

# Not Sexually Disabled but Disabled Sexuality

Ritam Gupta

**Abstract:** *Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud theorised that sexuality is the root of one's identity. To quote World Health Organization, "Sexual health is a state of physical, mental and social well - being in relation to sexuality. It requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. " Today we are in an age where even able - bodied human beings are grappling with disorders like body dysmorphia, anorexia and body image. This compels us to think how a disabled person feels as well as understands matters such as sex appeal and attractiveness, while struggling with confidence and perhaps internalising unfathomably deeper insecurities. In the Indian context, where intercourse, sexuality and their exploration is relatively still a taboo, there is a need to popularise narratives like Margarita with a Straw which portray and complicate the nexus between disability, self - acceptance, societal inclusion and homosexuality. The representation of characters like Laila (with cerebral palsy) and Khanum (who is blind) in the movie shines a light on the twice or even thrice - marginalised group due to their sex, sexual orientation and respective disabilities. Stories like this as well as Me Before You by Jojo Moyes challenge the existing ideas of "normalcy," heteronormativity and physical desirability through the lens of disability. The basic premise of psychoanalysis is to trace the developmental process of the subject becoming a self on three plains – biological, sociological and psychosexual. Social welfare schemes that are made available for the disabled by the state and governments largely ignore the sexual dimension of disability. Policy formulation of any kind seldom takes sexuality into consideration because of the stigma associated with it. This paper attempts to answer what is the place accorded to challenges with respect to sexuality for a disabled person in mainstream discourses and why it is necessary to work towards not only providing special facilities (for example, ramps, aids in public spaces for convenience) and economically uplifting differently - abled persons but also be vocal about their sexual needs which by extension impacts mental as well as emotional health.*

**Keywords:** Sexuality, disability, homosexuality, heteronormativity

Sigmund Freud theorised that sexuality is the root of one's identity. The basic premise of psychoanalysis is to trace the developmental process of the subject becoming a self on three plains – biological, sociological and psychosexual. Though the sexuality of people with disabilities is an integral component in their holistic well - being, it continues to be overlooked and even shunned due to the persistent stigma that surrounds disability and sex (Burr 259). This at times can create a fragmented sense of self and adversely affect the identity formation of the person with disability by altering the way he or she perceives himself or herself as an individual being. This paper will attempt to answer what is the place accorded to challenges with respect to sexuality for people with disabilities in mainstream discourses through the films *Me Before You*, *The Family Stone* and *Margarita with a Straw*, while delineating the necessity to not only provide special facilities like ramps, aids in public spaces and economically uplift differently - abled persons, but also be vocal about their sexual needs which by extension impact mental as well as emotional health.

Sexuality is a comprehensive concept which constitutes sexual experience, expression, orientation and behaviour among others. Sexual health is often defined as a state of physical, mental and social well - being in relation to sexuality, and according to World Health Organization "requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence" (Sexual Health).

In modern capitalist societies, where human bodies are valued only if they have a utilitarian purpose, disability for the longest time has been perceived as an unwanted weight which is to be borne by the state. With the onset of the industrial revolution, ideas of standardization and 'normalcy' ingrained themselves in the socio - economic and

cultural landscape of the times. Industrialisation established the hegemony of the 'norm' which required constructing 'the other' through manifesting notions of an aberrant mind and body. Today we are in an age where even able - bodied human beings are grappling with disorders like body dysmorphia, anorexia and body image. This compels us to think how a person with disability understands and feels about matters such as sex appeal and attractiveness, while struggling with confidence and perhaps internalising unfathomably deeper insecurities.

There is lack of appropriate sex education to accommodate the needs of people with disability. Lack of empathy, too, prevents them from having intimacy. Exacerbating the situation are a wide range of misconceptions such as that all people with a disability are either asexual and not sexually active or hypersexual. Hence, there is a need to popularise narratives which do justice to the sexual lives and desires of people with disability through a realistic representation. In his essay 'Sexuality and Disability: The Missing Discourse of Pleasure', Mitchell S. Tepper argues that "In the realm of sexuality and disability there is public discourse on deviance and inappropriate behavior, abuse and victimization, asexuality, gender and orientation with regard to women, and reproductive issues in women and men. However, there seems to be a missing discourse of pleasure" (Tepper 283).

In the movie *Me Before You* (2016) the character of Will Traynor suffers from paralysis from the neck down since two years after being involved in a motorcycle accident. He is in a wheelchair due to the damage done to his spinal cord. Depressed, cynical and hopeless due to the loss of his former adventurous self, he convinces his parents to give him six months time before he chooses to commit assisted suicide. They hire an optimistic and cheerful woman named Louisa Clark as a caretaker for Will. Louisa organises various trips to make Will realise the worth of life despite the disability.

