

The Cinematic Gaze and the Disabled Body: A Comparative Study with Select Autobiographical Narratives

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Abstract:

This research investigates how disability is represented in Indian cinema by analysing films such as *Sitaare Zameen Par* and *Margarita with a Straw*. These films are compared with autobiographical self-representational work of Malini Chib's *One Little Finger*. Indian films often try to romanticise, simplify and aestheticise disability. They frame it through sentimental narratives, inspirational tropes and visual stylisation that are shaped by the non-disabled gaze. Such portrayals frequently overlook the factors like structural barriers, embodied struggle and the everyday negotiations that shape disabled lives. In contrast, Chib's memoir foregrounds lived experience, detailing the physical, emotional and social realities of cerebral palsy while asserting narrative agency and political selfhood. Drawing on the Social Model of Disability, Ato Quayson's concept of aesthetic nervousness and narratives & visual analysis, the study compares how films and autobiographical forms present and construct disability differently. The findings reveal that cinema tends to contain disability within a celebratory or motivational framework, but autobiographical writing offers a more authentic and complex representation. The study also analyses how first-hand stories from disabled people question the oversimplified way films often show disability, and why these insider voices are important for creating more honest and respectful representations.

Keywords: Disability Representation, Aesthetic Nervousness, Social Model of Disability, Autobiographical Self-Representation, Non-Disabled Gaze, Indian Cinema and Disability.

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Introduction:

In contemporary Indian cinema the portrayal of disability is either glamorised or marginalised, which further influence societal perceptions and attitudes. Films like *Sitaare Zameen Par* portray unbelievably simplified lives of people with intellectual disabilities. In contrast, films like *Margarita with a Straw* portray individuals with disability as a symbol of resilience and strength, while sometimes portraying their journeys as effortless. Though these cinematic representations can stimulate a sense of hope and admiration, they frequently overlook the complex realities and struggles faced by people with disabilities. In contrast, autobiographies and personal narratives, such as *One Little Finger* by Malini Chib, occupy the subject position, allowing disabled individuals to assert control over their own stories and challenge stereotypes.

Considering the above points, this study will undertake a comparative analysis of *Sitaare Zameen Par* and *Margarita with a Straw* alongside Malini Chib's autobiography *One Little Finger*. By examining these works, this research aims to probe differences in narrative strategies, agency, and representation, highlighting how cinematic portrayals are shaped largely by non-disabled creators, in contrast to autobiographical writings which portray authentic self-representation.

Aims and objectives:

- To analyse Indian cinema with real accounts of disability portrayed by disabled writers.
- To conduct a comparison of characters in literary works and their media adaptations.
- To explore the disparity between the cinematic glorification of disability and the real struggles documented in autobiographical accounts, thereby shedding light on the potential superficiality of cinematic portrayals and advocating for a more nuanced and truthful representation of disability in Indian cinema.

- To investigate how silver screen magnifies disability as unchallenging and effortless.

Research Hypothesis:

While Indian cinema often romanticise and oversimplify the lives of disabled, autobiographical accounts such as Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* related to disability provides a more nuanced and authentic representation.

Research Methodology:

- The study will be grounded in theoretical frameworks from the Disability Studies, particularly the Social Model of Disability, which distinguishes between impairment (the physical/mental condition) and disability (societal barriers and attitudes).
- Narrative and Visual Analysis

Literature Review:

Cinematic and autobiographical narratives of disability offer critical interventions against the reductive and sentimental portrayals that dominate mainstream media. The Hindi film *Sitaare Zameen Par* foregrounds neurodivergence by portraying cognitive difference through everyday pedagogic and social challenges. On the other hand, the film *Margarita with a Straw* explores the intersection of physical disability and sexuality, foregrounding desire, intimacy, and bodily autonomy as central to disabled lived experience. Both the films complicate conventional tropes of pity and inspiration by centring subjectivity rather than spectacle.

