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## Disabling the Disabled: Representation of Disability in Popular Telugu Cinema

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### Abstract:

The present paper seeks to unravel a dichotomous situation with regard to disability : subjective understanding of the world by persons with disability and their objectification in normative discourses manufactured by society at large. Cinema is an important resource that can create a positive or negative image of persons with disabilities. In popular Telugu cinema quite often individuals with disabilities are portrayed as people to be pitied or as super human creatures to be admired. Among the marginalized sections in the Indian society the question of disability acquires prominence. With this in mind, I attempt to address the construction of disability in popular Telugu cinema through a scrutiny of selected films. Such as *Kalasiunte Kaladusukham* (1961) *Padaharella Vayasu* (1978), *Anjali* (1990), *Swathimuthyam*(1986): *Mathrudevobhava* (1993).

**Keywords: Disability, Representation , Normalcy, Telugu Cinema, Negative image**

### Introduction

The representation of disability in the above named films involves the portrayal of characters with various disabilities such as physical impairments, visual impairments and mental illness. Disability was not part of popular discourse, but the film makers merely used disability and disabled characters as props for their stories. The lives that disabled people lead are significantly different from those of “normal people” in the Indian social setup. Film makers chose the subject of disability in order to make their films effective. Disabled people have often been portrayed within broadcast and news media, literature, advertising and film, in negative ways which rely on a handful of demeaning and dehumanizing stereotypes. The prevalence and persistence of this negative imagery as well as the paucity of representations of ‘ordinary’ disabled people can be viewed as both a symptom and cause of the lack of equality for disabled people ( Dodd:11). Disability in society is treated as a cultural sign and as punishment for sins committed in previous birth by the disabled person or by her/his parents. However, cinema manifests it as an imaginative sign.

Disability is dealt with in such a manner as to highlight pity, inability, burden, and ill-omen. These films articulate disability employing linguistic resources such as abusive terms and cultural resources such as rites and rituals. Goodness is associated with ability whereas sin and misdemeanors are associated with disability. Philanthropic services towards persons with disability always carry a meaning of cleansing the sins of “normal” people.

Telugu cinema in 1950s and 60s was influenced by mythological themes and characters. Later film makers developed a form of social cinema which made use of values found in mythology. Female and male characters with disabilities and poverty are frequently combined in the movies. In the next phase of Telugu films we can observe a paradoxical situation in the filmic medium and society. They develop meanings around disability which do not reflect social realities. I employ a method which exposes these ideas with reference to the above mentioned films through an examination of their contextual implications and characterization.

### **The “family” and the perpetuation of disability**

A 1961 movie *Kalasi Vunte Kaladu Sukham* (In being united is happiness) is about a typical Telugu feudal family, a rather early movie in Telugu cinema industry in that genre starring the legendary actor N. T. Rama Rao who was treated as a demigod by the Telugu people for his roles as Hindu mythological characters. In the film, he plays the role of an elder brother who is struck with paralysis and considered as an identity-less human being in the family. Disabled people are often mocked in films as in real life for being hyperactive in a certain manner. The 1960's Telugu cinema portrayed disability as a problem of the family which demands a response from the social order. This decade of cinema tends to deal with either themes related to either the feudal family or a poor family. The cinema of the later decades carries the same notions of disability but is merely different in terms of plot.

The reflection of disability on the screen develops an image which enables one to re-examine the social and cultural contexts in India with particular respect to Telugu speaking people. There was never a serious representation of disability in Telugu cinema and it was used as prop for narrating the story but not from the point of view of the disabled themselves. In the 1978 movie *Padaharella Vayasu* (A Girl's Sixteenth Year) the disabled “hero” is used to draw compassion and evoke a comic sense while finally in the pre-climax scene establishing the so-called goodness of the protagonist. This movie uses many politically incorrect and abusive ways of referring to disability whereas in the real social context people do not hesitate to utter the same words. The later movies use the same language but the intensity of virulent abuse of the disabled is much lesser than in the movie *Padaharella Vayasu*. This movie is a remarkable stage in Telugu film making with disability as its subject.

The portrayal of disability in cinema is limited either to sophisticated, unrealistic and aesthetic exposure in elite circles or to a shabby country person living in poverty or in slum areas. On the other hand the cinema often portrays disability through an association with performative arts such as music, song and dance and thus tends to elevate them with ovations while offering special encouragement. The performative arts promoted recognition of disability by giving them a sense of social dignity through being identified with an art form while completely ignoring the disability itself. According to Darke (2009):

"The films examined offer a clear revelation of how films about disability represent and construct core and peripheral ideologies in relation to their discourse around disability. Equally, disability discourse (the construction of impairment as disability) is often utilized in support of other core and peripheral ideologies. These are ideologies such as the family, health and notions of success and failure, as well as the obvious ones of individualism and medicalisation of everyday life, let alone the disability, which affects the whole of society".

