when little, they went on to become famous because they had unique perspectives, that allowed them to think out of the box and change the world with their unconventional ways. When alone with Ishaan,

Nikumbh admits to his own learning disorder (dyslexia) and social persecution as a boy. Empathy and nurturing of the emotional intelligence works wonders for the young protagonist, he once again unleashes his creativity and begins to gain confidence in the process. Nikumbh uses special methods to teach Ishaan about numbers and letters too, taking care of his text book learning difficulties as well, after painstakingly convincing the principal of the school to allow him to spend the extra time with the boy. Bit by bit Ishaan begins to get the hang of other signs besides colours.

The story culminates in an art competition where the entire school participates, including faculty and management. It turns out that all his teachers who riled Ishaan for poor academic performance are absolutely terrible at drawing: one of them only scribbles on the canvas, while another draws letters and colours them up, while a third gets the forms of all his images wrong on the paper! Needless to say, Ishaan wins the first prize from celebrity painter judge Lalita Lajmi. Ishaan's inability to read and write is overcome by specialised education, while the Principal recommends art lessons for the above mentioned teachers who fail where Ishaan excels. Again who is disabled here? Ishaan, or the system that is unable to work outside conventions? The milieu Ishaan is located in needs, as much as him if not more, special education and sensitization, in order to avoid discriminating and causing harm to helpless victims of biological and cultural determinism. We are not going to create another binary by calling his teachers and parents disabled and Ishaan, Rajan and Nikumbh the only able ones, but we have to recognise that by prioritizing academics over fine arts as the accepted path needed to become successful in life or the only valid training to earn a livelihood, much harm is done to children and budding artists. It is impossible to know how many artists have been nipped at bud owing to this social convention and pressure of stereotypical classroom education; or how many individuals are still repressing the creative genius in them while mechanically adding numbers all day in an obscure corner of an ordinary office.

Motor Disorder

Laila, a young adult author, lyricist and musician in Shonali Bose's *Margarita with a Straw* is another character whose resilience breaks the stigma that society places on disabled women. Disability is a third degree of discrimination against women, who are already marginalized for belonging to the othered gender and are also discriminated against because of their lack of economic independence; on top of that if disabled, horrors are piled upon horrors in her repository of unpleasant experiences. Laila is dependent on a wheelchair for mobility. When facing stairs, her wheelchair fails her and she is grudgingly hauled up by support staff; her university does not have ramps or elevators for students like her. She requires help from others to take care of all her basic needs, like washing, changing and answering nature's call. But we hardly ever find her in isolation; she has a music band and a fun group of friends who admire her flair for writing and her music. Neither is she passive, as we see her composing songs, winning a scholarship to a creative writing course at New York University and making advances towards men as well as women she finds attractive. Pity insults her and she

acts out, when her band wins recognition for their music and the presenter gives more importance to her disability instead of focusing on her talent, she publicly humiliates the presenter in return! Whether it is winning a scholarship or living in New York City with her blind lesbian lover, Laila is lucky to have enough independence and power to prosper in spite of her physical challenges.

Laila lives in a world where disabled people have rights and privileges. All disabled young folk and mainly women do not dwell in such spheres as Laila. In India, Renu Addlakha and Shubhangi Vaidya point out, instead of being given rights, disabled citizens are treated at most with charity and welfare programmes, since long. The electoral politics had also disenfranchised them by pushing them to the margins of the political landscape of the country. The changing international perspective on disability affected India positively only in recent times, after liberalisation and globalisation. Now the government recognises disability as a human right and development issue. Attitudes are slowly changing after facilitating their entry into the professional and academic field through reservations.¹⁶ But all disabled individuals do not reap these benefits, till date a staggering majority among them are still considered and treated as burdens to their families, even though access is provided, they are not availed.

Women with disability are considered unfit for their assigned role as nurturers, incapable of fulfilling the stereotypical and normative role of a home-maker, a wife and a mother. They do not have the same shot at a marriage or sexual gratification as able bodied women do, their progeny is also suspected of carrying their imperfect gene. Laila faces this problem to a certain extent. Though the handsome lead singer of her band admires her talent, but as an asexual being, a fellow artist and a friend alone, and snubs the confession of her feelings for him. Laila receives emotional support and the fulfilment of a happy family life from her fiercely protective mother, and intimacy as well as acknowledgement as a sexual being from her blind lesbian partner in New York who also acts as her surrogate mother when she is away from home. Laila is able to gain sexual intimacy from men as well, first from a friend who is also disabled and later from a much liberal and progressive fellow in New York University. New York seems more adapted to individuals with difference than Laila's native cities! All three of her lovers find her attractive despite her difference; they empathise with her and are also ready to care for her when she needs it. This film recognises that disabled women too have physical needs and the right to their gratification. Such women are often treated like children by their care-givers who fail to take notice or accept their sexual maturity and needs. The same happens to Laila when her best friend and ally, her mother fails to accept her maturing sexuality; perhaps for fear of the possible and probable rejection that Laila might face as a result of it. Though she faces rejection, she never experiences any physical or sexual abuse even when she is most vulnerable or alone. Laila receives all the support, emotional, economic, physical and sexual, and gets recognised for all

