

Research Paper



Exploring disability, sexuality, and identity in contemporary film: margarita with a straw

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Article Info

Article History:

Received: 14 February 2025

Revised: 01 May 2025

Accepted: 09 May 2025

Published: 25 June 2025

Keywords:

LGBTQA

Disability

Films

Desire

Representation

Sexuality



ABSTRACT

The film expresses an ideal representation of a woman in a society with all disabilities through the characters Laila, Dhruva and Khanum. The film explores the themes of femininity, identity, and social class, as well as the darker aspects of human nature, to demonstrate the heterogeneous and nuanced nature of the characters. Laila, a disabled woman, faces societal constraints and discrimination because of her disability. Despite the challenges, Laila is a strong and independent character who asserts her personal space and resists the oppressive forces that seek to control her life. The family pushes Laila to be an asexual person due to her disability. The family initially sees her as an asexual person and tries to control her desires and relationships. However, as the film progresses, Laila's mother begins to understand and accept her daughter's identity and emotions. The film challenges the normative expectations around sexuality by portraying the protagonist's bisexuality and her exploration of gender and relationships. Genderqueer identities, which question the rigid binary between male and female, are becoming more and more prevalent in psychology studies and popular culture. On the contrary, little has been discovered about how genderqueer individuals' experiences vary by generation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Film is a powerful medium that can influence people's perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes toward the world by shaping their minds and affecting their views. When it comes to storytelling, films tell stories that can evoke strong emotions in the audience. A well-told story can be a powerful tool for conveying a message, raising awareness, and changing attitudes. For example, films like "Schindler's List" and The

Pianist have helped to raise awareness about the Holocaust and its impact on people's lives. These films can represent different cultures, identities, and perspectives that the audience may not know or understand [1]. By portraying these diverse experiences on screen, films can challenge stereotypes, broaden horizons, and foster empathy and understanding. Films can also be used as a tool for education, teaching people about historical events, social issues, and cultural practices. For example, documentaries like *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Inc.* have raised awareness about environmental and food-related issues and inspired people to act. It can encourage reflection and critical thinking about the world. By presenting complex issues and dilemmas, films can challenge people to question their assumptions, consider different perspectives, and engage in constructive dialogue [2]. By portraying individuals who have overcome challenges and made positive changes, films can motivate people to pursue their goals and contribute to society. Films can inspire people to act and make a difference in the world. Hence, films can be a powerful tool for shaping minds and affecting how people view the world. The film *Margarita with a Straw*, which is under analysis, is about the character Laila, who embarks on a journey of self-discovery and sexual awakening while studying in New York City. It was released in 2014 and is an Indian film directed by Shonali Bose. This movie recounts the story of Laila, a young girl with cerebral palsy who overcomes her difficulty despite becoming physically challenged with the help of technology. The aim here is to explore the themes of disability, sexuality, and identity in the film *Margarita with a Straw* and analyze how they are portrayed in the context of Indian cinema and society to contribute to the ongoing dialogue around the representation of marginalized groups in global cinema. By challenging and subverting traditional representations of disability and sexuality in mainstream cinema, *Margarita with a Straw* offers a more nuanced and intersectional portrayal of identity that contributes to a more inclusive and diverse representation of disability, sexuality, and identity in contemporary Indian cinema [3]. Through its complex characterization of Laila and its exploration of the intersectional dimensions of her identity, the film demonstrates the potential of cinema to challenge dominant narratives and promote social justice by increasing the visibility and understanding of marginalized identities.

