



Think India (Quarterly Journal)

ISSN: 0971-1260 Vol-22, Special Issue-05

ONE DAY NATIONAL SEMINAR

ON

DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



Decoding 'Zero': A Critical Review from Disability Studies Perspective

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Abstract

Disability has been a source of stock features of characterizations and an opportunistic metaphorical device in literature. The centre of Indian cinema, Bollywood, in particular, has been romancing disability on and off. Disabled persons have been the object of representational treatments. The themes of disability have been depicted by Indian cinema whenever and wherever they are required as both where disability lends a distinctive idiosyncrasy to any character that differentiates the character from the anonymous background of the 'norm'. Mitchell and Snyder (2000) calls this strategy *Narrative Prosthesis* or as a discursive dependency. Employing the framework of narrative prosthesis, this paper proposes a framework of cinematic prosthesis to decode disability in *Zero* (Anand L Rai, 2018) and offers a critical review of the film from a Disability Studies perspective.

The film has the potential to shed light on the dreams, aspirations and insecurities of disabled people. *Zero* is the story of Bauua Singh (Shah Rukh Khan) who is living with Dwarfism and looking for a bride for himself as he is approaching 40s. He meets Aafia (Anushkha Sharma), a scientist with Cerebral Palsy, and dates her after initial rebuking of each other's disabilities. However, Bauua Singh runs away from his wedding to participate in a dance competition. He wins the dance competition and as a prize gets to meet his dream girl, Babita Kumari (Katrina Kaif), a heartbroken superstar celebrity. Babita makes him realize Aafia's love. Bauua Singh then sets off to America to meet Aafia to mend his mistake.

Zero offers a classical case of cinematic prosthesis where the plot relies upon the potency of disability as a symbolic figure viz. Bauua Singh, Aafia Yusufzai and Guddu Singh who have different disabilities, however, their characterizations hardly take up disability as an experience of social or political dimensions and even if they take it, it exaggerates them rather than



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normalizing. The paper raises the question of representation of disabled people, first, why disabled people do not get the opportunity to act as disabled characters and second, why disability is just considered as the subjects of cinema for the sake of art and fail to create any serious discussion about the life experiences of disabled people.

To conclude, a close watch suggests characterizing persons with disabilities is a kind of cinematic investment with which the filmmakers wanted to reap benefits with its abled-bodied superstar casts. However, their wishes were greeted with empty seats in the theaters. Cinematic prosthesis is a paradoxical one in which disabled people's social invisibility has occurred in the wake of their perpetual circulation throughout the film. The film passes disabled people as 'normal' but fails to create space for the discourse of Disability.

Keywords: Disability Studies, Narrative Prosthesis, Dwarfism, Cerebral Palsy, Indian Cinema, Zero

Bollywood has been romancing disability on and off. Disabled persons have been the object of representational treatments. The Shahrukh Khan and Anushka Sharma starrer *Zero* has been one of the most anticipated movies of the year. It is heartening to note that mainstream abled-bodied superstars like Shahrukh Khan, Anushka Sharma and Katrina Kaif and acclaimed director Anand L Rai (Ranjhanna (2013) and Tanu weds Manu (2011) famed) under the aegis of Red Chillies Entertainment and Yellow Colour Production with a huge budget of ₹200 Crore, such endeavor can mainstream representation of disabled people and their politics. However, it is debatable why disabled people do not get to play the role of disabled characters in films. No doubt disabled people should get those chances, but on the flip side, if superstars like Shahrukh Khan and Anushka Sharma rule fandom and if they play the role of disabled characters there will be more awareness about the disabling conditions they are playing. However, the awareness only gets counted if disability is portrayed in a sensitive and right manner otherwise it may cause more harm than good.



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Disability has been a source of stock features of characterizations and an opportunistic metaphorical device in literature. Indian cinema has depicted the themes of disability whenever and wherever they are required as both where disability lends a distinctive idiosyncrasy to any character that differentiates the character from the anonymous background of the 'norm'. Mitchell and Snyder (2000) calls this strategy *Narrative Prosthesis* or as a discursive dependency. Employing the framework of narrative prosthesis, this article proposes a framework of cinematic prosthesis to decode disability in *Zero* (Anand L Rai, 2018) and offers a critical review of the film from a Disability Studies perspective.

Before going for a critical review, a brief plot summary may help us understand the analysis better. The film has the potential to shed light on the dreams, aspirations and insecurities of disabled people. *Zero* is the story of Bauua Singh (Shahrukh Khan) who is living with Dwarfism and looking for a bride for himself as he is approaching 40s. He meets Aafiya (Anushkha Sharma), a scientist with Cerebral Palsy and dates her after initial rebuking of each other's disabilities. However, Bauua Singh runs away from his wedding to participate in a dance competition. He wins the dance competition and as a prize get to meet his dream girl, Babita Kumari (Katrina Kaif), a heartbroken superstar celebrity. Babita makes him realize Aafiya's love. Bauua Singh then sets off to America to meet Aafiya to mend his mistake.

