

Chapter- 3

Margarita with a Straw: Discovering the ‘Self’

“Sexuality is an integral part of the personality of everyone: man, woman, and child. It is a basic need and an aspect of human life.” (World Health Organization 1975)

<http://ahs.uic.edu/media/uicedu/ahs/documents/dhd/sdc/MythsAndMisperceptions.pdf>

The third chapter, dealing with disability as discourse, is concerned with an Indian drama movie *Margarita, With a Straw* (2014) directed by an innovative issue evolving director, Shonali Bose and partly by Nilesh Maniyar. This movie dealing with the concept of disability particularly with the context of educational-cum-sexual needs, fundamental or physiological needs, of a young girl-student with psychomotor disability. The movie occasionally shifts from Indian setting to New York and vice versa. The movie depicts how a young girl with disability comes to recognition and realization of her own sexual instinct as a physiological and psychological need felt by every normal young girls. The movie is a depiction of two features, both being natural, of the same person suffering with cerebral palsy. This movie is an attempt to put before the society how the persons with disability, especially cerebral palsy, often misrepresented in the earlier movies and living a life of helplessness and sympathy, come to be welcomed by the mainstream society. Cerebral palsy is the condition of psychomotor disability in which the body part are not in proper control or command of the victim’s mind set. The cerebral palsy retardation may come to happen prenatal or at the time of birth or because of any accidental injury taking place in the cerebral after child’s birth. Cerebral palsy is always unchangeable. The PWD (Equal

Opportunities, Protection Of Rights And Full Participation) Act, 1995 defines cerebral palsy in its preliminary chapter as “‘Cerebral palsy’ means a group of non-progressive conditions of a person characterized by abnormal motor control posture resulting from brain insult or injuries occurring in the pre-natal, perinatal or infant period of development.” [<https://sadm.maharashtra.gov.in/sadm/GRs/PWD%20Act.pdf>] The other side of the person with cerebral palsy is her/his sexuality. The persons with disability, especially persons with cerebral palsy, always thought to be asexual and unproductive and excluded from the arena of sexuality and reproduction. This type of perception is result of medical model of disability which looks disability to be inside the person. Tom Shakespeare in his work titled *Disabled Sexuality: Toward Rights and Recognition* (2000) puts Anne Finger’s premise to change stereotypical perception of society toward persons with disabilities as:

Sexuality is often the source of our deepest oppression; it is also often the source of our deepest pain. It’s easier for us to talk about—and formulate strategies for changing—discrimination in employment, education, and housing than to talk about our exclusion from sexuality and reproduction.

[<file:///C:/Users/INDIA/Downloads/550a90a70cf26198a63b1873.pdf>]

The movie in the concern breaks people’s strong, long-time-made illogical and conventional perception about the sexual instinct of persons, especially women, with disabilities. *The Margarita, with a Straw* exhibits the unconventional, true and modern picture of a girl with cerebral palsy but she has attributes to be a musician, composer, and song writer. The movie explores the journey of a young disabled girl discovering her

sexuality having sexual relationship not only with opposite sex but with the same sex. The director has tried to put the protagonist, presenting all girls with cerebral palsy, to be bisexual because his intention is not only to represent her as a woman but as a woman of the modern age.

The movie *Margarita, With a Straw* starts with an affirming scene when Laila's parents along with Laila and her younger brother go to leave Laila to her college. The protagonist, Laila (Kalki Koechlin) is a student in Ramjas College where she composes music, writes lyrics and lives in company of boys and girls of her own age. Laila uses wheelchair to go to college which is for normal students. The movie depicts a positive view of society towards the persons with disabilities as Dhruv and Laila, being students with disabilities, have respected place among college students. Laila has been living with her parents and a younger brother with full dignity and respect. Laila is a young college girl having strong passion and enthusiasm to use mobile, laptop. Laila is sexually oriented as she is attracted to using porn sites and masturbation. She not only have her sexual urge limited to herself but she goes with her friend, Sameera, to the extension of buying a vibrator from a shop. When Laila asks for vibrator, the shopkeeper, taking vibrator for mobile, responds, "*Maine to apane wife ko bhi vibrator par daala hua hai!*" (I myself switch my wife's on vibrator!) Jill Marshall gives a very pertinent view about sexual orientation as he puts, "..., sexual orientation is defined as: 'each person's capacity for profound emotional, affection and sexual attraction to, and intimate sexual relations with, individuals of a different gender or the same gender or more than one gender.'" (Marshall 99)

