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Disability and Indian Cinema: A Paradigm Shift in Bollywood from being Neglected to being in the Limelight

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Abstract: Disability, according to medical terms, is a condition which is hard to compare to others. The issue of disability is neglected and lacks a lot of awareness among people. Indian cinema especially Bollywood is known for making films on different issues and they have made a lot of movies based on this. Unfortunately, the portrayal was negative or comic and ignored and many are shown weak and rely on a person who is physically fit. Most of the films were nothing but just making films for commercial interest. It is really important to promote awareness and real-life issues faced by them. This paper will explore the shift from being neglected to becoming the centre of attention where they become path-breakers, who are confident, and strong. With reference to the famous characters like-Naina from Hichki (2018), Rizwan from My Name is Khan (2010) and the most popular character Akash from Andhadhun (2018), this paper will give an insight into how these characters are different from the other characters and whether Bollywood was successful or not in order to showcase their characters in a different form, how they are bringing a different form within the films mentioned.

Keywords: Cinema, Bollywood, Disability, shift, portrayal.

I. INTRODUCTION

Disability, according to medical terms, is a condition which is hard to do compare to others. The issue of disability is neglected and lacks a lot of awareness among people. Indian cinema especially Bollywood is known for making films on different issues and they have made a lot of movies based on this. Disability is an issue which was ignored and needs to be discussed but unfortunately, the idea was mistreated and wrong portrayal of a character suffering from any sort of disability in Bollywood movies was in practice. Now there are many reasons behind like lack of awareness, social taboos or the film-makers just want to make money by using these characters. They are portrayed either as a victim or any negative characters or they will be comic characters. It is important to remember that Cinema is the popular media which gives an insight of the society, unfortunately, most of the films failed to do but some handled it in a different manner as well. Most of the films got popularity because of the star cast like- Shahrukh Khan, Priyanka Chopra, Ranbir Kapoor, etc., and the characters were popular in the history of Hindi Cinema. Still in some points they were the victims of the society. The other reason for less making films on specially-abled people is the funds which are supposed to be given by the government but sadly, government never helped in this case. Director Anurag Basu in an interview states that, it is really difficult to produce such films in India comparing to other countries because there are government funds provided and it is important to have a systematic panel to approve a script (Suri, 2020).

II. NEGATIVE PORTRAYAL OF DISABILITY IN BOLLYWOOD

Both movies and society play a very important role for each other because both are interrelated and it is important to understand the cinema is the mirror of the society which narrates the picture of society on screen. Sadly, this idea got changed and cinema became a medium for box office collection making baseless stories. In this context, this happened with characters like people who are suffering from any sort of physical ailment. Bollywood movies worshipped and glorified their, "fit" and, "strong" heroes and they have portrayed the specially-able character as a villain. *"In the last 25 years or so, Bollywood has matured and villain characters have become more real and believable. It is neither the Kader Khan – Shakti Kapoor buffoonery nor the Indrajal Comic-type Mogambos"(*Vittal and Bhattacharjee,2018).

Various examples are there like- the king of Romance Shahrukh Khan's 1993 superhit movie, *"Darr"* the character Raj is an obsessive lover who became a violent lover to get over his beloved was a sign of mental illness. But he was termed as a villain who tried to harm his beloved and was obsessed with Kiran(Sharma,2018). Another character is Kaal from, *"Krish 3"* (2013) who is physically handicapped and he has the ability of telekenesis. But same thing happened to him, why and how he became handicapped and what made him to be like that. The actor Vivek Oberoi stated that:

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- *"there is an aristocratic aura around this character. This character is the prince of darkness. He is a super villain who is the king of his own world,"* (Kaal In 'Krrish 3' Has An Aristocratic Aura: Vivek Oberoi).