Cinematic prosthesis takes forwards the notion that all narratives operate out of a desire to compensate for limitation. *Zero* retrieves three characters from the stock features of characterization that demonstrate disability as the primary impetus of the director's efforts. Bauua Singh, the male protagonist is a dwarf who in his dreams rescues a woman as a *normal* person in the opening scene of the movie. In order to compensate the physical limitation, Bauua

Singh is characterized as an audacious, obnoxious, self-obsessed 38 years old man who dares to call his father by name, Ashok (Tigmanshu Dhuliya). Calling your father by name is quite an extraordinary act by the politeness parameter in Indian kinship system. Moreover, Bauua Singh is shown as a carefree, cool character who has a unique super power to shoot the star with



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his finger. Apart from this, Bauaa Singh also belongs to upper caste/Savarna Hindu family who dreams of marrying or meeting a celebrity, Babita Kumari to compensate his short stature.

Similarly, the female protagonist, Aafiya Zusufzai Bhinder (Anushka Sharma) is a scientist with Cerebral Palsy. Her limitation is compensated with being a scientist of great repute who has discovered water on the Mars. She is also heading the project of sending a chimpanzee on the Mars for trial. She is also shown as inspirational orator. Aafiya's name is also interesting. While her disability reminds us of Stephen Hawking; her middle name alludes to Malala Yusufzai, Nobel laureate for peace in 2014. She is shown as resilient and determined. There is also the character Guddu Singh (Mohammad Zeeshan Ayyub), the sidekick of Bauaa Singh who has night blindness. As part of his compensation, he is portrayed as loyal and trustworthy friend of Bauaa Singh. His night blindness is used for comic relief.

This compensation to these characters creates the effect of an extraordinary tale. Disability has been portrayed in two extremes if Bauaa Singh is *zero* then Aafiya symbolizes infinity. The cinematic prosthesis of the character Bauaa Singh engages the audience with laughter. However, the same prosthesis evokes a sense of awe and inspiration about Aafiya who engages the audience not because of her disability but of intelligence. This is the message Ananad L Rai, filmmaker, wants to give as he is quoted in Mumbai Mirror "You can touch infinity even if you are zero, like Khan saab's (Shahrukh Khan) character. December is a month when we celebrate life and what better time for a boy who celebrate that his is physically incomplete and in his incompleteness completes others as he travels from Meerut to New York. There is a beauty in incompleteness we are celebrating." This interview reeks of 'inspiration porn' through which the filmmaker establishes the exceptionality of its protagonists to justify the telling of a story.

There are other techniques that cinematic prosthesis involves as Mitchell and Snyder (2000) highlight that the (re)mark upon disability with a stare, a gesture of disgust, a slander or derisive comment upon bodily ignominy, a note of gossip about a rare or unsightly presence, a comment upon the unsuitability of deformity for the appetite of polite society or a sentiment



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about the unfortunate circumstances that bring disabilities into being. *Zero* captures all these mechanism through which cinematic prosthesis works.

The (re)mark of disability is unfolded by Ashok who rebukes Bauua Singh for his short stature. Bauua Singh frantically replies, “*Maine patwaari se keh ke chhoti karwa li apni height?*” (Have I got my height reduced from a government account official?) He goes to the extent of blaming his father for his dwarfism; “*Sperms chhote pad gaye tumhare*” (Your sperms had been short). This is the show of audacity that Bauua Singh’s character compensates for his short stature. The second instance of (re)mark occurs when Aafia is introduced in the movie, as “*Khubsurat hai, padhi likhi, achhe khandan se hai, itni badi naukri hai iski bas ek mechanical problem hai....technical dissonance...*” (The girl is beautiful, educated, from a good family and has a good job but has some mechanical problem...some technical dissonance). Bauua Singh is also reminded of his dwarfism by the manager of a Matrimonial bureau when he says, “*Aap kaun se hoor ke pare hain, inki tange kursi se zameen tak to pahunchti nahi...*” (So what, you are not absolutely abled. Your legs don’t even touch the floor while you sit on a chair”). This shows the historical and social attitudes our society has for disabled people.

Ironically, a gesture of disgust is shown by both the characters before falling in love with each other. Aafia says to Bauua Singh, “*Tumhari akal tumhari height se bhi chhoti hai...*” (Your brain is smaller than your height). Seeking revenge for this comment, Bauua Singh says, “*Chhote Chhote se sahi haath paun kaam to karte hain hamare. inse hilne ke alawa hota kya hai.*” (I have short stature but my hands and legs work. She can’t do anything except shivering). On a serious note, Mitchell and Snyder (2000) use the notion of physiognomy in which the physical “irregularities” of disabled characters become a paradigm of access to the ephemeral and intangible workings of the interior body in which speculative virtues such as moral integrity, honesty, trustworthiness, sanity etc. are tested. Bauua Singh’s decision of running away from wedding has been questioned throughout the film prominently by Aafiya, her relatives and even his best friend Guddu Singh from the axis of moral integrity and trustworthiness. Babita Kumari even questions Bauua Singh’s sanity for leaving Aafiya.