Laila's body is victim of cerebral palsy but her mind is as active and enthusiastic as a young girl with normal body. Her intelligence has no any defect as her mother says to Nancy, assistant of Laila in New York, "I hope you understand it is just the motor skill affected and not the intelligence." In the movie Laila is never conscious of the deficits of her body and is always in search of opportunities to celebrate her prime age. Laila in Ramjas College often looks for chances to get company of young boys and her will to live a life of normal girls forgetting her disability. Laila has wish to be always in touch with her company by using social sites as Facebook. Rosalee A. Clawson & Zeo M. Oxley in the book titled *Public Opinion* (2013) a very clear statement about the engagement of youths in social media to find a dignified recognition in the society. "...adults of all ages are engaging with others more through social media, such as Facebook and Twitter." (Rosalee A. Clawson & M. Oxley 329)

In Delhi Laila's college has no elevator as she feels problem in reaching her classroom. The unavailability of elevator at college and other public places creates difficulties and barriers for the persons with impairments and ultimately they become disabled and disability takes birth inside their bodies as the medical model perceives. Applying the social model of disability barrier-free environment can be created and persons with impairments can be made live normal lives like us. The infrastructural barrier is the cause to make Laila disabled in reaching at the intended classroom. The peons or assistants of the college hold the wheelchair along with Laila to take her in the classroom. The infrastructural barrier is one of the most repulsive barriers to persons with disabilities in going toilets, schools, colleges and assembly as well as other public places.

Jayna Kothari puts a right statement thinking about the rights of persons with disabilities and by bringing them in to the mainstream society:

In order to ensure that children with disabilities have equal access to education, reasonable accommodation measures are required to be put in place. Problems of access to include infrastructural barriers in schools, toilets, classrooms and transport, providing aids and facilities (such as hearing aids, spectacles, Braille and all other necessary aids), training of teachers, and the supportive structures in place for curriculum modification for disabled children. (Kothari 61)

She has a love-affair with a boy, Dhruv (Hussain Dalal), who himself is disabled. Dhruv has feelings and emotions for Laila but he is narrow minded as he never wants her to love someone else who is normal. He gets disgusted when she falls in love with Nima (Tenzing Dalha), a person with normal body. Nima is lyric singer who sings Laila's lyric composition at the college lyric competition. Laila, a girl with cerebral palsy, loves Nima but Nima, a boy with normal and healthy body does not have a mark of love within his heart which puts a picture of normal human being's mind set and perception toward persons with disability. Nima does not want to have any type of relation after he comes to know about Laila's love for him. Nima has a false attitude toward love and sexuality of persons with disabilities.

Laila, being a student in Delhi, is from an urban metropolitan city and has no fixed intention to love a boy like Dhruv with disability. Renu Adlakha, in one of her research papers, explores a study about the notion of sexuality of persons with disabilities in the same metropolitan city, Delhi, where Laila lives and has college study. Renu Adlakha's result of research comes to the point as the women with disabilities have wish

and intention to have life partners with disabilities but on the parts of men with disabilities, they do not have any idea to make women with disabilities as their life partner. As matter of fact, in respect of Laila and Dhruv's perception to each other is opposite the result of Renu Addlakha's research done in 2007. Addlakha puts:

The study highlights difficulties of a person with disabilities in finding a partner.

