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The Narratives of Othering: Representation and Intersection of Disability and Desire in *Zero*

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Abstract

Aim: This paper analyses the representation of disability in the Bollywood film *Zero* (2018), directed by Aanand L. Rai, by investigating its intersecting themes of vulnerability, romance, and disability. Its primary focus is on the portrayal of dwarfism via Bauua Singh (Shah Rukh Khan) and cerebral palsy through Aafia (Anushka Sharma). The paper addresses the exploitation of disability as a spectacle, while examining the societal and cultural perceptions of disability and desirability.

Methodology and Approach: The research employs an interdisciplinary framework, integrating Disability Studies and Feminist Theory, to examine the film's exploration of the intersections of disability, masculinity, and romance. Both primary and secondary sources are consulted to assess the film's representations of disabled characters and its adherence to prevailing social norms.

Outcome: The research concludes that although *Zero* strives to address disability, it frequently commodifies it for dramatic and narrative effect. The film highlights Bollywood's difficulty in reconciling entertainment with authentic representation of marginalized identities, emphasizing the pervasive ableism in mainstream cinema.

Conclusion and Suggestion: Despite initiatives to portray disability, *Zero* highlights the ongoing conflict between inclusion and commercialization in Indian cinema. The research advocates for more nuanced and authentic representations of disability to confront prejudices and foster social awareness.

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Cinema, as a cultural text, frequently portrays and shapes societal attitudes towards disability, creating narratives that fluctuate between empathy and othering. Bollywood, which is one of the largest cinema industries in the world, has a long legacy of representing disability. Films such as *Black* (2005), *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), and *Guzaarish* (2010) have endeavored to elevate disability to the forefront of mainstream narratives. Seibers remarks, “disability does not express defect, degeneration or deviancy...rather, disability enlarges our vision of human variation and difference,” (2010). These films, however, frequently succumb to sensationalism, in which disability is either romanticized as a metaphor for resilience or reduced to a plot device intended to elicit sympathy. Aanand L. Rai’s *Zero* (2018) is situated in a liminal space in this context, where it is torn between the perpetuation of ableist tropes and progressive representation. This paper adopts an intersectional approach to examine how the film negotiates the intersections of disability and gender in *Zero* (2018), as examined through the critical lens of disability studies. At its core, the narrative centers on Bauua Singh, a man with dwarfism, and Aafia Yusufzai Bhinder, a scientist with cerebral palsy. It explores their individual journeys of love, acceptance, and societal negotiation. The film endeavors to normalize disability by featuring two disabled characters at its core; however, it also commodifies their conditions, reducing them to spectacles that are intended to entertain rather than accurately depict the intricacies of disabled lived experiences.

This paper critiques how Bauua’s dwarfism is both celebrated and degraded within the film’s plot, drawing on Davis’s idea of ‘constructed normalcy’ and the function of disability as a disturbance to normative cultural norms (1995). Bauua’s character embodies a complex blend of defiance and conformity; his irreverence and charm frequently mitigate the societal marginalization stemming from his physical condition, yet these same attributes also reinforce “hegemonic masculinity,” perpetuating the notion that disabled men must compensate for perceived deficiencies through exaggerated performance. The analysis further employs Connell’s notion of “hegemonic masculinity,”

(2005) which situates Bauua's hyper-masculine characteristics within cultural norms of male supremacy and achievement, irrespective of ability.

The portrayal of Aafia initiates significant discussion around the interplay of gender and disability. Aafia's portrayal as a scientist and a woman with cerebral palsy, seeks to challenge preconceptions around disabled women by establishing her in a position of professional and intellectual authority. However, her romantic relationship with Bauua prompts enquiries over the boundaries of this empowerment, especially when examined via Garland-Thomson's notion of the "normate," (1997) which delineates the societal preference for able-bodied and heteronormative standards. Aafia's autonomy and appeal contrast with the cultural perspective that both eroticizes and marginalizes her due to her disability. This intersectional framework of the paper posits that *Zero* (2018) both contests and upholds social notions of disability, especially within the Indian cultural milieu. The film juxtaposes disability with romance, humour, and spectacle, highlighting social unease in incorporating disability into conventional standards of desirability and success. This paper attempts to critically assess these conflicts, positioning *Zero* (2018) within the broader debate on disability representation in Indian film and contribute to the worldwide dialogue on the ethics of disability portrayal in popular culture.

