

## Films as Propagators of the Social Model of Disability: *My Name is Khan* as Rizwan's Journey from Disability to Impairment

Reeba Sara Koshy

Independent Researcher Pulikoottil (H) Vanchithra, Kozhencherry India

### Abstract

“In our view, it is the society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (Shakespeare 13) is what the UPIAS opines. In a world where cultural representations, which include cinemas, are given greater stress over reality, an effort to spread the social model of disability has become a necessity. “The imagination is a dangerous tool when it comes to disability: we tend to exaggerate, project, and mistake what life is really like for people with disabilities” (Shakespeare 48). The reverse is portrayed in *My Name is Khan*, one of India's big budget, box office hits, by Karan Johar, where it is not the exaggerated picture of a person with disability that is shown onscreen, but the reality wherein the protagonist with Asperger's Syndrome turns out to be a normal individual, only different from others who share the same world.

The paper titled “Films as Propagators of the Social Model of Disability: *My Name is Khan* as Rizwan's Journey from Disability to Impairment”, tries to examine how the society creates disability, though the individuals with disability consider themselves only slightly different from others. In his birthplace Khan's impairment goes undiagnosed and transforms him into a spectacle to be laughed at and bullied, thus burdening his impairment with disability, while in another place his impairment gets named ‘Asperger's Syndrome’ thus making him only different from others and not disabled. When the title as the ‘disabled’ gets removed from the individual s/he has to go along with the rules and laws put forth by the society which prefers the presence of only the people who are different from others and not disabled. This forces her/him to accept governmentality along with many other issues, though sometimes they are beyond her/his comprehension. Rizwan too faces such issues in *My Name is Khan* where the 9/11 incident and hatred towards Muslims become the backdrop.

In his *Disability: The Basics* Tom Shakespeare quotes the Greek philosopher Aristotle, “As to the exposure of children, let there be a law that no deformed child shall live” (Shakespeare 15). This was and to a certain extent still is the attitude towards a person who is impaired. In the present era the killing as suggested by Aristotle is done not literally, but symbolically by calling such people with any kind of shortcomings, as “disabled”, a term which has got severe psychological impact upon the individual. This kinds of criticisms exist as people have in minds, set norms that create ‘normal’ people. The concept of norm/normal comes into being as a result of the notion that an ideal human body exists somewhere. This ideal body is as abstract and unattainable as Plato's ideal world. What the society has done is, it took as ideal the “perfect” parts of the human

bodyrandomly from different individuals and thus formed the ideal body. This abstract concept resulted in the division of human beings as normal-abnormal/ abled-disabled. This division caused the “abnormal” move away to the fringes of the society, thus losing access to the benefits enjoyed by the mainstream individuals, and turning out to be a *homo sacer*, neither inside nor outside the rules and laws put forth by the majority.

In such a society which depends upon the unknown ideal body for setting normal bodies, UPIAS suggests an analysis, which is the social model of disability, as per which “...it is the society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of [individuals’] impairments, by the way [they] are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (Shakespeare 13). They bring about a parallel between impairment and disability, and sex and gender. Impairment which comes under the medical model of disability is similar to sex, which is universal and biological, while disability, like gender becomes a social construct, and thus not naturally formed.

In the hyper-real world of today where there is no clear cut distinction between reality and virtuality, Brecht’s concept of defamiliarization is not possible. This transition is visible in various art forms among which the one that got widespread acknowledgement is the film, which as Ashish Nandy opines, serves in the economic development of a nation as well. What is depicted onscreen with a tinge of exaggeration is without doubt accepted by the audience. In such a world where virtuality gains upper hand over reality, an ideal situation aspired by many can achieve acceptance with much applause. A world where disability is replaced with impairment, and being disabled becomes not a crime can achieve attention and acceptance with the various forms of art, especially films.