Volume 12 Issue 7, July 2023

[www.ijsr.net](http://www.ijsr.net)

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution CC BY

The two grow close and Louisa tries to change his mind about euthanasia but he intends to follow through with it. The main reason here being his inability to accept his current way of life despite companionship. Louisa implores him to change his mind in the last vacation they undertake saying "I can make you happy." Will's response is "I get that this could be a good life. But it's not my life...I loved my life...I don't want you to miss all the things someone else could give you" (*Me Before You* 01: 20: 07–01: 22: 00). He is acutely aware of the fact that his disability restricts his participation in the physical act of intercourse and not being able to exercise his sexuality frustrates him. Will's repeated references to his life before the mishap and ultimately his resolve to end his current life of pain and dependency brings out the contrast between people who are born or grow up with a disability during childhood and those who experience it in adulthood. It is crucial to note that as a privileged man he is in a position to make that choice and avail the required resources, unlike most people in a similar situation.

The character of Meredith Morton in the American film *The Family Stone* (2005) is a great example of the ignorance and insensitivity that people with disabilities who are a part of the LGBTQIA+ community encounter. Meredith goes with her boyfriend Everett Stone to his hometown for Christmas. One of Everett's brothers is Thad Stone who is an architect, gay and also deaf. In a scene at the dinner table, the family is engaged in a conversation about Thad and his partner Patrick wanting to adopt a child. Meredith's remarks when she questions the siblings' parents about Thad's sexual orientation and hearing condition are homophobic and disablist. She says, "I just don't think that any parent would hope for a child to be challenged like that...I just think any parent would want a normal child" (theshowcurtian). This sheds a light on how if a person with a disability defies heteronormativity, it is viewed as an additional burden on their family and a source for increased suffering.

In the Indian context, *Margarita with a Straw* (2015) is a bildungsroman which portrays and complicates the nexus between disability, self - acceptance, inclusion and female sexuality. Laila, the protagonist is in her late teenage years, lives in Delhi with her family, studies in Ramjas College and is a lyricist for the college band. She also has cerebral palsy. Broadly, it is a group of permanent disorders that restrict movement, affect sleep, language and speech. Laila is reminded of her disability in several instances and the trope of normalcy is recurrent throughout the feature. During a band competition, the judge announces their band as the winner but attributes their victory solely to Laila being a "disabled musician" and goes on to ask her to share her journey which must have been tough compared to "normal children." Her friend Dhruv also crudely states "You will not become normal by hanging out with normal people." Laila likes the band's lead guitarist Nima but when she confesses her feelings to him, he does not reciprocate. Perhaps Nima's rejection intensifies the ostracisation that Laila already feels and is an instrumental factor in her determination to move to New York University for a semester, where she meets Khanum, a young activist who is blind. The two soon begin a relationship based on mutual love but Laila betrays her partner's trust by sleeping with Jared. Her creative writing professor had assigned Jared to

help her in typing her assignments thinking Laila will have a difficulty, even though she does not. She lets him as she finds Jared "cute." She tells Khanum about the incident after a few months and the latter reiterates Dhruv's earlier sentiments by asking Laila "Has Jared given you the certificate of being normal by having sex with you?"

The narrative highlights the distinctions and hierarchies within disability when it comes to sexuality and sexual pleasure. For example, Laila explicitly points out Khanum's blindness when they are having a conversation about Laila's unfaithfulness. Laila says "Jared could see me." This statement by Laila showcases how the act of sex itself is a significant step in the process of sexual development of the self. Juxtaposing Khanum and Laila's disabilities, the former is less reliant on another person in terms of mobility, but when it comes to sensuality and intercourse, the latter has the advantage of sight.

Indian writer and critic Baradwaj Rangan found the filmmaker's treatment of disability and normalcy refreshing: according to Rangan, "there's not a trace of stereotype, not a shred of self - pity" in Laila's characterisation, adding that "Laila isn't a differently abled person. She's a person who is differently abled. The order of the words matters. The human being comes first, the condition only later" (Rangan). The sincerity in dealing with this subject matter stems from the writer - director Shonali Bose's personal life as a bisexual woman in India as well as her cousin Malini Chib who has cerebral palsy and is a disability rights activist. Bose's powerful story can be seen as a venture intended to draw attention to a neglected issue and communicate the experiences of both women by intertwining them in Laila's personality. There is no romanticisation or idealization of the differently abled here. More often than not if the differently - abled are the desiring subject, they are portrayed as fiercely loyal, but Laila adds the much needed shade of grey since she is flawed. The film pushes the boundaries by incorporating desire, disability and infidelity.