Looking at gender differentials the study also reveals that women with disabilities are willing to get married to men with disabilities whereas most men with disabilities would prefer to have a women who has no disabilities for a wife.

(TARSHI 25)

Dhruv, himself being a person with disability, loves Laila but at the same time by telling Laila not to have any type of attachment with a normal person like Nima, he displays a mindset which a normal-conventional minded person often has. Dhruv says, "*Normal logon ke saath dosti karane se tum normal nahi ho jaogi.*" (Making friendship with normal people you will not become normal.)

Dhruv's having such idea towards disability not only highlights the mentality and readiness of a person with disability to get included in mainstream community but also the conventional and wrong attitude of a person with disability toward the other person with disability. Being human is natural to be sexual, a woman with disability is considered to be helpless, without sexual energy and emotions. A woman, as a wife, with disability is helped, cared and sympathized by her normal husband or life partner. To have too much attention and care with different perception for a disabled woman denotes or refers her to live a life only being a disabled and not as a human being. Such varied perception controls

a person, especially a woman, with disability in evolving any kind of relationship with someone, especially with opposite sex.

This attitude limits the possibilities of developing relationships and defines someone as disabled and not as a person. The non-disabled person in a relationship with a person with a disability may be seen as wonderful, caring, self-sacrificing, or as not capable of having a relationship with a non-disabled person. This reflects a negative attitude towards disability and suggests that a disabled person is less worthy than a non-disabled.

[\[http://ahs.uic.edu/media/uicedu/ahs/documents/dhd/sdc/MythsAndMisperceptions.pdf\]](http://ahs.uic.edu/media/uicedu/ahs/documents/dhd/sdc/MythsAndMisperceptions.pdf).

Laila's meetings with Dhruv in the Biology classroom and with Nima in the library very clearly put before us Laila's emotional and sexual urge as a normal young girl has. She hugs Dhruv as well as Nima with her whole passion of love denoting sexuality exists inside her. During bathing she tells her mother that she loves someone but he does not. She expresses her suffering caused by the lack of love and belonging. When Laila is not given the prize for her lyric composition and is depressed, Neema comes to Laila and appreciates her for her great job of lyric composition and says:

Neema: Trust me Laila, you

Did a great job.... Totally deserve to it, ok."

Laila: "Tum ho to sab thik hai. "

(It's you, everything is ok.)

Neema: "*Tumhare sath pura band hai, Laila.*"

(The band is with you, Laila.)

Laila: "*Tum, sirf tum!*"

(You, only you!)

Laila's getting closeness cast light on her curiosity and eagerness of making a real relationship only with a particular person who can care and fulfil her need of love and belongingness living in the mainstream society.

Laila has been learning music from her seven years of age. She is very talented as Sameera tells her mother. Laila suffers from cerebral palsy losing proper motor function of her body parts. Being victim of cerebral palsy, Laila is not mentally retarded at all. Her lyric, sung by Nima, wins the inter-collegiate music competition. When the principal of the competition organizing college awards the prize to Ramjas College, she says:

Though the winners are Ramjas College,

"hame jab pata chala ki iski composition aur lyrics

ek disabled musician ne likhi hai."

(When I came to know that its lyrics and

compositions have been written by a disabled musician

sowe have to give the award to her college.)

The principal's being biased, in awarding the prize to her college on the basis of her being disabled, is wholly injustice to Laila. This decision taken by the lady principal refers to the stereotypical mentality of an educated woman towards a woman with disability. It seems here that education has failed in changing stereotypical and conventional attitudes of people towards the marginalized section, especially the section of people with disabilities. The disabled persons have no their own identities as they have the identities which they are given by the people, like the principal, of the mainstream society. Consequently, persons with disabilities acts as they are made to act and behave. The principal at the prize awarding time continues to say about Laila as:

“Tumhari journey dusaron bachchon se...,

normal bachchon se kuchh different hai.”

