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## Exploring the Intersection of Desire and Disability in *Margarita with a Straw*

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Article Information	Abstract
Received : April 26, 2023 Revised : June 5, 2023 Accepted : July 2, 2023 Published: July 11, 2023	This research paper explores the theme of desire and disability in director Shonali Bose's film <i>Margarita with a Straw</i> . Through a close analysis of the film, the paper proposes to examine how the protagonist, Laila, a young woman with cerebral palsy, navigates her desires and relationships while dealing with the challenges posed by her disability. It is my contention that the film challenges the dominant narrative of disability as asexuality and incapable of experiencing love or sexual desire while portraying Laila's sexuality and desire as a normal and important part of her life. Additionally, the paper examines how Laila's intersectional identity as a disabled, bisexual woman complicates her desires and relationships. The film emphasises the value of recognising and addressing the sexuality and needs of handicapped people via Laila's character. Ultimately, the paper argues that <i>Margarita with a Straw</i> offers a nuanced and empowering portrayal of disability and desire that challenges ableist and heteronormative assumptions about sexuality and relationships. Overall, this study seeks to add to the expanding body of knowledge about the relationship between disability and sexuality and emphasises the need for change in the portrayal of disability in mainstream media.
<b>Keywords</b>  Disability; desire; gender; sexual identity; bisexuality; normative bodies; Hindi movie.	
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## INTRODUCTION

An estimated one billion people worldwide experience some form of disability, 19% of which comprises the female population and 12 % male (Davis, 2013). The systemic marginalization faced by women and girls can be caused by people's attitude to them as well as environmental barriers which result in lower economic and social status. Being in this category women experience sexual abuse and physical violence (Shuttelworth & Sanders, 2013; Tepper, 2000). The goals and guiding principles of disability law are to safeguard people with disabilities from discrimination, encourage their equal participation in society, and make sure they have access to the same opportunities and rights as those without disabilities (Wendell, 1996). The fundamental tenets of these laws are rooted in social justice, equal opportunity, and human rights, acknowledging the inherent dignity and worth of every individual, regardless of their talents (Garland-Thomson, 2011). Nevertheless, concerns about whether these regulations actually ensure equal treatment continue to surface. Work specifically in the area of empowerment of women with disabilities forms part of the *UN Women's Strategic Plan 2018-2021* yet equality can be achieved only when all differently abled people achieve full, as well as active participation in all areas of life.

Women in India have always been marginalised and women with disabilities face a double handicap: the problems of her handicap as well as the fact of being a woman. Disabled

women in India are known to be victims of neglect, dogged by physical, sexual and mental abuse due to their inability to defend themselves by way of escape (Milligan & Neufeldt, 2001). They in turn look to the man for protection, but since, ‘...society regards disabled women as non-sexual’ (Baquer & Sharma, 1997, pp. 193-194), they are not considered to be suitable subjects for marriage. Often, they are forced to marry much older men, widowers, or men with disabilities, usually for an exorbitant dowry. Disabled women are undervalued by society as they are considered unable to bear and rear children. The media too has shown indifference and discriminated against women with disabilities, portraying them as victims, relegating them to the fringes of society or most times conspicuously absent (Sandahl & Auslander, 2005). There is no documented history of disabled women, but Indian mythology depicts them as cruel, spiteful and invariably acting in connivance with evil spirits. In one of the Indian mythologies, Lord Vishnu claimed that Heaven had no place for the disabled when Lakshmi urged him to marry her disfigured, older sister, who could not find a spouse. Vishnu suggested instead that she should be married off to a tree, said to be another form of Vishnu, in order to clear the way for him to marry Lakshmi. Disabled men on the other hand have occupied prominent positions like King *Dhritrashtra* and *Shakuni Mama* in the *Mahabharata*. *Taimur Lang* was a powerful ruler whose malformed foot gave him the name *Lang* meaning lame. He is legendary for his insensitive and atrocious personality; negative images such as these continue to have a strong influence on the minds of Indians.

