

# Myth and Realities: Analyzing Disability Representation on the Bangladeshi Silver Screen

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## Abstract

Disability representation in Bangladeshi film is a multifaceted and often contentious subject, serving both as a mirror reflecting societal beliefs and a lens through which cultural myths are disseminated. Drawing insights from the social model of disability and Ronald Barthes' concept of myth, this paper examines the portrayals of disability in Bangladeshi films over the past three decades. Through a content analysis of three films on disability, *Shuva* (2006), *Ostitto* (2016), and *Raat Jaga Phool* (2021), the discussion elucidates how disability is often mythologized, serving as a plot device, a form of punishment, or a metaphor for passive heroism and comedic relief. Thus, it reveals significant distortions that strengthen societal prejudices of labelling disabled people as "other" and hinder their inclusion in mainstream society. Furthermore, gender roles within a patriarchal society are explored, highlighting how disabled female protagonists are marginalized and confined to roles of dependency and pity. The paper also critiques the romanticization and misunderstanding surrounding disability treatment and remedies portrayed in Bangladeshi films that establish able-bodied norms and overshadow the agency of disabled individuals. Therefore, it calls for a more authentic and inclusive representation of disability in Bangladeshi films.

## Keywords

Disability Representation, Bangladeshi Films, Cultural Myths, Otherness, Social Exclusion

"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view."

-Harper Lee (Lee, 1960: p. 30)

## 1. Introduction

Historically, disability, with its complex recognizable form, has been misunderstood and stigmatized in society. It has often been perceived as a personal tragedy, a punishment for wrongdoing, or a “sign of being chosen, of possession by God or the devil” (Oliver, 1983: p. 33). In many cultures, these supernatural explanations for disability are deeply rooted and intertwined with cultural and religious beliefs. For instance, in various ethnic groups across Southern Africa, certain cultural beliefs link disability to witchcraft or ancestral punishment for breaking customs (Masasa, 2002: p. 20). Meyers (1992) found that the Hmong people in the United States believe in spirits, both good and bad and that offending these spirits might result in disease or disability. Similarly, disability is often portrayed in Hindu culture as a terrible outcome, frequently perceived as a form of punishment for wrongdoing (Masasa, 2002: pp. 21-22). Therefore, these misconceptions have led to discriminatory attitudes and practices towards disabled individuals, resulting in marginalization and exclusion from all social participation. In Bangladesh, over 15 million people are identified as disabled and close to half a million people are suffering from multiple disabilities (GED, 2015, cited in (Hussain, 2021)). Despite these figures, social stereotypes and misconceptions regarding disability persist within the Bangladeshi community, often contributing to the marginalization and discrimination faced by individuals with a disability. These stereotypes manifest in attitudes of pity, helplessness, violence, or mystic belief towards disabled people, strengthening the belief in their inherent inferiority and dependency and denying their agency and rights. Additionally, there is a tendency to homogenize the experiences of disabled individuals, overlook the diversity of their needs and capabilities, and elimination from different social sectors, exacerbating their exclusion from mainstream society. As Oliver (1983) posits, this issue is particularly crucial within capitalist societies, where individuals are judged based on their productivity and “appropriate social status thereby accorded”. Consequently, the existing social perception of disabled individuals as “dependent” does not primarily stem from their physical inability to work but rather from the structural organization of work within modern industrial societies (Oliver, 1983: p. 26).

Film, as a media tool, sometimes mirrors societal perceptions and attitudes, while in other instances, it shapes them. Consequently, throughout the history of cinema, disability has been presented as a “source of stereotypes or as a narrative device in which the disabled are blessed or damned but never wholly human” (Hunt, 2020). In Morris’s words, like beauty, disabilities are frequently used in the film as symbolic devices for conveying the non-disabled filmmakers’ intended message. In doing this, filmmakers take advantage of public misconceptions, anxieties, and prejudices associated with disabled people within society, “knowing that to portray a character with humped back, with a missing leg, with facial scars, will evoke certain feelings with the audience”. Unfortunately, the overuse of these portrayals further confirms the cultural stereotype (Morris,

