

Disability and Sexuality in Margarita with a Straw

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Abstract

The paper examines the stigma which is attached with a disabled body and its sexual needs. The stigmatization of a disabled body creates a non-disabled heteronormative imaginary that is uncomfortable with a disabled having sexual relations and the contestation increases threefold when it is a homosexual relationship between two disabled women. It also looks at the connection between heterosexuality and able-bodied identity. It tries to analyze the censorship of certain scenes in the film, *Margarita with a Straw*, directed by Shonali Bose. Through the character of Laila the paper investigates the controversial intersection of disability and sexuality. It also looks at issues related to body and self, pertaining to disability.

KEYWORDS: Disability, sexuality, censorship, body image, heteronormative, non-disabled imaginary

INTRODUCTION

The unity of the two terms ‘disability’ and ‘sexuality’ is often regarded as incongruous in the popular imagination. *Margarita with a Straw* enters the domain where it shows disabled bodies as both subjects and objects of a range of erotic desires and practices. It deals with the portrayal of bisexual identity of a girl, Laila, who has cerebral palsy. Laila is depicted negotiating with her sexuality in an abelist and heteronormative culture where the constant subordination of homosexuality to heterosexuality and disability to able-bodiedness allows heterosexuality and able-bodiedness to be institutionalized as ‘normal’ and anything not abiding with the normative comes under scrutiny. The paper talks about the representation of disability and sexuality in the film and the way in which Laila’s impairment adds another layer for the film to come under the scanner of Central Board of Film Certification.

ANALYSIS

The sexual journey of Laila is dynamic in a sense that she is involved in four different relationships, each of which needs to be analyzed keeping in mind the controversial intersection of disability, sexuality, and censorship. The film also throws light on the intersection of disability and body image through Laila’s alteration and acceptance of who she is towards the end. It is a story of sexual discovery of Laila who is a girl with cerebral palsy but is undeterred by it. She lives with her family in Delhi and is a student of Ramjas College, University of Delhi. Her condition, cerebral palsy, has impaired her motor functions but not her intelligence. She composes music, plays chess and excels at creative writing. The title of the film, *Margarita with a Straw*, is indicative of the kind of girl Laila is. She is bold and confident in her desires and is beautiful just like a Margarita. Straw here could be

analyzed as her wheelchair that has redefined the body aesthetics and has led to questioning of the concepts of sexuality and desirability. It is through films like these that the intersection of disability and sexuality could be given a new expression. The film could be an example of a modern representation of disability focusing on a “crip-queer” sexuality. The term “crip-queer” is a subversive play on the word ‘cripple’ and has been borrowed from Robert McRuer which is a celebration of the disabled as well as queer identity in neoliberal late capitalist system.

In one of the interviews, the producer of the film Nilesh Maniyar, said that this film is often seen as an “intelligent” film. However, he does not acknowledge such a label for the film, pointing out that he has made a "very basic film" about basic human emotions which every human being has the right to feel. It is interesting to note that the film doesn't create the character of Laila as heroic, pitiable or larger than life. Rather, she is like any other person with or without a disability. The basic human need to form close relationships is as relevant for persons with disability as for persons without disability.

The corpo-normative, non-disabled world de-sexes disabled women by denying them femininity and sexuality, and by locating them beyond the definitions of sexuality, desirability, and marriageability. There are numerous myths about persons with disability that get circulated. These include notions that they don't need sex, they are sexually unattractive, they have more important needs than sex, they cannot have real sexual relationships, etc. Such negative perceptions of impairment and disability are internalized both by persons with disabilities and non-disabled persons, and influence their behavior and concepts related to self-image.

The evaluative gaze of the non-disabled world causes persons with disabilities to feel judged and uncomfortable in their own bodies. This could also be a drawback of the social model of disability. It laid emphasis on the failure of the social and structural environment to adapt to the needs and aspirations of persons with disability. In doing so, the social model contributed to the invisibility of the disabled body by focusing on disabling environments and barriers to social integration. It led to the near total rejection of corporeality from the social model. The de-eroticization of their sexuality is very common since their bodies are seen as “deviant” bodies as Michel Foucault would call them, different from the absolutist able bodies. The stigmatization of these deviant bodies is visible in the attitudes of the power structures around us, one of them being the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC).

Foucault argued that even within seemingly impenetrable hegemonic structures, individuals maneuver, subvert and offer resistance within existing cracks and crevices to exercise agency. The subversive undertones in Laila's character could be read in the scene where Tribes, Laila's band, wins the DU music contest but she feels miserable when the judge announces that they were awarded only because of her special challenge. When the judge asks for her response, Laila shows her the finger and leaves. Also, through her different sexual encounters, she negotiates a sense of embodiment that challenges the prevailing corpo-normative and hetero-normative standards of femininity and sexuality.