2. RELATED WORK

In 'Hansal Mehta's *Aligarh* [4], A Critical Study of Queerness in the Socio-Political Backdrop' (2022), the authors explore socio-political ideologies that surround the Queer studies in India, note a reluctance to discuss LGBT issues despite of openly—being in the 21st century. They try to hail *Aligarh* as a significant contribution to Hindi cinema by its poignant exploration and portraying the need for queer identity. Ajeeb dasstaans (2021) refers to two women in lesbian relationship without knowing their true identity [5] and societal acceptance. In 'HIV Stigma, Gay identity, and caste 'untouchability': metaphors of abjection in my Brother Nikhil [6], the boyfriend, and *Gandu Bagicha* (2020), Shamira A Meghani, substantiates that she contends that the comparisons made in the film reinforce the marginalisation of LGBTQ dalit people living with HIV/AIDS. Despite implying that parental acceptance can be a solution, the article emphasises the importance of explicitly addressing stigma and caste prejudice in HIV prevention initiatives. In addition to this, it also investigates how caste stigma connects with homophobia in depictions of seroconversion risk, examining works such as the book "The Boyfriend and the poem & "Gandu Bagicha. In 'Critiquing the Motion (Cinema) through Queer Lens' (2022), Ashish Aggarwal contends the linkage between Queer Studies and Film Theory, highlighting cinema; sability to express ideologies and connect viewers to reality. He describes & "queer as encompassing different sexualities that go beyond binary standards, representing hope and diversity of identities. He evaluates two recent films, *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2021) [7] and *Badhai Do* (2022) [8], for their portrayals of queerness and disruption of established gender roles to broaden public expectations and provide alternative viewpoints through cinema.

The Objective of the Study

To examine the use of technology and assistive devices in the film and their potential to enhance the lives of people with disabilities.

To discuss the importance of inclusive education and employment opportunities for people with disabilities, as highlighted in the film.

This research objective focuses on the film's exploration of important themes related to disability, sexuality, identity, and its cultural and social context in India. It also emphasizes the importance of contributing to a larger conversation about representation and marginalization in global cinema

3. METHODOLOGY

Content analysis: This methodology involves systematically analyzing the film's content to identify recurring themes, symbols, or messages. Content analysis can be used to quantify certain aspects of the film, such as the frequency of certain types of characters or themes, and can be used to compare the film to other works in its genre or period. Qualitative research is often used to gain an in-depth understanding of complex phenomena or to explore the experiences and perspectives of individuals.

Disability Structure

Stereotypes and stigma play a vital role in disabled people's lives. Stigma refers to negative attitudes and beliefs that lead to prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities [9]. Stigma can be both internal and external, meaning that people with disabilities may internalize negative attitudes toward themselves, and they may also experience discrimination from others due to their disability [10]. Stigma can lead to social exclusion, bullying, and harassment and can create significant barriers to inclusion and participation in society. Both stereotypes and stigma can have a significant impact on the lives of people with disabilities. Addressing stereotypes and stigma requires a multi-faceted approach that involves education, awareness-raising, policy change, and community engagement [11]. This can involve initiatives such as creating more accessible environments, increasing the representation and visibility of people with disabilities in media and public life, and challenging negative attitudes and stereotypes through education and advocacy [12]. The movie revolves around the disabled character of Laila, who has cerebral palsy, but she is talented and never expects any comfort from anyone. She wanted to feel like a normal person. She joined the band at Ramjas College. She was a Musician, Composer, and Songwriter. However, she was not considered and did not get any recognition from the educational institution's side. Even if she was admitted to the institution, the people from the institution pitied her. They started to compose the song for the competition. Laila started to write lyrics for her band.

Theoretical Framework

The queer theory emphasizes the fluidity and complexity of sexual and gender identities and how social norms and power relations shape these identities. In "Margarita with a Straw," queer theory can be applied to analyse the film's portrayal of Laila's bisexuality and how it intersects with her disability, race, class, and culture [13]. McRuer uses the words "the constructed binaries have ostracised the marginal sexual identities, often creating stereotypes regarding those who have been defined as disabled and queer" to explain their struggle of being ostracized. The inability to acknowledge that individuals with disabilities also have their sexual interests and should be honoured for those needs "...perpetuates disillusionment about sexual identity in their minds" [14].

By representing Laila as a bisexual character, the film challenges the dominant narratives that often simplify and stereotype bisexuality in popular culture. The film also explores how Laila's sexuality is shaped by multiple forms of marginalization and discrimination, including ableism and heteronormativity [15]. By applying a queer theory lens to the film, the movie can be analyzed on how Laila's sexuality is constructed and represented, how it intersects with other aspects of her identity, and how the film promotes a more inclusive and complex understanding of sexuality and gender.[16]

Furthermore, queer theory can be applied to analyze how "Margarita with a Straw" challenges heteronormativity, which is the assumption that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural form of sexual orientation [17]. The film portrays Laila's bisexuality as a legitimate and natural form of sexual identity, challenging the dominant cultural norms that often stigmatize and marginalise non-heterosexual identities [18].

