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**The Persistent Politics of Hegemonic Beauty and the
Marginalization of Disability in Malayalam Cinema**

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Abstract: The article explores the sustained normalisation of aesthetic ideals in malayalam films that contribute to the exclusion of the disabled. The myth of the ‘perfect body’ and the ableist concepts of beauty reinforced by the media for decades act as discourses of power that marginalize the disabled. The films with disabled protagonists represent them as unappealing and undesirable. They are depicted as dependent individuals who are sexually and romantically unacceptable. The article primarily analyses four major Malayalam films with disabled protagonists, *Kunjikoonan*, *Albudhadweep*, *Sound Thoma* and *Jai Ganesh*. The protagonist of the film *kunjikoonan* is a man with a hunchback who is derisively referred to as kunjikoonan by his fellow beings. The film *Albudhadweep* draws a stigmatizing contrast between men of short-stature and the normatively abled individuals. *Sound Thoma* unfolds the story of an individual with a cleft lip and a defective voice, ridiculed for his interest in singing and his love for an able-bodied woman. The protagonist of the film *Jai Ganesh* is an aspiring artist with paraplegia, struggling with feelings of inferiority. The study of these films spanning two decades traces out the persistent glorification of hegemonic beauty norms in malayalam films that adversely influence the social perceptions and the self-esteem of the disabled.

Keywords: *Normalisation, aesthetic ideals, Disabled, Discourses of Power, Marginalize, Social Perception*

Introduction

Disability does not inherently impede the experience and expression of intimate relationships. The physical differences do not preclude emotional and sexual intimacy. Intimate life is not just about physical manifestations; it is also a psychological affair. The experience of sexual life differs among individuals. But people with disabilities whose physical appearance deviates from the normative expectations shaped by ableism are marginalised. Disability can be genetic or acquired. An able-bodied man may acquire an impairment following an accident or disease. The physical restrictions caused by the accident do not negate his inherent human instincts. The emotions and impulses remain intact despite the accident. Disabled individuals are regarded as “strange” or “different” within the discussions of sexuality and marital life. Disabled people can overcome biological conditions that restrict their sexual relationships and reproduction through sexual aids, medications and assistive reproductive technologies. The prejudices of society hinder the romantic and sexual experiences of disabled people. In the medieval era, religions preached that disability was a curse and sexual pleasure was a sin. Religion regarded sexual relations done with the intention of reproduction as noble. The ableist society perceived people with disabilities as incapable of reproduction and denied them marital relationships. Society regarded disabled women as incapable of fulfilling maternal responsibilities and deprived them of reproductive autonomy. The society is least concerned about the conjugal life of people with disabilities. “Marriage and Disability are two terms considered anti-thesis of each other. Marriage seems to be an unattainable goal to the persons across disabilities” (Adhikari 53). The Malayalam films depict conjugal relationship as insignificant in the life of the disabled people, and they are portrayed as individuals struggling merely to survive. The films often construct disabled people as objects of ridicule and rejection. This persuades disabled people and their families to withdraw from social relationships, and the opportunity to discuss their intimate needs with peer groups is restricted. Disabled individuals are denied privacy in the family because they are often infantilized. The ableist power structures operate through mass media and impose hegemonic assumptions upon disabled individuals and society. Normative perceptions of beauty are disseminated and reinforced by Malayalam films. The insecurity about their appearance and life induced by the persistent politics of ableism in Malayalam films inhibits disabled people from experiencing and expressing sexual and romantic relationships. Dr B. Ramaswamy, in *Introduction to Disability: Basic Concepts and Issues*, states that, “Similar to many of the assumptions underlying the medical model of disability amongst many clinicians, the ‘ableist’ societal world-view is that the able-bodied are the norm in society, and that people who have disabilities must either strive to become that norm or should keep their distance from able-bodied people. A disability is thus inherently, a ‘bad’ thing that must be

overcome. The ableist worldview holds that disability is an error, a mistake or a falling, rather than a simple consequence of human diversity, akin to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender” (199).