(Your journey is different from other children...,

different from normal children.)

Lailais avoided in Ramjas College by her mates, like Neema, and this critical situation breaks Laila from within and she finds a secure place of love and affection at her home, the place where every human being finds love and attention from the members of family in much or less amount. Laila makes her mother aware of the situation as:

Laila: (putting her head in her mother's lap)

“Wo mujhase pyar nahi karate.

Mujhe college nahi jana hai.”

(They don't love me.

I don't wish to go to college.)

Every person with normal or abnormal body, needs something more than physical needs as food, water, air. Every human being seeks attention and respect from others by living in a socio-cultural group. Without love and belonging a person goes into isolation and becomes gradually a person with introvert personality. Abraham Maslow has given 'theory of need' in Psychology discipline by putting the social need just above the need of fundamental as well as safety needs. Maslow puts, "Once a person has met the lower level physiological and safety needs, higher level needs become important, the first of which are social needs." [\[http://www.abahe.co.uk/Free-En-Resources/Theories-of-Management/Maslow-Hierarchy-of-Needs.pdf\]](http://www.abahe.co.uk/Free-En-Resources/Theories-of-Management/Maslow-Hierarchy-of-Needs.pdf)

The persons with disability, like Laila, don't think themselves different but they are made to think different from others. The perception of majority always has impact in deforming and misshaping the identity of persons with disabilities. The concept of 'normalcy' and 'non-normalcy' have come into existence as result of people's mistaken attitudes and because of clinical model. The identity formation of disabled persons depends on the mentality of normal people who can construct conducive environment to make disabled enable to live life with honour and with an individual identity. Jill Marshall in his book titled *Human Rights Law and Personal Identity* (2014), gives a clear idea of necessity of group of people to have a personal identity. He says:

However, personal identity is something that comes into existence through our being in the world, including with, and through other people. It comes into existence through recognition with other people including the legal and political system seeing and acknowledging us as being fully human. This way, identities can be enabled and empowered to exist for us to live lives of meaning to us. (Marshall 237)

Laila gets an opportunity to shift from Delhi to the city of New York, a city of art, fashion, culture and finance, by securing admission in the New York University. Her parents, especially her father (Kuljeet Singh), overcoming their situation of dread and fear, allow Laila to live her life her own way. Changing the city not only gives Laila the chance of accessible classes and other places with ease and comfort but the opportunity of exploring and discovering her sexual identity also. The New York University has less infrastructural barriers than Ramjas College in Delhi. There Laila, along with her wheelchair, finds easy accessibility in transports and classrooms assisted with ramps. In the City of New York, people having no any kind of attitudinal barriers towards persons with disabilities help in making conducive as well as barrier-free environment to make persons with impairments less disabled and live a life with equal dignity.

Laila's mother, Aai (Revathy), constantly has a positive perception toward Laila and always enables her to live like a normal person. Aai cares, occasionally becomes angry, and assists Laila in every possible way to make her similar in living her life like other young girls. In the New York University Laila comes across a blind girl, Khanum (Sayani Gupta), at the moment of students' strike at the university. Khanum, half-Pakistani and half-Bangladeshi, is a student in the New York University where she lives

comfortably dressed in fashionable clothes. Laila's meeting with Khanum gives her a lot of opportunities to go into the depth of her sexual-exploration. The movie not only presents Laila with disability celebrating her youth but also presents Khanum with visual impairment seeking chance to have sexual satisfaction. At the time of her first meeting with Laila, Khanum caresses and feels Laila's hands with a romantic gesture. Laila goes to stay at Khanum's residence for one night and there they have mutual sexual relationship. Khanum extols Laila's physical beauty when she touches her and she comes to be first person, though being of the same sex, to appreciate her beauty fully.

Khanum: (touching Laila) "*kamini!*" (Indian Slang for a girl who is inhumane)

Laila: "*Kya?*" (What?)

