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Representation of Disability in Anand L. Rai's Film *Zero*

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Abstract

The term disability has come to be associated with social discrimination and injustice. Different forms of art have often brought to the fore the inhuman treatment meted out to the disabled persons by representing various types of disability, but their treatment has not been unquestionable. In films belonging to this category the disabled characters are more often than not treated with a patronizing attitude on the part of the so-called physically 'abled' persons. One such example is the latest Bollywood film *Zero* (2018), directed by Anand L. Rai. This paper tries to show how the much-hyped film fails to do justice to the sensitive issue of disability. The very title *Zero* bluntly suggests that the disabled protagonist is worthy of nothing. The name given to him is Bauaa, the Hindi equivalent for a dwarf. The girl he meets and falls in love with is Aafia who suffers from cerebral palsy and is frequently referred to in the film in most derogatory terms. Another disabled character in the film is Bauaa's friend Guddu Singh who is presented in a comic banter. No wonder, these characters either make us laugh or move us to pity, but are never looked upon with respect and dignity, which is farthest from a desirable representation of disability in any form of art. The paper also touches upon the issue of the deprivation of the real-life disabled actors to play the roles of the disabled characters and questions the popular trend of the films on disability to project the disabled characters mostly with shades of white or even as superheroes.

Keywords: Disability, Art, Bollywood, Film, *Zero*, Bauaa, Vertically Challenged

Introduction

Cinema, as a powerful form of art, has represented disability of various types. If the West boasts of films like *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *My Left Foot – The Story of Christy Brown* (1989), and *Scent of a Woman* (1992), the Indian Hindi film industry, popularly known as Bollywood, has to its credit Gulzar's *Koshis* (1972), Rakesh Roshan's *Koi Mil Gaya* (2003), Aamir Khan's *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) and Karan Johar's *My Name Is Khan* (2011) all of which deal with some kind of disability or the other. The latest addition to this is Anand L. Rai's *Zero*. The makers of all the films of this category may honestly seek to address the issue of disability in positive terms and try to sensitize the audience to it, but unfortunately this aim is rarely achieved. They present the disabled persons either as objects of fun and ridicule or as possessors of superhuman qualities, but certainly not as common human beings. This paper tries to show how the film *Zero* just strictly follows the stereotypes related to disability, and ends up being a failed attempt. But while doing so, it will mainly take into consideration a few Hindi films on disability with occasional reference to some other films made in Indian regional languages.

The Story in Brief

The film starts with the protagonist Bauua Singh, a man of 4 feet 6 inches' height, having a dream about his heroics against a villain (the villain in his dream is none other than his father). This antipathy towards his father continues in real life, too, when in the very next scene he counterattacks his father's charge of wasting money by saying that it was his flawed lifestyle that was responsible for his short height. However, this charming Bauua has his moments of almost frenzied happiness whenever he finds himself in the company of the filmstar Babita Kumari, whether onscreen or offscreen. He is almost mad about her, and can go to any extreme for her. But at the same time, he also realizes that he is 38, and needs to get married as soon as possible. So, he pays regular visits to a matrimonial agent who one day sends him to Aafia Yousufzai Bhinder, a scientist who suffers from cerebral palsy. They meet, fall in love and decide to get married despite differences in their social and educational background.

Life takes a surprising turn for Bauua when he gets a chance to spend a whole day with the queen of his heart Babita Kumari by winning a dance competition. After a tussle with himself to choose between an ordinary life with Aafia and a dream-like one with Babita, he prefers the latter and runs away just before getting wedded. Quite impressed with Bauua whose joviality and liveliness provide at least momentary relief to her pangs of a broken relationship, Babita Kumari allows him to stay with her for over a year. But gradually he gets disillusioned with the apparently glamorous film world, finding himself a misfit there. All his dreams get shattered when Babita Kumari severely insults him after coming to know from his own confession that he has broken a girl's heart, and he feels compelled finally to go back to his 'pathetic life'.

When Bauua returns to Aafia, he discovers that she has given birth to their baby. Aafia who is still unmarried does not pay heed to Bauua's pleadings. Instead, she focuses more on her mission to send a chimpanzee to Mars. The chimpanzee that Aafia thought was perfectly ready to be sent to Mars shows some strange and unexpected behaviour. So, they decide to send a human in its place. They invite applications for selecting a physically and mentally tough person who would be able to successfully undergo all the tests required for that mission. Quite predictably Bauua comes out as the fittest of all candidates. Aafia has to tolerate Bauua's presence for months during his training and trial at the research centre, and her dislike and even abhorrence for Bauua gradually die down. Breaking an engagement with a fellow scientist, she professes her love to Bauua only before moments of his flight, and promises that she would wait for him. Bauua leaves for a new planet with a proud feeling of victory over all.