Globalisation served to strengthen patriarchy as women, in spite of being producers of economy came to be projected as consumers and therefore a burden on limited family resources. The number of beauty pageants increased in number extending to remote and small towns in India objectifying the woman, bringing her to the fore of the sex market and heightening the angst of the already marginalized women with disabilities who were considered asexual, being neither sexually marketable nor physically beautiful. They were no longer in possession of the quality of *looked-at-ness* – society rendering them, ‘inefficient, incapable, unwanted and undesirable’ (Jain & Rai, 2015, p. 75).

In popular Hindi cinema, disabled people are represented in the most anaesthetic and apathetic manner. They are seen as parasites, dependant on society for their existence, or are confined indoors drowning in self-pity or crying for escape from their disability. Bollywood’s treatment of men with disabilities continues to be a little more sensitive than that of women, as long as their impairment did not interfere with their sexuality. With women however, it was the opposite, and they were accepted as long as it did not detract from their femininity. Women with severe impairments were always assigned supporting roles as mother or sister but rarely that of a protagonist. It therefore came as a refreshing surprise when Shonali Bose directed and released *Margarita with a Straw* (Bose, 2014). The title of Anupama Chopra’s review of this film dated April 17, 2015, ends with, ‘It’ll make you cry’, so sensitive was the treatment of the sexuality of Laila, a young woman with cerebral palsy.

## DISCUSSION

Inspired by the life and experiences of her cousin Chib, who has cerebral palsy, director Shonali Bose’s film *Margarita with a Straw* highlights the challenges encountered by people with disabilities in India, and in particular the differently abled women. Played by Kalki Koechlin, Laila, the film’s protagonist is a young woman with cerebral palsy eager to explore her sexuality and find her identity. The narrative follows Laila’s journey as she leaves home in India to study at a college in New York, where she discovers her bisexuality while falling in love with a blind woman. The film sensitively addresses issues of disability rights, sexual orientation and the challenges faced by differently abled women in India.

The film is essentially about Laila's sexual awakening but sadly although the film did well abroad the sex scenes were censored for Indian audiences. The narrative unfolds in two spatial locations, Delhi and New York. As a Delhi university student Laila moves around independently and considers herself to be normal, since her family has encouraged her to feel this way. Rejecting Dhruv, a wheelchair bound student, Laila sets her mind on Nima, the lead singer of the student band for which she writes the lyrics. After having won a rock music faceoff, Laila throws caution to the wind and makes her feelings known to him. She is completely devastated when he politely declines her overture. Laila is too embarrassed to return to college and decides to drop out, resolving to go abroad instead for further studies. A scholarship makes this possible and she moves to Manhattan along with her mother to assist her. Laila begins to enjoy her new surroundings and especially the company of the English boy assigned to her as her study partner. But it is not he who succeeds in awakening Laila's sexuality but a chance meeting with Khanum a woman of Indian-Pakistani origin who also happens to be blind. Laila is drawn into a Lesbian relationship moving quickly from the initial awkwardness of first contact to a full-fledged live-in relationship. The film treats this same-sex relationship with respectfulness minus the drama of a soap opera. Director Bose realistically portrays issues of a woman with a severe disability. Although Laila faces occasional setbacks and her confidence fails, she is not constricted by physical limits; her intelligence, sex drive and eagerness to experiment are more powerful and our attention is drawn to it away from preconceived notions of what life could be like for a woman with cerebral palsy. Chopra claims that Laila's libido sometimes side-lines everything else. Her untamed spirit forces us to admire her uniqueness as she laughs and loves fiercely. Laila comes across at times as being selfish, contrasted against the inherent generosity of spirit and warmth of her mother played by female actor, Revathy.

