

Tracing the Roots of Prejudices: Perspectives on the Trend of Heinous Portrayal of Disability in *Disney* Movies and Indian Cinema

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Disability is an umbrella concept that covers both chronic illnesses, mental and physical impairments. The multidisciplinary field of disability studies is concerned with how people identify and interact with society. The research seeks to re-establish societal fairness and relate to individuals with humanity. Due to the common belief that disabilities are the result of past transgressions and punishments, people with disabilities are typically ostracised and denigrated by society at large. Individuals with impairments receive no respect and are either teased or chastised.

In most films, characters with disabilities are treated indignantly. Popular media fabricates a fake image of persons with impairments by invoking the idea of a disabled villain, super cripp, or inspiration porn. It is common for the antagonist or the head of a gang of thugs in movies to be portrayed as crippled. The pattern in films suggests that a character with a disability inspires more fear than sympathy. This research focuses on how disabilities are portrayed in Western and Indian films. Movies and television portray people with impairments in a cynical light. It is common to see individuals with impairments rendered disabled in order to provide a dramatic twist to the story. The paper renders perspectives on the negative stereotypes of disability, as in, the villainous depiction of disability.

Keywords: Disability, identity, *Disney* movies, disabled villain, inspiration porn

Disability is often portrayed in a darker shade in movies. This has been the tradition for ages – right from folklores taught to children to movies made for young and adult audience. Villains have most often been portrayed as pirates with amputated body parts or people with poor psychological balance in the society. Some movies depict villains as people with amputated body parts or with eye patches, indicating a disability as an aspect of the villainous character. This kind of physical depiction of disability is sometimes accompanied by mental disability. Of all the disabilities, it is psychological disability that is exploited the most. But, psychological illness is discarded as a menial issue; most of the problems in the society and families are vitally due to the lack of psychic wellbeing. People choose to ignore and walk past issues which do not bother them personally.

There are three major representations of disability: evil avenger, supercrip and inspiration porn. Of all this negative stereotyping, the most harmful to the society is the evil avenger. This creates a false perception of disability and also invokes terror on seeing a disabled person. The evil avenger model registers the wrong notion that every person disabled, either physically or psychologically is unstable and hence dangerous to the society. Psychological disability is a negatively overworked area in media and many such characters are presented as serial killers. As Jack A. Nelson states, “The roots of prejudices against

those with disabilities run deep” (Nelson, 1994). The supercrip model exaggerates the capabilities of the disabled person to unbelievable feat. ‘Inspiration porn’ is a phrase coined by Stella Young; it is a classification where a disabled person is seen as exceptional and inspirational by the non-disabled people to perform a similar function.

Ranging from classical literature and fairy tales to modern day popular fiction and movies, the portrayal of disability has positively evolved, but not to a great extent. Witches are usually depicted as deformed. The witch in *Hansel and Gretel* has a limp and is cannibalistic. She prepares the furnace to cook the two children Hansel and Gretel in the Gingerbread house, in the middle of a forest. On the other hand, Rumpelstiltskin is a goblin-like dwarf, who asks for the queen’s firstborn as per the deal he had made while turning straw into gold, when she was only a miller’s daughter. This is a popular *Grimm’s Tale* which was made into a movie, the same is the case of *Hansel and Gretel*. The reason behind tracing the origin of the depiction of disabled villains in fairy tales is because of the abundance of such nefarious representation of disability which has influenced present day movies. Several movies have drawn their plot from the classic tales of the past. In the present time, the tradition is starting to diverge yet it is not completely revised. In William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Caliban is a slave who was enslaved by Prospero for his earlier misdeeds. Caliban is described as a “deformed slave” in the dramatis personae of the play. His appearance and disability is looked down upon and his appearance is repetitively taunted in the text. Alison Hartnett accordingly opines, “From Shakespeare’s Richard III to the modern day ‘Two Face’ Batman villain, we can see writers using physical disability to embody, or personify evil” (Hartnett, 2000, p.21). This is not just the case of facial disfigurement but also that of psychological issues that are embodied by the scarred antagonist of the same movie, the Joker, who manipulates people suffering from schizophrenia and other such disorders.

There has been a lot of progress in the analysis of disability and the various stereotypes found in the society. There are theories that explain the immodest perception of the society regarding disabilities. Films, as well as literature, have depicted numerous characters with disabilities that perform a trivial task, remain unseen or are hyper-devolved to the status of a villain where the person’s disability becomes one of their characteristic traits. In a *New York Times* article titled “Scary is How You Act, Not Look, Disability Advocates Tell Filmmakers” the highlighted case is that of facial disfigurement and anomaly of limbs with reference to the Anne Hathaway starrer *The Witches*. Another article entitled “Why a Disfigured or Disabled Screen Villain is an Idea that Needs to Die” by Jessica Gibson discusses the deformity of the body as the crucible that boils the villainous aspect of a human being. The tropes of disabilities as highlighted in the critical works on disability studies present characters that are disfigured and do not elaborate on the villainous killers who linger on the issues of psychological disorders. This paper looks at villainous stereotypes in world of cinema with an inclusion of villains with psychological illness; it additionally represents how this archetype of a disabled villain is portrayed with reference to Indian cinema. The paper also contrasts the drift from the notorious depiction of characters to a politically appropriate representation of disability. The use of disability as a character feature, plot device, or atmosphere, according to disability studies expert Tom Shakespeare, is a convenient short cut. These portrayals do not accurately depict what it is like to be disabled. The prejudices and misunderstandings regarding the nature of disabilities that are existent in the society are the by-products of such stereotypes.