Laila is fascinated by sex and masturbates to online porn sites. She enters relationships with four different kinds of people. She kisses her friend Dhruv, a disabled male, out of

sheer curiosity. She is attracted to her non-disabled fellow band member, Nima and is totally crushed after being rejected by him. She explores her sexuality by being in a homosexual relationship with Khanum, who is a blind girl of Pakistani-Bangladeshi origin. She had sex with her classmate, Jared, a white male non-disabled man. Such explorations with one's sexuality have always come under the axe of CBFC. Laila being a disabled, bisexual woman is marginalized threefold in an ableist heterosexual patriarchal setup. Therefore, two of her relationships came under the scrutiny of CBFC. CBFC asked the director of the film to shorten the kissing scene between Laila and Khanum and to tone down the sex scene between Laila and Jared.

Before investigating the reasons for such a decision by CBFC, it is essential to look at the formation of this board which is inspired and derived from the British code of censorship applied in Britain as well as in British India. The written rules prohibited 'excessively passionate love scenes', 'indelicate sexual situations' and 'scenes suggestive of immorality'. In the post-independence era, a major discussed feature of the censorship code for Indian films has been the prohibition of scenes of kissing. This is based on an 'unwritten rule' according to the inquiry committee on film censorship led by G.D. Khosla in 1969. According to M. Madhava Prasad, ban on kissing could be related to a nationalist politics of culture. The most frequently offered justification for this informal prohibition has been that it corresponds to the need to maintain the "Indianness of Indian culture". Kissing is described as a sign of "westernness" and therefore alien to Indian culture, as analyzed by Prasad. Rosie Thomas characterizes the ban on kissing scenes in popular cinema as 'puritanical'. According to her the ban "came only with the puritanical reformist zeal after independence that saw kissing in public as an immoral, Western import".

The prohibition of kissing scenes also validates the 'repressive hypothesis' given by Foucault where he explains how sex has been treated as a private, practical affair that only properly takes place between a husband and a wife. Sex outside these confines is not simply prohibited but repressed. Discourse on sexuality is confined to marriage. Taking Laila's case, her first kiss with her disabled friend did not come under scrutiny since at some level the ableist viewpoint suggests that disabled should marry a disabled, to marry in the similar order. Her second kiss with her disabled gay friend was frowned upon since Laila was trying to contest and redefine the notions of heteronormativity. Her third encounter with her white non-disabled friend, Jared, was again seen as something to be cut short and toned down since she was now trying to disturb the absolutist order by building a relationship with a non-disabled male.

Laila is hounded by reminders that she's different. At the beginning of the film, she crops out her wheelchair in a picture on Facebook. S. Wendell wrote that people with physical disabilities may experience shame, self-hatred and a negative body image because of not 'measuring up' to a cultural ideal that has been accepted and internalized. When she breaks up with her first boyfriend Dhruv, who is also disabled and starts flirting with the able-bodied lead singer of her band, Nima, Dhruv tells her bitterly that dating normal people won't make *her* normal. Laila who falls in love with a non-disabled friend, Nima, and is reminded of her disability after he is repulsed by her after she confesses her love for him. She is made to feel that this bond between disabled and non-

disabled is not possible. Her disabled friend, Dhruv, also reminds her of her 'abnormality' and that no matter how much hard she tries she couldn't become 'normal'. These two instances affect her in developing her notion regarding self-image. H. Rousso (1984, p.84) wrote that people with cerebral palsy often struggle with their body image; they question their desirability and attractiveness, given the visible physical features of their disability. For them, such characteristics as being uncoordinated, having involuntary movements, grimacing, and speaking in an uneven, unmelodious voice, may be in startling contrast to the traditional definitions of desirability and beauty. As a result, their own gestures and mannerisms may be a source of self- disgust.

Erving Goffman (1986, p.12) explained of the process of stigmatization with a psychosocial perspective on physical disability. He wrote that when a person with a physical disability meets a stranger, the stranger immediately becomes aware of the person's 'discrediting attribute', that is physical impairment. The impairment results in 'stigma', and the stranger makes many other attributions about the person based on this one attribute. These attributes may include that the person with the physical disability is unattractive, impotent, asexual, receiving welfare payments, or of lower intelligence. The person may be immediately discounted as a possible lover or friend. Hence, the disability becomes an all-permeating, overwhelming classification that obscures all other personal characteristics, skills and abilities. Nima did see Laila as a possible lover because of Laila's stigmatized position. In one of the scenes where Laila was at Nima's birthday party she was sitting alone while her friends were enjoying outside having drinks. It is important to note here that it was only in Khanum's company that Laila tries her first alcoholic beverage because there was no space for stigma between them and she wasn't discredited in any way by Khanum.