Shakespeare argues that “We have a distorted view of disability, made more graphic by the ways cultural representations of disability play on our anxiety about incapacity and dependency. The imagination is a dangerous tool when it comes to disability: we tend to exaggerate, project, and mistake what life is really like for people with disability” (Shakespeare 48). But it is the reverse that happens in *My Name is Khan* in which Karan Johar has attempted to propagate the social model of disability by portraying the protagonist Rizwan Khan as a disabled person and not a person with disability. As opposed to Shakespeare’s view of cultural representation as increasing the audience’s fear of impairment, Johar pictures impairment in another light where Rizwan introduces himself as, “My name is Rizwan Khan...Khan...Khan. I may look a little strange to you. But that’s because I have Asperger’s Syndrome...That doesn’t mean I am mad. I’m intelligent. But I don’t understand certain things”.

An individual’s deviation from the ideal body gets labelled as an impairment or as disability depending upon the notions held by the society where he/she resides. In his birthplace in Bombay Rizwan is bullied by his peers, calling him “mad...insane!”, as his problem remains undiagnosed. “No doctor could tell [mother] why I was the way I was. But my mother never felt the need to know why.” Razia thinks that her son is only different from the other kids, and not disabled. It is her unconscious that prevents her from knowing the real reason for Rizwan’s difference because, remaining ignorant of disability is one way of escaping from being labelled as disabled. “...people do not want

to be labelled as disabled...because disability remains a stigmatized identity. Nobody wants to be categorized in a way which seems limiting or negative. They want to stress their similarity to others, not their differences; what they can do, not what they cannot do” (Shakespeare 5). To save Rizwan from a stigmatized identity, Razia promotes his ability to repair things, which in the later part of the film is done by Rizwan himself when he is shown carrying aboard that reads “REPAIR ALMOST ANYTHING”. Razia even thinks of Rizwan’s problem of echolalia as something of advantage to him as she finds that this ‘blessing’ is the main reason why Mr. Wadia starts teaching the child. In order not to have a poor esteem Razia in a direct way, and the other people of the locality after the cycle-pump incident in an indirect way, make him feel positive at the cost of the fair relationship between Rizwan and his younger brother Zakir. But none of these appreciations is able to develop in Rizwan the happy slave idea as per which the people with disabilities are happy with their lives as “they do not know any better” (Shakespeare 47). This gets evident when Rizwan says, “Zakir was fortunate. He could cry”, while he himself is not able to express any of his emotions which make him think that Mandira is angry with him as he is not able to express his love in words. His explanation goes like, “the book *Different Minds* says that, people like us can’t express their emotions in words. But we can write them easily.” Rizwan is able to formulate such an explanation only due to the reason of his moving away from a society which fears diagnosing an impairment to one where an impaired body is nothing more than one with differences. In short, Rizwan moves to a new place where the social model of disability works.

As Tom Shakespeare opines in “The Social Model of Disability” “...the social model has been effective *psychologically* in improving the self-esteem of disabled people and building a positive sense of collective identity. In traditional accounts of disability, people with impairments feel that they are at fault. The social model has the power to change the perception of the disabled people. The problem of disability is relocated from the individual, to the barriers and attitudes which disable him/her” (Davis 217). When such a situation arises the society makes changes to itself thus making the former disabled, the abled. It starts considering the person as not different from others but sharing the same platform in life. The incidents in *My Name is Khan*, after Rizwan moves to America to his brother are enough proof to the above mentioned. It is there that Rizwan’s undiagnosed “difference” gets labelled as Asperger’s Syndrome, after the diagnosis of which he is treated as an ordinary human being who should be brought to the limelight from the fringes. Deviating completely from the traditional concept where disability causes discrimination in higher education and employment, Rizwan becomes a product seller at Mehnaz herbal Beauty Products, the company owned by Zakir. To a very good extent it is Zakir’s guilt formed out of ignorance which becomes the deciding factor in giving Rizwan a job, and thus treating him as a “normal” individual. Johar’s talent at portraying Rizwan as different from other people, at the same time as an abled individual comes to the limelight when the protagonist as a product seller says the truths about his products which bewilders the customers. His explanations like, “it says the product will reach you in seven days. It is a lie. It’ll reach you in ten days...no product can make you beautiful. Beauty products can only enhance the skin...all our products expire in three months. It dies”, bring to the audiences’ mind a feeling of strangeness, sympathy and surprise simultaneously.