1991, cited in (Boray, 2011)). Nevertheless, in recent years, a notable shift towards more authentic portrayals of disability has been observed in the film industry, driven in part by an increasing demand for realistic, diverse, and inclusive representation. To comprehend the meaning of disability in Bangladeshi society, this essay explores the representation of disability in Bangladeshi films, employing both Ronald Barthes' notion of myth and the social model of disability as theoretical underpinning. A content analysis of three films focusing on disability over three decades will be conducted to examine how the selected films contribute to or challenge societal views of disability, with a particular emphasis on the perpetuation of myths and stereotypes. Despite the growing interest among filmmakers in recent years, there remains a dearth of thorough and authentic depictions of disability in Bangladeshi films, emphasizing the necessity for further examination and advocacy towards more inclusive portrayals. An in-depth analysis of these cinematic portrayals can provide valuable insights into existing beliefs and misconceptions regarding disability, thereby facilitating dialogues aimed at fostering greater inclusivity in societal actions and representations.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Before looking into the film analysis, it is pertinent to explore Roland Barthes' interpretation of myth together with the notion of the social model of disability. These theoretical constructs will serve as the foundational framework for the ensuing discussion in this essay.

Barthes's idea of myth analyses the hidden meanings and ideologies behind various cultural phenomena, such as photography, cinema, wrestling, fashion, and so on. He utilizes the method of semiotics, the study of signs, to reveal how these phenomena communicate messages that reinforce the values and interests of the dominant social group. He calls these messages myths and argues that they are a type of speech which transforms a sign into a concept. In Barthes' words, myth functions as a "system of communication", a "mode of signification", articulated through discourse (Barthes, 1972: p. 108). Using his signification model, which is based on Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's concepts, Barthes expands on his analysis of myth. He distinguishes between three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation is "the descriptive and literal level of meaning" shared by the majority of individuals within a culture; connotation, on the other hand, is the meaning produced by linking signifiers to the broader cultural issues, for instance views of a social formation, attitudes, frameworks, and ideologies. Myth is the meaning at the connotation level, where meaning has been accepted as *natural* and *normal*, and has *naturalized* as hegemony. Myth is a conceptual map of meaning that helps us make sense of the outside world. Furthermore, according to Barthes (1972: p. 129), myth is a "second-order semiological system" where the sign of the first system (language) becomes the signifier of the second system (myth). Myth conceals the sign's social and historical context while naturalizing and universalizing particular mean-

ings. For instance, “a picture of a black soldier saluting the French flag” may be interpreted as a symbol of democracy and loyalty. Still, it hides the existence of French colonialism and imperialism. Thus, Barthes attempts to dispel the prevalent fallacies in popular culture. Applying his concept to the portrayal of disabilities in Bangladeshi cinemas reveals how cinematic narratives contribute to the naturalization, normalization, and reinforcement of cultural ideologies, power dynamics, and mythical signifiers related to disability in society.

On the other hand, disability rights advocates have long been striving for equality between disabled and non-disabled individuals. In recent years, two theories, the medical and social models of disability, have been the subject of much discussion. According to the medical model, an individual’s disability is primarily a problem that needs to be settled by the person experiencing it (Hughes, 2010). Conversely, the social model of disability, first introduced by disability rights activist Michael Oliver (Oliver, 1983), claims that social, economic, and environmental factors are the primary causes of disability rather than individual impairments. Citing UPIAS (1976), Oliver argues that “Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (Oliver, 1983: p. 24). The model acknowledges that obstacles may arise from “negative attitudes, lack of access to services or support” (Hughes, 2010). It strongly emphasizes the human rights and lived experiences of individuals with disabilities. In addition, it promotes the elimination of institutional, environmental, and attitudinal barriers that impede the full and equal participation of disabled individuals in society. The social model of disability can enable a critical examination of how films either reproduce or contest the dominant societal views on disability and thus propose potential ways to address the existing barriers faced by disabled individuals.

### 3. Literature Review

Throughout the scholarly exploration of the nexus between film and disability, a dominant framework has been the argument that the negative representation of disabled individuals in cinema leads to harmful real-life consequences for those with disabilities. In the early discourse surrounding cinema and disability, critique often targeted films for fostering offensive and prejudiced portrayals of disabled individuals. A pioneering study of this discourse was made by Longmore (1985), whose groundbreaking work offered an in-depth exploration of the harmful stereotypes present in Hollywood films addressing disability. By scrutinizing the distorted representation of disabilities, such as criminals, evils, self-pitying, and so on, in television and motion pictures, Longmore argues that this portrayal contributes to the cultivation of misconceptions and biases, ultimately fostering instances of discrimination and social marginalization. Advocating the establishment of a disability studies program, he posits the imperativeness of surpassing conventional viewpoints on disability.