Name of the Film and the Protagonist

The title of the film *Zero* leaves us pondering over the very drive behind making a film on disability. If the objective of making such films is a respectful representation of the disabled persons, titles such as this, needless to say, do very little justice to it. Mathematicians may argue that zero is as important as any other number, but in common parlance it is equivalent to nothing. Naturally, the title *Zero* is more likely to establish in the audience a notion that a disabled person is

worthy of nothing. One might also argue that the title ridicules such people who consider disabled persons worthless. But then, there is the counter-argument that the majority of the audience of a popular film is quite different from the readers of a literary text, and is most likely to miss the irony associated with this title.

If the title of the film is a derogatory one, the name of its protagonist is no less belittling. Disabled persons are generally referred to in most abusive terms that constantly remind them of their deformities. But this happens only when they are in the company of notorious people, mostly friends. In places where people are expected to show some civic sense, their official name which is supposed to be as good as that of anyone is used. In this context it is quite surprising to note that the makers of the film have failed to even find a proper name for the protagonist. His name, the only name to be particular, is Bauua Singh. The term Bauua in Hindi means a 'dwarf'. For anyone with knowledge of the Hindustani language, the very name is evocative of a sense of disrespect and even insult. It only leaves to our imagination to consider the degree of humiliation the character may be put to each and every time he is called by that name. Moreover, the way the protagonist Bauua Singh has been described in numerous reviews of the film has drawn flak from various corners. Instead of being spoken of in terms of common human characteristics, he has been most unjustly referred to as one who is 'vertically challenged'. Words such as these endorse a patronizing attitude under the garb of political correctness. The very mention of these words suggests the superiority of a person over the other. Again, the association of the word 'vertically' relegates a person to the status of a non-human. This, again, is a very negative way of dealing with disability and disabled persons.

Portrayal of other Disabled Characters

Apart from Bauua there are two other disabled characters in the film – Aafia Yousufzai Bhinder and Guddu Singh. The first is, as we have already come to know, the one who ultimately helps Bauua find a meaning in his life and the second his closest friend and confidant. Aafia is a patient of cerebral palsy while Guddu Singh suffers from nyctalopia. The disabilities in all these characters may be of different types, but their representation is the same having little or no respect

in it. If Bauua is looked upon with an air of ridicule, pity and compassion are what Aafia's character evokes in the audience. Though a scientist of immense repute, she is made to look a most pitiable character when she feels elated after receiving a marriage proposal from Bauua's family. On the other hand, Guddu Singh's night blindness is presented mostly in a comic banter. Thus, his character lacks any individuality, and he ends up looking more like a clown.

One Dimensional Portrayal of Disabled Characters

The idea that the worth of disabled persons is not measured in the same yardstick used in cases of others is endorsed and established in films dealing with disability. In almost all the films of this category the disabled persons have to achieve some extraordinary feats to gain social acceptance, as if securing a decent livelihood normally is not enough for them to be considered with respect and dignity. If we just rewind our memories of such films made in India in the last ten or fifteen years, we will see that this has been the commonest and the most bankable practice of the filmmakers. If Rohit who plays a character with developmental disability in *Koi Mil Gaya* connects with an extraterrestrial being through his father's computer, the dyslexic Ishaan in *Taare Zameen Par* has to beat everyone and match his teacher's skill in a drawing competition. Similarly, in *My Name Is Khan* Rizwan Khan who has Asperger's syndrome has to fight all the odds to meet the US President and deliver his message. Anand L. Rai's *Zero* is no exception in this regard. Here Bauua manages to win the hearts of two ladies by different skills. He gets an access to the world of film stars represented by Babita Kumari by proving his excellence as a dancer. However, he has to bring out the best in him to undergo all the tests to be declared fit for the Mission Mars. It is only then that Aafia feels convinced of his worth, and decides to wait for him.

Another aspect of the films on disability is that there is an inherent pressure among the directors of these films to portray the disabled characters with shades of white. Complete inclusion can never be achieved unless and until the film makers show their flaws too. Radha Mohan, the director of the critically acclaimed film *Mozhi* (2007), expresses his concern over this issue. He says, "Most popular

films scream for sympathy. If I write a story in which the disabled person is a serial killer, people should not take offence. I am treating him as any human.”