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A slander or derisive remark comes when Aafia comes to their home, from Ashok, Bauaa Singh's father, as he is seen telling his son, "*Kismat wala hai, ladki mil rahi hai tujhe shadi ke liye. tujh jaise ko to launda na mile..*" (You are lucky to get a girl for marriage otherwise you won't even get a eunuch). This comment is full of apathy which also reeks of homophobia. A gossip erupts about his unsightly presence when Bauaa Singh enters the premise of a school where Aafiya is delivering a speech. The children mistook Bauaa Singh as one of the students of the school and later on make fun of him. Similarly, Aafiya's parents and relatives comment on Bauaa Singh's height and try to convince her to not marry him in view of her professional career and social status.

Mitchell and Snyder (2000: 56) note that "Literary narratives support our appetites for the exotic by posing disability as an "alien" terrain that promises the revelation of a previously uncomprehended experience." This happens when Babita Kumari kisses Bauaa Singh out of frustration which ascribes absolute singularity to Bauaa Singh's character. Being a dwarf and kissed by a celebrity makes him "stand out" as result of an attributed blemish, but this exceptionality divorces him from a shared social identity as Bauaa Singh is seen as saying 'goodbye' to Meerut while going to Mumbai. Bauaa Singh is again subjected to this process when he fails to do his falling star motif and becomes a matter of ridicule amidst a socialite party. It is here that the film seems to be a *sandwich* between a freak show and circus.

The filmmakers make this *sandwich* by what Mitchell and Snyder (2000: 56) observe that "Disability marks a character as "unlike" the rest of a fiction's cast, and once singled out, the character becomes a case of special interest who retains originality to the detriment of all other characteristics." Zero provides this element when Bauaa Singh is 'singled out' from a pool of aspirants to be sent to Mars. Interestingly, he is chosen in place of a chimpanzee that is trained for the purpose. The filmmakers are too sensitive to concerns of the emotional state of the chimpanzee who finds solace with its family and a bit hostile and reluctant for the project. However, Bauaa Singh's selection for the Mars mission treats him as an object for the experiment given the fact that there was no certainty to coming back safe to the Earth. The short



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stature and academic credentials of Bauua Singh is nullified with his level of endurance. It is disturbing to note that Bauua Singh becomes a substitute for chimpanzee because of the filmmakers want of heroism. Like in a paradigmatic travel narrative, Bauua Singh undergoes the epic journey from Meerut to Mars as headlines hits the print and electronic media. The Mars mission loses its contact with the spacecraft only to be discovered after 15 years without any reference of the challenges Bauua Singh faces. This may be a script for the next movie for the filmmakers. The epic journey of Bauua Singh echoes what Mitchell and Snyder (2000: 57) describe as “This journey and ultimate return home embody the cyclical nature of all narrative (and the story of disability in particular)—the deficiency inaugurates the need for a story but is quickly forgotten once the difference is established.” The audience becomes happy as Bauua Singh’s spacecraft has a safe sea-landing.

The cast of Aafiya also carries this problematic narrative strategy. She disappears heartbroken after Bauua Singh’s ditch at their wedding. She *returns* to the screen with the Mars mission project in the second half. Her character goes through an emotional turmoil when Bauua Singh was about to be launched while Aafiya was to be engaged with a fellow abled-bodied scientist. However, she is shown to be taking the decision to call off the engagement and run to accept her feelings for Bauua Singh. The decision to wait for his uncertain return creates an irony of an argument about human attraction based upon shared likeness. Both the characters, initially Aafiya and later on Bauua Singh, convince each other that they are meant for each other because of their disabilities. This reinforces the stereotype of disabled people like the company of themselves. The ending of the film hinges upon the typical Bollywood masala formula which avoids tragic ending.

However, the execution of disability trope in the film turns out to be one of most prominent themes of literature i.e., narrative prosthesis. However, the over deterministic portrayal of disability in the film becomes recurrent and because of this, it can be called “Cinematic prosthesis.” Both the lead characters are shown overdetermined- Aafiya about her ‘ability’ to carry on the marriage and Bauua Singh about the Mars mission. Similarly, they are



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shown to be confused about their decisions about love and life. The filmmakers use the characters' disabilities to carry out this cinematic prosthesis that uses the trope of disability to carry on the cinematic appeal to its story line but leaves the disability after establishing the themes. The film does deal with the individual concerns of disabled people but fails to raise their social and political concerns.

Zero offers a classical case of the cinematic prosthesis where the plot relies upon the potency of disability as a symbolic figure viz. Bauua Singh, Aafiya Yousufzai and Guddu Singh who have different disabilities, their characterizations hardly take up disability as an experience of social or political dimensions and even if they take it, it is exaggerating them rather than normalizing. A close watch suggests characterizing persons with disabilities is a kind of cinematic investment with which the filmmakers wanted reap benefits with its abled-bodied superstar casts. However, their wishes were greeted with empty seats in the theaters. Cinematic prosthesis is a paradoxical one in which disabled people's social invisibility has occurred in the wake of their perpetual circulation throughout the film. The film passes disabled people as 'normal' but fails the discourse of Disability.

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