Later, in the academic study of disability representation in world cinema,

scholars have identified various ways disability is traditionally depicted in films. Citing some scholars, [Safran \(1998\)](#) posits that one such example is the portrayal of psychiatric disabilities in film narratives, a practice that dates back to the early 20th century with the influential German film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919). This film marked a milestone by featuring a character who commits murder under the hypnotic control of a mentally unstable therapist, thus initiating the depiction of psychiatrists as mentally disturbed. The period following World War II saw a notable increase in the on-screen visibility of mental illness, although it was often criticized for its portrayal as “grossly simplified, naive, and inaccurate...” ([Schneider, 1977: p. 616](#)). In a similar vein, [Miller \(1987\)](#) notes that during the film noir era (1940s-late 1950s), directors frequently used psychopathology as a central theme, with a particular focus on antisocial personality disorders. These disorders were often depicted as a symbol of societal malevolence and potential doom. According to Miller, the creative liberties taken by scriptwriters sometimes led to sensationalized and inaccurate portrayals of these disorders.

Research by [Schuchman \(1988\)](#) endeavors to examine the presentation of deafness and hearing impairment in motion pictures. He found a persistent trend of negative stereotyping since the early days of cinema. Deafness was initially used as a trickery device in silent films, and later, deaf characters were often shown as mute or expert lip-readers. Schuchman argued that the film industry, largely controlled by able-bodied individuals, has failed to represent the active and independent deaf community accurately.

In the seminal work *Mad Tales from Bollywood Portrayal of Mental Illness in Conventional Hindi Cinema*, [Bhugra \(2006\)](#) dissects the attitudes towards mental illness in Indian culture and their reflections in Hindi cinema. Through a detailed critique of individual films, Bhugra posits that over the past half-century, the portrayal of madness in Hindi cinema has transitioned from a gentle depiction to embracing psychoanalytic and psychopathic dimensions. These depictions serve as a narrative tool, a form of punishment, and a means of solving crimes. Psychiatrists in these films have been portrayed in various archetype roles, ranging from buffoons to sagacious figures, detectives, and stern paternal figures. This recurring thematic treatment has wielded an influence on cultural perceptions. Furthermore, the filmic representation of the enduring and forgiving woman is situated within the framework of societal expectations. This is particularly evident in films such as *Baseraa* (1981), where the female protagonist’s mental state varies according to the extent of sacrifice expected from her ([Bhugra, 2006: p. 259](#)). Likewise, [Islam \(2010\)](#) analyzes four Bollywood films spanning three decades, asserting that individuals with mental illness undergo a process of *Othering*. This process entails their representation in stereotypical roles as desperate individuals who are noticeably divergent from the societal norm. The cause and remedy for their mental state are invariably connected to themes of love. These characters are depicted as individuals who contravene established societal norms, ultimately encountering a destiny marked by ruin.

An additional focus in today's film industry is the representation of mental illnesses, including autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). In a discerning analysis of Hollywood films, [Conn & Bhugra \(2012\)](#) scrutinize 23 recent movies, identifying many examples where the autistic protagonist is characterized as idiosyncratic, serving as a driving force for the narrative. The naivety attributed to the autistic character serves as a deliberate contrast to the rapidly evolving technological, political, and social landscapes depicted in these films. However, the unrealistic portrayal of the protagonist's capabilities, and its associations with myths, legends, and violence, gives rise to detrimental consequences. The scholars criticize filmmakers for their apparent focus on exploiting the condition for cinematic impact rather than adhering to scientific accuracy. They advocate for a heightened sense of responsibility among filmmakers, urging them to approach the depiction of ASDs with more significant consideration for accuracy and to contribute to the audience's education on the subject. In their words, "If chosen well, films can provide a powerful visual description of a medical disorder, providing genuine insight without the discomfort of voyeurism and concerns for patient confidentiality" ([Conn & Bhugra, 2012: p. 62](#)).

On the contrary, in her 2015 study, scholar O'Dell highlights the lack of thorough research into the multifaceted representations of disability in Iranian cinema and its role in the rise of the Iranian New Wave cinema. She examines several award-winning films where disability is a key narrative element. Contrary to Western cinema, O'Dell argues that Iranian cinema does not depict disabled individuals as simply tragic or heroic figures overcoming adversity. Instead, it presents disability as a metaphor for spiritual potential, a sign of marginalization, and a subtle critique of society. Moreover, these films underscore the ability of cinema to confront societal, religious, and cultural obstacles ([O'Dell, 2015: pp. 1123-1126](#)).