In Indian movies, the 'sexuality of an able-bodied woman is startling idea so imagine the shock you get when Laila masturbates, watches porn, openly lusts and experiments with men and a woman'. Chopra describes *Margarita with a Straw* as a film about a 'differently abled bi-sexual Hindi Film heroine', words one would never expect to see together in a sentence, describing Hindi cinema. Chopra concludes by telling the viewer that she can expect to be filled with hope as three amazing women encourage you to embrace life with a new ferocity. Kalki Koechlin, in an FTII Interview in response to her role in *Margarita with a Straw* confessed that she found her role challenging nevertheless one that sensitized her to the daily lives of women with cerebral palsy. However, what she saw as most remarkable was the fact that *Margarita with a Straw* does not focus on cerebral palsy but on the person behind the disability and the story is primarily about how Laila falls in love with herself, breaking taboos and stereotypes in the bargain.

The cinematography of the film ensures a respectful and candid portrayal of disability through skilful framing and composition, playing a crucial role in reflecting the main themes. Using a combination of close-up, medium and long shots, the film succeeds in sensitively capturing Laila's experiences. Close-ups convey her innermost desires and emotions, medium shots reveal her interactions with the outside world and long shots, especially during her time in college, reveal her desire to be independent as she struggles to navigate her way in a cruel, unaccommodating world. Laila is often placed at the centre of the frame, making her the focal point and highlighting the importance of her perspective.

The film uses a naturalistic lighting style, lending a sense of authenticity and a feeling of reality to Laila's narrative. Particularly during sequences that take place in Laila's house, soft, warm hues are employed to create a personal and emotional mood. On the other hand, scenes when Laila has difficulties or is in a strange setting, like when she was in New York, employ colder hues and more contrast.

Handheld camera movements are frequently used in the cinematography, giving Laila's experiences a sense of intimacy and immediacy, this choice of style also represents the erratic and unstable nature of her travels. Laila's perspective is captured by carefully choosing the camera angle: low-angle images are utilised when she encounters challenges or feels overwhelmed, while high-angle pictures are used to highlight her vulnerability and reliance on others.

A series of visual metaphors depict the inner world of Laila. For instance, the motif of the wheelchair is employed to represent Laila's physical limits as well as her determination to overcome them. The eponymous *Margarita with a Straw* symbolises Laila's ambition to defy social standards as well as assumptions about handicap.

The casting of disabled performers in supporting parts further improves *Margarita with a Straw's* accurate depiction of handicap, enhancing the film's authenticity while simultaneously challenging prejudices and encouraging representation in the field. The film succeeds in challenging stereotypes, in highlighting the difficulties faced by the differently abled while celebrating their determination and resilience through cinematography, visual metaphors, framing, lighting and camera movement.

*Margarita with a Straw* is filled with several iconic scenes demonstrating the exploration of its main themes of self-discovery, love, and the longing for acceptance. Two iconic scenes in the film indicate Laila's journey towards independence: firstly, the scene where she receives news of her acceptance into New York University and secondly, Laila's meeting with Khanum: the first the start of self-discovery and the latter the beginning of her understanding of her sexual orientation. Both scenes are memorable in that they establish a start of the journey to self-discovery, personal as well as the relationship with the other. Laila's excitement is palpable in both instances and the Laila-Khanum first encounter reveals an instant connection despite the differences in their backgrounds and disabilities.

While the wheelchair dance scene is remarkable by being both moving and inspiring, the scene where Laila crops her wheelchair out of the frame before uploading the image onto the social media, speaks volumes of societal expectations of normativity. Laila and Khanum dance together at a club, with the former in her wheelchair, emphasizing a defiance of societal expectations and the limitations placed on them as a result of their disabilities. Another poignant scene, one between mother and daughter, where Laila confesses to her mother that she is bisexual, reveals the complex family dynamics, with her mother trying to grapple with Laila's revelation. Of course, the most empowering of all scenes would have to be Laila's visit to the beach after the death of her mother, as she struggles and eventually manages to reach the water and touch the waves, revealing her strength and determination to face life head on by overcoming all obstacles.