¹⁶ Renu Addlakha and Shubhangi Vaidya, "Disability and Feminism", *Theories of Women's and Gender Studies*, New Delhi, IGNOU, 2014, p. 424-437.

her talents. She strides forward with a pace unimaginable by our friends Shashi and Ishaan. Laila's world is the least fragmented and there exist fewer binaries; for her the margin is the mainstream to a great extent.

Directors Shonali Bose and Amir Khan, who are both prominent activists and debutant Gauri Shinde have done a commendable job by making such novel and powerful representations of the 'othered' in mainstream India cinema. They have forced us to recognise dyslexia for what it really is, the subordinated treatment of non English speaking individuals, especially house wives, and the latent sexual desires of the differently abled individuals. Given the impact that cinema has on Indian masses, they have utilized the platform to not only to gain commercial success and critical acclaim, but also to educate the audience by making them aware of the social lacuna. The fact that these films have been very successful on box office also proves that their messages have reached many.

Conclusion

For Ishaan, Laila and Shashi to be included and respected by society, more than their efforts to eliminate their limitations and overcoming their disabilities, society needs to work harder and evolve to leave behind ableist prejudices and practices, and adjust to different needs of different individuals instead of expecting the individuals to adjust. Education will play a key role in understanding, living with and overcoming limitations faced by differently affected groups, enable the society to facilitate inclusion of those who have so far been excluded, by breaking the hold of myths, superstitions, fears and shame in our minds. Also education imparted with the goal of demystification of the social constructs, spread of awareness of differences, sensitization and disability mainstreaming¹⁷ may be a few ways to achieve that goal. Laila, Shashi and Ishaan need not struggle harder, instead their teachers, friends and families must struggle to learn to look at them from a different perspective, not coloured by their own experiences or biases. Instead of believing in the fierce competition and the survival of the fittest, as preached by Social Darwinism, we can learn from Kropotkin's theory of Mutual Aid, which preceded the theory of Mutualism¹⁸. Kropotkin pointed out in the beginning of twentieth century that Social Darwinists overemphasised on survival of the fittest and the ruthless competition for the same, ignoring the other side, the mutual aid factor, where survival is ensured by mutual aid or co-operation and not war. Empathy, as we all have and will suffer disabilities, and a little tweaking of the stereotypical services available, worked for the characters discussed above. Women with disability have claimed that

¹⁷ The process of engaging in a structured way with an issue as an organisation, at workplace, programme and policy levels, in order to address, and avoid increasing, the negative effects of that issue. In other words, we see mainstreaming as a method for addressing specific issues in areas where they wouldn't normally be addressed. Daniel Jones and Li Webster, *A Handbook on Mainstreaming Disability*, London, VSO, 2006.

¹⁸ 'Mutualism' is association between organisms of two different species in which each benefits. <http://www.britannica.com/science/mutualism-biology>, (accessed on15/May/2016).

the disabled rights movement all over the world including India is male dominated.¹⁹ So their issues are now talked about in order to eliminate gender discrimination, here disability mainstreaming has taken off from gender mainstreaming.

Of course real life will not be simple, where differently abled individuals may not have distinctive geniuses like their reel representatives do, nor will their struggle for mainstreaming be easy and always rewarding or successful; but that does not mean that they will never succeed or that they deserve little attention; to cross over to the mainstream they do not need to be over achievers or make substantial contribution to society, but be acknowledged for who they are and not who they are expected to but cannot be. Consciousness and sensitivity to special needs, legislation and reconstruction of shared public amenities, innovative and experimental teaching learning environment and special provisions will ensure enhanced accessibility and comfort to the 'able' and 'disabled' alike. When such binaries are destroyed the margin will become the mainstream and no longer remain at the opposite extremes of the spectrum.

¹⁹ *Disability Studies Quarterly*, <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/692/869>, (accessed on 15/May/2016).