
The Portrayal Of Sexuality And Disability In The Movies

Introduction

In this paper I try to analyse the portrayal of sexuality and disability in the movies. I will mainly focus on two movies namely, Sixth Happiness and Scarlett Roads and the documentary called Accsex. According to Harris, most of the viewers do not relate the sexual lives of the disabled characters with their own sexuality. It is seen as a plot device and not as a component of the character's overall identity. This attitude also reflects a common stereotype of the disability identified by Barnes (1992): of the disabled person as sexually abnormal. Given these misconceptions, it becomes important to understand how the media constructs and imparts them.

Double the Trouble

In the movies it is almost taken for granted that disabled people are incapable of normal sexual relations. Moreover, in many movies with disabled characters, the characters are often depicted as asexual. In that sense, the movie Sixth Happiness can be seen as an exceptional movie because it tried to break many stereotypes like being stubborn, arrogant and manipulative – traits that are acceptable for an able bodied person and never associated with the disabled. Brit was portrayed as exhibiting all these traits thus breaking this stereotype. Another important stereotype of disabled being sexually incapable was also very well depicted and this also runs as one of the most important themes of the movie. In Sixth Happiness, Brit was not only shown as sexually active but also had a gay relationship. The disabled having a gay relationship is subject to even more discrimination. This form of discrimination is what Shakespeare calls 'Double Trouble'. Tom Shakespeare opines that even among the meagre resources available for sexuality and disability, gay and lesbian relationships have been least researched on (Shakespeare,1996).

Furthermore, Brit experienced marginalization from three ends– he was a Parsi and therefore belonged to a minority community (this movie is set in 1970s India), sexual minority and disability. The protagonist did not realise his love for Cyrus until Brit met Cyrus and when was not treated by him as a Fragile and hapless being. Moreover, narratives on sexuality and disability cannot be treated as separate entities. Universalising discourse on marginalities and vulnerabilities leads to the elimination of acknowledging differences. In negotiating with his sexuality and disability, Brit refuses to be an ideal citizen who could be accepted by the then post-colonial state. Furthermore, Shakespeare argues that, disabled having gay relationships are not considered 'manly-enough' to have 'normal' heterosexual relationships (Shakespeare,1996). This brings us to the stereotypical notions associated with masculinity.

Disability and Masculinity

Disability and Masculinity are conflicting identities mainly because of the stereotypes associated with them. The stereotypical notion of masculinity is physical strength and an ability to ignore bodily functions. Conversely, the stereotypes associated with a disabled man includes weak,

impotency etc. Media often represents them as war veterans who are coming to terms with the loss of masculinity as a result of impairment. According to Murphy, 'The sex lives of most paralysed men, however remain symbolic of a more general passivity and dependency that touches every aspect of their existence and is the antithesis of the main values of direction, activity, initiative and control'(Shakespeare, 1996, p. 74). Shakespeare highlights some of the problems faced by men with disabilities and I would like to use some of them here.

To begin with, Nigel, one of the respondents, who happens to be a gay, is faced with a dual tension. He states that as a disabled person he is expected to be meek and childlike, however as a man he is meant to be masterful, a leader and should also get angry. Moreover, Shakespeare argues that although conflicting stereotypes can lead to confusions as shown by the previous example, the reality for disabled men is much more complicated. This is further explained using Patrick's experiences. According to Patrick, who is again a gay man and is visually challenged, 'society doesn't expect you to be physically strong if you are disabled'. He further states that he was brought up saying that he was weak and now even he felt that way. This is substantiated by another example where people refuse to believe that this person could fight as he was disabled.

Shakespeare also throws light on another stereotype associated with men with disabilities. They are seen as non- threatening and this justifies their close relationship with women than their heterosexual peers. This is well explained by the experience of Eddie who states that he was always seen as a big brother figure, who was 'safe' but could never become a boyfriend. This is what Shakespeare calls Biological Reductionism. He argues that there are evidences of the possibility of disabled men perpetuating violence against women , children and even other men.