People with disabilities are subjected to aesthetic devaluation and marginalisation by ableist politics that operates through mass media. The article analyses major Malayalam films featuring disabled characters from 2002 to 2024 to demonstrate that there has been no significant change in the representation of the disabled individuals. They are portrayed as undesirable, dependent, and incapable of fulfilling normative marital roles by positioning them outside the ideals of hegemonic beauty. The article examines major Malayalam films with disabled protagonists, spanning more than twenty-two years. The film *Kunji koonan*, released in 2002 and written by Benny P. Nayarambalam, narrates the life of Vimal Kumar, who is derogatorily called “Kunjikoonan” by the public because of his disability. *Albudhadweep*, directed by Vinayan in 2005, explores life on an island with its inhabitants, short-statured men and able-bodied women. *Beautiful*, released in 2011, was written by Anoop Menon and explores the friendship between Stephen Louis and John. Stephen is an affluent man with disability, and John is a singer. *Sound Thoma*, released in 2013 and scripted by the writer of *Kunjikoonan*, centres on the life of Plaparambil Thoma, a generous man with a disability. Shyamaprasad explores the life of an aspiring artist with an acquired disability in his movie *Artist*, which was released in 2013. It is based on the novel *Dreams in Prussian Blue*, written by Parithosh Uttam. *Jai Ganesh*, Ranjith Sanker’s 2024 film, depicts the life of Ganesh, who became disabled in an accident. The article analyses the statements and situations portrayed in Malayalam movies that aesthetically devalue the disabled people. It examines the persistent politics of hegemonic beauty in Malayalam films, which stigmatise disability.

Textual Analysis

In the movie *Kunjikoonan*, the title character, Kunjan, has kyphosis. He faces ridicule from the women to whom he proposes marriage. The exaggerated physical appearance of the disabled character, like the excessive application of face powder, gives the impression that he is not “normal.” The film represents the disabled characters as intellectually incapable and comic figures. Many statements in the movie humiliate people with disabilities. This movie portrays disabled people as unattractive and grotesque. The father of the girl Kunjan went to propose to remarked that he had mistaken him for a beggar. His friend stated scornfully that Kunjan had intended to frighten a girl with his appearance when he went to visit the prospective bride. Kunjan remarked self-deprecatingly that he was frightened of his own shadow. The people mocked Kunjan for his desire to marry. “Marriage becomes a disciplinary institution that reinforces bodily norms, excluding those who deviate from them. Disability, therefore, is not just a condition but a category produced through power relations and control” (Sree and Singh

4). They even ridiculed him for addressing him as ‘Vimal Kumar’ rather than using the derogatory name the public had assigned him. A short-statured lady expressed her aversion to Kunjan’s proposal in a most discourteous manner. She remarked that it was better to live the life of a widow than living with the “hunchback.” She made a derisive statement that she lost all hope in life upon seeing him. Kunjan also showed anger towards his well-wisher, Thoma, for bringing the proposal of the lady with a short stature. This frames disabled individuals as unacceptable in the context of romance and marriage, and propagates the notion that their own community finds disabled people unappealing as prospective partners. Kunjan meets Chembagam, who was blind, during a street show. Kunjan supported her after the death of her father. Kunjan fell in love with Chembagam. He concealed his disability and told her he was six feet tall and fair. He decided to help Chembagam regain her sight. Kunjan was anxious about whether she would choose him if she overcame her disability. Prasad is an able-bodied man, and Vasu, the antagonist, murdered his lover. Her eyes enabled Chembagam to regain sight. When Kunjan visits the hospital after she had regained her sight, he finds her hugging Prasad. Chembagam mistook him for Kunjan, and, unaware of the misunderstanding, he became disheartened. He later fled from his native place. Kunjan expressed, with a sense of despair, that his experience substantiated Thoma’s remark that women with sight would never choose to love him. Thoma informed him that Chembagam mistook Prasad for Kunjan because he disguised his identity. The representation of the union of Chembagam and Kunjan suggests that sympathy and gratitude dominated her decision to accept him. Chembagam is seen as shocked when she realises she was helped by a man with a disability. The movie does not offer any scenes where she feels desire or lust for him. It is Prasad who protected Chembagam from Vasu, who tried to rape her. It portrays Kunjan as reliant on an able-bodied man for protection. Kunjan, a person with disability, is depicted as feeble, weak, disfigured, dependent and unappealing. Prasad, an able-bodied man, is portrayed as a handsome, heroic protector. The two characters were played by the same actor, which intensifies discrimination. Chembagam was not chosen as a romantic partner by men when she was disabled. The able-bodied men had approached her only with the intention of sexual assault. Kunjan said that he was inferior and unsuitable for her, as she was no longer disabled. “The twin ideologies of normalcy and beauty posit female and disabled bodies as pliable bodies to be shaped infinitely to conform to a set of standards called normal and beautiful” (Nandhini 105). The film portrays Kunjan as exploiting Chembagam’s disability and financial constraints to win her affection. The film creates an adverse effect on the self-esteem of the disabled. It depicts disabled individuals as struggling to conform to normative standards of beauty, ultimately positioning them as objects of mockery. It also represents disabled people as unsettling and physically compromised, unworthy of conjugal life. These cinematic representations would restrict them from asserting their sexuality and expressing their romantic aspirations.