Similarly, [O'Reilly \(2018\)](#) examines the Japanese audience's reception of films centered on disability. Through a comparative analysis of the portrayal of disabled war survivors and other impaired bodies in the recent Japanese films *Love and Honor* (2006) and *Caterpillar* (2010), O'Reilly delves into the motivations behind the visceral retelling of both war trauma and general disability, while also scrutinizing the factors contributing to the commercial or critical success of each film. The research findings highlight the success of Japanese disability-related films over the past decade, indicative of an increasing societal openness to impairment-themed projects, as exemplified by their remarkable box office performance. However, this success prompts inquiries into the evolving attitudes of the audience towards impairment. O'Reilly posits that demographic shifts, particularly an ageing population, contribute to heightened empathy for the physically impaired. Additionally, the study emphasizes the role of a postwar secularization process in Japan, challenging traditional views that associated disability with karmic debt.

In an effort to scrutinize the situation of Bengali cinema, [Sengupta \(2018\)](#) delves into Aparna Sen's three films set in diverse Indian contexts. Through de-

tailed analysis, Sengupta argues that in the subcontinent, disability takes on a unique significance for women, who are primarily valued for the cultural, social, and familial profitability of their bodies. Unlike disabled men, who are seen with sympathy, disabled women are often blamed for bringing shame to their families and communities. Disability in this context is wielded to stigmatize women deviating from normative expectations, emphasizing their roles in childbearing and as satisfactory partners. Sengupta highlights how Sen's films challenge binary identity categories, resisting marginalization and silencing and complicating the conventional definition of disability by transcending clinically diagnosed anatomical norms.

While this array of research findings presents a vibrant panorama of how disability is depicted in global cinema, an intriguing gap persists concerning exploring the Bangladeshi film industry. This study embarks on a pioneering journey to unfold how the Dhallywood industry perceives disability, aiming to disentangle the complex tapestry of societal attitudes towards individuals with disabilities.

#### 4. Method

The present study employs qualitative content analysis as a methodological approach to decipher the cinematic representation of disabilities in Bangladeshi films. Brylla (2018) outlines that "Content analysis involves the empirical study and subsequent theoretical analysis of a body of film texts in order to generate knowledge about, for example, production practices, representation or formal common denominators". Despite the notion that content analysis predominantly involves quantitative analysis, Krippendorff explains it as a means of comprehending the symbolic qualities of texts through diverse qualitative procedures (Krippendorff, 1980, as cited in (Rose, 2001: p. 55)). The method involves sampling (selecting the media texts), coding (textual analysis for common denominators), and explanation (drawing conclusions based on the scope of the research) to analyze texts. This method encompasses three stages: manageability, relevance, and representativeness. In contrast, Brylla recommends Richard Dyer's approach for coding film texts, wherein Dyer delineates two textual dimensions—"structural" (or narrative) and "iconographic" (or aesthetic). The former encompasses the material and ideological organization of the depicted world, including story and plot, while the latter relates to visual and aural signs in *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, sound, and editing (Dyer, 2006, as cited in (Brylla, 2018)).

Considering this approach, the current study scrutinizes three Bangladeshi films over a three-decade period that address the theme of disability. The selected films are *Shuva* (2006), directed by Chashi Nazrul Islam; *Ostitto* (2016), directed by Anonno Mamun; and *Raat Jaga Phool* (2021), directed by Mir Sabbir. These selections are deemed representative due to the notable accolades received by *Ostitto* (2016) and *Raat Jaga Phool* (2021), both of which earned National Awards for their outstanding performances. Additionally, *Shuva* (2006)

holds significance as it was adapted from Rabindranath Tagore's short story *Shuvashini* and garnered acclaim from critics. Of paramount importance is the central focus on disabled individuals as the primary protagonists in each respective film. Drawing from Barthes' semiotic study of myth and the social model of disability, this paper will analyze how disabilities are portrayed in the narratives of the chosen films while considering the aforementioned methodological approach.

