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The Disabled in Disaster Zone: Representation, Vulnerability, and Narrative Prosthesis in 2018: *Everyone is a Hero*

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Abstract

The Malayalam movie 2018: Everyone is a Hero, directed by Jude Anthany Joseph, is set against the backdrop of the Kerala floods of 2018. The movie portrays various vulnerable groups affected by the flood and how they mitigated the natural disaster. This paper critically examines the portrayal of disability and vulnerability in the movie, mainly focusing on the characters of Bhasi Chettan, a person with visual impairment, and Aby, a child with intellectual disability. Using theoretical frameworks like Mitchell and Snyder's Narrative Prosthesis and Ato Quayson's Aesthetic Nervousness, the paper uses a close textual and cinematic analysis to explore how characters with disabilities are used to enhance the emotional depth of the narrative as well as a medium to develop the protagonist's heroism. It examines the stereotypical and ableist representation of the characters and their vulnerabilities, alongside capturing the increased vulnerability of disabled individuals during and after a natural disaster. The characters are sometimes valorised and sometimes antagonised to push the narrative, which reveals the tension between authentic representation and narrative necessity. The analysis highlights the need for more ethical portrayals of disability within survival narratives and stresses the relevance of considering people with different disabilities in disaster risk reduction and response planning.

Keywords: Disability, Vulnerability, Natural Disaster, Aesthetic Nervousness, Narrative Prosthetics, Survival Thrillers.

Introduction

Natural disasters render people vulnerable irrespective of their individual bodies. But the extent to which the vulnerability varies depends on several internal and external factors, including age, physical and mental health, availability of resources, communication facilities, and community resilience. While conventionally able people are more capable of relocating themselves, the highly vulnerable groups often don't have that agency. Children and the elderly are dependent on their caretakers. The same goes for people with disabilities and pregnant women. It is important to understand the debilitating effects of natural disasters on these vulnerable groups.

The right representation is necessary to mitigate disasters and spread awareness for different groups of people. And it also enables changes in the perspective of the general public regarding the said groups.

Movies are a far-reaching medium of representing socio-cultural reality. This paper critically analyses the movie *2018: Everyone is a Hero* (2023) by looking at the representation of disability and disabled characters. It uses the theoretical concepts of aesthetic nervousness and narrative prosthesis to study this representation. The Malayalam movie *2018: Everyone is a Hero* (2023), directed by Jude Anthany Joseph, is based on the 2018 Kerala Floods, one of the worst floods in Kerala's history, with many casualties and property damage. The movie was critically acclaimed for its realistic recreation of the impact of the flood and the portrayal of community resilience and the humanity of individual people. Along with the nature of representation, this paper also looks at how people with disabilities are more vulnerable during natural disasters by critically analysing the movie.

The objectives of this paper are: to explore how people with disabilities are more vulnerable during natural disasters, to critically analyse the depiction of disabled characters as a narrative prosthesis to portray the heroic nature of the protagonist, to analyse how disability and disabled characters are antagonised, and to map the aesthetic nervousness in the overall representation of disabled characters and disability in the movie.

Enhanced Vulnerability of Persons with Disabilities During Natural Disasters

Natural disasters, in general, displace people and temporarily suspend the agency of most people. In case of floods, both people and animals are displaced. Sometimes they are also entrapped in their settlements. The movie portrays people of all types being vulnerable during the Kerala floods. The central characters in the movie, who are disabled, are: Bhasi (Indrans), a blind man, and Aby (Pranav Binu), an autistic child with a broken leg. Disabled individuals can be more vulnerable during natural disasters for a variety of reasons that add to their existing disability.

The “vulnerability” perspective in disasters, which is rapidly emerging as a dominant view in the field, assumes that a real disaster occurs when it strikes an underprivileged population. Vulnerability is formally defined as “the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a natural hazard.” Implicit here is “differential vulnerability”; that is, different populations face different levels of risk and vulnerability. (Donner)

During natural disasters like floods and landslides, there is a disruption of modes of transportation, leading to limited mobility. In the movie, it is shown how airports are closed down because of flooding on runways and trains are discontinued due to landslides. The roads are flooded, making it impossible to walk or drive through them, so they have to resort to rafts and boats. In such a situation, disabled characters like Bhasi and Aby find it difficult to move to relief camps, as this impairs their access to evacuation services. “In the event of a disaster, PWDs (persons with disabilities) face the risk of being left behind or abandoned, as preparedness activities and early warning systems are often not designed in an inclusive way” (Doll 4). Real-life footage used in the movie shows how the elderly and children are being relocated.

There is a suspension of communication and transportation as people are displaced. A husband and wife lose communication as he is on his way to meet his hospitalised mother. Another incident is that of a rescue team losing contact with a family trapped in a landslide. Aby also finds it difficult to communicate with his parents because of his intellectual disability. This also affects their accessibility to shelter and medication needs. Children, the elderly and pregnant women also face the mobility issue and access to proper health care.