Overall, by applying a queer theory framework to Margarita with a Straw, we can analyze the film's representation of sexuality and gender, as well as its potential to challenge dominant cultural norms and promote greater visibility and understanding of marginalized identities.

A Brief Overview of the Characters

To have a clear idea about the film and to start with the analysis, a brief overview of some of the main characters is provided here:

Laila - The female protagonist of the movie, Laila, is a bright, talented young woman with cerebral palsy. She is fiercely independent and determined to live life on her terms, despite the limitations of her disability. She is a complex and relatable character, grappling with universal love, identity, and belonging themes. Laila's journey of self-discovery and sexual awakening is the pivotal point in the film, but also acts as a testament to her strength and resilience. Laila is a complex character, struggling with her insecurities and fears, but ultimately finding the strength to embrace her sexuality and her identity as a bisexual [19].

Khanum - Laila's love interest, is a blind girl from Pakistan. Khanum is a strong and confident young woman who challenges Laila's assumptions about herself and her sexuality. Despite, facing discrimination and prejudice as a queer Muslim woman, Khanum is unapologetically herself, inspiring Laila to do the same. She is a groundbreaking character in Indian cinema. Her relationship with Laila is a tender and poignant portrayal of two women from different backgrounds finding love and connection. Khanum's confidence and self-assurance inspire Laila, who has spent much of her life feeling isolated and misunderstood.

Shubhangi - Laila's mother. Shubhangi is a caring and devoted parent who is fiercely protective of her daughter. However, she struggles to come to terms with Laila's disability and growing independence, leading to conflicts. Shubhangi is a loving parent, but her protective instincts sometimes clash with Laila's desire for independence. Their relationship is a realistic portrayal of the tension that can arise between parents and children with disabilities. However, Shubhangi ultimately learns to support Laila's dreams and aspirations, even if they differ from her own.

Monique - Laila's friend and roommate in New York, Monique is a free-spirited musician who encourages Laila to explore her sexuality and embrace new experiences. Despite their cultural differences, the two women form a close bond and support each other through the challenges they face. She is refreshing in the film, encouraging Laila to take risks and try new things. Monique's struggles with creative expression and self-doubt provide a counterpoint to Laila's journey of self-discovery.

Overall, *Margarita with a Straw* is a powerful and poignant film that explores themes of disability, sexuality, and identity with sensitivity and nuance [20]. The characters are well-developed and complex, and each facing struggles and challenges as they navigate their way through life, they are bringing their unique perspectives and experiences to the story.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The film combines disabled characters with unique representations by the director. It is based on the real-life story of the director's sister, Miralini, who is one year younger than her. The film significantly portrays the impact on the director during her 40th birthday celebration. Miralini's role is played by Kalki Koechlin. When Miralini was born, she was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, a neurological disorder that affects movement, balance, and posture. Cerebral palsy is caused by damage to the developing brain before, during, or shortly after birth. The severity of cerebral palsy can vary from person to person and can affect different parts of the body. In the film, Laila's hands and legs are paralyzed, and she cannot move without a wheelchair. Technology helps Laila cope with anxiety and stress, making her feel more comfortable. She never detaches herself from the wheelchair and even travels around seated in it.

One perspective of the film projects materialism and technology, which play a vital role in achieving Laila's desires. Laila identifies herself as bisexual and eventually becomes involved with Khanum. She feels betrayed when Khanum finds out about Laila's physical relationship with another man. Khanum is portrayed as a social activist, and when she discovers Laila's sexuality, Laila's mother has already died of cancer, which is in its fourth stage. Due to the tragic incident, Khanum was not ready to move on from Laila's family. In this film, Khanum's character reflects the director's life, as was mentioned in an interview with Shonali Bose. When Malini was 39, she was busted for her sexual needs, but in the film, it is shown to

have happened when she was 20. Khanum cannot tolerate that Laila is bisexual and behaves selfishly, and normally in that sequence. The plot of the movie is shown dramatically opposite. Laila wakes up with a positive attitude after her mother's death and separation from Khanum. She wants to prolong her life in a normal way because she has already experienced many dark aspects and tragedies in her life.