More than anything else it is the resemblance of Razia in Mandira that brings Rizwan close to her. Just like his mother, Mandira protects him from harassing comments like “Get out of the way, you freak” as she finds out that Rizwan is different from the others. This is the same reason why when he unintentionally insults the manager of Karma she tells her not to take Rizwan’s comments personally. There are instances in the song sequence where he imitates Mandira, which is in a sense the play of his psyche. By imitating her who is not disabled, he thinks he too can be like her and will be able to do whatever an abled man does, thus Mandira accepting his request to take him with her when she moves to another place. The film has some events where Rizwan is presented as someone superior to the so-called non-disabled people. His going to the Discovery Museum with Sameer and winning the competition where the other participants are people labelled “the abled”, is such an instance. No one in the society considers him disabled, and his differences do not cause any discrimination. On his way to meet the President, he helps those who have problems with their vehicles. No one is bothered about his differences and for his service pay him just as they do to any other person. The Wilhemina episode is another one where Rizwan is treated unbiased. In his own words, Mama Jenny and Funny Hair Joel of Wilhemina are “good people” as they do good deeds. They never consider him an alien. He too is given a chance to speak in the church about Sameer at the occasion of the remembrance ceremony of those who died in the war in Iraq.

Johar, in the film also brings to light one of the major dangers that the social model can bring about. When an individual’s impairment is given lesser importance and the label “disabled” is taken away from him/her, the individual is no longer a *homo sacer* but one inside the laws and norms the society puts forth. The airport episode and Rizwan’s prison life help in proving the argument right. In the airport, because he is a Muslim, Rizwan is unnecessarily body checked thoroughly, till the card AUTISM ALERT comes to the notice of the officials. In a similar fashion in the prison he is brutally tortured. When Rizwan appears to be a normal person, the same punishment is meted out to him as others. The officials, without any regard to his hypersensitivity, shout at him, place bright light in front of him and even make him lie on ice slabs. His impairment does not let Rizwan sort out the real reason why he is made to suffer a lot. He writes, “I think they are angry because I’m not able to answer their questions about the Al Qaeda. But I don’t know anything about them. Mandira, I should have read up on Al Qaeda before.” From another perspective, the reason why Rizwan is brutally interrogated in the prison may be that, earlier the disabled, the poor, and the criminals were brought together under the umbrella term of “feble-minded”. This notion is present in the collective unconscious, and the so-called disabled become an archetype of feble-mindedness. When the image in the id comes to the conscience, the id’s wish to governmentalize the deviants works, though unknowingly.

Johar, by presenting the role of media in Rizwan’s life, actually is throwing light to the purpose of *My Name is Khan* as a visual representation helping to spread the social model of disability. Media help Rizwan get released from the traumatizing prison experience. When his lifestory spreads through the various news channels, and when he is proven not a terrorist, but one whose phone call to the FBI spotted the real terrorists under the leadership of Dr. Faisal Rehman, the society gets the notion that a person with

disability too can work for the welfare of the state and that he too becomes a contributor to the overall peace of the land. Such an understanding helps the society in changing the adjective used to identify people with impairments, from “people with disabilities” to “disabled people”.

Similar is the hurricane hit Wilhemina episode. Like the earlier one of Rizwan’s life this too gets enough media coverage. The repeated appearance of Rizwan Khan on the television makes him and his difference familiar to the society, which is not only the one shown onscreen, but also the society/societies of the real world. When something which earlier was considered fearful becomes familiar the fear vanishes and it is embraced by the society. In this case the society dropped the negative attitudes towards impairment and replaced them with accepting attitudes. *My Name is Khan* is an effort to distinguish between the medical model and social model of disability, thus replacing disability with impairment and wiping away the excesses of pity, fear and sympathy the society has towards those who have impairments, thus considering them as “people”, and not “people with disabilities”.

### **Works Cited**

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