Mr.Jindal in, "Mohra"(1994), played by Naseeuddin Shah, is secretive who faked his blindness and he convinces the main character to kill all the criminal elements in the city. Jindal is not the typical villain who will have, *"some flamboyant name like Thukraal or Jabraal, had one trademark element like his dressing style or an elaborate den or something that would help you differentiate him from another movies' villains"(Bhatt,2019).*

III. COMIC PORTRAYAL OF DISABILITY IN BOLLYWOOD

Why can't Bollywood make these things normalized instead of giving it a comic twist. Bollywood used these cheap methods in order to get popularity. For example, *"Housefull 3"(2016).* The film is a complete example how the makers are insensitive towards disability, where the concept of slapstick comedy and jokes pointing at mental and physical ailment. The agencies of Financial Express reviewed the film pointed out that all sorts of disabilities were taken as a matter of joke. They also added:

-*"It is ironic that while disclaimers about smoking, drinking and treatment of animals are mandatory in Indian films, comedies such as this one are allowed to get away with mocking the physically and mentally challenged*" ("'Housefull 3': Review; Akshay Kumar, Abhishek Bachchan Use Standard Slapstick Devices To Ramp Up Hilarity Quotient")

Bunnu from, Deewana Mastana(1997), played by Govinda, who was suffering from phobias, and his behaviour are similar to a child, falling in love with a psychiatrist. The film lacked in showing the actual portrayal of a mental patient than using it for a comic purpose and, it becomes "a game of one-upmanship, where the winner gets the hand of the fair psychiatrist"(Ikram).

IV. WOMEN AND DISABILITY

Women characters in Bollywood, mostly objectified or they are considered to be, "a burden" for her family or for the society. The women characters are nothing but a victim of abuse and violent sexualization. In fact Bollywood films are male-centric where the protagonist is a guy and most of the films are based on them. Kareena Kapoor's film, *"Heroine" (2012)* is one of the examples, where Kareena's character was misunderstood instead of understanding the reason behind her Bipolar Disorder. Since she is an actor, she was, *"branded as damaged' and 'unstable"(Agarwal,2021).*

Sridevi's character Reshmi from the film, *"Sadma"(1983),* who was forcefully kidnapped and sold in a brothel taking advantage of her amnesia. Another point is that she was saved by Somu, played by Kamal Hassan who was both physically and mentally fit. He was there, "to who cared for her for several months and nursed her back to health" ("RIP Sridevi: After Sadma, Janhvi Kapoor Did Not Talk To Her Mother For Three Days").She is in care of a man who will protect and take care of her.

Priyanka Chopra as Jhilmil from, "Barfi"(2012) is an autistic girl who is actually a burden for her parents since they are embarrassed about her condition and, *"She is dependent, frightened and her own parents are ashamed of her condition in contrast to the male protagonist who also has a disability but is independent, fearless, caring and responsible just to establish the alleged valour and nobility of manhood"*(Khetarpal,2018).

Deepika Padukone starrer, "Lafange Parindey(2010)" which is also another example of showing how a woman who is blind is fully dependent on a man who helps her to fulfil her dreams. The reasons are still unknown why it is necessary to show these women characters are so dependent on a man who are physically and mentally fit.

The concept of pure women is a dominant theme in Bollywood and this refers to the ideal wife or the ideal mother. Hrithik Roshan's film, *Kaabil(2017)* is one of the examples where the victim, played by Yami Gautam was hardly given any space to express her condition after getting sexually assaulted and, *"Rohan had failed to be supportive towards her, neither he nor the filmmakers seemed to think that he was even remotely responsible for her decision to commit suicide*"(Javalgekar, 2017).

V. A PARADIGM SHIFT IN BOLLYWOOD

Making these characters as a victim, negative, comical, luckily some of the directors handled the seriousness the issue of a handicapped person's position in the real harsh society. The characters are ambitious, strong-willed, and independent.

In this section, the characters that are chosen as an example for bringing a paradigm shift in the film industry are qualified in terms of breaking stereotypes, gender barriers, social barriers, strong and independent. These characters became an inspiration for others in order to make others to understand their flaws and to move forward and try to embrace the flaws.

