

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cinematic Representation of Women with Visual Impairment: A Study of *Black* and *Kabil*

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ABSTRACT

Visually impaired people, especially women, have been the subject of representation for ages both in print and electronic media. As we live in an age of science and technology, when most technical resources are available to inspire them to keep pace with mainstream society, electronic media play an extremely pivotal role in representing their status and role in both visual and auditory modes. Film production, among electronic media, is one of the most powerful forms of representation, capturing the inescapable attention of common people. India has been one of the largest producers of films since ancient times. The films, to a very large extent, can present a realistic portrayal of VI women, especially their intricacies and the problems they encounter in their day-to-day lives due to being disabled as well as women. Such representation draws the public's attention to Indian cinema, disability studies, and gender studies. It makes us aware of the complications and challenges they encounter due to a lack of both their visible and invisible interconnectivity with mainstream society. This paper focuses on the proper representation of visually impaired women: their socio-political, socio-cultural, socio-economic, and educational status, along with their space in their domestic and social lives in some popular Hindi films. It highlights the situation they face during their academic struggle, their internal conflict as well as their conflict with society in the domestic and social spheres. It also focuses on the relevance of cinema in portraying problems and on reviewing their development processes and access to technological advancements that assist them in gradually connecting with mainstream society, directly or indirectly. This paper also

seeks to portray visually impaired women in some Hindi films who finally achieved their goals after a series of struggles.

Keywords: Representation, visually impaired women, Hindi cinema, electronic media

FULL RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

Visually impaired people, especially women, have been a severe matter of representation for a very long time, both in print and electronic media. Various books, research articles, journals, and magazines have been published as print media resources to highlight disability issues and their challenges. Newspapers are also an important print media source to make the common people aware of the problems, complications, challenges and fights of disabled people. As we are living in a critical age of science and technology when most of technical resources are available to inspire them to keep a pace with mainstream society to achieve the objective of intermingling themselves in mainstream society, electronic media (Facebook, linkdin, twiter, Instagram and so on) proves to play an extremely pivotal role in representing their status and pertinent role in contemporary progressive Indian society both in visual and auditory mode. Film production, among electronic media, is one of the greatest, most amazing, and most powerful sources of representation, capturing the inescapable attention of the common public sphere. India has been one of the largest producers of films for a very long time. The films, to a very large extent, can draw a realistic photograph of visually impaired women, especially of their intricacies and problems which they encounter in their day-to-day life on account of being disabled as well as being women simultaneously. Such representation draws the unavoidable attention of the public towards Indian cinema, disability studies, as well as gender studies. It makes us aware of the complications and challenges they encounter due to a lack of both their visible and invisible interconnectivity with mainstream society. The salient objective of this research paper is to highlight the various ways of properly representing visually impaired women: their socio-political, socio-cultural, socio-economic, and educational status, along with their space in their domestic and social lives in some popular Hindi films. It highlights the situation they face during their academic struggle, their internal conflict as well as their conflict with society in the domestic and social spheres. It also focuses on the relevance of cinema in portraying the problems, as well as on reviewing their development processes and their access

to technological advancements that assist them in gradually reconnecting to mainstream society, in direct or indirect ways. To possess an evident perception of iconic, symbolic or indexical representation of visually impaired women in Indian cinema, it becomes necessary for us to have a brief overview of the conceptual understanding of disability, especially visual impairment, gender and their association with each other and the significant role of cinema as a supporter in their ceaseless struggle and fights in the world of science and technology.

Nowadays, disability is a very significant polemical issue in Indian society, which is completely misunderstood by mainstream society. In the traditional model of disability, it has been regarded as a result of sins committed by parents or children in their previous birth. Still, over time, people's perception of disability changed and took a U-turn in a new direction. It encompasses both positive and negative connotations. Various models like the medical model, socio-cultural model and psychological model of disability have been suggested by disability studies activists, which compels us to reflect that, unlike gender, disability is a biologically, socially, culturally and psychologically constructed notion. To prove the point, arguments have been drawn from Carolyn L. Vash and Nancy M. Crewe's collaborative book, *Psychology of Disability*, which presents various appropriate illustrations of psychological models of disability. The author's comment:

Some of these abnormal stimuli are biological, such as being paralysed. Some are environmental, such as an inaccessible entrance. Others are social, such as having a salesperson ask your companion, not you, what size you wear. Being unable to get a job is an economic example. Some stimuli are obvious, such as a restroom door you can't get through, while others are subtle, like people not using the word 'handicapped' when you are around. Some are pleasant, such as being allowed to enter an aeroplane first. Some are unpleasant, such as not being able to use a restroom on a long flight (xi Vash & Crew)."