People with disabilities might also face social isolation during natural disasters, as in the case of Bhasi, who was left behind when a rescue boat arrived. He is told that another rescue boat will come for him, but later he is forgotten about. There is a communication gap between the rescue team and they become dependent on their caregivers. This not only happens during the rescue but also when risk warnings are issued. This is noted by Vivien Doll as:

Early warning systems are often not designed in a disability-inclusive way, for example for people with hearing or visual impairments, that may not be able to be reached by the warning in case of a hazard and evacuation may be delayed. Furthermore, depending on the kind of impairment, PWDs may have trouble understanding the situation or understand information and risk differently, which leaves them in situations where they are unable to react appropriately. (Doll 20)

In the movie, the pregnant lady is airlifted with the help of the protagonist, and that happened only because he was able to communicate with her. There is also a catastrophic feeling of entrapment because of flooding and landslides. People are trapped inside their own houses and safe spaces, and once they become claustrophobic. A mute person cannot cry out for help, a blind person may not see what they're walking into, and a deaf person may not hear warning signs. Thus, as the movie portrays, vulnerable groups become more vulnerable due to a lack of agency. Apart from physical disability, people with intellectual disability tend to either underestimate the gravity of the situation or may panic due to a lack of understanding or even the sudden change of their comforting atmosphere.

To address these vulnerabilities, it is crucial to take into account the specific needs and challenges faced by disabled individuals and ensure that they have equal access to information, services, and support during and after natural disasters. Additionally, raising awareness about disability issues and promoting inclusive practices within communities can contribute to greater resilience for all members, including those with disabilities, in the face of natural disasters.

Disability as Narrative Prosthesis

Usually, disabled characters in movies have often been portrayed using stereotypes and tropes. These stereotypes may include the tragic disabled character who exists solely for inspiration or pity and the evil disabled character whose disability is linked to their villainy. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, in "Narrative Prosthesis", develop a narrative theory of the pervasive use of disability as a device of characterisation in literature and film. They argue that, while other marginalised identities have suffered cultural exclusion due to a dearth of images reflecting their experience, the marginality of people with disabilities has occurred in the midst of the perpetual circulation of images of disability in print and visual media (Mitchell 225).

This concept highlights how narratives serve as tools or prosthetics for both disabled and able-bodied individuals to engage with disability as a subject matter or to make sense of the disability experience. Despite the considerable change in disability narratives in Malayalam movies, disabled characters are often used as narrative prosthetics irrespective of the significance of their roles. When a disabled body is inserted into the narrative as a metaphor, it points to the dependence of the narratives on the disability. Here, the disability acts as a storytelling device. That is, the representation of people with disability is for what their disability can do to develop the story. Characters with disability become a vehicle for communicating traits like weakness and/or resilience.

Both Bhasi and Aby can be considered as tragic disabled characters. The film narrative portrays Anoop as an empathetic character who looks out for the disabled. A sarcastic comment is made to him when a local person jokes that working at the blind man's supermarket is such an esteemed job. The dialogue patronises Anoop as well as depicts how society treats disability and people with

disabilities. When Anoop is with Bhasi, he becomes his eyes. The scenes show how he describes the things going around: like children going to school or the sky being cloudy. The camera shows his eyes and his smile as Anoop narrates all this. Also, at the beginning of the movie, he is shown listening to the radio while Anoop is away. Later, when Anoop sends a message at the request of Bhasi, he sends a voice note. This puts forth an ideal way of accommodating people with disabilities. But even Anoop comments jokingly that he only helps Bhasi *Chettan* (brother) because he is a poor blind man.

Again, when Aby breaks his leg, Anoop takes care of him and sets the TV in his room to make him comfortable. Anoop's concern for the welfare of the child creates one of the most emotionally taxing scenes in the movie: the rescuing of Aby and his family. It not only furthers Anoop's heroic demeanour but also elevates Aby as a rescuer. It is finally the disabled child who helps in the rescue of his family. As the whole family is about to drown, a lizard falls on Aby, and the boy, being scared of it, screams out in fear. It is this voice that prompts Anoop to look inside the house for the trapped family. Thus, the intellectual disability of the child inadvertently makes him a hero.

Antagonisation of Disability

The presentation of disabled characters in movies varies depending on factors such as the film's genre, the intentions of the filmmakers, and the portrayal of disability within the story. "Oftentimes, the film industry presents people with disabilities in a variety of stereotypical ways, thus perpetuating ableist stereotypes" (Black 67). This portrayal can reinforce negative stereotypes about disability and might even lead to the stigmatisation of disability. "These stereotypes were (a) pitiable and pathetic, (b) supercrip, (c) sinister, evil, and criminal, (d) better-off dead, (e) maladjusted, his or her own worst enemy, (f) a burden, and (g) unable to live a successful life" (Black 67).