Disability is mostly associated to karma in the Eastern belief system; it is a mentality prevailing in the minds of the educated and the uneducated, the rural and the urban. Disability

is considered as a punishment or a curse. *The Holy Bible* portrays the incident of a blind man, where the disciples question Jesus, “. . . ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus . . .” (*New International Version*, John 9: 1 – 3). In these verses, the disciples question Jesus about the reason for a person’s disability. They believe that disability is the result of a prior sin or misdeed, for which Jesus replies in negation. This typical attitude towards disability is because people want to safely assume that disability is a result of sin and feel good about themselves. This propagates their cause at judging people with disabilities and segregating them from the mainstream as sinners. Disabled people are effortlessly portrayed as villains. Sometimes villains are disabled just to make sure that they are so, as a punishment for their vile behaviour. Disability is disrespected, demeaned and caricatured in movies. Disabled characters are used in movies for the sake of comic relief or to evoke pity or terror. They either have no role to play in the movie or are portrayed as terrific villains. Movies can be employed as excellent vehicles to convey socially valuable messages and to create awareness about lesser known issues to the public. Ranging from children to adults, everyone loves to watch movies for entertainment and passion. The reason may vary, but every individual is consciously or unconsciously influenced by movies. Due to this reason, movie makers have the greatest responsibility of carefully representing the problems prevailing in the society. While depicting the gore and violence involved with the disabled villain, the villainous trope reinforces fear of disability and difference. It could further transcend to bullying of people with disabilities, strengthened by the cliché.

Movie makers usually stereotype the disabled characters as a comic relief or to invoke pity or otherwise to instigate terror. On the contrary, the main motive must be in order to create awareness about the particular disability. In addition, it should also attempt to provide a solution or point out ways to treat the disability. The depiction of disability should be done with utmost diligence because the audience can learn about the different disabilities, the person’s behaviour, feeling, symptoms, etc. Children’s movies should try to impart moral values in the minds of the young generation. “The number of maimed and amputee bad guys are so great on the silver screen that when a character shows up with a physical defect, the audience’s assumption must be, ‘Oh Oh! Look out for this guy!’”, quips Jack A. Nelson (Nelson, 1994, p. 6). Hence, a responsible portrayal of disability in cinema is crucial and must have a positive and educational perspective.

In *Toy Story*, when Andy plays with his toys, Mr Potato Head is depicted as a thief after the removal of one of his eyes. This scene is recreated in *Toy Story 3*, with certain changes, where Mrs Potato Head too appears as a burglar with a patch on one of her eyes. According to Jack A. Nelson, “Modern movie and television portrayals abound in villains whose evil and threatening presence is exemplified by a deformity of body” (p. 6). The *Disney* movie *Peter Pan* is about the magic performed by Peter Pan and his archenemy Captain Hook. The villain, Captain Hook, is shown with an amputated wrist which is replaced by a hook. The back story comments that Peter Pan had cut Captain Hook’s wrists and fed it to a crocodile, to punish him for being evil.

The target audience of these *Disney* movies is essentially children and it is very natural for the young minds to regard disabled people as bad. This is a complicate problem with racism, casteism, gender issues and other prejudices already predominant in the society. Disability should not be seen as a punishment. Instead, children should be sensitised about different disabilities from a young age. Children should be taught to accept everyone around them, irrespective of their differences. Children are more attracted to films rather than to

books because of the use of bright colours, motion and the impressive graphics used. Hence, utmost care should be taken while working on children's movies.

Some movies portray villains with disability as taking revenge on people, who were responsible for their disability. Most fictional characters with disability attempt vengeance and do not stop with the person responsible for their pathetic condition. It extends to innocent people too. *Maleficent*, a *Disney* movie, follows the plot of the well-known classic fairy tale "The Sleeping Beauty". Maleficent is a fairy who takes revenge on the king who betrayed her trust and cut off her wings for his personal benefits. She kidnaps his daughter, Aurora, whom she had cursed as a baby in her wrath. In this movie, Maleficent's role is more or less like a villain until three-quarters of the story when the sad flashback of Maleficent is brought to light. Maleficent kidnaps Aurora and keeps her safe during her sleep. Her character evolves from a villain to the guardian angel of Aurora. This positive aspect of the story is reimagined and presented only in the recent times.