Thus, after close analysis of the above-mentioned illustrations, disability can also be categorised into two types: visible and invisible. Visible models of disability are often kept in consideration while invisible models are generally neglected. One of the most paramount issues in the representation of disability is its terminological representation. Even today, so many negative terminologies are used for disabled people, which reveals a conservative outlook of mainstream society towards disabled people. Simi Linton, in her essay 'Reassigning Meaning ', has used several terms like: 'deformed, crippled, vegetable, restarted, dumb and gimp'. (Linton 164) She has also

used some terms, such as 'physically challenged' (Linton 163), which have positive connotations and are few in number. As time passes and our society progresses, new terms like differently abled and divyang are coming into use. In the PwD Act 2016, twenty-one categories of disability were mentioned. Visual impairment, or being visually challenged, is one of them and includes blindness (B) and partial blindness (PB).

Simone de Beauvoir, in her seminal book *The Second Sex*, comments, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female acquires in society. It is civilisation that develops this product, intermediate between female and eunuch, which one calls feminine." When we think of differentiating between sex and gender, we come to know that sex is biological in nature while gender is a socially and culturally constructed notion. A person's genital organs reveal his/ her sexual identity, while his/ her cloths, appearance and activities reveal his/ her gender. Sex can be transformed through transplantation of organs only in critical cases, while gender can be transformed easily without any exertion. In her seminal book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler comments on the distinction between sex and gender:

Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed; hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex. The unity of the subject is already potentially contested by the distinction that permits of gender as multiple interpretations of sex (Butler 9-10)."

Thus, sex and gender disclose the unified identity of a male or a female. Sex refers to the acquired status of a person, while gender refers to the roles that he/she is expected to perform in society. According to gender, women are anticipated to perform a certain role determined by society for them and on account of this privileging notion, they become the subject of subjection, subjugation, subordination, subversion and disorientation in an already set patriarchal society. They are even deprived of their fundamental rights and basic needs and are expected to follow the patriarchal set of norms and conventions.

As this paper contemplates the representation of visually impaired women, we see that they have often been projected in a category of double marginalisation; being

women as well as being visually impaired. They have often been deprived of their rights, whether educational, economic, social, political, cultural, religious, or even domestic. They are considered by society to be born to trouble and punishment. But with the progress of time, visually impaired women have become independent and started taking equal participation in every platform of life. They are advancing in the field of education, and now they are not dependent on others for their financial needs, but despite this, a power relation persists. As literature and media are mirrors of society and can capture a true photograph of it, they seek to represent the power relations that function in domestic as well as public spaces, and the educational, financial, and political emancipation of visually impaired women. To support the argument, the two most popular Hindi films, *Black* (2005) and *Kabil* (2017), have been selected for critical analysis, interpretation, and polemical discussion to develop a framework for disability and gender in cinema.

Black is one of the most popular films released in 2005, serving as a great source of inspiration for visually impaired women who want to reach the highest point of success and show society their amazing capabilities, even after so many intricacies and impediments in adverse circumstances. The film addresses pertinent polemical issues such as education, love, marriage, family, and social backwardness. It narrates the life story of a visually and hearing-impaired girl named Michelle, who struggles for 40 years to earn her degree. In the opening scene of the film, she is portrayed as animalistic, but after encountering her teacher, her life changes completely and takes a new direction. Various crucial issues have been depicted in the film that visually impaired women often confront in both domestic and public spaces. As we all know, education is one of the most important tools for making a person cultured and civilised to survive in society. Still, for people who can neither see nor hear, it is a hard nut to crack to achieve a higher level of education. In the beginning, we are introduced to black as darkness, but as her life progresses and she reaches the final stage of her objective, the meaning of black becomes the colour of knowledge and achievement. As is well known, the family is the first stage of children's socialisation. If they do not receive proper guidance within their family, they must suffer in society throughout their lives. When her father resists the presence of the teacher in their home, engaged by her mother only because he does not like his method of teaching, the teacher comments, "If parents are not ready to accept their children as human beings and treat them as animals, we can expect nothing from society (Translation mine). They are not given equal educational status as those of normal people, but the film projects the best way of teaching to such abnormal children. In the beginning, she is afraid of

water and even eats like an animal, but later she learns to swim and eat like a human being, which is the first lesson she learns in her life. She can read the books in the Braille system through touch and passed her exam in Braille. This scene gives a lesson to society that visually impaired people are also able to read and write but differently and attain the higher and prestigious position they deserve.

Now, when she enters another stage of her life, when society plays a prominent role in socialisation in her life, she encounters problems due to double marginalisation; being a woman as well as being visually impaired. Marriage is the biggest and most controversial problem for her. The most pertinent question before her is who will accept her as his life partner due to her disability. At the same time, women must get married according to societal norms and conventions. Later, she is satisfied and decides to live single throughout her life. In a letter to her sister at the auspicious occasion of her marriage, she writes, "I will decorate myself as much as I can. In your marriage. If I am not the bride, I will be the bride's sister." To remain single for a disabled woman throughout her life might be the question of her choice as well as compulsion which can not be finalised.