In *Zero* (2018), Bauua's dwarfism serves not just as a character trait but also as a fundamental element that shapes the film's visual and narrative identity. Mitchell and Snyder (2000) contend that disability in mainstream tales frequently functions as a "narrative prosthesis," serving to propel the storyline or symbolically embody social anxieties. Bauua's short height, enhanced by visual effects, serves as a focal point that underscores his apparent deviation from "normalcy" (Davis, 1995). The camera often accentuates his physical difference in contrast to his surroundings, underscoring his distinctiveness and portraying his physique as an object of both amusement and intrigue. Davis (1995), in his seminal work on Disability Studies, examines the socio-historical formation of "normalcy" as a dominant ideology that marginalizes bodies and identities that diverge from normative standards. Davis contends that normalcy is not an

intrinsic condition but rather a construct of industrialization and statistical metrics that established the “average” as a coveted and essential benchmark for human beings (1995). In this framework, the disabled subject is perceived as the “other,” characterised as a divergence that undermines societal standards of autonomy, productivity, and aesthetic conformity. Davis offers a critical perspective on “normalcy” (1995), positioning disability as a divergence from socially created standards of the able-bodied, autonomous individual. Bauua’s dwarfism operates within this framework, since the film’s narrative consistently portrays him as an outsider striving to manoeuvre through a society designed for “normal” bodies. His ostentatious attitude, excessive charisma, and audacious self-assurance may be viewed as compensatory strategies used to mitigate the stigma associated with his physical condition.

In *Zero* (2018), Bauua Singh’s dwarfism is firmly positioned within the framework of ‘otherness.’ His small height serves not just as a biological characteristic but as a narrative mechanism that highlights his estrangement from the conventional socio-physical landscape portrayed in the film. Bauua’s continual transit of both physical and metaphorical spaces intended for “normal” bodies serve as a repeating motif that exemplifies his marginalization. The visual arrangement of scenes, in which Bauua is frequently depicted as short compared to his environment or contrasted with able-bodied individuals, underscores his divergence from the normate ideal, a concept articulated by Garland-Thomson (1997) to denote the cultural elevation of able-bodiedness as the standard.

Bauua’s characterization is further complicated by his ‘performance’ of masculinity, which intersects with his disability to establish a distinctive, yet problematic, construct. Connell’s concept of “hegemonic masculinity” elucidates Bauua’s hyper-masculine characteristics. Hegemonic masculinity, as articulated by Connell, embodies the prevailing standards of masculine conduct, distinguished by attributes like as aggressiveness, sexual competence, and domination (2005). Bauua exemplifies these characteristics via his audacity, hubris, and relentless pursuit of women, particularly Aafia and the Bollywood star Babita Kumari, played by Katrina Kaif.

This narrative normalization corresponds with Garland-Thomson's (1997) critique of the "normate," which favors able-bodied traits as the standard indicators of competence, attractiveness, and legitimacy. Disabled men, such as Bauua, are perceived by society as 'inferior,' necessitating excessive performance to get acceptability under patriarchal standards. Bauua's ostentatious confidence, his theatrical charisma, and his audacious self-assurance serve as instruments of reclamation within a paradigm that associates disability with emasculation and dependence. Nonetheless, these compensatory traits are not intrinsically empowering; rather, they sustain ableist beliefs that masculinity must be amplified to offset the perceived 'deficit' of disability. Moreover, this hyper-masculinity highlights a profound ideological conflict in the portrayal of disability. According to Mitchell and Snyder's (2000) "narrative prosthesis" paradigm, disability frequently functions as a metaphorical or narrative support, utilised to elicit emotional involvement or propel plot progression. Bauua's infirmity functions primarily as a cinematic device for crafting an exaggerated identity, ensuring that his difference is 'overcome' via the prism of macho bravado. This framing diminishes Bauua to a narrative device, obliterating the intricacies of his actual experience as an individual with dwarfism. By portraying Bauua as a disabled individual who must 'prove' his masculinity through exaggerated characteristics, the film unintentionally perpetuates ableist notions that associate value and identity with heteronormative representations. This hyper-performance of masculinity is not only a narrative decision but a manifestation of a wider societal unease around the interconnections of disability and gender.

This depiction undermines the potential to express disability as a legitimate and multifaceted identity. Bauua's extravagant behavior, however seemingly attractive, serves as a diversion that alienates the audience from the profound socio-political and emotional truths of experiencing dwarfism. His persona is made superficial, his identity reduced to a display intended to elicit enjoyment and admiration instead of comprehension and empathy. This corresponds with the cultural framing of disability as a spectacle, as posited by

Siebers (2010), wherein the disabled body serves to support able-bodied standards rather than challenge them. In *Zero* (2018), Bauua's hyper-masculinity serves as a "narrative prosthesis" (Mitchel & Snyder, 2000, pp. 47) that conceals the intricacies of his identity, reinforcing societal norms around masculinity and disability. This depiction underscores the constraints of film narratives that attempt to 'normalize' disability through compensatory frameworks, thereby reinforcing the preconceptions they intend to eliminate. The outcome is a simplistic depiction that does not critically address the complex interconnections of disability, gender, and power, so perpetuating cultural unease with non-normative bodies and identities.