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1. Between Reality and Myth: Disabled as "Other"

"Other" or "us vs. them" is a way of labelling specific individuals or groups as not fitting in within societal norms. One of the manifestations of "other" involves attributing negative traits to individuals or groups that set them apart from the perceived normative social group. The profusion of false stereotypes that justify society's persecution of minority groups is another manifestation. Similar to preconceptions regarding women or Third World people, certain stereotypes concerning persons with disabilities are based on facts with distorted images. Though some natural limitations are experienced by disabled individuals, such as decreased ability of hearing or speech, mental illness, autism, and so forth, the majority of these constraints stem from society's response to disability. With their artful portrayal, films capture societal responses, transforming the screen into a dynamic mirror that reflects the prevailing norms. Consequently, in the domain of Bangladeshi cinema, disabled individuals have frequently been portrayed as "other" with little connection to their actual illnesses; rather, they are represented as having cultural significance or functioning as a myth through cinematic representation that is "not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters its message" (Barthes, 1972: p. 108).

Islam's film *Shuva* (Islam, 2006), adapted from a short story by Rabindranath Tagore, presents a tale of a speech-impaired young girl (Purnima). When Shuva was born, she was named Shuvashini (one who is eloquent and has a melodious voice) to rhyme with her two elder sisters' name. But now, everyone calls her Sh-uva for short. Despite having trouble speaking, Shuva has two large, mesmerizing dark eyes with long lashes that are incredibly expressive, and her boundless vivacity enralls everyone she meets. Yet to the eloquent girls of the village, she is unwanted; to others, she is nothing but an object of pity. Thus, Shuva's speech impairment has led to her being presented as "other" from the outset of the film. Furthermore, Shuva's mother becomes a little irritated with her, as she somehow mirrored a flaw in herself as a mother. Halder (n.d.) claims that a woman's social standing in this subcontinent is primarily determined by her reproductive capacity. The importance of maternity in societal formation even goes so far as to exclude women who are incapable of having children from some social events, thereby jeopardizing their social position. In Shuva's situation, her speech impairment becomes a potential threat for her mother as it calls into

question her own perceived inadequacy. However, Banikanttha, Shuva's father, is always a little more loving toward this speech-impaired creation of God, and he always makes an effort to keep the girl away from all the resentment of her mother and the crooked eyes of the villagers. In this film, the family dynamics, however, are characterized by a mix of acceptance and internal conflict; Shuva's father efforts to protect and care for her emphasizes familial love and support as crucial elements in challenging societal attitudinal barriers. Besides, Shuva's two closest companions, their domestic cows Sarvashi and Panguli, who are familiar with her every footstep, react affectionately when she wraps her arms around them, pats their ears, and feeds them. They lick her body while gazing lovingly at her. She used to go there on the days when she heard bitter remarks or reproach. Sensing something, her two friends rub their horns against her arms to console her. In this process the narrative displaces disabled individual from the normal relations of society, places them with the non-human beings as *natural* and *normal*. Thus, according to Barthes, "myth hides nothing: its function is to distort, not to make disappear" (Barthes, 1972: p. 121). Myth naturalizes its subject, and the articulation, or the "practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice" (Lac-lau & Mouffe, 1985: p. 105). Shuva's parents are silently weighing the load upon their minds because Shuva is still unmarried while her two elder sisters have been duly married. Within the village, Protap, the only son of usurer Govinda Goswami, cherishes Shuva's quiet companionship. He approaches Shuva's parents with a proposal of marriage, leading to Banikanto presenting the proposal to Protap's father. The film once more labels Shuva as "other" when Govinda Goswami rejects the proposal and disparages Banikanto due to her speech-impairment. Being humiliated in this way, Shuva's parents opt to arrange her marriage in Kolkata. Shuva is reluctantly being prepared with ornaments to amplify her natural beauty as much as possible, intending to conceal her flaw from the bridegroom. Shortly after their marriage, Shuva's husband discovers her condition and abandons her, leaving her in the hands of uncertainty. Shuva, in this film, thus, portrays the classical "other" of our culture, one who must face their fate or punishment for not abiding by the expectations placed on women by a patriarchal society. Even while the family is initially shown as her refuge, in the end, the family again makes her feel as an outsider. According to the concept of myth and the social model of disability, Shuva's speech impairment is not inherently disabling, instead, it is the prejudices, societal norms, and discrimination that defines her as the "other" and restrict her opportunities in all spheres of life.