Plentitude of Abusive remarks about Disability

Anand L. Rai's *Zero* makes abundant use of abusive remarks against the disabled persons in the film. When rebuked by his father for his short height, Bauua blames him for that: “*Sperms chhote padh gaye tumhare...*” (Your sperms had been insufficient). One can hardly think of a more humiliating remark than this one to refer to someone's short height. But quite ironically this remains the most publicised line in the teasers of this film. Aafia, a renowned scientist, is introduced in the film in most derogatory terms: “*Ladki khoobsurat hai, padhi likhi, achchhe khandaan se hai, itni badi naukri hai iski, bas ek mechanical problem hai...technical dissonance...*” (The girl is beautiful, educated, from a good family and has a good job. But she has a mechanical problem – some technical dissonance.) The same tone of objectifying disability continues when the manager of the marriage bureau reminds Bauua of his deformity: “*Aap kaunse hoor ke pare hain, inki taange kursi se zameen tak to pahunchti nahi...*” (You are not someone out of the world, your legs don't even touch the floor while you sit on a chair.) When Aafia comes to Bauua's house with a marriage proposal, his father is seen telling him: “*Kismatwala hai ladki mil rahi hai tujhe shaadi ke liye, tujh jaise ko to launda na miley...*” (You are lucky enough to get a girl for marriage, otherwise, you don't even deserve a boy.)

More surprisingly, both Aafia and Bauua make fun of each other's disability, giving an impression that it is quite okay for a disabled person to ridicule another. When Aafia mocks Bauua by saying, “*Tumhari akal tumhari height se bhi chhoti hai...*” (Your intelligence is even less than your height.), Bauua makes a most insulting comment: “*Chhote chhote se sahi, haath paun kaam to karte hain humare. Inse hilne ke alawa hota kya hai?*” (My hands and legs, though short, at least work. What can she do except moving constantly?) It is quite obvious that comments such as these, when circulated widely through a popular film, worsen the situation for the disabled persons instead of sensitizing the people to their plights.

Deprivation of Disabled Persons to Play the Roles of Disabled Characters

One more criticism against the film *Zero* is its failure to feature real-life disabled persons to play the roles of disabled characters. However, this is a strongly established practice in any film industry which very few film-makers dare to challenge. There is none denying that disabled persons with their better understanding of the psyche of such people will be able to do more justice to the characters. Again, the portrayal of disabled characters by such persons will lead to an immense gain in the awareness of people about disability and in turn their social acceptability. Yet, the number of films featuring disabled persons is pitifully low, P.K. Sreekumar directed Malayalam film *Shabdham* (2018) and the Tamil *Anjathe* (2008) and *Naan Kadavul* (2009) directed by Mysskin and Bala respectively being some of the rarest examples. The pangs caused by such deprivation are quite manifest in the words of Virali Modi, an aspiring actress with disability as well as a disability rights activist:

“I have given auditions for side and main roles many times and the only barrier that comes up is my disability. Why cannot a person with disability play these roles? Take *Guzaarish* where Hrithik Roshan plays a quadriplegic. The character could have been played by a disabled person. There are so many more films like these like *Black*, or *Barfi* to name a few.”

One might argue that acting is a highly professional job which requires rigorous training and practice on the part of the performers. Real-life disabled persons may not be confident enough to stand in front of the camera. Well, there are many actors who, in order to perform well, have to be given so much of instructions by the directors that would even make a tree act. The question is – why can the same thing not be done with the disabled persons? This preference for the so-called trained actors over the non-trained ones often compromises the honest representation of disability in films. This is very true of *Zero* in which Bauua looks more like a caricatured figure and Aafia's lack of consistency to portray the nuances of one suffering from cerebral palsy is quite visible. Moreover, the justification that the incompetence of disabled persons as actors is the primary reason for their rejection in films does not hold ground for actors like Virali Modi who get deprived time and again simply

because of their disability. Jenni Gold's 2013 film *Cinem Ability* raises questions about this particular issue.

Commercial aspect of the Film

The makers of *Zero* were quite vocal in numerous pre-release promos that the film, instead of revolving around disability, deals with a simple story involving certain characters who happen to be disabled, and that the film does in no way seek to capitalize on the issue of disability. But, quite contrary to this, the film does exactly this. If one just recollects the teasers of the film, one would only be reminded of scenes and dialogues making unbearable mockery of disability. Again, the cast of the film only proves that it is very much commercially oriented. Had its makers been concerned only with proper representation of disability having little or no regard for box-office results, they would not have to rope in big stars like Shah Rukh Khan and Anushka Sharma to play the roles of the disabled characters. However, this has been the trend with almost all the films of this category, and *Zero* just faithfully follows that monotonously repeated tradition.

Conclusion

Thus, what the film does is to perpetuate with the same undercurrent the age-old stereotypes associated with disability. There is no uniqueness in its portrayal of the disabled protagonist with superhuman qualities or the projection of a disabled character as fit only to marry another. Both Bauua and Aafia try to love people different from them physically, but ultimately get the space they need only in the company of each other. There are, however, sporadic moments in the film – be it in its presentation of the emotional conflicts in the minds of both these characters regarding love and marriage, in Bauua's indefatigable efforts at the research Centre to win Aafia's heart or in Aafia's speeding up of her wheelchair in the last scene to see Bauua just before his flight. But the film's overall tone of mockery and ridicule is enough to make the audience forget these sparkling moments. Thus, the film *Zero* ultimately fails to zero in on any real issue related to disability.

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