



Of Cognition, Erotica and Cerebral Palsy: Body, Beauty and Disability in Margarita with a Straw

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“The problem, unstated till now,
is how to live in a damaged body
in a world where pain is meant to
be gagged uncured, un-grieved-over.

The problem is to connect,
without hysteria, the pain of
anyone's body with the pain of the world's body”

– from *Contradictions* by Adrienne Riche

Body is the locus of identity, sexuality and gender performativity. The female body more importantly is the site of male gaze and desire, where the operative rhetoric is beauty. The quality called beauty is a cultural manufacture and a social behaviour that women learn to appropriate. The cult of masculinity on the other hand seeks to possess women who pander to these set standards of physical beauty. The paradigms of beauty then function to repress, rather than celebrate womanhood. It is more about patriarchal power and control. If a woman is already the ‘other’, defined by her body, what happens to disabled women? The disabled woman is further stigmatized because she violates the norm of the aesthetic. Body imaging renders her ab(normal), physically and mentally redundant. Feminist and disability rights are born from the same anguish. They are social movements that acknowledge oppression as stemming not from a biological reality but from a socially constructed inequality and

hence seek to dismantle hegemonic power structures; in sex, in work, in reproduction. They are concerned with unlearning notions of idealized human bodies. Bolt and Brink described the powerful effect of physical appearance on how people are evaluated, concluding that “a widespread physical attractiveness stereotype exists” in which attractive people are assumed to possess various desirable qualities whereas those whose appearance is less pleasing are viewed negatively (qtd in Anderson 185). The long term effect of this indoctrination is that physical attractiveness becomes a standard for measuring the character or worth of persons leading “those with visible deficiencies” to become “stigmatized by culture as deviants, because they embody our fears of failure and death” (qtd in Anderson 185).

Feminists have celebrated the body as a means of agency, power and pleasure. One of the chief concerns of feminism has been to reclaim the right of women over their bodies, especially women's sexuality and reproductive processes, which have been throttled by patriarchal violence and coercion. Legal and economic measures, together with religion and standardized social norms have contributed further to the subjugation of women. While the feminist movement has always sought to give agency to women to make decisions about their own bodies and to prevent or reduce their bodily suffering, it has for long ignored the experiences of bodily suffering that cannot be controlled or prevented. Women with disabilities have therefore felt that feminists have an ideal of the female body or of female bodily experience in which they cannot participate any more than they can in the idealized images gendered by society (Wendell 117). Feminist scholars like Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous have urged women to write their bodies, and in doing so feminist writing has failed to consider the experiences of the negative body. Susan Wendell defines a disabled woman as a ‘rejected body’, trapped in a sexually unattractive body. Jenny Morris, critiquing the concept of ‘body beautiful’ in “Feminism, gender and disability”, states:

Living in a sexist and a heterosexist society as we do, all of us, nondisabled and disabled women, find that our behaviour and appearance is policed by men. Sexist and heterosexist values tell us what kind of appearance we should aim for, what kind of behaviour is acceptable...As Liz Crow writes in *Encounters with Strangers*, we need to put back the experience of impairment into our politics. We need to write about, research and analyse the personal experience of our bodies and our minds for if

we don't impose our own definitions and perspectives then the nondisabled world will continue to do it for us in ways which alienate and disempower us. (14-15)

There are visible disabilities and invisible disabilities (as no one is born perfect). In the social chain each person is dependent on the other for survival. Subaltern politics and feminist ethics harp on the importance of iteration and vocalization on the part of the subjugated people along with the need for their presence and visibility in the public domain. Similarly there is very little visibility of people with disability in popular culture. But in the rare cases when they are represented, there is an obvious infantilization in the rhetoric and depiction of the disabled subject.

Disability is linked to dependency, childlikeness and helplessness. Bollywood cinema is home to many such stereotypes like *Main Aisa Hi Hoon*, *Koi Mil Gaya*. This is not surprising considering how Bollywood has thrived on a cult of hyper masculine male figures and hyperbolic feminine standards of beauty. However sensitive representations are not all together absent. Films like *Koshish*, *Iqbal*, *Black*, *Taare Zameen Par* have paved the way for acceptance and inclusion. Released in 2015, written and directed by Shonali Bose, *Margarita with a Straw* is an exceptional film about a feisty girl Laila, tied to her wheel chair, attending college, watching porn, dreaming of orgasms, flying off to New York on a scholarship and loving and lusting for people she is attracted to. Laila is not defined by her im(perfect) body. Yet it is her body that creates alternative spaces of bisexuality and subverts the heteronormative myths of 'real beauty' and 'real love'. According to Carol Hanisch the 'Personal is Political' (Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation in 1970). The issues concerning disabled people are not merely individual and personal, they are public issues, which need to be politicized, and in doing so *Margarita with a*

Straw makes a powerful statement.



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The disabled character as and when represented is stereotypically and conveniently de-sexed. Malini Chib an Indian disability rights activist, on whose life the film *Margarita with a Straw* is based, observes in her autobiography *One Little Finger*, “Like everyone else, I did have the desire for sex. Once when I brought up the subject, people around me started whispering and I was told ‘why would you need sex?’ Chib promptly wrote an article, “No Sex Please, You’re Disabled” (147). It is interesting how *Margarita with a Straw* constructs and portrays the sexuality of Laila beginning with the idea of auto eroticism, as she watches porn and enjoys orgasms.

