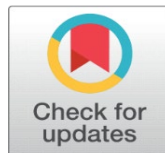


REPRESENTATION OF DISABILITY IN MALAYALAM CINEMA: AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF SELECTED FILMS OF THE ACTOR DILEEP

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ABSTRACT

This research paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the portrayal of disability in Malayalam cinema, focusing on five carefully selected films: Kunjikoonan, Pacha Kuthira, Sound Thoma, Ring Master, and Kodathi Samaksham Balan Vakeel. The objective is to investigate how disability is depicted and the impact it has on character development, societal perceptions, and the overarching themes of the films.

Keywords: Malayalam Cinema, Films, Character Development

1. INTRODUCTION

Media encompasses various communication channels, from printed material to digital data, serving functions such as information dissemination and entertainment. Media also carries social responsibility to raise awareness and contribute to societal reform, often referred to as the "fourth pillar of democracy."

Malayalam cinema, like many other film industries, has explored the theme of disability through various narratives. This paper delves into the nuanced

representation of disability in five distinct films, each offering unique perspectives on how disability is portrayed. We explore the following key themes in these films:

- 1) **Portrayal of Disability as Punishment:** In this section, we analyze how the films challenge the conventional notion of disability as a form of punishment for past transgressions. The characters with disabilities in these films often do not view their conditions as burdens or divine retribution, instead focusing on leading fulfilling lives.
- 2) **Gender and Disability:** This section examines the intersectionality of gender and disability, illustrating how both factors impact the experiences of the characters. We explore how disabled women are particularly vulnerable in certain situations and the societal challenges they face.
- 3) **Disability as Comic or Tragic Interlude:** This segment of the analysis explores the multifaceted portrayal of disability as both comedic and tragic. The films use humor and tragedy to challenge societal perceptions and provide insight into the complexities of living with a disability.
- 4) **Disability as Heroes:** The paper highlights instances where disabled characters are portrayed as heroes, emphasizing their resilience, strength, and ability to overcome adversity. These portrayals serve to inspire positive attitudes toward disability and raise awareness about the capabilities of disabled individuals.
- 5) **Disability and Social Economic Status:** In this final section, we examine how social and economic factors influence the treatment and perception of disabled characters. The films demonstrate that financial resources and social support systems play a crucial role in shaping the experiences and opportunities of individuals with disabilities.

Disability communication can influence the public agenda, advocate for policies, improve socio-economic and physical environments, enhance disability rehabilitation, and promote social norms that benefit the quality of life for individuals with disabilities. This study sheds light on the status and importance accorded to disabled people in movies.

2. DEFINITION AND TYPES OF DISABILITIES

Disability is defined as any condition that impedes a person's ability to perform certain activities or interact with the world around them. It encompasses cognitive, developmental, intellectual, mental, physical, sensory, or combinations thereof. Disabilities include impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. There are 21 identified types of disabilities worldwide, prioritizing specific categories of people.

- 1) Blindness
- 2) Low Vision
- 3) Leprosy Cured Persons
- 4) Locomotor Disability
- 5) Dwarfism
- 6) Intellectual Disability
- 7) Mental Illness
- 8) Cerebral Palsy
- 9) Specific Learning Disabilities
- 10) Speech and Language Disability

- 11) Hearing Impairment (Deaf and Hard of Hearing)
- 12) Muscular Dystrophy
- 13) Acid Attack Victim
- 14) Parkinson's Disease
- 15) Multiple Sclerosis
- 16) Thalassemia
- 17) Hemophilia
- 18) Sickle Cell Disease
- 19) Autism Spectrum Disorder
- 20) Chronic Neurological Conditions
- 21) Multiple Disabilities including Deaf and Blindness

Role of Media in Empowering the Differently Abled

Media possesses the power to empower differently abled individuals by disseminating information about government schemes and showcasing their talents. However, mainstream media has increasingly focused on glamour, while social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp have provided dedicated coverage to the talents of differently abled individuals.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study conducts content analysis on five selected movies featuring Actor Dileep to understand how disability is represented in his films. The research utilizes both primary and secondary data sources, with a primary focus on content analysis.

4. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- 1) To examine how people with disabilities are portrayed in movies.
- 2) To understand the evolving trends and approaches in the portrayal of disability in Malayalam movies.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

5.1. PLOT OF THE MOVIE

Kunjikoonan: The narrative of Vimal Kumar (Dileep), a physically challenged bandwagon with Kunjikoonan or little Hunchback, is told in the movie Kunjikoonan. Due to his hunchback, no woman is willing to marry Kunjan, which makes Kunjan miserable. But when Chembakam, a woman who is visually impaired, enters his life, everything improves.

Pacha Kuthira: Anandakkuttan, a young film artist, meets Akash Menon, his long-lost brother from Germany. But because of his autism, his brother causes problems for everyone in his vicinity, even the neighbours. Anandakkuttan finds the troubled Akash unpleasant at first, but as he grows to love and deeply connect with him, the story takes a different path.

Sound Thoma: A cleft-lip man with a poor voice is the subject of the film Sound Thoma. The embarrassment he endures as a result of his infirmities is shown in the movie, as well as how he deals with all of his issues.

Ringmaster: The film follows Prince's struggle against those who try to take his dog away from him because he is a dog trainer, and his life is closely connected to that of a dog.

Kodathi Samaksham Balan Vakeel: Balakrishnan is a lawyer who struggles with his stammer and hasn't had much success in his career. His brother-in-law gives him a challenging case involving a wealthy businessman, which causes his life to take an unusual turn.

5.2. PORTRAYAL OF DISABILITY AS PUNISHMENT

Disability in movies is perceived as a personal punishment or act of karma for a person's previous transgressions or the unfortunate consequences of their harsh and evil parents.

Kunjikoonan: When Kunjan is simply joking with the customer while the customer is commenting, God only gives this hunch back on purpose. He is not seeing his hunchback as a burden or punishment from God. He feels he is normal, as are others, with strong legs and hands and capable of doing what others do. People are encircling him, only sympathetically seeing him. Chembakam, the blind girl, is also helping her father in the street circus and is ready to work.

Pacha Kuthira: The autistic Akash Menon lives in his own world, communicating in his own way to meet his basic needs. But his brother Anandhakuttan and his friends only see his disability as a headache for them in its initial stages. scene in which his friends are mentioning him as a special character and feeling sad about the person, like some kind of punishment to the people who take care of those autistic kids. It demonstrates society's ignorance of the autistic disability.

Sound Thoma Thoma's father, Paulo, believed that his son was born with a cleft lip and that his wife died shortly after birth, all because the son was the antichrist. His father regards him as unfit for anything, and people refuse him in the marriage market, so he will not receive any dowry due to his speech deformity. His father claims he is useless and a burden to others. Thoma's villagers and he himself believe that he got a deformity in his speech due to his father's cruel activities like lending money and buying more interest without humanity. Unknowingly, he is doing charity work for the people in the panchayat with his father's money to atone for his father's sin and show love for his family.

Ring Master: Karthika, the blind girl in this movie, never blames her disability. Instead of that, she bought a guide dog for her assistance. Later on, she got a companion, Mr. Prince, and he accompanied her to the hospital for an eye checkup, and later on, she got vision.

Kodathi Samksham Balan Vakeel: During his college days, Balakrishnan was affected by stuttering due to an accident caused by a friend. He himself had lost faith in his ability to communicate the information to the people. From every angle, he is having difficulties as a result of his speech disorder, and he is convinced that he is a failure who will not be able to overcome his difficulties with treatment. It clearly portrays the problems faced by the person with stuttering and how he is carrying the thoughts and jokes of society over his disability, which will demotivate his career and personal life.

5.3. GENDER AND DISABILITY

The impact of disability on the lives of both genders is portrayed in the movies and varies according to the person's social and financial status.