The film predominantly uses humor to engage with Bauua's dwarfism. Bauua's clever quips and self-deprecating humor connect him to the audience while perpetuating the archetype of the 'comic disabled figure.' Humor typically serves as a double-edged sword in disability portrayal, as it can both humanize and trivialize. Bauua's humor provides relatable moments but also risks trivializing his disability and so perpetuating societal stereotypes that oversimplify the intricacies of disabled identities. This tension is especially apparent in instances where Bauua's dwarfism serves as the punchline of jokes, coming from both his character and others. Such instances highlight social uneasiness about disability, wherein humour serves as a coping strategy to address discomfort associated with addressing difference.

The portrayal of Aafia Yusufzai Bhinder in *Zero* (2018) offers a distinctive yet problematic perspective for examining the intersection of disability and gender in cinematic narratives. Aafia, a woman with cerebral palsy, experiences dual marginality stemming from her gender and disability, a position that necessitates critical examination through the lens of intersectionality, as outlined by Crenshaw (1989). This approach facilitates an examination of how intersecting systems of oppression—patriarchy and ableism—inform Aafia's representation, not alone as a disabled individual but as a disabled woman navigating her autonomy within a constraining sociocultural context.

Aafia's characterization first seems to defy stereotyped representations by depicting her as a competent scientist at NASA, a role that allegedly denotes empowerment and intellectual prowess. This framing slightly corresponds with Mitchell and Snyder's (2000) concept of "narrative prosthesis," wherein disability is utilized to denote resilience or uniqueness. This notion offers a critique of the commonplace use of disabled people as stock figures or metaphorical devices in literature and the media, as opposed to their complete humanity and complexity, "people with disabilities have been the object of representational treatments, but rather that their function in literary discourse is primarily twofold: disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device" (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, pp. 47–64).

Aafia's professional success serves not as a celebration of her uniqueness but as a compensating narrative device, suggesting that her value and desirability depend on extraordinary accomplishments. Her disability, instead of being a neutral facet of her personality, serves as the catalyst for a redemption narrative that reinforces the ableist stereotype of 'overcoming' disability via exceptional measures. The conflict between her professional achievements and emotional insecurities is exacerbated by societal gender expectations. Aafia, as a disabled woman, is shown as emotionally repressed and self-sacrificing, exemplifying her as a 'sentimentalized' disabled figure—a persona designed to elicit empathy but posing no danger to societal norms. Her romantic involvement with Bauua Singh establishes her as a caretaker and moral guide, duties conventionally assigned to women in patriarchal narratives. This dynamic diminishes her character to a mere instrument for Bauua's salvation, redirecting the narrative emphasis from her existence as a disabled woman to her role as a catalyst for the male protagonist's development.

Aafia's representation embodies the "superchip" stereotype, a notion challenged by academics like Young (2014), in which disabled persons are lauded for "achieving" despite their disabilities, thereby reinforcing the supremacy of able-bodied norms. Aafia's cerebral palsy is recognized, although her intellectual brilliance is depicted as a means of "compensating" for her condition, so

promoting the notion that individuals with disabilities must validate their value by outstanding achievements. This narrative approach diminishes the range of common lived experiences of disabled women and reinforces an ableist paradigm that associates production and success with worth.

The gendered component of this depiction must not be ignored. Aafia's romantic appeal as a disabled woman is examined through the "male gaze," a notion notably challenged by Mulvey (1975). Her encounters with Bauua are depicted from his perspective, rendering her an object of both sympathy and desire. Bauua's initial attraction to Aafia seemingly contests cultural stigmas regarding the desirability of disabled bodies, however it ultimately yields to a narrative of pity and redemption. Aafia's autonomy in the relationship is eclipsed by her function as a stabilizing influence in Bauua's tumultuous existence, a dynamic that reinforces conventional gender norms while simultaneously attempting to contest them.

To thoroughly analyse Aafia's character, it is necessary to consider both intersectional feminism and the social model of disability. The social model, as defined by Oliver (2012) redirects attention from individual impairments to the cultural and institutional obstacles that inhibit them. Nonetheless, *Zero* (2018) inadequately addresses these obstacles, depicting Aafia's cerebral palsy mostly as a personal difficulty rather as a result of institutional inaccessibility. Her professional achievement is shown as an extraordinary victory over difficulty, rather than as a reflection of societal advancement towards diversity. The omission of systemic critique highlights the film's failure to adequately address the intricacies of lived experiences of disabled lives.

