



Research Paper

## Representation of Intersectionality in the Film *Margarita with A Straw*

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**ABSTRACT:** *Intersectionality, a term coined in 1989, by an American Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw describes how race, class and gender and other individual characteristics overlap and intersect with one another. Immensely popular over the past half-decade, it is a branch of feminism which asserts that all facets of discrimination overlap. It claims an identity separate from white feminism and acknowledges that the identity and experiential reality of all women are different. Social stratification built along the lines of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, creed, disability and age comes under the purview of intersectional feminism and its cultural and social effects. The motive of intersectionality is to identify the impact of overlapping categories on individuals and institutions. It seeks to promote social and political equity and includes different aspects of social identity although it essentially began as a movement that explored female oppression. Intersectionality explores the phenomenon of being impacted and subjugated by a variety of sources and has often been criticized as being open ended. Its focus on subjective experiences can lead to difficulties in identifying common causes of oppression. This paper attempts to showcase how intersectionality is represented in the Bollywood movie Margarita With A Straw, wherein the director Shonali Bose explores disability, gender, race, and social class. The story revolves around Laila, the female protagonist who finds the courage to celebrate life, to confront and challenge existing norms despite being disabled. It is a 'coming of age' movie in which the female lead delves into her sexuality and it breaks the stereotypical codes of cultural representation of disabled women in films.*

**KEYWORD:** *Intersectionality, Disability, Film, Gender, Gynocriticism.*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Social and political identities like disability, race, class, gender and sexuality often combine to create unique modes of discrimination and Intersectionality is a broad framework for understanding these overlapping concepts. Intersectional feminism acknowledges the fact that all women do not have the same experiences and identities and Intersectionality examines how these interlocking systems affect the marginalized sections of society. This term was first coined by black feminist scholar and social theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in her 1989 paper "Demarginalizing The Intersection Of Race And Sex: A Black Feminist Critique Of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory And Antiracist Politics". Intersectionality is a phenomenon which is used to describe multiple means of oppression and over the years it has become a feminist buzzword which conceptualizes a person or a group of people being at a disadvantage due to the discrimination they face. Different forms of social stratification such as race, class, disability, gender, religion, creed, age and sexual orientation are included when we consider the social and cultural effects of intersectional feminism. The purpose of the theory is to identify how these multi-layered concepts and categories impact individuals and institutions and these relationships should be taken into account when seeking to promote social and political equality.

In short Intersectional theory avers that people are often disadvantaged by their identity markers (e.g. "female" and "black") which depend on each other. One informs the other and it creates a complex web of oppression. An understanding of this theory is absolutely essential to fight the biases and prejudices that people are faced with in their daily lives. The theory began as an exploration of the discrimination and subjugation of women of colour and was born from the call for a distinct feminist practice that centralized their lived experiences but today it has expanded its reach to embrace additional aspects of social identity and a complexity of prejudices. Now the theory has become a causative factor and activists and organisations participate in unique dynamic conversations about the variegated experiences among people with overlapping identities. Seeing

things through an intersectional lens empowers one to address the systems of injustice in place in society and the theory is crucial to the understanding of interlocking identities.

This paper attempts to state that innovative representations of impairment and disability in films help to create a dynamic of intersectional feminism recognizing the symbiotic cultural and embodied relationships between disability, race, and gender. People living with impairments, like all other human beings are also gendered beings with distinct bodily experiences. Each identity factor is inextricably linked to each other and gender is inseparable from race, age, impairment, and all other bodily experiences; therefore disability also becomes a feminist concern. Impairment and disability are two essentially separate but interrelated issues. Physiological and psychological attributes that an individual has are referred to as Impairment, which is then medically termed as abnormal or socially constructed as disabled. Disability refers to the social oppression that people with impairments experience as a result of their social failure to adapt to their needs. This is termed as the social model of disability. Individuals are not disabled by their impairments but by the way society fails to cater to their physical, emotional and intellectual needs. Disability therefore is not the problem of the individual with a disability but rather a social and cultural construct which leads to their disempowerment. Social regulations of gender, race, sex and disability predominantly assume the able bodied to be the representational norm while any deviations become deviant. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson aptly sums up the connection between feminist discourses and disability by stating that: “disability, like femaleness, is not a natural state of corporeal inferiority, inadequacy, excess, or a stroke of misfortune. Rather, disability is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender” (Garland- Thompson, 2002).