The plot of the movie *Albudhadweep* is set on an island inhabited by men of short stature and able-bodied women. The movie was praised for its casting men of short-stature. While the movie appears to advocate inclusion of people with disabilities, it ultimately reinforces ableist stereotypes. The inhabitants of the island consider able-bodied men as demons. It is revealed through their conversations that they fear the able-bodied men would confiscate their wealth and women. Through Devamma's words, it is revealed that the men of the island became short-statured following the curse of a Gandharvan. It was revenge against the king, who used black magic to end the love affair between Gandharvan and his daughter. She states that Gandharvan cursed the men, saying they would become short-statured and ugly, which gives a negative implication that "disability goes along with ugliness". The film characterises disability "as a curse that symbolically emasculates the male body". Gajendran, who is short-statured is hailed as a hero until the introductory scene of Hari, an able-bodied man. Radha, one of the princesses of the island and the "lucky charm", was the prospective bride of Gajendran. A group of six naval officers reached the island in an aircraft accident, and two of them were murdered by the inhabitants. The other naval officers, including Hari, took refuge in the temple of Gandharvan. Radha, an admirer of the Gandharvan statue, fell in love with Hari at first sight. The characters with disabilities were reduced to caricatures for comic effect after the introduction of able-bodied Indian naval officers. "Thus people with disabilities are seen as tragic figures or heroes, unfortunate or useless, the overarching being that of the 'other'. They are marked as a kind of doppelganger in whom all the fears of the able-bodied are posited. The prejudice against people with disabilities amounts to their being oppressed, and everywhere around them, there are barriers that check their social inclusion" (Banibrata 34). People with disabilities were portrayed as envious and brutal through depictions of disabled inhabitants perpetrating violence against the naval officers. The love affair between Hari and Radha is romanticised, but Gajendran's love for Radha is presented as a slapstick comedy. Mallika, Radha's maid, comments on a painting of Radha-Krishna, saying that Krishna looked handsome when his height was enhanced. Radha pronounced that all Gods in the Puranas were tall, unlike the short-statured men on the island. Their conversations assert the perceived superiority of able-bodied men in sexual and romantic appeal. Radha and Mallika meet the naval officers, and both appreciate their physical appearance. They also expressed their desire to marry the able-bodied men. Mallika and Radha helped the naval officers disguise themselves as short-statured saints to protect their lives from the island's inhabitants. The King found out the deception, and the naval officers abducted him. Radha knew about the abduction, but she didn't reveal it. He was rescued by one of his daughters, and he ordered for the execution of the disguised naval officers. The king and Gajendran had to seek help from Hari to protect their lives from cannibals who intruded on the island. Vamanan remarked that their kingdom, with the men of short stature, would have perished without the