Khanum: "*So beauty!*"

Laila sitting with Khanum in a lawn looks at Khanum's face and she says to her a conflicting idea, "Your (Khanum's) body is perfect. You could be a model." Here the word 'perfect' is not in its right usage in respect of Khanum, a blind girl. Though Laila, being impaired, never thinks Khanum's visual impairment as an obstruction or hurdle in her life enjoyment yet Laila is somewhat mistaken by herself from inside as when Khanum asks her if she ever has dated someone, she answers negatively. Laila says, "*Mujhe koi kyu date karega?*" (Why would someone date with me?)

Though lesbian relationship between Laila and Khanum may not be offensive in the city of fashion like New York still it's considered by Indians very offensive to do so and as far as the sexual need of persons with disabilities is concerned in India, such lesbian relationship is intolerable.

...TV debates and news coverage regarding sexuality education in schools and Delhi High Court ruling on reading down section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalized same-sex sexual behaviour has also led to these issues becoming the subject of dining-table conversations. Paradoxically however, sexuality is still kept largely under wraps, especially so for people with disabilities who in the popular imagination are not considered as sexual beings.”(TARSHI 26)

Laila being sexually oriented shifts her seeking attention from Khanum to Jared (William Moseley) whom she looks kissing a young girl in the university. She initiates telling Jared about her first affair with Nima in Ramjas College. Her open talking about her own affair with Jared marks Laila to be always obsessed with sexual passion and sensual desires. Once being at home of Jared in regard of some study work, Laila's taking help of Jared in using his toilet is the sign of her open and original mentality free from any hypocrisy or affectation. But just post the toilet use her indulgence in sexual intercourse with Jared again marks proceeding of her journey of sexual discovery. Laila becomes bi-sexual and searches meaning of 'bi-sexual' in google and tells her mother that she has become 'bi'. Her mother being busy in daily works mistakenly takes 'bi' for 'baai' and in complement says, "*Mai kya kam baai hoon?*" (I am 'baai' too.) Laila tells, "*Mera matalab, (I mean) 'bi-sexual'. Aai, Khanum meri girlfriend hai.*" (Aai, Khanum is my girlfriend.) But having known the right meaning of 'bi', Shubhangini, Laila's mother, gets angry for few minutes. Laila tells a lie that she sold her earring for iPad for her study, her mother says, "*Parhai, porn sites ko tum parhai kahati ho. Sharam aani chaiye tujhe. Chhi!*" (Study, you call porn sites as study. You should be ashamed of it. Fie!) Laila's carelessness about her study comes front once again when during her stay in New York,

her mother asks Laila who have missed the current semester to go home and study, with disgusting expression Laila says, “*Aai, mujhe pata hai, Mujhe kab parhana hai.*” (Mother, I know, I know when to read.) The movie only deals with sexuality of persons with disabilities and not educational part. Though the movie is set in two educational institutions, it does not dealt with education aspirations of the disabled protagonist. Education is the best tool to get integrated and included in mainstream culture for persons with disabilities.

Khanum, being in love with Laila, is static and does not shift her attention from one to other as Laila does frequently. Laila’s having physical relationship with Jared is not acceptable to Khanum. When Khanum comes to know about Laila’s affair with Jared, she becomes aggressive.

Khanum: What do you mean?

...how could you?

Laila: I know. I have done wrong.

Khanum: You use me to take care of you.

“Jab tak koi boyfriend nahi mil jata

tab tak Khanum hi sahi hai. Right!”

(Until you find a boyfriend, Khanum is right.)

Although Laila’s disability does not come in her way of using media as iPad, mobile and laptop and other tools of information and communication technology, she does

not care for her study as much as she cares for her sexual urges and desires. She uses the media not to enhance her knowledge but to inspire her sexual instinct. Though Laila, in Delhi, is active in lyric composition evolving a skill of creative writing, shifting in the city of New York she runs only on the path of sexual exploration. Laila, at last after her mother's death, goes on the journey of dating someone.