From an intersectional feminist perspective, Aafia's portrayal reveals the multifaceted marginalization experienced by disabled women. Crenshaw's paradigm emphasizes that intersecting identities, such as gender and disability, generate distinct experiences of oppression that cannot be comprehended in isolation. Aafia's professional and emotional challenges are profoundly connected to social views of her twofold marginalization. Her romance arc with Bauua is imbued with ableist and patriarchal implications that depict her as a 'prize' for the

male protagonist's quest, rather than as an independent being with her own aspirations and intricacies.

Aafia's character, while seemingly innovative in depicting a disabled woman in an intellectual position, lacks a nuanced representation of the intersectionality between disability and gender. Her accomplishments are contextualized within a patriarchal and ableist framework that diminishes her autonomy, relegating her to a mere symbolic entity rather than a complex human. This simplistic depiction exacerbates social unease in fully accepting the intricacies of disabled women, who are frequently marginalized due to both their disability and gender. Aafia's portrayal in *Zero* (2018) highlights the constraints of conventional cinematic narratives in depicting the intersection of disability and gender. Although her role contests specific preconceptions, it concurrently sustains others, promoting ableist and patriarchal structures that obfuscate the lived experiences of disabled women. An analytical examination of intersectionality of Gender and Disability underscores the necessity for authentic and nuanced representations that transcend the clichés of exceptionalism and sentimentalisation, thereby embracing the diversity and complexity of disabled identities.

The depiction of disability in *Zero* (2018) illustrates both the potential and challenges of modern Indian cinema's interaction with marginalized identities. By presenting Bauua Singh and Aafia Yusufzai Bhinder as central characters, the film challenges the marginalization of disabled people in mainstream Bollywood narratives. This visibility is diminished by the cinematic spectacle that frequently transforms disability into a symbolic or compensating tool. Bauua and Aafia are, to differing extents, portrayed not as fully developed people but as tools that perpetuate able-bodied standards and patriarchal beliefs, therefore supporting the oppressive structures they may want to contest.

At its core, *Zero* (2018) exemplifies Bollywood's persistent challenge to balance commercial objectives with the ethical obligation of authentic portrayal. Bauua's dwarfism is frequently shown as a deviation to be countered by charm and hyper-masculinity. Aafia's cerebral palsy, first shown in the context of her

professional abilities, finally takes a backseat to her function as a moral compass for the male protagonist. These representations highlight a continual dependence on simplistic archetypes—the “superchip,” the ‘sentimentalized’ disabled individual, and the compensating love partner—that mask the intricacies of the lived experiences of disability. From an intersectional perspective, *Zero* (2018) provides an incomplete examination of the numerous oppressive structures encountered by disabled people, especially disabled women. Aafia’s simultaneous marginalization as a woman and an individual with cerebral palsy is eclipsed by a storyline that emphasizes Bauua’s quest for self-discovery. This disparity sustains a hierarchy of narratives, relegating the experiences of disabled women to the margins of the transformational journeys of able-bodied or masculine heroes.

Bollywood needs to implement a paradigm change in its approach to disability representation to transcend the constraints of spectacle. Authenticity and intersectionality must serve as the foundation for this transformation, utilizing the concepts of the social model of disability and feminist disability studies to create narratives that accurately represent the complex experiences of disabled people. This necessitates a shift away from the monetization of disability as a cinematic tool and a commitment to narratives that prioritize disabled voices, viewpoints, and autonomy. The inclusion of disabled actors, writers, and advisors in the filmmaking process will enhance the ethical depiction of disability, promoting narratives that are transformational rather than exploitative.

Zero (2018) exemplifies Bollywood’s overarching engagement with disability—an industry oscillating between progressive aspirations and regressive practices. This paper critiques the film within a Disability Studies perspective, highlighting the pressing necessity for Indian cinema to rethink its representational methods. An emphasis on authentic, intersectional, and systemic representation of disability may challenge established preconceptions and enhance the cultural dialogue surrounding inclusiveness and equity. By doing so, Bollywood might surpass its dependence on spectacle, providing narratives that are not only indicative of cultural biases but also actively transformational in confronting them.

In conclusion, *Zero* (2018) emphasizes the advances and deficiencies in Bollywood's depiction of disability, functioning as an essential subject for examining the nexus of film, identity, and representation. By critically engaging with films such as *Zero* (2018), researchers, filmmakers, and audiences may collectively foster a cinematic environment that honors the complexity and intricacy of disabled lives, therefore redefining the parameters of Indian cultural imagination.

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