help of the able-bodied naval officers. He hailed the “able-bodied naval officers” as divine protectors of “the disabled short-statured men.” The Kingdom is also said to have been protected by the Gandharvan for centuries. The disabled men are characterised as vulnerable and incapable, who always need the protection and consideration of the able-bodied. The Climax of the movie ends with words of Gajendran that degrade the disabled community. He proclaims that he thought there were only short-statured people as men in this world, but now he understood that “they are incomplete beings, a consequence of God’s mischief.” He allowed Radha to leave the island. Radha, who was regarded as the lucky charm and the most beautiful woman on the island, left with Hari. This movie characterises the able-bodied as strong, noble, and aesthetically appealing, and the disabled individuals as cursed, feeble, unappealing and unsought. The women there are shown to have chosen the short-statured people solely due to the absence of the able-bodied. All the able-bodied women of the island admire Gandharvan, who embodies ableist standards of physical beauty. The film constructs disabled people as aesthetically inferior. It also negates the self-respect of disabled people and induces uncertainty in the assertion of their sexuality.

The movie *Beautiful* depicts the life of Stephen Louis, who has Quadriplegia. He was born into a wealthy family, and all his relatives expect to inherit his property. Stephen’s uncle notes that there are limitations to enjoying life in a wheelchair, even though he is affluent. When Stephen returns home, Kammalu, his caretaker, asks him to wait until the Rahu kalam is over. Stephen remarked that Rahu could do nothing further to him. Stephen’s words construct disability as the worst disaster. When he saw a robber making his escape, he expressed his jealousy of the ease with which the robber moved. Stephen was impressed by the songs of John, which he heard from a hotel, and he wanted John to sing for him. John first denied the proposal but later felt sympathetic for the paralysed Stephen and agreed to spend time with him. The people surrounding Stephen feel that his life has no purpose and that he is a burden to them. Even John stated that he had wished for Stephen’s death. Alex and Anjali, whom Stephen trusted, tried to murder him. Stephen is portrayed as hypersexual through the scenes in which he chooses young maids, his erotic statements and the nude paintings in his room. The film also includes remarks that desexualise Stephen and people with quadriplegia. Thambi, one of his detractors, derisively remarked that the wealthy Stephen cannot move all the parts of his body, conveying that he is asexual. Karunan, his caretaker, asserts to Anjali that there are no men who can sexually approach her at Stephen’s home. His statement denies the sexuality of Stephen and disabled people. Stephen, who has disability, is portrayed as asexual and hypersexual in different instances to satisfy the commercial aspects of the movie. John, who is able-bodied, is portrayed as romantic and as possessing a “normal” sexuality. Upali Chakaravarthi, in “A gendered perspective of Disability,” discusses the impact of misrepresentation of sexuality of disabled individuals:

Disabled people have often been represented as without gender, as asexual creatures, as freaks of nature, monstrous, the other to the social norm. In this way, it may be assumed that for disabled people, gender has little bearing. Yet, the image of disability may be intensified by gender – for women, a sense of intensified passivity and helplessness, for men a corrupted masculinity generated by enforced dependence. Moreover, these images have real consequences in terms of education, employment, living arrangements, personal relationships, victimisation, and abuse that in turn reinforce the images in the public sphere. (28)

Anjali, Stephen's maid, considers him a child, and the only emotion that she possesses for him is sympathy. In contrast, she shows both reluctance and attraction, as well as a range of emotions towards John, who is able-bodied. His colleague loves John, and he also had a deceased former lover. The only emotion women express towards Stephen is sympathy. A television anchor remarked that she was inspired by his life and intended to do something for the disabled community. When Stephen asked whether she would marry him, her expression of shock reflected the ableist notion that marrying a disabled man is a disastrous decision. Medical science affirms that people with Quadriplegia can have a fulfilling sexual life. If there are any biological restrictions, they can enjoy a sexual life using sexual assistive devices. The movie persuades society to generalise that individuals with Quadriplegia lack sexual desire and agency. The film perpetuates the ableist notion that disabled individuals exhibit significant deviation from normative sexuality.