Autobiographical writing further deepens this representational shift. Malini Chib's memoir *One Little Finger* provide an intimate account of growing up with cerebral palsy, emphasising personal agency with simultaneously exposing the social and infrastructural barriers imposed by ableist norms. Similarly, her earlier autobiographical text, *Impressions from a Wheelchair* foregrounds disability as an embodied condition shaped by mobility constraints, chronic pain,

fatigue, and communicative labour. These texts reposition disability not as an individual tragedy but as socially mediated experience.

Theoretical frameworks on representation and affect help contextualise these narratives. Quayson, in his critical theoretical monograph, “Aesthetic Nervousness”, examines how literary and cultural texts manage audience’s discomfort when confronted with disability, arguing that representation often produces anxiety rather than empathy. His concept is useful for analysing cinematic moments where disability unsettles normative visual regimes rather than being neatly resolved. Empirical scholarship further grounds these cultural readings.

O’Grady et al., in a peer-reviewed journal article titled, “Disability, Social Exclusion and the Consequential Experience of Justiciable Problems,” demonstrates how structural exclusion leads to emotional distress and social marginalisation. Their study underscores the importance of narratives that foreground lived experience within legal, institutional, and social frameworks.

Similarly, Odell, in the journal article “Not Your Average Childhood: Lived Experience of Children with Physical Disabilities,” documents the everyday embodied routines of children in institutional settings. His analysis shows how bodily limitations are continuously negotiated in mundane contexts, challenging romanticised or inspirational portrayals of disabled childhood. Disability here emerges as an ongoing embodied negotiation rather than a singular moment of adversity.

Institutional constraints on agency are examined by Olli, Vehkakoski, and Salanterä in the journal article “Facilitating and Hindering Factors in the Realization of Disabled Children’s Agency.” They argue that institutional environments either enable or restrict autonomy, a framework particularly useful for critiquing cinematic narratives that individualise agency while obscuring structural limitations.

Finally, Reindel, in the theoretical journal article “Independence, Dependence, Interdependence,” critiques the Western ideal of absolute independence and proposes interdependence as a more ethical and realistic framework. This perspective enriches the reading of Chib’s autobiographical work, where autonomy is consistently framed as relational rather than purely individualistic.

1. Cinematic Gaze and the Emotional Fabric:

This section looks at how images, framing, and emotional cues are used in film to construct disability using Social Model of Disability and narrative-visual analysis. In order to gain emotional response from viewers, films frequently use visual techniques that sentimentalise disability. Through close-up shots, slow-motion scenes, and poignant background music, the story in *Sitaare Zameen Par* softens disability and visually scripts the characters as inspirational rather than socially marginalised. Instead of showing real problems like social stigma or lack of accessible schools, these visuals focus on making the character seem inspiring and creating an emotional bond with the audience. It is evident from the Social Model perspective that the movie portrays disability as a personal struggle rather than a socially constructed illness. From the perspective of the Social Model, disability is understood as socially produced rather than individually located; as Shakespeare states, “disability is caused by the way society is organised, not by impairment” (Shakespeare 29).

Even though Laila's sexuality and independence are portrayed in *Margarita with a Straw*, it still focuses more on her personal achievements. The story mostly ignores structural problems like societal prejudice and inaccessible infrastructure in favour of internal development, romantic exploration, and self-discovery. A narrative-visual approach reveals how cinematic techniques shape perception, reinforcing the idea that “disability is a representation before it is an experience” (Garland-Thomson 78).

As a result, even though the movies seek to encourage inclusivity, they ultimately satisfy viewers' expectations and reinforce sentimental rather than structural conceptions of disability. What the visual design hides is clear from the social model that "disability comes from society's exclusion, not just from physical limitations" (Davis 12).

2. Autobiographical voice as Counter-Narrative:

Grounded in Disability Studies, especially the Social Model, *One Little Finger* feels like a powerful counter-story because it does not follow the common movie-style portrayal of showing disability. Instead of being shown from someone else's point of view, Malini Chib speaks in her own voice and writes from her real life. It makes her story feel direct, honest, and real. She talks about everyday problems like stairs where there should be ramps, schools and offices that forget about disabled people, and how people look at her with pity, curiosity, or confusion. Through this, she clearly shows that her biggest struggles come from society, not from her body. "Today, many will invite the whole family for dinner or a party but not me! Do they feel I am infectious?" (Chib 54) encapsulates this painful social marginalisation.