Kunjikoonan: Kunjan, being an employed person, having his own house, and hardworking, got rejected from various marriage proposals. It shows the reception of disabled people in the marriage market. When Garudan Vasu attacks him, he can't oppose him because of his body condition. He is staying away from all the problems that affect him physically. Chembakam, the blind girl, is facing an issue with Garudan Vasu. The evil character Garudan Vasu came to know that she is alone and blind too, and he is always looking for a chance to physically abuse her. It raises the issue of a blind girl's safety. When Vasu tries to abuse her, Kunjan is not able to protect her with his body. Prasad, another hero of this movie, saves her from this evil local goon.

Pacha Kuthira: Akash Menon, a German citizen with an autistic disability, is portrayed as being trapped by people who are oblivious to how to interact with people with autistic disabilities. He was born with a disability. Later on, Anandakuttan and his friends learned how to deal with him. The same can be said for his childhood friend Dia. Dia was diagnosed with autism at the age of three due to some growth in the brain. Autism, whether male or female, requires time to perceive and comprehend information. Patience and loving care are required to deal with autistic people. They will meet their basic needs with a lot of training. They like to interact with the same category of people and travel in their own world.

Sound Thoma: Thoma, the film's hero with a cleft lip and a weird sound, is a financially successful man who is subjected to disability jokes. Because of his voice, he was rejected by her girlfriend. His miserly father believes that a disabled person's value in the marriage market will be low and that he will not receive the dowry that he is expecting at the time when he is taking the doctor to surgery, which he will reject when the baby is born. The faces of the heroes in this film reflect society's prejudice and ignorance of people with disabilities.

Ring Master: In this movie, the heroine, Keerthy Suresh, is blind, and her character is portrayed as bold. She is capable of taking care of her own daily needs with the help of a trained dog named Toby. She is aware of what is going on around her by using other senses such as smell and touch. At the same time, she is getting trouble from her sister's husband. Her brother-in-law understands that he cannot touch her or go beside her with wrong intentions when her dog is there. My brother-in-law understands that people with disabilities, like blind people, will be helpless without their guide dog. So, he kidnapped the dog. Later, Prince the Hero stepped in to protect her from her evil brother-in-law. She tells hero and friends about her plans and expresses her fear of living alone in a large house and is considering moving to a place that protects people with disabilities. It demonstrates whether visually impaired or disabled evil people in a society will seek out opportunities to abuse women.

Kodathi Samksham Balan Vakeel: In this film, three male characters with disabilities are depicted: the hero, Balakrishnan, who stutters; the judge of the court, Vidya, who limps; and the local goon, Babu, who stutters. The film depicts how these three male characters perceive their disabilities and incorporate them into their personal and professional lives. People in society will make fun of people with disabilities, but with self-confidence and training, they can put a stop to it.

5.4. DISABILITY AS COMIC OR TRAGEDY INTERLUDE

It is bizarre how people talk, whether in the media or in society. It is not portrayed differently in films, either. Characters with disabilities in films are either portrayed as comical or tragic figures, or as people looking for sympathy.

Kunjikoonan: Kunjan is applying a lot of facial moisturising cream and will bath more than twice before going to see the bride to make him glow and to attract them. Despite owning a home and working, he was turned down for several marital marriage proposals. In the case of Chembakam, a blind girl shows her family situation as a little tragedy. After her father died, she and her father ran a street circus; when she became alone, Kunjan appeared as her protective hand. Chembakam is begging for money from people to buy medicines for her father, and all show or portray some of the usual sympathy-creating images.

Pacha Kuthira: In the scene in which Anandakuttan and friends are seeing Akash Menon in an airport, they are mentioning him as a special character, and he is telling them that if they get someone like that as their brother, then life is done. It demonstrates a lack of knowledge about the disability, such as autism, and viewing them as a special character in society, which is tragic for the people who work with those children. Anandakuttan is unable to accept Akash Menon as his brother, and he collapses, reflecting society's attitude toward disabled children. The behaviour of Akash Menon in the movies is portrayed as comical. Certain conversations between Anandakuttan friends about his brother portray him as mentally unstable.