Disability content in cinema is based on two aspects of society: one is orthodox and traditional and the other one is about those who believe in superstitions. This includes both the elites and the working class people. The movies associated with disability and performative arts are encouraged and promoted by elites and the movies about respect, loyalty, dependency, vulnerability and sacrifice are associated with either the middle classes or the poor. The language referring to disability is abusive and disability is usually viewed as a product of sin in a previous birth of the person him/herself or his/her parents. But in cinema the disability is used as a narrative to explore the positive side of characters and to introduce their presumed “greatness” in being a socially or emotionally concerned man or woman.

The movie *Padaharella Vayasu* is known for the main character played by the actress Sridevi and not for the actor Chandramohan who plays the hero with the physical disability. His character is ignored completely by the audience because of the character played by Sridevi. In the movie, ability means “masculinity<sup>1</sup>” but Chandramohan’s character is not viewed as one who is in need of succor owing to his “lack<sup>2</sup>” of manhood<sup>3</sup>; the audience’s sympathy lies with Sridevi for daring to fall in love and marry a person who is physically challenged. The notions of masculinity or what constitutes an able body plays a key role and it is reinforced through pity towards the helpless protagonist and admiration towards the heroine for making the decision of marrying a disabled person.

Disabled men and women are often addressed through their disabilities rather than being identified by their names. Their identities are restricted to the disability as in being addressed in very general terms as a “lame<sup>4</sup>” person or a “blind<sup>5</sup>” person. The disability ends up being a prefix to address them which is usually a painful verbal abuse that carries a bunch of negative meanings. The main motif behind this kind of addressing is to reduce the capabilities and identities of the disabled to a specific characteristic without any regard for the whole person. The language used on the screen to refer to the disabled is one of pity. The scenes are meant to create pity and sympathy in the audience towards disability rather than respect and awareness of dignity; not all the scenes carry the same intentions though; most of the time the scenes are meant to reinforce the existing stereotypes with regard to disability such as inability, physical impotence, arrogance owing to frustration and potentially tiresome, argumentative and problematic both in public and private spaces.

### **Representations of Disability outside the lens of the “normal:”**

A representation is deeply personal and individual and our relationship with how we are represented on the ‘big screen’ of cultural life is dynamic – changing as we grow personally and in conjunction with broad developments in society (Dodd:20). Telugu cinema rarely views the disabled as family members or as a part of a social group. We can see this in the Telugu movie *Anjali* (Name/The Offering) made in the year 1990. The entire discussion on disability is always an excluded theme in mainstream society and cinema. Cultural integration has failed to include them in active social participation. Cinema has consistently shown disability and the disabled as a burden to the family and society (*Matru Devo Bhava* - 1993); the disabled people are shown as more vulnerable than others when it comes to acquiring financial rights and ancestral property because their siblings and the other “normal” members of the family are traitors towards them and the latter could always destroy them (*Swati Muthyam* - 1986). The violence becomes a way to exile them from the rightful ownership of property.

Disability is in addition used as a source of merry making to the audience and the resulting identity is mocked without any expectation of dignity and respect from the others. The image of disability is portrayed through the use of a special music and in a particular tone to make it evoke forced laughter; that rhythmic percussion makes the audience to guffaw as in the movie *Padaharella Vayasu* and it creates a sense that the way the physically challenged walk must be like this.

A disabled person doesn't expect to be looked at with pride by the family and the rest of the society. It is a reflection of the deprivation of basic human dignity through the socio-cultural construction of disability. The step mother stories in Indian families are famous for a vicious character that treats disabled children in a brutal manner even though there are normal children in the same age group.

### **Socio-economic perceptions of disability**

The sovereignty and empire of woman/man's beauty is relegated to a state of inferiority thanks to disability and it doesn't have either a decent profile or a profession. The movies with disability plots are developed around the family institution and relationships but not through an active professional life and career.

The movies which I selected are not dealing with the professional life of the disabled people. In this case Telugu cinema doesn't have an interest to show their professional life or even if the disabled people do have a professional life at all? Disability is considered through an emotional lens rather than from a professional perspective. It is viewed as a conspicuous fact that their bodies are not able to perform a job and are not useful to either the market or for production. Fortunately, in the movie *Padaharella Vayasu* it is shown that their livelihood is restricted to painful manual labor, cattle grazing and menial jobs.

*Swati Mutyam* is one more movie from the famous director K. Viswanath that deals with autism. Kamal Hasan (the actor playing the role) marries a woman who happened to be married once and is now single, from the upper caste, leading to caste conflicts and social out casting of the widow.