Similar to the portrayal of Maleficent, a man with disabilities is depicted destructing innocent lives can be seen in a Tamil movie titled – *Ratsasan*, released in 2018. This crime thriller focuses on a series of murders committed by Christopher. What makes it different from other psycho-killer movies is the fact that the antagonist Christopher suffers from Progeria, a rare genetic disorder. The disease gives him the appearance of an aged person at a very young age. Bringing such a disease to the notice of the popular audience is appreciable, but the portrayal of the character is negative. He faces hostility in his school where everyone taunts him for his appearance. It is Sophie, who befriends him, in spite of her friends' warning but later rejects his love proposal by pointing out at his impotency. This aggravates Christopher's anger; his appearance and the humiliation caused due to it wipe out his naivety and make him a psychologically insensitive villain. He kills Sophie and begins his hunt. He goes on to kill four more innocent school girls after his release from prison. This exposes the affected psyche of the villain who thirsts for revenge because of the lack of acceptance of his disability.

The portrayal of such a villain, who was a humiliated victim in the past, turning into a gruesome killer, terrifies the audience. This puts across a lesson that people should not be teased because of their disability. At the same time, this valuable moral loses meaning after the serial killings of the four innocent girls, and Sophie. The four innocent girls were in no way related to Christopher and his humiliation. Paul K. Longmore (2003) claims, "Giving disabilities to villainous characters reflects and reinforces, albeit in exaggerated fashion, three common prejudices against handicapped people: disability is a punishment for evil; disabled people are embittered by their 'fate'; disabled people resent the non-disabled and would, if they could, destroy them" (p. 134).

Another character falling in this evil avenger model is Scar from the iconic *Disney* movie *The Lion King*. The scar on Scar's face can be considered as facial disfiguration and he fits perfectly as a plotting villain. Freddy Krueger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* has a disfigured burnt face. He is a serial killer who chases and kills people through their dreams. Jake Sully in *Avatar* is not a villain as such, but works as a traitor who forges the secrets of the Avatars. He earns the trust of the people and passes on the information to the colonisers. He tries to mend his mistake but at the cost of losing several lives.

Sometimes people who cannot be handled by the society are also labelled as abnormal or disabled and restricted from leading a normal life. In the *Disney* movie *Frozen*, Elsa

possesses supernatural powers and initially finds it hard to control her superpowers, as a child. So she is taken to the trolls for 'cure' and she is isolated from her sibling Anna, her family and the entire kingdom. She is portrayed to be the nemesis of her sister and their happy country. Hence, she lives in isolation in a single room until she is an adult. This negative portrayal of disabled characters is a general trait existing in the world of cinema. In the current scenario, the curse or punishment stigma attached to disability is slowly disappearing. Negative portrayal of disability has started to change with the arrival of movies like *Tare Zameen Par* which sensitise the public about disability and shows how to treat people better.

The Hindi movie, *Tare Zameen Par* breaks the mould from the regular portrayal of disability. The movie has emotionally charged episodes about a small boy named Ishaan and focuses on his disability – dyslexia. He finds it difficult to differentiate certain alphabets, and so the teachers consider him stupid. The movie does not extend on caricaturing his weakness; instead it introduces Ram, an art teacher, who suffered from the same disorder during his childhood. He takes steps to resolve the condition of Ishaan and also brings his extra-ordinary potentials to light.

The villain stigma attached to differently abled character is vanishing and now certain films aim at positive portrayal as in *Paa*. This movie also discusses the same disease as Christopher in *Ratsasan*, that is, Progeria but in a different light. *Paa* is about Auro, an intelligent twelve year-old boy who suffers from Progeria. The genetic disorder deteriorates his physical condition and he looks quite old. The story revolves around how Auro reunites his separated parents and the beautiful moments spent by Auro, Amol and Vidya. Through this movie, the viewers are familiarised with the disorder and not terrified or disgusted by the portrayal of disability. Thus, the movie *Paa* is in sharp contrast to the movie *Ratsasan* in its approach to the plot, as well as in the treatment of disability.

Recent movies show characters with disability without focussing on the stigmatic models of pity, evil avenger and supercrip. Instead they choose to tell simply the story of two or many people involved in the plot. An example for this kind of a movie is *Barfi!* Barfi, the male protagonist lacks the ability to speak and hear; Jhilmil Chatterjee, a girl from a rich family, is autistic. The plot revolves mainly around the two characters and also shows the logical shortcomings in their lives due their disabilities. *Barfi!* stands out as a different movie by not drawing complete attention to their respective disabilities but rather by portraying how life is for the two young people. *Netflix* has chosen quality portrayal of disability in *Atypical*, *The Good Doctor* and *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*; these portray autism in the shade of inspiration porn but highlight the limitations and capabilities of the persona with the diagnosis. This kind of a different portrayal gives a hope that movies in future will not look at disability as a taboo, but as a part of life and a sense of inclusion may get inculcated in the minds of everyone by keeping aside the bigotry. This in turn can help create a prejudice-free attitude in the minds of people in the society. Every disability is, in fact, a patch on the eye of the seer who fails to look at the other person beyond their disability. Self-righteousness makes humans narcissists and in turn leads to judging others based on differences. These patches can be removed only when the society embraces diversity and treats everyone with humanity. Humanity, empathy and love for others will help mankind to build a society free from prejudices.

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