A fellow wheelchair-bound classmate, Dhruv is more than interested in Laila and the two even get a little uninhibited in their sexual experiments. It is Laila who takes Dhruv to the biology lab and initiates the lessons on

the erotic. But Laila has her heart set on Nima, the charismatic lead singer of the student rock band she writes lyrics



for.

When they win a battle-of-the-bands competition, she professes her feelings for him. This subversive scene is important in its powerful rebuttal of public sympathy for the disabled. Yong calls it a normate bias—an unquestioned worldview leading nondisabled people to assume their experiences and perception of the world to be the norm and thus “adequate for measuring the experiences of all people.” This view negates the experience of persons with disabilities and leads people to consider people with disabilities as “victims” or “sufferers.” The normate bias causes many to assume that someone born with a disability or who becomes disabled at an early age desires to be “normal.” Laila is crushed by the social disregard for her ability, only to be further heart broken by Nima’s rejection — so much so that she drops out of school, saying she can’t face going back. Malini Chib recounts, how in adherence to the macho image, a typical boy would deem it unacceptable to be seen with a disabled girlfriend. An arm candy cannot be anything but normal. Chib poses a question for society at large, “Would a man see beyond my body?” (65) A disabled man is perceived as a wounded ‘male’ while a disabled woman suffers due to the cultural stereotypes associated with women being caregivers. A woman is required to perform child-care, spouse-care, cooking, feeding, soothing, nurturing. The stereotypical thinking is that a woman with disability is unable to provide for a man in a similar manner, nor satisfy his sexual and emotional needs. Chib

observes that it is therefore easier for men with disabilities to get an able-bodied partner because society is conditioned to having and seeing women in domestic roles.

Laila decides to continue her writing studies abroad. A scholarship brings her to Manhattan with her mother, where Laila begins to enjoy her new beginnings including crushing on her British classmate assigned to help her.

Then a chance encounter at a street protest introduces her to Khanum, an assertive young blind woman of Indian/Pakistani origin.



To her initial surprise, Laila finds herself drawn into a same-sex relationship that moves from hesitant beginnings to a heady live-in commitment. However, *Margarita, With a Straw* admirably treats this lesbian relationship with sensitivity and reverence that avoids any conspicuous propaganda, being just one of the elements of personal discovery for Laila, as she finds her place in the world. It is Khanum who teaches her to appreciate the physical beauty of her body and find joy in it. It is from Khanum again that she learns the importance of accepting the self, just the way it is, with happiness and grace. Just as lesbianism as a movement was an offshoot of radical feminism, rejecting the domain of patriarchy, similarly the two of them find perfection in their imperfect bodies and (dis)abled world, as if in rejection of the 'normal'.



Laila tells the blind hence naturally/biologically impaired Khanum that she has the most perfect body, hereby subverting the category of the ‘normal’.

Referring to Foucault, Chib introspects, “What is normal? Who is normal? Why am I abnormal? Who decides? I cannot speak, I cannot walk; does that make me abnormal?” Laila eventually goes on to sleep with her handsome classmate Jared after a bathroom encounter.



In projecting Laila as bisexual the film takes on multiple challenges. The compulsory heteronormativity and resultant homophobia of society are suitably critiqued. She comes out to her mother about her bisexual identity in a scene that is as hilarious as it is commiserating.

Malini Chib recounts that she was supposed to be nothing more than a vegetable for doctors and society alike. “I was not mentally handicapped...I was normal and above average in intelligence”, “an intelligent mind with

a disobedient body” “I knew that I was different and trapped in a dysfunctional body, but did others realize I had a spirit and a mind separate from this body? My body did not work like others, but did they realize that my mind was normal? Did they consider thinking that my desires were just the same as theirs?” (54). Physical disability carries the stigma and myth of cognitive dysfunction. To quote from one of Chib’s encounters where a young woman had remarked, “...I know what these people are like, they don’t know their minds” (142). “...I know what these people are like, they don’t know their minds” (142). Physical disability is more often than not equated with mental retardation. A person in a wheel chair is considered psychologically and cognitively challenged. “The old belief that a disabled person had to be fixed, fitted and cured had changed to a more social approach. In other words ...the environment and not the person that needs fixing” (Chib108). Minor scenes like the game of chess, Laila’s dislocation to an alien environment and her academic enterprise wonderfully acknowledge Laila’s cognitive and social skills. She negotiates her way through Manhattan, does her groceries and even makes her own eggs. Laila is not defined by her physical limits — her intellect, libido and eagerness to experience new things are more powerful than any preconceived notion of what someone with cerebral palsy can or should do.

The end is often viewed by critics and audience alike, as melodramatic and tear jerking in an otherwise brilliant script. But the death of Laila’s mother is that necessary final act of Laila learning to survive on her own. The dependency on her mother gives way to the individual space that she had once demanded. In the end Laila is seen going on a date with herself and finally coming to terms and falling in love with her identity.



Margarita with a Straw reiterates Malini's eloquence and profundity, as expressed in her book, *One Little Finger*: "Today, my mind takes over. I do not want to be normal!... I do not know what your 'normal' is. I only know *me*. I like me" (198). This acceptance sets her "Finally free to be me". A poem by Mamta Kalia, called "Viewpoint" puts this idea into perspective:

I was born upside down
 and I'm very proud of it
 Not that I walk on
 my head or talk with my toes,
 but I swear I feel comfortable
 in the world as it is
 (In school I believed it had something to do with how my parents made love)
 Once I did stand up
 But I found everything down:
 prices, politics, love.
 So I stood on my head again
 And struck a tidy bargain. (13)

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