Sound Thoma: Nurses see the newborn grunting and crying with a cleft lip and making strange sounds; even the nurses referred to as angels do not see a baby born with a cleft lip as normal and regard the birth as a tragedy. Certain dialogues in the film depict Thoma's disability as both comedy and tragedy, for example, his voice was compared to a loudspeaker caught cold, singing with your voice can't be heard by your mom, and people are so curious about Thoma's love relationship, which is seen as a tragedy, and why normal girls would love a cleft on lip guy with a strange sound. The pronunciation of certain words and names is portrayed in the movies as comical.

Ring Master: In the hospital scene where heroine Keerthy Suresh came to meet the patient, the veterinarian doctor who was bitten by her dog at the time, a policeman requested that the film's hero Dileep provide maximum support and help to these types of people. It shows the need to give separate considerations to people with disabilities. She is having a difficult time in her life when her support dog, Toby, is abandoned. It shows some support system is required for blind people. During that time, the hero of the film, Prince, became her staunch supporter. Suraj Venjaramoodu tells Aju Varghese in a scene that Karthika, the blind girl, is the one who spent money on making the film, but I made my name as a producer because she is blind; how can she see that? Suraj falls down in the next scene without seeing the opposite person carrying a ladder. It portrays the message that "Kannudayal pora Kananam."

Kodathi Samksham Balan Vakeel: The audience can understand the difficulty of a stammer to convey information to the public during the hero's introduction scene. People with stutters take time to communicate. The people around them will not have the patience to hear the entire conversation and will instead mock Balakrishnan or see it as a tragedy. Another character in this movie is named Babu, a local manish goon who is also shown to stammer. When goon Babu and hero Balakrishnan meet face-to-face, Balakrishnan avoids conversation with Babu on

purpose because the goon is unaware that the hero is also a stammerer, and if Balakrishnan starts speaking, Babu might think it's a joke because he is facing away from others.

5.5. DISABILITY AS HEROES

Certain films in the Malayalam film industry portray disabled people as heroes, thereby raising social awareness in society and instilling a positive attitude toward disabled people.

Kunjikoonan: Kunjan, the hero with a hunch back, is carrying a positive attitude and working at a phone booth, dreaming of starting a family by marrying a beautiful girl. He faced rejection from so many girls, including some who were disabled, but he hoped for the best. His emotions and feelings are well portrayed in the movie. He fell in love with Chembakam, a beautiful blind girl, and assisted her in overcoming her disability by providing financial assistance for an eye operation.

Pacha Kuthira: In this movie, the second hero is Akash Menon, the autistic one, who is a German citizen coming to India to meet his elder brother Anandakuttan. The early stages of the film focus on the difficulties that his younger brother Anandakuttan faces due to his lack of understanding of how to deal with his autistic younger brother. In later stages, he understands that the love of his autistic brother for him is pure and divine and learns how to deal with him. Furthermore, we learn from this film that children with autism have their own world; they are also members of society, which those around them must respect and understand.

Sound Thoma: Hero Thoma, born with a cleft lip and a weird voice, is portrayed very well throughout the movie. The heroine rejects his love proposal in the early stages; later stages: his girlfriend; and the entire village in the panchayat accepts his pure mind. Hero Thoma is portrayed as a happy person who hides his sorrows from others. He is not demotivated by the jokes about his disability among family and friends.

Ring Master: There are two heroines in this movie, among whom one is blind. In the film, the hero, like the heroine, has impaired vision. The common factor that binds us is our love for animals, especially dogs. The audience is made aware through the film that disability is not a barrier to a loving relationship.