What a competition! It was too close. Okay, without delay. The winners are.....Ramjas College! This competition is a milestone. It's not just about music. When we heard that the lyricist was a disabled girl, we had to give the award to her college. Your journey must have been very difficult compared to that of A normal musician...Will you share something with us? (T1:0:12-1:0:13) [21]

A woman who has wanted to address the winners at the moment. She addressed the audience by saying that it was a great competition and milestone event for all participants, and it was not just the music; it was beyond that. They all banged and rocked the stage on fire. It was time to announce the winner, and we wanted to give away the momentum to the respective winners. It was too close, but Ramjas College's music band had a disabled person, and she was the lyrics writer for this music. Without being late, considering her disability and momentum, she went to Ramjas College.

A woman has degraded another woman only because of her disability. It's the worst part of the discrimination done by same-sex people [22]. She was blind, and she could not bear the winning title with the toxic discriminatory words, so she showed bad signs to her, and she fell on the stage without collecting the momentum. She started to cry, and Nimu came, hugged her, and tried to console her, but she was not ready to accept. Even though she delivers her love towards him, she is rejected by him. So, the director wants to make these two different scenes make some sense from the point of disability [23]. The frame causes the most important breaking point in the movie when she hugs the person and conveys her love to him, on that moment he says we are with you and our whole trop is with you but she only needs him and she says "Just you" Suddenly you feel the presence in the background audio 'damm silence' for a second. Film and Music plays a vital role in caring for the emotions towards the audience. Sometimes, it fails, but silence never fails to create a huge impact somewhere. The movie revolves around a particular moment, an important.

5. CONCLUSION

Margarita with a Straw is a powerful, moving film exploring identity, disability, and sexuality. Through the character of Laila, the film challenges societal norms and encourages the audience to embrace diversity and individuality. Laila's journey of self-discovery and acceptance is inspiring and heart-warming. It serves as a reminder that we can all overcome adversity and find our place in the world. As we continue to strive for a more inclusive and accepting society, "Margarita with a Straw" is an important contribution to the ongoing conversation about diversity and representation in contemporary cinema.

In the final scene of "Margarita with a Straw", we see Laila out of her wheelchair and sitting in the front seat of a car. She went to the spa and groomed herself, preparing to go on a date. While the person with whom she is going on a date is not revealed, this moment is significant as it represents Laila's journey toward self-acceptance and independence. Throughout the film, Laila struggles with her disability and her feelings of inadequacy, but in this final scene, she can embrace her true self and move forward toward a new chapter in her life. This moment is a powerful reminder that disability does not define a person and that everyone can find love and happiness. Overall, the final scene of "Margarita with a Straw" is a poignant and uplifting conclusion to a remarkable film that challenges societal norms and promotes inclusivity and acceptance.

Funding Information

This research was conducted without any external funding support.

Author Contributions Statement

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Surenderkhanna R	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
Dr. Rajasekaran V		✓			✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		

C : Conceptualization	I : Investigation	Vi : Visualization
M : Methodology	R : Resources	Su : Supervision
So : Software	D : Data Curation	P : Project administration
Va : Validation	O : Writing - Original Draft	Fu : Funding acquisition
Fo : Formal analysis	E : Writing - Review & Editing	

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

Data Availability

This study does not involve the collection of primary data. The analysis is based on publicly available sources, films and existing literature.

Recommendation

This article is recommended for publication in the Journal of Humanities, music and dance, as it contributes significantly to Film Studies, LGBTQ Studies, and the Social Construction of Gender by providing.





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How to Cite: Surenderkhanna R, Dr. Rajasekaran.V. (2025). Exploring disability, sexuality, and identity in contemporary film: margarita with a straw. *Journal of Humanities, Music and Dance (JHMD)*, 5(1), 55-61. <https://doi.org/10.55529/jhmd.51.55.61>

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