Sound Thoma narrates the incidents in the life of Plaparambil Thoma, who has a cleft lip. A Cleft lip is not considered a disability if it does not create difficulties in speech or hearing. In this movie, Thoma is socially perceived as disabled because he cannot articulate his words clearly. He is often ridiculed by his father, Lady Love and other fellow beings. From the outset of the film, disability is portrayed as a tragedy. The voice-over conveyed that when Thoma was born, the nurses, who are considered angels, didn't laugh as usual; they didn't sing happy songs and kept their fingers on their noses, sympathising with the sad birth of the child with a deformed face. The voice-over continued humiliating the disabled individuals by fabricating his mother's death as a means of escape from the insulting remarks about his birth. His father confirmed that he was an Anti-Christ. Society claimed that Thoma was a divine retribution for his father's evil deeds. The film propagates the ablist construction of disability as divine punishment and tragedy. Thoma reveals to the doctor that his teachers were the first to take the initiative for his surgery. The teachers took the initiative to collect funds because the other students began to leave school, fearing his deformed face. The film frames the disabled people as unsettling, aesthetically devalued and socially unacceptable. His miser father showed reluctance in his treatment when he was a child. His father remarked, Thoma was a useless burden, as he would not

even get a dowry. Thoma's father agreed to surgery with the intention that he would get a wealthy bride if his cleft lip were cured. The doctor revealed that the surgery could improve his appearance, but it wouldn't rectify the defects of his speech. He himself asserted that he would not get a bride with his speech deformity. Sree Lakshmi, the Thoma's childhood crush, rejected and ridiculed him. She said she lived through music, and deserved at least someone who could speak properly. Thoma tried to convince her that the purpose of sound is to communicate, and that he was capable of doing so. She ridiculed him by remarking that he could not even use the word communicate properly. She feigned consolation while mocking him, saying he didn't have to worry, as women with speech deformities would accept him. Her words constructed his speech impairment as a perceived inadequacy and consolidated the normative perception of disabled people as unworthy of marriage. All his fellow being teased him. Thoma pleaded with Sreelakshmi to accept him and strenuously attempted to convince her that his vocal deformity was not his mistake. He remarked that even surgery would not cure him and he would do anything for her love. She was grateful to him for financially supporting her father. She felt sympathy for Thoma when her fiancé brutally attacked him. G. N. Karna observes:

On the other hand, when abnormality has been equated with the possession of special-supernatural powers, the status of the disabled may be unpredictably high. Even if the disabled are vilified or sanctified, the outcomes are in one sense similar; he/she is viewed primarily in terms of his/her disability and stereotyped. Whatever his/her status, he/she has been separated from ordinary people because he/she is physically different from them. Both perceptions may be visualised as means of alienating the disabled. (101)

The depiction of Sree Lakshmi's acceptance of his love perpetuates the ableist notion that the sole reason for the acceptance of disabled people within intimate relationships is sympathy and gratitude. Thoma states that he did charity to wipe out the maledictions from his family, and his cleft lip was the punishment for his father's avarice. Urupadi is another character in the movie with a disability, depicted as a figure of ridicule and intellectual inadequacy to evoke laughter in the audience. The romance between Thoma and Seelakshmi is also used as a comic interlude that mocks disability. The film reaffirms the ableist assumption that disabled individuals are romantically undesirable, and even they consider themselves a curse. It reduces the qualities attributed to disabled characters to nobility, sympathy and vulnerability. The apprehension that they will be treated like the characters in the movie would prevent disabled individuals from revealing their desire for romantic relationships.