Here the disability is not explored as discrimination though the invisible social and cultural barriers are nothing but a thinly disguised negative treatment of the disabled. The disabled are always viewed as victims when they have ancestral property provoking negative feelings from other family members who are usually out to prove that the disabled character is not worthy of the inheritance. In such cases, the exile from home is an option to them and we do not have evidence that they return to get back their property.

In terms of economic conditions the disabled are portrayed as vulnerable when it comes to enjoying their property. They are not allowed by the family to acquire inheritance and to be legal heirs to property. The discrimination begins from a gross disrespect of their individuality through the films; and ignorance with regard to the personalities of the disabled continues to reduce their importance to the level of an underdeveloped psyche or a thief or a less dignified person. According to the report of *Rethinking of Disability Representation in Museums and Galleries*:

"The representation of disability in films inevitably contains a diversity of opinions and viewpoints but there is nevertheless a degree of consensus around certain principles and

conceptual approaches when it comes to understanding disability . In particular, the social model of disability has been widely recognized as a key conceptual tool for the advancement of the rights of disabled people" (Dood:7).

The social construction of disability is based on the cultural attitudes and religious practices and that decides the treatment of the disability. This is what is done in the movie *Padaharella Vayasu*. The problem is that the disabled characters are always shown as not having self-respect and self-dignity. There is an idiomatic construction of abuses that reflects social reality through the cinema. A look can sometimes decide the future of the disabled.

In the popular mind, the disability occurs owing to a sin of the individual in the previous birth by his or her parents. The reference to the curse is common when an individual reacts against discrimination or pain with the following statement that God made the person in that manner for a specific reason. People always think of the disabled as people with low self-esteem and they feel as if it is their responsibility to bring them into mainstream society. But when the disabled are able to rise beyond the average expectation this even the good-intentioned men and women cannot tolerate.

## Conclusion

Representation can reinforce prejudices or help tackle them; visibility matters and so does positive representation in cinema which could be an opportunity to change stereotypical attitudes against disability(Dodd:21). The recent developments in narration and portrayal of disability are the effect of the globalization and advanced knowledge of technology that created new opportunities to survive. Economic and marketing opportunities are promoting disability in a positive way and creating new avenues of progress for them. Information technology has created a space for them to share their feelings and emotions; at the same point disability awareness is spreading across the media.

It is obvious that disability is one of the important themes of cinematic narration where it represents reality or utopia but it portrays the body in many ways; cinema has never neglected disability as society does and it has done its part to observe disability as a social and cultural reality. My analysis on some of the films is an attempt towards revealing both the manner and the nature of the social construction of disability both within the films themselves and the culture in which they circulate. Normalcy does not exist, but it is a complex social construction that we use to make sense of the everyday(Darke:2009). As such, the Social Model theorists aim to show that 'disability' does not exist as a reality and that it is merely a complex social construction of impairment as abnormality(Darke:2009). Thus, in applying the Social Model, I have attempted to show the cinematic aspect involved in the process of construction.

## Filmography:

1. *Anjali* (Name/An Offering)1990: Director: Mani Ratnam, Cast : Raghuvaran, Revathi, Baby Shamili, Master Tarun. (The story of a mentally challenged girl child and her family).
2. *Kalasiunte Kaladusukham* (In being united is happiness) 1961: director: Tapi Chanakya Cast: Araka Rama Rao Nandamuri, Savitri, S.V. Ranga Rao, Relangi and Suryakantham (the story of an elder son in a feudal family suffering from paralysis on the one side of his body).

3. *Mathrudevobhava* 1993: Director: K. Ajaya Kumar. Cast: Madhavi, Nasar, ( The story is about a cancer affected mother and her children)
4. *Padaharella Vayasu*, (A Girl's Sixteenth Year) 1978: director: K. Raghavendra Rao. Cast: Sridevi, Chandra Mohan, and Mohan Babu (narrates the story of a dreamy teenage girl trying to live a real life with a physically handicapped person after her bitter experiences).
5. *Swathimuthyam*(Pearl)1986: Director: K. Viswanath. Cast: Kamalhasan ,Radhika,J.V Somayajulu.(The story of a mentally challenged man and a widow).

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### Notes:

1. see in Davis, Lennard J. (ed) *The Disability Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print. pp 49-52.
2. See in Davis, Lennard J. (ed) *The Disability Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print. pp 39 , 52, 63.
3. See in Davis, Lennard J. (ed) *The Disability Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print. pp 58.
4. See in Davis, Lennard J. (ed) *The Disability Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print. pp 11, 12, 13, 134, 214, 268.
5. See in Davis, Lennard J. (ed) *The Disability Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print. pp 10, 13, 14, 82, 100.