Rani Mukherjee starrer, "Hichki!"(2018), where she plays the role of the main protagonist, Naina who is suffering from a neurological disorder called the Tourette Syndrome a disorder which makes people unwanted sounds which cannot be controlled. But this film is not only about education system, but it is about how to accept and to love yourself than being ashamed of it.

Naina was confident about her disorder during her interviews and how at the end she teaches others, *"not to be disheartened by rejections as it prepares us to strive harder towards our goals in life".*(Kaur,2020).

Naina was rejected and ridiculed by the society including many schools and her students, *"but, it doesn't stop her to give her heart and soul to her noble profession of teaching. At the end, she is awarded with all the reverence she deserves(Sharma,2019).*

This film also pointed out the fact that underprivileged students can do better and they have the potential to do the best if proper guidance is given to them. Naina's character proved to be the best teacher who can make these unruly into a smart ones in the school, this movie in a lighter way promotes the idea of the syndrome and taught us how to become a good teacher in future because, *"many things we can do to make our students become good moral students and teach us in teaching not only one strategy that we use and can apply a variety of strategies that can grow enthusiasm for student learning. Physical backwardness and economic backwardness do not prevent someone from getting the best education possible, everyone has the right to get an education"(* Fitria,*2021).*

The reason to choose her character in this context, because Naina, faced a lot of criticism, in fact her father offered her a bank job but still she was confident about what she wanted to do in life. She is an inspiration for others rather being the victim or burden for her family or society.

Rizwan Khan was victim of both racial discrimination and disability in, *"My Name is Khan"(2010).* He is intelligent, honest and genius and he only learnt one thing from his mother and that is, "Humanity" and he believed that there are two kinds of people in this world one is good and the other one is bad and this is what he thinks only and due to his Asperger's syndrome he has the ability to understand only one thing and he is unable to deal with any sort of complexities which leads to *"ability to understand the hidden layers of the words spoken in different situations like having Asperger's does not mean I am stupid. I am very intelligent, but I don't understand people*(Naveen,2012). Rizwan life in the film is actually a quest in order to prove that he is, "not a terrorist". Through his character, the film pointed out the fact that not every Muslims are terrorist and, *"terrorism should not be generalised with the Muslim names only" (Hossain, 2021).* At the beginning, he was a victim of racial discrimination and he was suspected as a terrorist, but at the end, he became a hero.

According to the director Sriram Raghavan, the director of the most popular movie, *"Andhadhun" (2018)* he wanted to use the idea of a, *"a blind rabbit being hunted, since we will later meet a blind man being hunted"*(Ramnath,2018).Akash, played by Ayushmann Khurana is such a character who is similar to that blind rabbit.This black comedy is about a guy who pretended to be blind for concentrating in his music earlier but he witnessed a murder which led to problems. Simi played by Tabu punished him making him blind. Akash was tracked down ad this was seem to be like, Tom and Jerry and at the end, Akash took the revenge on killing Simi and at the end he got his eyesight back. The mystery lies here in how did he get his eyesight back and why he did not tell Sophie, by Radhika Apte, the truth because, *"if lady luck smiled on him and someone got him his eyes back, he would have had no reason to hide that information from Sophie. His motive for lying is because of what transpired in that car (This is Barry).* Among all the characters have discussed, it is Akash who was clever but at the same time he was innocent and he became a victim accidentally, but he never harmed anyone with his fake blindness which he experimented for his music.

VI. CONCLUSION

Bollywood is trying to make certain changes in these kinds of films by educating the audience and creating a sense of social awareness in order to bring a change in attitude among the audience and sensitizing the issues related to it. Showing the idea that how the people having any sort of disabilities are also equal and they can also do wonders as well. The films and the characters are discussed shows they are as same like other people and most importantly, disabilities are not physical or mental, it is in the society and exist in the mentality of the people who believes in patriarchy, racial discrimination, and in the old social norms made by the society. It is important to remember that cinema is a medium to bring a change in people's understanding since it reflects on many incidents of the society.