Kodathi Samksham Balan Vakeel: In this film, the protagonist, Balakrishnan, is a lawyer who stutters. He was not born with this speech disorder. His friend was in college when he was involved in an accident by mistake, and he developed nervousness and a speech disorder as a result. The perception of society towards an advocate who has stuttering is clearly understandable in this movie. Hero is a gifted, clever, sharp, intelligent, and knowledgeable individual, but he struggles in his profession due to his lack of confidence, low self-esteem, and inferiority complex. He got trapped in a problem, but he resolved the issue very successfully and won the case. Through the movie, the hero gives information to society about how stammering can be rectified with training and self-confidence and is not a barrier to performing or shining in a profession.

5.6. DISABILITY AND SOCIAL ECONOMIC STATUS

Social and economic status is one of the important factors that shows how society sees a disabled person, and it is well portrayed in the movie.

Kunjikoonan: Kunjan, the hunchback hero, is from the lower middle class. He is running a STD booth for his earnings. His marriage proposal got rejected by

various girls because of his hunchback. He fell in love with a blind girl and assisted her by providing shelter and financial support for an eye operation to restore her vision. Later, Thoma, a hardworking and kindhearted man, received approval from the girl he loves. She understands the purity of mind of a hunchback, not the physical appearance.

Pacha Kuthira: Akash from Germany came to India to meet his brother, who is working as a junior artist in the film industry. He is getting a low income, not enough to support himself. He cannot afford his brother's expenses, and he lacks the time and resources to care for him. The Anandakuttan situation in the movie clearly shows the lack of knowledge about autism and the difficulty of a middle-class family dealing with autistic people with disabilities. But in the case of Dia, his childhood friend and the one and only child of rich couples from Germany, they are financially well off, they understand and have knowledge about the child's disability, and they are willing to provide all the support and care. Because Akash is her best friend, when he leaves her, she becomes depressed and less active. The financially rich parents of Dia came to know that he was a trouble for his brother, who is working as a junior artist in the cinema industry. They decided to adopt Akash Menon for their daughter Dia in order to make her happy again.

Sound Thoma: Doctors advised Paulo to have surgery for his baby and conveyed the future consequences of a cleft lip. But Thoma's miserly father, Paulo, refused because surgery is expensive. When he grows up, his father considers having him correct his cleft lip and creating a market in the marriage contract to get more dowry. But the doctor's reply was that surgery was now useless. Here, I'm demonstrating to the audience that cleft lip and palate can be completely cured in the early stages. Thoma comes from a wealthy family, but his miserly father turned down his request to correct his disability. Unawareness of disability can be seen here. People around him will accept or tolerate his singing because he is wealthy and Paulo's son. People in his panchaath learned that he is not like his miserly father, and after witnessing his many charitable works, they began to recognise his good mind despite his disability.

Ring Master: Karthika, the movie's blind heroine, comes from an upper middle-class family. She has her own house and guide dog to support her disability. In the movie, there is a scene in which her friends are in need of money to produce a movie. She is willing to pledge her house for 30 lakhs and hand it over to them. She is financially able, and her disability is not affecting her morale. She is getting trouble only from her brother-in-law for wealth, but it was cleverly resolved by her owning a guide dog later on as a supporting companion.

Kodathi Samksham Balan Vakeel: Balakrishnan, the hero, belongs to a middle-class family, and by profession he is an advocate. He is facing a lot of humour due to his stuttering from the family and professional sides. Initially, he doesn't try to overcome. He saw numerous speech therapists, but his confidence in overcoming this speech disorder did not work. In his life, he faced a problem and overcame it with high confidence and knowledge in his profession. It altered his social and economic standing. His friend Vidha, the judge, is a limp; he performs his duty well and shines in his profession. At the same time, local goon Babu is stuttering; in this case, the whole colony is respecting him and having fans by looking at his manly, strong body; nobody is thinking about his speech disorder.

6. CONCLUSION

This research paper contributes to the broader discourse on disability representation in cinema by offering a nuanced examination of selected Malayalam films. By analyzing the films' treatment of disability, we gain insights into how societal perceptions and attitudes are shaped and challenged through storytelling. The findings highlight the importance of promoting positive representations of disabled individuals in cinema and the need to challenge stereotypes.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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