Intersectionality, while concerning women, who are multiply marginalized on the basis of not only gender but disability, race and economic backwardness, their emancipation is definitely a historical and ideological narrative operating on exclusion alone. It is therefore easy to understand that feminist theory is not prescriptive. It only offers possibilities of approach, whichever is helpful. They must always be committed to real women’s lives.

Thus, it began by looking at the images of women in male-authored literary texts which were unrealistic. A corrective offered by textual feminism pioneered by Elaine Showalter has worked through both literary texts and cinemas by women becoming producers of texts. My paper is a case in point. Thus breaking the stereotypes on feminist issues is always related to the contexts of production and contexts of consumption against the wider cultural context. When disability narratives come within the purview of feminist concerns the feminine becomes doubly marginalized and hence the context becomes one of being socially oppressed due to physical impairments and also as a part of being in a patriarchal society.

It is against this background that intersectionality and feminist theory go hand in hand while reading the text of the film *Margarita With A Straw* directed by Shonali Bose and released in April 2015. The story in a nutshell focuses around a rebellious young woman suffering from cerebral palsy, who is on a journey of self-discovery. It is a page in the text of the second phase of feminist criticism where women become producers as well as consumers of texts. This is the phase of ‘gynocriticism’ where woman is the writer. The earlier stereotyped images were broken down to make the text more historical, practical and this created a revolution in the academy with women becoming more educated and having more spaces in popular literatures and cinema. *Margarita With A Straw* tries to rewrite the image of a disabled who aspires towards greater spaces in the academic world. Shonali Bose who has won many accolades has literally translated the ‘self’ of Laila to visual codes on the screen. Her experiences both as a woman and as a physically impaired character encounters her own self-awareness which is no different from a normal person’s journey. The audience is able to relate with this ontological essence in both a political as well as an aesthetical sense.

## II. DISABILITY

*Margarita With A Straw* portrays disability in a beautiful, liberating and empowering light. Unlike other Indian films that portray disability with either sympathy or disgust, *Margarita With A Straw* normalizes disability through wit and humour. Dr. Atanu Mohapatra notes, “portrayal of disability in films swings primarily between two extremes – pity, fun, caricaturing, sympathy, and awesome heroism are at one end of the spectrum while discrimination, coping-up, emotional swings and aspirations of the human soul are at the other end.” (Mohapatra, 2012). The central character, Laila (Kalki) is a young woman who is an aspiring writer beset with cerebral palsy who embarks on a journey of self-discovery and self-actualization. The opening scene of the movie shows the mother, Shubhangini (Revathy) driving the family around in an old van which has been customized for Laila. Born in an inter-religious family the parents do not discriminate between disabled Laila and their able bodied son.

In the beginning of the movie Laila is uncomfortable with her impairment when she is carried up the stairs of her college because the elevator is out of order. She desires to appear normal and even crops out her pictures in social media. The film is not apologetic but portrays cerebral palsy and its challenges with optimism. Laila is the lyricist of a rock band, open minded and carefree and to her disability is not a constraint. From being

cocooned in a middle class family background, Laila discovers her independence and freedom in New York where she roams the streets unaided. Living alone, she enjoys her life and even learns to cook. She rescues the blind girl Khanum (Sayani) from the riots and carries her in her wheelchair to safety. There is a significant shift in the attitude of the people towards Laila. While in her home country her music band is awarded the first place largely due to her disability, in New York, her intelligence comes to the fore as she defeats everyone in chess. The movie does not ask for sympathy for the protagonist but it aims at providing her the space to maximize her potential. It attempts to showcase the fact that people with special needs can also lead normal and independent lives given adequate emotional support and infrastructural access. Towards the end of the movie we see a reversal of roles. Laila looks after her dying mother, who used to care for her all her life.

### III. GENDER

The film *Margarita With A Straw* breaks patriarchal norms and portrays its women characters in a positive light. Despite being disabled, Laila does not face any discrimination in the family. Both Laila and her brother are treated equally. Multiple layers of discrimination are created by the intersection of gender and disability but in this movie the protagonist overcomes the obstacles in her life. She is on a voyage of self-discovery and self-actualization. Laila's mother Shubhangini is an empowered woman and the matriarch of the family. Her decisions are final and she in turn empowers her daughter. Khanum, though blind is a strongly delineated character who builds a deep emotional bond with Laila. She joins the anti-racist protest and raises her voice against injustice.