The movie *Margarita with a Straw* is very carefully crafted to deal with a young disabled girl's personal choice, the question of her identity, homosexuality and above all humanity. The disabled protagonist explores her journey of sexual discovery breaking all the conventional and stereotypical perceived ideas about the sexuality of a person suffering from cerebral palsy and limiting herself to the wheelchair only. The director, Shonali Bose, once accepted about producing lesbian relationship between two disabled young girls in this movie. In India if disabled persons, considered to be offensive, have wish to have sex that becomes more offensive and above all if two disabled persons of the same sex have sexual relationship, it becomes a taboo upon taboo. "No one explored sexuality of the challenged before. Though I must admit, even that would've been easy. The introduction of the lesbian dynamic is what made the project real, challenging and exciting for me." [<http://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/report-margarita-with-a-straw-and-the-sexuality-of-the-differently-abled-2076712>]. Despite all its demerits the movie has no any scene which can make its audience feel sorry for the protagonist, Laila. This only depicts the protagonist's journey of searching the shades of her sexuality. Laila, being left in gutter by Nima in Ramjas College, leaves for the New York University where she discovers her sexuality by having not only homosexual encounters with a blind girl but heterosexual encounter with a normal person of opposite sex also. Her journey in the movie only focuses

on one aspect that is sexuality of a disabled person. As matter of fact there are so many other challenges, as inclusion in normal schools for education, becoming self-dependence physically and financially, self-acceptance in the society and overcoming other little and big difficulties coming into play in living a life with dignity and full of humanity. So many reviewers challenged the sole theme of this movie by attacking its dealing with over sexuality affairs. As “The India Today”, on 24 April, 2015, published The TV actor Sonal Vengurlekar’s open letter, titled “No Sex Ahead” expressing her disgust to Shonali Bose, the director of *Margarita with a Straw*, where Sonal writes:

The only subject of the film was sexuality. I was embarrassed to see the movie as I was accompanied with someone who happens to be a CP patient. She was infuriated with the storyline as it was only about sex. For a disabled person, sex is the last thing on their mind as there are so many different things to worry about; their relationship with their close one, their talent nurturing, their acceptance in society as normal people, and many more. BUT SEX IS THE LAST THING ON THEIR MIND, I guarantee!!...If a disabled person has 10 difficulties in their life, SEXUALITY WOULD BE THE TENTH! [<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/tv-actor-sonal-vengurlekar-writes-an-open-letter-to-margarita-with-a-straws-director-shonali-bose/1/432008.html>]

In an article, published on 18 April, 2015, in “The Hindu”, named “Margarita with a Straw: A beautiful mind in a disobedient body”, the author Venky Vembu highlights the same highlighted issues in movie as he writes, “Margarita narrates a moving, endearing rite-of-passage story of a ‘disabled’ young woman who embraces life in its entirety. As Laila,

Kalki will make you laugh sillily — and also cry buckets. But not tears of pity or sorrow, just the joy of falling in love with a beautiful mind in a disobedient body.”[<http://www.thehindu.com/features/cinema/cinema-reviews/margarita-with-a-straw-a-beautiful-mind-in-a-disobedient-body/article7117039.ece>]

Shonali Bose once was interviewed by NDTV when she said that only persons, like Laila, should be seen not the wheelchair in which they sit. Assessing the personality by looking the person not his/her wheelchair may prove very good step to abolish the societal stigmatized perception to persons with disabilities. The audience look Laila’s improving her motor functioning gradually as she rubs her mother’s feet with ease and comfort in the hospital. Her disability never results as a hurdle in her sexual encounter. Her disability never becomes a hindrance in her typing letters on laptop as she rejects the proposal of the teacher to assign her a writer in the class in the New York University. So the misconceptions and wrong or stigmatized social attitudes should be put away to make enable the persons with disabilities to live lives of respect.

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