The protagonist of the film *Artist* is a man with acquired disability. Michael, who is an artist, acquired visual impairment in an accident. He was in a living relationship with Gayathri. The film portrays that Michael and Gayathri were leading a life of vitality and contentment before the onset of disability. He began to challenge her moral integrity. The intimacy and the understanding between them changed after the accident. He complained that her silence frustrated him. She remarked that he had previously complained about her being disruptive and that he was merely attempting to find fault with her. The narrative depicts a regressive transformation in his character after he acquired disability. Michael remarked that she could never understand him, as she had not experienced disability herself. He advised her, satirically, to start a new life since she was young and beautiful. He remarked that the only factors compelling her to stay are sympathy and conscience. His statement was validated when she expressed her aversion to him. She always lamented that she had become the sole financial provider, which constrained her dreams. When Abhi, their friend, visits the house, she hides it from Michael. She tells Abhi that she forced Michael to rush for the interview, which caused the accident. Her words revealed that repentance was the sole reason for continuing her life with Michael. Michael practised calculating inches in his mind and resumed painting. Gayathri became frustrated because she regarded buying paints for the blind man as a waste of money. Abhi advised Gayathri to give him the same Prussian blue colours and claim they are different. Gayathri praised his idea of saving money by deceiving Michael and exploiting his disability. Abhi sexually advances towards her in front of Michael, taking advantage of his visual disability. She didn't react instantly but later felt remorse for cheating him. Michael completed his paintings with the same Prussian blue colour. He expressed his desire to conduct an exhibition of his paintings to prove himself. He wanted people to acclaim that, 'like Beethoven, Michael's masterpiece was created after he became disabled.' Gayathri discouraged him, fearing that Michael would recognise her deliberate deception. She claimed that people would treat him as a "strange artist" and would ask sensitive questions about his disability. Gayathri agreed to have a sexual relationship with Abhi to hide the deception from Michael. When Michael realised he was deceived by Gayathri, he called out that people were enjoying the manipulation of his disability in the paintings. He described that he used Prussian blue because it was the colour of betrayal and lies. Gayathri's suggestion that love is not the only essential element in an intimate relationship consolidates the ableist perspective that you can't find happiness and contentment in a relationship with a disabled person. The film depicts their lives being transformed from profound intimacy to physical and emotional estrangement after he acquired the disability. Gayathri is assigned the role of financial supporter and caretaker. Michael is portrayed as dependent, worthless, impetuous and frustrated. Even the scenes are shown in dark or sombre lighting, which conveys that their life was dull and gloomy. Michael is depicted as sexually passive after the accident. Michael, who always expressed his lust for

Gayathri in the initial scenes of the movie, does not show any sexual feelings after the accident. Gayathri also does not show any physical intimacy with him after he acquired disability. Several scenes show their sexual urges before the accident, and there is not even a single scene that shows their physical intimacy after Michael acquired disability. When Michael's paintings were presented, Roy described them as "the cruel absence of colour like the life of the artist who is blind." Life with a disabled individual is portrayed as gloomy, devastating, sorrowful and troublesome. The film uses negative metaphors to describe disability. The movie constructs the notion that life with a disabled individual is miserable. It affirms the normative preconception that a relationship with a disabled partner will lack physical and mental intimacy.

Jai Ganesh unfolds the story of Ganesh, who has an acquired disability. He developed paraplegia after a bike accident. He is a graphic designer and an ethical hacker. Ganesh is depicted as a frustrated individual who considers disability as the dissipation of hope and purpose. Ganesh finds it difficult to adjust to his altered body. He laments to his father that he lost his life and all hope in the accident. He remarks that he doesn't even have the prospect of being loved by a woman or a friend. The heroine of the movie mistook him for a struggling bookseller when he approached her for the publication of his comic book. She sympathises with his disability, which makes him feel awkward. The film depicts disability as a tragic deviation from the normative masculine ideal and existence.

Conclusion

Sexuality and conjugal life are often associated with a "perfect body." Films have significant influence on people's lifestyles, thoughts, and actions. While analysing Malayalam movies with disabled characters, we can trace that most of them depict disabled people as incompatible in romantic or married relationship. The love at first sight that is common in films with able-bodied protagonists is rarely depicted in films with disabled protagonists. The characterisation of the disabled people in the films discussed persuades people to believe that words like "beauty", "attractive", "appealing", "glamorous", and "desirable" are exclusive adjectives for the able-bodied. Life with a disabled person is depicted as a frustrating and exhausting experience. The cinematic narrative marginalises disabled corporeality by depicting them as sexually and emotionally passive. Disabled people are also portrayed as intellectually incapable. Life with a disabled person is depicted as a mere sacrifice. The actors celebrated for their physical attractiveness are rendered undesirable and unattractive when portraying characters with disability. The films discussed construct disability and beauty as mutually exclusive. The Malayalam films selected for the study, featuring disabled protagonists and spanning two decades, demonstrate the persistence of hegemonic beauty ideals and marginalisation of disability.

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