The style of editing of *Margarita with a Straw* done by an experienced editor of Indian films, Monisha R. Baldawa, known for her work on Indian films, plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative and enhancing the emotional impact of the scenes. The methodical slow and reflective pacing enables spectators to identify with Laila's journey and emotional challenges by allowing the range of characters' nuanced emotions to be fully understood. Baldawa makes use of the parallel storytelling style of editing that powerfully weaves multiple storylines together, highlighting Laila's various relationships, her grappling with self-acceptance, and experiences with her friends and family. Montage shots are used to indicate the passage of time: Laila's personal development and growth as a character, featuring her song writing and other college experiences, enhancing the scenes which show her creative pursuits. Cross-cutting techniques are utilized to reveal the stark contrast of Laila's Indian and American experiences revealing different environments and their influence on her relationships and life.

The editing work of Monisha R. Baldawa on the movie provides spectators with a captivating and emotional experience helping them understand Laila's emotions and journey better.

Music too plays a crucial role with the sound design and mixing of the film that complement the visuals, creating a thoroughly immersive and all-encompassing experience for viewers. The scenes where Laila uses music to express herself stand out in particular.

This research will be incomplete without commenting on the intersection of performativity, disability, and desire through the lens of Judith Butler's concept of performativity. In Judith Butler's seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, she opines that it is a series of acts and gestures conforming to the expectations and norms of society that reinforce and reiterate the performance of gender and that it is not a fixed, inherent trait. According to her thesis, gender identity is performed and constructed via social interactions rather than being something that is intrinsic (Butler, 2006). These performances reinforce one's gender identification and uphold the idea that there are two fixed, binary genders. This notion of performativity applies to the protagonist of *Margarita with a Straw*, Laila and relates to how her goals and experiences defy societal norms and expectations. The film has indeed broken new ground in its bold portrayal of a disabled protagonist who is also a sexual being. By subverting traditional gender roles and societal expectations, it succeeds in engaging with the issues of both desire and disability.

Laila's experiences in the film demonstrate how Butler's idea of performativity is applicable outside of the boundaries of gender. Laila, a young lady with cerebral palsy, is unable to conform to society norms around her sexuality and desire. Through the entire film, Laila questions the ableist presumptions that people with disabilities are asexual or lack desire. Laila challenges the conventional narrative that marginalises individuals with disabilities by embracing her sexuality and partaking in relationships. In doing so, she expresses her agency and identity as a sexual person defying society's script that continues to marginalise people with disabilities.

The encounters Laila has with various partners also help to subvert conventional beliefs about gender, desire, and disability. She discovers via her connection with Khanum, a blind woman, that desire is not limited by gender or ableist presumptions. As they become each other's protectors, allies, and confidantes, their love and support for one another transcend gender stereotypes. This relationship supports Butler's idea of performativity by illustrating the fluidity of gender and desire.

Laila's journey in *Margarita with a Straw* highlights how disability may serve as a site of resistance to dominant societal norms. Laila rejects the idea that having a handicap makes living a meaningful life impossible by refusing to conform to ableist presumptions and embracing her wishes. Her story emphasises how crucial it is to define and embrace oneself in the face of cultural expectations.

## CONCLUSION

Under the prism of Judith Butler's notion of performativity, *Margarita with a Straw* presents an engaging investigation of desire and disability. Laila's journey is shown in the film in a way that stresses the performative character of identity and the strength of self-definition in defying social standards. *Margarita with a Straw* challenges viewers to re-evaluate their beliefs about gender, sexuality, and ability as a study of desire, disability, and performativity, promoting a more inclusive and diverse interpretation of human experience. Film as a cultural text survives its moment of production and its polysemic nature allows multiple and continuous readings. Significant to the reading is the question of power i.e., who is doing the reading and the context in which it is done. In relation to changing social and political concerns of those in power,

meanings are articulated and rearticulated. It is hoped that alternate readings of *Margarita with a Straw* will sustain and empower spectators to interpret other films with similar themes in a manner which is sensitive to the needs of persons with disabilities.

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