Unlike films that use background music, special camera angles, and emotional scenes to control our emotions, Chib's writing takes us straight into her mind. She writes about basic human needs like love, respect, independence, work, and being treated as an equal. She shows how disabled people try to balance needing help with wanting to live independently. As an autobiography, there are no filters or cinematic tricks. Her story is not portrayed as an inspirational fairy tale as she openly writes about anger, fear, ambitions, weakness, and strength. This honesty dismantles the soft, sentimental version of disability often shown in films and shifts our attention back to the real barriers created by society. Her story reminds us that disability is not about defeating one's body, but about living in a world that often refuses to make space for everyone. She illustrates not only physical but also attitudinal barriers, as

when she notes that “they look at our imperfect bodies, and believe some of the religious beliefs which explain that we are the way we are, due to a retribution for sins committed in the past” (Chib 69), revealing how cultural stigma compounds exclusion.

3. Authorship and Representational Power:

The difference between films and an autobiography becomes easier to comprehend when we look at who is telling the story and how it is portrayed. In most films, the story of disability is usually narrated by non-disabled writers and directors. Because of this, disability is often portrayed from an outsider’s point of view. These films use soft lighting, emotional music, and close-up shots to make disability look inspiring or morally uplifting. This creates a narrow picture where the problem seems to be the disabled person’s body. Real issues like inaccessible buildings, rude attitudes, and absence of proper support are mostly ignored. As a consequence, “disability is often reduced to an individual condition located within the body, while structural issues such as inaccessible infrastructure, discriminatory attitudes, and inadequate institutional support remain marginal or invisible” (Quayson 63).

In contrast, *One Little Finger* is written by Malini Chib herself, which makes a big difference. She tells her own story in her own words. She writes honestly about feeling excluded, being frustrated, having dreams, feeling strong, and dealing with daily struggles. There are no dramatic visuals to make her life look softer or more emotional. Instead, her words feel direct and real. She does not show herself as someone to be pitied or admired from a distance, but as a human being trying to live in a world that does not always make space for her. Her story shows that what really disables people is not their bodies, but a society that refuses to change.

4. Disability and Social Model:

Social Model of Disability helps us clearly understand the difference between films and autobiographies in their representation of disability. When we look at the stories of *Sitaare Zameen Par* and *Margarita with a Straw*, we see that both films mostly show disability as a personal struggle. The emotional scenes, inspiring music, and happy endings in the movies make disability feel like it can be defeated through bravery or hard work. This approach aligns with what the Social Model critiques as an individualised understanding of disability, where, “impairment is treated as the primary problem rather than social exclusion” (Shakespeare 33). Ato Quayson’s Model teaches us something very crucial, that disability is constructed by the society. It comes from buildings without ramps, schools that do not welcome everyone, and people’s negative attitudes. When we read *One Little Finger* through this lens, we understand that Malini Chib’s real struggles come from the world around her. She clearly talks about the barriers in her life, such as places that are not accessible, systems that ignore disabled people, and the prejudices she has to face every day. In her memoir, disability is not just about the body, but about how society views it.

Unlike films that try to make disability look neat and emotional, Chib portrays the real exhaustion of living in an unkind and unprepared world. She shows how tiring it is to keep asking for basic respect and rights. Her autobiography shows the reality that films often ignore. This comparison helps us see that films often hide the political and social side of disability, while Chib’s writing brings it back and reminds us that “disability is not only a personal matter, but a responsibility” (Garland-Thomson 110).

5. Reality, Struggle and Emotional:

Films often make disability look simple by using emotional techniques to control how the audience feel. Close-up shots, soft colours, and emotional music make scenes feel sad or inspiring. This can make viewers feel sympathy or admiration, but it does not help them

understand the real problems disabled people face in daily life, like lack of access, discrimination, and poor support.