Russell P. Shuttleworth in his essay "The Search for Sexual Intimacy for Men with Cerebral Palsy" discusses the accounts of fourteen men with the said disorder. He articulates that "despite an adverse socio - cultural context of disability and desirability, most of the men had experienced long - term sexual relationships" (Shuttleworth 263). In a study published in the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, the aim was to assess the self - image of seven adolescents - 3 girls and 4 boys - with cerebral palsy. Conclusions drawn from the research were that "Further studies on self - image and the psychosocial development of disabled adolescents should (a) focus on the social interaction outside their immediate families, and (b) continue to use and develop methods where these adolescents can give voice to their own experiences and opinions" (Adamson 578). Such findings oppose the commonly held view that people with disabilities have a low self - esteem or negative self - image.

The depiction of characters like Laila and Khanum in commercial cinema brings to the fore the double marginalisation faced by homosexual, bisexual and queer people with disabilities. Perhaps the women of this

particular group are three times marginalised due to their sex, sexual orientation and respective disabilities. Shelley Tremain in her essay "Queering Disabled Sexuality Studies" claims "A pervasive heterosexual assumption conditions work currently done in disabled sexuality studies... (It) assumes a distinction between sex and gender... Rather than a "natural" attribute or characteristic, the category of 'sex' is a product of power put in the service of reproductive interests" (Tremain 291). The film's fundamental concern arises from the words "natural" and "normal." It illustrates the friction between desires that are normal but thought of as "unnatural" and a physical state that is believed to be more natural than normal. Freud's approach towards female homosexuality was extremely problematic as he claimed that it needs to be cured with a solution that psychoanalysis can't provide. He interpreted it as a "virility complex" in women and maintained that motherhood is the remedy. This is a testament to the efforts made to reduce and contain the power of female homosexuality (Irigaray 192).

In this country especially, where free discussion on intercourse and sexuality is not encouraged and their exploration is relatively still a taboo, sexuality itself can be said to be disabled. Going back to *Margarita with a Straw*, perhaps Laila along with her mother decides to move to New York because the environment of even an urban metropolis in India is not conducive for a woman with disability to experience and experiment with her sexuality. Contrary to popular belief, all people with disabilities are not sexually disabled. Rather it is their sexuality which is disabled due to societal institutions and structures whose power has been further consolidated over the years. Hence, it is essential to acknowledge and absorb in the collective consciousness that if people without disability have the freedom and platforms to express their sexuality comparatively more in the present, it is vital to create a non - judgemental space for people with disability for their sexual expression.

## References

- [1] Adamson, Lena. "Self - image, adolescence, and disability. " *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, vol.57, no.5, 2003, pp.578 - 81. National Library of Medicine, doi: 10.5014/ajot.57.5.578.
- [2] Baradwaj Rangan. ""Margarita With a Straw"... A light, lovely tale of sexual awakening and other things that make up life"" *WordPress*, 25 Apr.2015, "Margarita With a Straw"... A light, lovely tale of sexual awakening and other things that make up life / Baradwaj Rangan (wordpress. com) . Accessed 1 Jul.2023.
- [3] Burr, William. "Sexuality of the disabled often overlooked. " *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, vol.183, no.5, 2011, pp.259 - 60. *National Library of Medicine*, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1503%2Fcmaj.109-3813>.
- [4] Irigaray, Luce. "Commodities among Themselves. " *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Translated by Catherine Porter with Caroline Burke, Cornell University Press, 1985, pp.192 - 97.
- [5] *Me Before You*. Directed by Thea Sharrock, performances by Emilia Clarke and Sam Claflin, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2016.
- [6] "Sexual Health. " *who. int*, World Health Organization, [https://www.who.int/topics/sexual\\_health/en/](https://www.who.int/topics/sexual_health/en/). Accessed 17 June 2023.
- [7] Shuttleworth, Russell P. "The Search for Sexual Intimacy for Men with Cerebral Palsy. " *Sexuality and Disability*, vol.18, no.4, 2000, pp.263 - 82. *Springer Link*, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005646327321>
- [8] Tepper, M. S. "Sexuality and Disability: The Missing Discourse of Pleasure. " *Sexuality and Disability*, vol.18, no.4, 2000, pp.283 - 90. *Springer Link*, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005698311392>
- [9] theshowercurtian. "Family Stone (Dinner Scene). " *YouTube*, 23 January 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_82PrxpAQZo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_82PrxpAQZo). Accessed 17 June 2023.
- [10] Tremain, Shelley. "Queering Disabled Sexuality Studies. " *Sexuality and Disability*, vol.18, no.4, 2000, pp.291 - 99. *Springer Link*, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005650428230>