When Aby's parents are entrapped in their house, not only the kid but also the parents are disabled in that situation. Even when the father gets hurt, the mother is asked to stay with the child. And as the water rises, both of them have to hold him up, even to the point of sacrificing their lives. Here, the audience wonders how things would have been different had the child been mobile. It is as if the child dragging down his parents with him had not been for Anoop's arrival to rescue them. One of the first instances of treating disability as a villain in the movie arises when a negative character creates an accident. He drives past a journalist's car, and she calls out to him, asking if he is blind. This can be seen as a foreshadowing, as later the blind man, Bhasi, accidentally causes the death of the protagonist. In the flashback, he unconsciously becomes the villain in people's minds, as it was his rescue that led to the death of the protagonist. In his attempts to survive, he climbs on Anoop's shoulders and pushes him down. In the process, his legs get stuck inside the crevices between rocks, and Anoop drowns because of that. Although the circumstances were inevitable, many viewers bashed Bhasi and blamed him for the death of the character. The disability becomes a constant source of anxiety. With the placement of the flashback, the intentions of the director may also seem ambivalent. The ending of the movie becomes painful and haunting because of the death scene of Anoop, where Bhasi is being held accountable by at least a small portion of the audience.

Resilience and Aesthetic Nervousness

In "Conversation with Prof Ato Quayson: Aesthetic Nervousness and Disability", Ato Quayson proposes that aesthetic nervousness happens when a disabled character unsettles the protocol of representation, whether in a movie or a novel, and the text struggles to accommodate the disability. The concept looks at the "aesthetic" and the "ethical" at the same time, forcing the audience to look outside of the aesthetic domain into the real world and its form of disablement ("Conversations"). According to him, every text has an established way of seeing or knowing things. But there is a

small tension around disabled characters. The tension is a sign that disabled characters or figures unsettle the protocol of representation. This unsettling is called “aesthetic nervousness”. The text is struggling to accommodate the disability (Quayson 213).

Aesthetic nervousness forces us to look at ethics and aesthetics at the same time. Disability never allows us to ignore the aesthetic domain. A description of a disabled person has correlations in reality. So, when it is reflected in the text, you realise that there is something wrong with the way it is perceived in the world. It forces you to look outside the aesthetic domain and into real-world problems of disablement. The function of disabled characters is disruptive to the discourse. Aesthetic nervousness takes into account individual encounters between disabled and able-bodied characters.

The most emotionally taxing scenes in the movie were the rescuing of Aby and the survival of Bhasi, both of which inadvertently led to the death of the protagonist Anoop. When Aby cries for his father, he knows that his father is hurt, but there isn't much he can do in the situation. His mother is forced to take care of him instead of his bleeding father. Both his parents have to put his safety first. The heart-wrenching cries and helplessness of the family stress out the audience. From a narrative of flood, at this moment, one is forced to look at the disability experiences around them. Even after being rescued by Anoop, there are a few minutes where the audience wonders, along with his parents, if he is alive. It was a sigh of relief when he came back to consciousness after a while.

As mentioned earlier, Anoop's death scene is one of the most difficult scenes to watch in the movie. His death and grasp for air are paralleled with the survival of Bhasi, the blind man. The audience is left in a state of unrest, almost hoping that Anoop would survive, and when he does not, they displace the anger on Bhasi and blame it on his disability. But the initiation for this displacement starts from the moment Bhasi comes out of his house. The audience hopes he stays inside, but he walks out. Since he is blind, he doesn't know that the area is flooded. Anoop shouts to him to warn him, but as soon as he hears Anoop's voice, he walks further and falls into the water. The audience worries for the blind man initially and is relieved he is safe till the flashback is shown at the end of the movie.

At the end, there is also a stereotypical representation of Bhasi as a lottery ticket seller. Although it is a common sight in most parts of India, the downgrade for Bhasi is evident from the supermarket store owner to the lottery ticket seller. It is important to note that the portrayal of disabled characters in movies has evolved, and there is a growing push for more authentic and nuanced representations that reflect the diversity of disabled experiences. Disability advocates and organisations have been actively working to raise awareness of the need for better representation and inclusion in the film industry, leading to positive changes in recent years. Nevertheless, there is still work to be done to ensure that disabled characters are presented in a fair, respectful, and accurate manner in movies.

Conclusion

The representation of disability in *2018: Everyone is a Hero* reveals the complex intersection between vulnerability and resilience. While the film succeeds in depicting the additional challenges faced by disabled individuals compared to their able-bodied counterparts during natural disasters, it sometimes reinforces traditional stereotypes through narrative prosthesis and aesthetic nervousness. Characters like Bhasi Chettan and Aby are often caught in tropes that either villainise or overemphasise their disabilities. The portrayal oscillates between narrative prosthesis, where disability is a vehicle for heroism and tragedy, and aesthetic nervousness, where the disabled body unsettles the comfortable frameworks of storytelling and viewer expectation. This paper underscores the importance of nuanced portrayals that do not merely use disability as a plot device

but acknowledge the lived realities of disabled individuals. The limitation of the paper is that it only focuses on a single movie that shows natural disasters and how vulnerability is presented concerning people with disabilities. There is scope for further study on other survival thrillers in books, movies, and other media. Disability experiences in the face of natural disasters are a significant area of study as they would help the resilience process, spread awareness, and provide better rehabilitation facilities for people with disabilities and their caregivers. It also calls for a discussion on inclusive emergency planning, accessible communication, and evacuation plans. Ultimately, survival itself is a heroic act because you are saving yourself. And everyone is thus a hero irrespective of their physical or mental state.

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