Disability Studies, especially the Social Model, teaches us that the real emotional struggle comes from being excluded by society, and not just from a medical condition. Autobiographies like *One Little Finger* show this truth in a much more honest way. Malini Chib writes openly about her feelings, her anger when places are not accessible, her wish to be independent, her moments of fear, and her strength in dealing with constant rejection.

Films rarely portray such deep and mixed emotions because they prefer clean, happy endings that make viewers feel good. An autobiography, however, does not hide the hard and uncomfortable parts of life. It focuses on real feelings and real situations, showing disability as an ongoing struggle shaped by personal dreams and social barriers.

The Social Model helps us understand this difference clearly. Films focus on personal success stories, while Chib shows how society often fails disabled people. As Davis notes, “the concept of disability is constructed through social norms that define the body” (Davis 47). Films try to make audiences feel emotional, but autobiographies help them understand real life. It changes disability from being just a sad or inspiring story to being a serious social issue based on real experiences. In doing so, disability is redefined not as a sentimental or inspirational story, but as a serious social issue rooted in exclusion, inequality, and everyday struggle.

Conclusion:

The comparative study of *Sitaare Zameen Par*, *Margarita with a Straw* with Malini Chib’s memoir *One Little Finger*, shows how disability is represented differently across film and autobiographical writing. Together, these texts reveal that disability is not only a bodily condition but also a social, emotional, and political experience shaped by the narrative form through which it is portrayed. While the films attempt to create awareness, they remain

influenced by cinematic expectations and audience comfort. The memoir, however, provides a deeply personal and authentic account because it is written by a disabled person. In *Sitaare Zameen Par*, disability is framed through an inspirational lens where emotional transformation, sports achievement, and social acceptance form the core narrative. The film shows barriers, it also resolves them quickly, often suggesting that disability can be overcome through determination or mentorship. As many disability scholars argue, this type of representation simplifies the lived reality of disabled individuals and fits into what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls visual rhetoric, where “disabled bodies become symbols rather than full human beings” (Garland-Thomson 13). The film’s quick social acceptance and dramatic transformation sequences highlights how cinema can portray disability as easier than it actually is. *Margarita with a Straw* presents disability in a more nuanced way by exploring Laila’s sexuality, desires, and emotional conflicts. Her journey challenges the common belief that disabled individuals lack sexual identities. The film acknowledges complexity, but it remains an outsider narrative because an able-bodied actor performs the disabled character. As critics argue, this continues to filter representation through cinematic conventions instead of authentic lived experience. Even when cinematic narratives appear to resist stereotypes, “disability remains framed through a gaze that structures experience into emotional peaks and resolutions, thereby containing its political implications” (Quayson 22). In contrast, *One Little Finger* stands as an authentic first-hand narrative. Malini Chib writes from her embodied experience of cerebral palsy, providing details that films rarely capture such as the exhaustion of daily care, architectural barriers, academic exclusion, social prejudice, and the emotional toll of constant dependence. Her narrative highlights what G. Thomas Couser calls the power of autopathography, “where disabled writers reclaim authority over their own stories and challenge cultural misconceptions” (Couser 78). Chib’s political consciousness transforms her memoir into an act of resistance, demanding visibility, accessibility, and rights for disabled

individuals. Quayson argues that “able-bodied audiences often feel discomfort when confronting disability because it disrupts social norms” (Quayson 15). Films usually reduce this discomfort through inspirational music, soft lighting, or neatly resolved endings. The memoir, however, does not ignore the discomfort; instead, it uses it to reveal structural inequality and demand social change. Overall, the comparison shows that films, though empathetic, often simplify or dramatise disability for audience appeal, while autobiographical narratives like *One Little Finger* offer depth, authenticity, and political insight. This contrast foregrounds the need for more insider voices and honest representations. Memoirs help readers to understand disability as lived reality rather than spectacle, thereby fostering genuine awareness and transforming societal attitudes.

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