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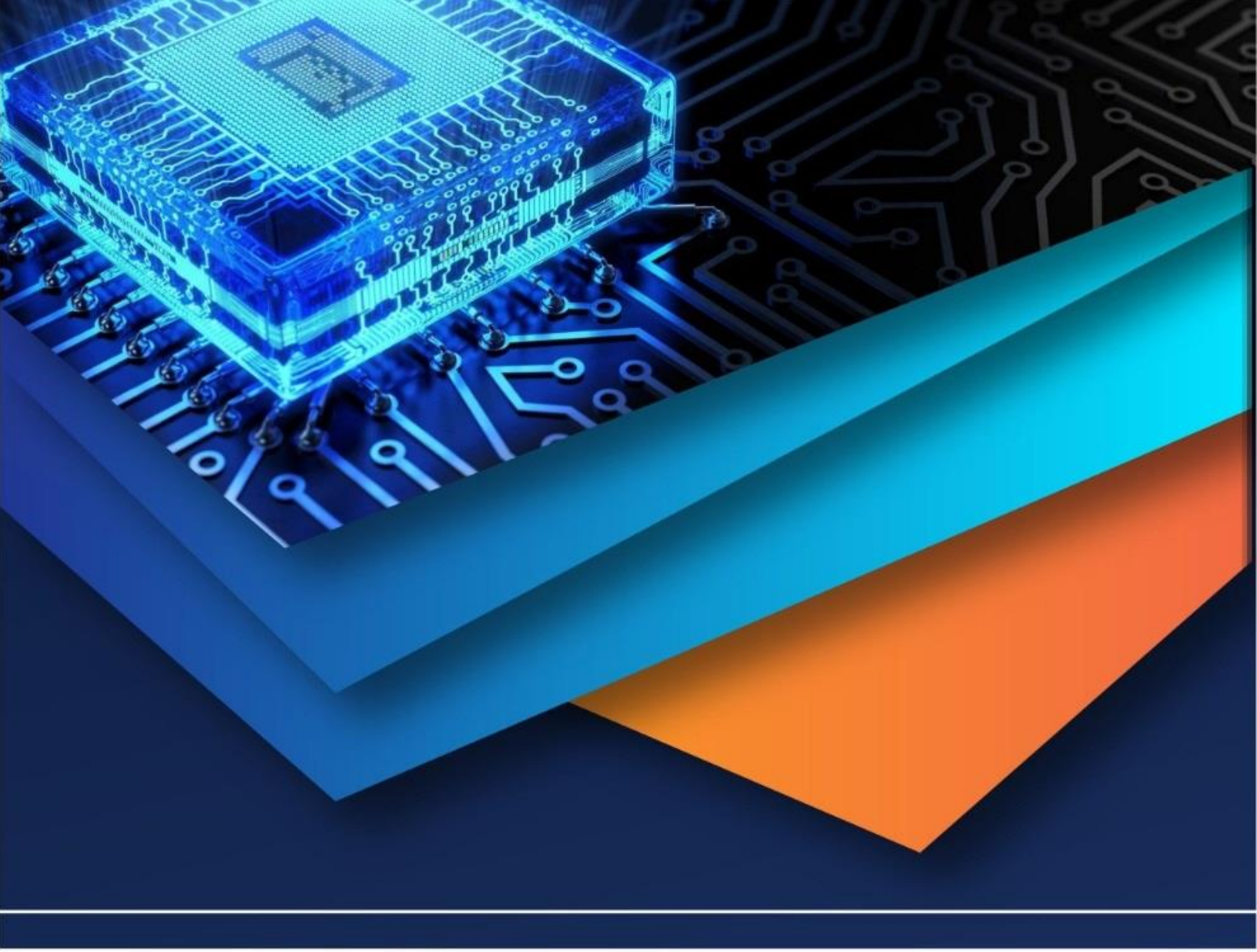
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