The film unfolds in action and reaches its climax when Michelle stands on stage after receiving her degree, the result of her forty years of struggle; she is in seventh heaven, but her mentor, who changed her, is not there. She delivers a wonderful and inspiring speech there. She says, "The difference between you (normal people) and me is that the work you completed in twenty years, I took forty years for this." She later says, "The meaning of black is not only suffocation and darkness, but it is the colour of achievement, the colour of knowledge, the colour of a graduate girl." Thus, we observe how visually impaired women have been represented in the film, covering both positive and negative dimensions. The film depicts the intricacies and critical challenges that visually impaired women generally face in both public and private spaces. It also evaluates the love and respect of common people towards such people, which always pushes them to move forward and achieve great success in life after an uncountable and unbreakable chain of calamities and fights.

Kabil is also one of the renowned Hindi films released in 2017 that sheds light on the life of a visually impaired couple, in which the woman suffers more due to the workings of an invisible power dynamic. Although Supriya is financially independent, in the eyes of society she requires an assistant to manage her own life. The film projects various social problems like marriage, sexual assault, suicide, law and order and economic emancipation. The most positive aspect of the film is that, despite being

visually impaired and a woman, Supriya has had the opportunity for higher education and financial independence, which should be a source of staunch inspiration for visually impaired women. Besides these positive approaches to life, there are several negative things she confronts, as revealed in the film. She is raped twice and finally commits suicide. Now this suicidal case compels us to reflect, contemplate and meditate over the psychological outlook of Supriya, a visually impaired girl, towards herself as well as society where she must survive at any cost. Even after her suicidal attempt, she is not provided equal justice. Rohan, who is also a victim of visual impairment, fights for her justice and encounters so many challenges on the way. When he is ignored by law and order, he asserts, "There is more darkness in your law and order than that of our world. (Translation mine)" Despite all these calamities, he does not sit silently and fights against injustice till the last breath of his life. He delivers a challenging statement to society, "Your eyes will be open, but you won't be able to see anything; your ears will be open, but you will not be able to listen to anything, and the main thing is that you'll understand everything, but you won't be able to explain anything to others." At the end of the film, life becomes more inspirational for visually impaired people when he says, "Now the purpose of my life is that I want to become so capable that I can fulfil every dream of yours." The film represents both positive and negative aspects of disabled and women's lives and instigates disabled people to achieve the highest goal of their life. It also proves that disability is not a weakness, but it's our power.

Thus, we see the prominent role and contribution of electronic media, especially Indian cinema, in projecting the critical problems and complications, progressive ideologies, and the development process of visually impaired women in Indian society through both auditory and visual modes. We also study their level of education, economic and political emancipation, and their situation in domestic and public spaces. Thus, we come to know that although they are not interconnected with mainstream society, gradually, they are accepting the developmental progression which occurs as a result of proper implementation of innovative programs and are receptive to interconnect themselves with mainstream society, culture and civilisation in such a critical and innovative age of science and technology. Our government is also trying to implement some most effective and innovative programs for their development and continuous progress like: opening schools for children with special needs, promoting Braille system of education, encouraging them to come in contact with technology and operate computers with JAWS software, starting computer centers for visually impaired children and most importantly providing sources of

employment to them to do some improvements in their economic and educational status. We also come to know how these films have proved themselves to be eye-openers for mainstream society regarding the fundamental rights of these visually impaired women. Now, although the number of films dealing with the critical issues of differently abled people is very low, they draw a real photograph of disabled life in such a way that a genuine and sensitive viewer becomes spellbound and intensely emotional towards the critical way of life and circumstances of the differently abled people, especially visually impaired women. One of the most significant, but negative, points about mainstream cinema that should be noted here is its commercialisation. To play the role of a visually impaired character, we select mainstream actors rather than visually impaired people, who can play these roles much better than mainstream actors. It shows that although these marginalised people are represented in the media, they are not permitted to enter the world of cinema. Despite this dark side of our film industry, it is working progressively for the multidimensional evolution of the marginalised or differently abled community. As there is an urgent requirement of well documentation films and video libraries for the new production of disabled community, our film industry is working to produce more films dealing with disabled society to make the common people aware of their situation so that they might be reconnected to mainstream society, may be able to get their fundamental requirement without any fight for which they should not fight avail of advancements of the technical resources available for them to stand by the common men or women at every secure and successive platform of life to show their hidden talent. Now we can anticipate that this formulated objective will reach higher in the future.

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