### IV. CLASS AND RACE

Hailing from a middle class family, Laila transcends all barriers of class and goes in search of her dreams. Her family supports her decisions to go abroad for higher studies. Laila's middle class status is a hindrance in her quest for the self. She is forced to sell her grandmother's heirloom to buy a device that aids her communication. In New York Laila comes face to face with racist attitudes and lends her voice to the protests along with Khanum.

### V. SEXUAL ORIENTATION

"*Margarita with Straw* is perhaps the first movie to depict sexuality and disability together and is absent of other elements like pity" (Gawande and Kashyap, 2017). It is a romantic comedy that touches upon sexual orientation and does not sensationalize her normal desires and relationships. A young independent woman Laila flirts with whoever she fancies and initiates all her relationships which help her to find herself. The film portrays Laila as a woman with normal sexual desires and not as a disabled sexless person. Laila starts a casual relationship with her friend Dhruv, who is also disabled out of sheer curiosity and later breaks up over a text message. She flirts with Nima, is rejected and goes to New York to escape her heartbreak. There she meets Khanum and begins a deep, emotional and intimate relationship with her. She meets Jared at college, is interested in him and cons him into helping her though she does not require any help. Her flaws are totally human. She cheats on Khanum with Jared and does not confess until faced with a bigger crisis. The excuse she gives Khanum for cheating on her is that Jared could see her. She wants to be seen and admired.

Cahiers du Cinema had its most politically engaged phase in the mid 1970's. Today, Cahiers has brought to film aesthetics both a political and a theoretical dimension which endorsed the fact that movies were not vulgar entertainment but an art form. Later Bazin's writings (collected in 1958 into a four volume series called *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*) reveal the growth of an aesthetic that concentrated on the cinema's capacity for metaphysical transcendence through realist observation. The history of film aesthetics then took a radical turn after the student-worker uprising of May 1968. "The aftermath of this situation for Cahiers was that the magazine began to be less concerned with a 'pure' aesthetic and instead pursued a new aesthetic which could be put to concrete political use" (Wolfreys, 399). This gives us an overview of the normative concerns in Hollywood cinema which has become almost prescriptive today.

A study of non- Hollywood films and cinemas shows that many of the theoretical frameworks follow the universalizing and prescriptive categories of Hollywood cinema. There has been a need for popular Indian Cinema to redefine itself. The special issue of *Screen* in 1985, attempts "to address Indian Cinema in its own term (by relying heavily on the views of Indian critics and film makers) and in the process arguing for a culture-specific genre approach" (Eleftheriotis and Needham, 273). Thus, Indian Cinema while moving from a universal prescriptive norm began its journey through a diversity of contexts of which the social cinema marked its stamp on the screen from the 1950's. From this period onwards we come across political implications or ideological meanings given a context through the culture in the text which is otherwise the content. The context or the cultural realm on *Margarita With A Straw* implies an ideological and political analysis against the background of the broad patriarchal and exclusively rigid class, race and socially superior Indian social context. Laila, the physically challenged female protagonist, who belongs to a rather middle class milieu, climbs the social ladder

not in India but in New York. The sociological implications of the Indian migrant in New York trying to conquer her disabilities in a foreign soil keeps the stakes high for her, making her more of a universal figure trying to upset any qualms about her success. It is indeed a theoretical feat for the new sociological signature regarding intersectionality and gendering. Indian Cinema has indeed put a firm foot forward in intersectionality and gynocriticism.

*Margarita With A Straw* is a coming of age film which promotes awareness of the experiences of people with disabilities. Through Intersectionality it celebrates and embraces the diversity of lived human experience. The main character, Laila, is not defined by her disability but rather by her fascinating, cheerful and complex character. The movie deals with acceptance, self-discovery and self-actualization without moving into the realm of disappointment and pity. This movie is a prime example of Intersectionality and how the protagonist deals with discrimination on multiple levels. It changes our deep-seated prejudices and perceptions of who the 'disabled' are.

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