It is only after the entry of Khanum that there is a change in Laila's thinking about herself. Khanum is a blind Pakistani-Bangladeshi girl whom Laila met at a protest site and soon their friendship grew stronger. Khanum was the first person to call Laila beautiful. It is with Khanum that Laila has her first drink, a Margarita with a straw, at a bar. Khanum makes her dance with her and their attraction grows, leading to a sensuous lesbian encounter. They both kiss each other, and it is a 12-second scene which stirred a controversy by CBFC asking to shorten the scene on "moral" grounds. S. Wendell (1960, p.143) wrote that people with disabilities arouse fear in able-bodied people, and it is for this reason that they are made 'Other'. He explained: "When we make people 'Other', we group them together as the objects of our experience, instead of regarding them as subjects of experience with whom we might identify, and we see them primarily as symbolic of something else—usually, but not always, something we reject and fear and project onto them.

Laila has difficulty coming out to her conservative parents. Laila unintentionally makes her mum laugh when she says that she's 'bi', which is confused with the Hindi word *bai*, meaning 'maid'. The sweet and funny tone of the scene explicates the theme of differentness and failure to be understood with a lightness of touch. The film depicts Laila's quest towards an acceptance of who she is. The search is strenuous for her since she belongs to a South Asian country like India where the women's sexuality is under patriarchal control. The main institutions of society—the family, religion, law, political,

educational and economic institutions, media, knowledge systems—are all patriarchal in nature, and they form the pillars of a patriarchal structure. This well-knit and deep-rooted system makes patriarchy seem invincible; it also makes it seem natural. Robert McRuer (2006) gives a theory of “compulsory able-bodiedness” wherein he describes that the system of compulsory able-bodiedness produces disability, is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness: that, in fact, compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness, and vice versa. It is these essential categories perpetuated by these institutions, in name of normalcy, that leaves no or little scope for a disabled person to come out of the stereotypes pertaining to ability and sexuality.

The reason for cuts from CBFC at some level could also be analyzed by understanding the kind of emotions a disabled body populate the non-disabled imaginary. Borrowing the general frame of reference from ‘the affective turn’, Bruno Latour suggests that one should think about bodies, not as things or reified objects but as a process—in terms, that is, of “what a body can do”: its reactions and impacts, its capacities and practices, and most fundamentally how it affects and is affected. Bill Hughes lists the three emotions of fear, pity, and disgust that collect in the non-disabled imaginary and contribute to the social distance between disabled and non-disabled people—People with disability invoke anxiety and revulsion in the non-disabled because they are defined as literally embodying...loss of control, loss of autonomy, at its deepest level, finitude, confinement within the human condition, subjection to fate, according to P. Longmore. The body fascism of ableist culture wishes to avoid reminders of human vulnerability and frailty. This could be observed in the scene where Laila hugs Nima and confesses her feelings towards him. He is totally taken aback and, more importantly, revulsed and leaves her in her wheelchair.

Another scene that came under the scissors of CBFC was the one where Laila is at Jared’s place and Jared helps her in the act of relieving herself by removing her undergarments. If one analyses the scene using the theories from the affective turn, the scene could have produced a sort of fear in the non-disabled CBFC of our country. The fear and disgust remind the ableist culture of the harsh, inevitable realities of suffering, loss, pain, and death. According to Bill Hughes, a negative and aversive reaction to the presence of a disability is, in part, fear for the precariousness of one's own being and the vulnerabilities of our ephemeral flesh. Soren Kierkegaard and Frederich Nietzsche also talked about modern persons being in denial when it comes to facing up to their own vulnerability. These limits on the corporeal selves are the product of modernity that tells the story of the civilization process and rejects what Bakhtin called as the volatile ‘carnavalesque’ body that transgresses its own limits. Through these analyses, it can be concluded that it is this vulnerable body that repulses the CBFC and through the act of censorship it tries to tame the carnivalesque of the human body.

The last scene of the film needs to be read closely in terms of how Laila perceives herself. Laila comes to accept her impairment as her notions of beauty changes and she feels comfortable in her skin. She is depicted as being on a date with herself, with a mirror placed on the opposite seat to her. To make a desire for selfhood possible, Laila must have a new perspective on her body. Rather than defining herself through a non-disabled heteronormative gaze, she learns to define herself synecdochally taking pride in

her own company. Laila's new appreciation of her body is a start of another journey which is more about self-value and worth. Laila acknowledges the way she is disabled yet varies to such claims, and opens a newer discourse, a shifting lexicon and repositions signs and bodies.

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