Shakespeare identifies yet another stereotype as observed by one of his respondents, Michael. The respondent observed that disabled men and women as seen as analogous to each other. He made this remark after observing this in restaurants when the waiter gave the bill to the able-bodied people who were with him even when he was the one paying the bill. Zebedee felt that men are thought of as strong and as someone could take command and since he was disabled, he got only little opportunities where he could take command.

Thus, disabled masculinity involves many stereotypes associated with it and disabled men have to fight these battles almost every day.

Disability and femininity

While disabled people in general face many discrimination, disabled women are particularly oppressed. Research shows that disabled women are less likely to get married (Shakespeare,1996) Besides that, they also are the most vulnerable - socially and financially. I would like to throw more light on this concept with the help of the documentary film Accsex and the movie called Scarlett Road.

Accsex chronicled around the lives of four women, living in New Delhi, who were people with visual and mobility impairments. The movie was also about their negotiations with beauty, body, sexuality and disability. The movie was very instrumental in the sense that the women were able to, to put it in Tom Shakespeare's words (1996), 'come-out' about their sexuality. Shakespeare opines that coming out is very important for disabled women especially about their

sexuality. For Stuart, an activist, coming out meant redefining disability. He maintained that it is important to come into contact with the reality that “it is not you who is responsible for your oppression, rather it is the society.” (Shakespeare,1996). He also states that in order to come to terms with reality, it is important to become part of any disability group because disabled people help other fellow disabled; they help boost your confidence and these groups also provide a platform where you can express yourself through articles, magazines etc.

Another important aspect of this movie has been the way this movie has portrayed the four women- it has captured their ‘everyday lives’ and not depicted them as extraordinary beings or pitiful. Moreover, they themselves do not want to be portrayed that way. This is evident when the protagonist says that we are treated by the people as special or pitiful and we don’t even want that. The storytellers, Abha, Kanti, Natasha and Sonali bring to the forefront a different view about sexuality, which is different from the dominant view. These four women think about sexuality differently. Sonali states that, for her, holding hands or resting your head over your partner’s shoulder is also sexuality. Furthermore, Natasha opines sex is only one of the many things in one’s life and people should not make any ‘drama’ about it. In addition to that, Sonali views that disabled people do not receive adequate sex education. Apart from that, the movie also throws light on how menstrual blood is treated as ‘dirty’. Abha explains how she is considered as ‘childlike’ by her family, thus closing all doors for any sexual engagement. Shakespeare states that this is another way of saying that ‘you are not yet ready’. According to Jazz, “disability is a breed on its own, neither masculine nor feminine.” (Shakespeare,1996).

Sexuality and Body

Shakespeare opines that the society that we live in is filled with stereotypical notions of perfect or acceptable physical appearance, which a lot many people find oppressive. According to Jenny, one of the respondents, body beautiful meant the application of all the stereotypical images of beauty to your body. She also maintains that this meant spending most of your time trying to look ‘beautiful’ as the society defines it. Jenny argues, in other words, body beautiful is ‘about changing your body to meet somebody else’s view of how it should be.’ (Shakespeare,1996). We can find such instances in the documentary film as well. Sonali, who is visually impaired tries to ‘see’ herself by what others ‘show’ her, in other words Sonali states that, “when you can’t see, you perceive yourself in terms of what other’s tell about you”. She further goes on to say that when people tell her that she looks good in black and white, she goes and buys clothes of those colours. Another instance in the movie is in the form of the views expressed by the girl in the animation. She highlights the way the models are depicted as tall, slim and therefore they look ‘sexy’ and she on the contrary is fat and therefore ‘not sexy’. However, she refuses to accept this notion and argues that even she can look ‘sexy’. Besides that, Abha expresses her views on how disabled people are understood when it comes to becoming beautiful. She states that people are amused to see her in the beauty parlour.

Many other issues were also raised by the protagonists. Abha spoke of her experience in the hospital, where her body was being treated as a sack of potatoes and she was being infantilized by her family and others alike. Natasha expressed her concerns with the universal symbols associated with accessibility for washrooms for disabled as dehumanising and also suggested a newer symbol. The movie also throws light on the view that being in a relationship with a person with disability doesn’t mean compromise but compensation. (Ghosh,2015).

The three interrelated problems of femininity, sexuality and disability can be seen even in the movie *Scarlett Roads*.

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