On the other hand, *Ostitto* (2016), directed by Mamun, features Pori (Nusrat Imrose Tisha), a young girl who is mentally disabled. The cinematic exposition opens with a mid-shot capturing Pori's footsteps as she traverses a mountainous road with unbridled excitement. Despite her younger brother's futile attempts to stop her, Pori runs unabated, eventually finding herself within the confines of a stranger's house, later identified as her sibling's lover's residence. In *Ostitto*

(2016), Pori has a caring family that is extremely affectionate and loving towards her, and desperate to protect her from all kinds of dangers from the outside world. The ideology of family is utilized here as a way of entertaining us by saying that regardless of the hardship we face in the outside world, we still have our family. However, despite having an affectionate bond with Pori, in one scene of the film, her brother requests his lover not to tell their other friends about Pori's madness since other will make fun of him. This scene, according to the social model of disability, delineates social exclusion and stigma often faced by families with disabled members. It encapsulates the societal myth that disability is a source of shame or embarrassment, perpetuates the marginalization of individual with disability. Although Pori's family wants to send her to a special school for such people, her mother is not ready to send her anywhere since *she does not want to accept that Pori is a special kid* ((Mamun, 2016) 2:21:17). The sequence again emphasizes the tension between societal expectations and familial acceptance of disability by highlighting the myth of normalcy in society and unwillingness to accept deviation from norms. Even at home Pori always acts crazy, cannot eat properly, often destroys properties, is stubborn, and always wants to cling to her mother. But she has a talent for drawing and has two dear friends who are birds. Thus, Like *Shuva* (2006), the film also establishes a close bond between disabled individuals and animals, withdraws them from conventional human relations and identifies them as "other" who deviate from social norms. However, Pori's family finally admits her to a special school run by a handsome, charismatic young guy Itu (Shuvo). Although the school is for disabled children, Itu agrees to admit Pori as a special case because of Pori's ability to achieve the seemingly impossible. At first, Pori yawns for the comforting embrace of her mother. As events unfold, Itu emerges as a new place of hope in Pori's life. Pori's trust in Itu gradually develops into a more profound love transcending conventional boundaries. But Itu views Pori as a special patient, which is a challenge to his unwavering commitment towards these patients' welfare. Meanwhile, Itu devotes himself to preparing disabled children to participate in the National Olympics. Despite personal challenges, he remains resolute in showcasing their talents to the world. The audience receives a subtle hint that Itu is suffering from cancer. The climax moment arrives on the day of the competition. Itu collapses before everyone's eyes, while Pori finishes first in the running. Following a visit to the hospital, the narrative reveals that Itu is in the latter stages of his cancer. The last scene of the narrative shows Pori standing before Itu, draped in a saree as a lover, while Itu is confined to a wheelchair, looking at Pori with utter compassion. Due to his illness, Itu has become paralyzed on one side, and he himself is now disabled. This scene implies that a disabled person can have a romantic relationship with a normal person only when the normal person also suffers from some disability. Otherwise, the disabled person becomes an "other", or a "special case" deserving of sympathy and charity, similar to Pori in the film *Ostitto* (2016).

In contrast to the previous two films, *Raat Jaga Phool* (Sabbir, 2021) begins with the terrible death of a couple in the jungle at the hands of Pakistani soldiers in 1971. Afterwards, the focus shifts to an orphaned infant abandoned in the middle of the forest accompanied by a black-faced monkey, metaphorically evoking a sense of maternal protection. The child, introduced as Rois (Mir Sabbir), forms a unique bond with the forest fauna, acquiring a mythical and comedic status due to his perceived mental differences, including understanding animal language and witnessing human atrocities through their eyes. Thus, from the beginning Rois's depiction as "mad", "mysterious", and "other" serves to reinforce societal attitudes towards disability, framing Rois as an outsider whose unconventional traits are both celebrated and ostracized. The narrative takes a dramatic turn when the village's corrupt Lander murders his daughter's orphaned, poor lover, Jamal, in retaliation for his opposition to Lander's illegal drug trafficking. Rois's dog, who he claims tells him about the murder, is the sole witness to this heinous crime. As a result, insane Rois becomes a threat to Lander's group, prompting them to devise a plan to kill him. Meanwhile, Faria, the niece of Jabbar master, arrives from the city and encounters Rois. After learning his bizarre utterances, she reassures her uncle that Rois's actions do not indicate madness. She invites Rois to accompany her to Dhaka, thereby challenging existing beliefs about his mental state. Rois is taken to sister Lipi's ashram, which appears to be a sanctuary for animals and wildlife enthusiasts. But underneath the veneer, Rois discover a darker reality. Through his interactions with the caged animals, Rois becomes aware that child trafficking occurs within the ashram. In the climax, the authorities step in and arrest sister Lipi, while the Lander consumed by remorse and facing the consequences of his deeds, meets a tragic death. Finally, Rois returns to the village, seeking comfort alongside his animal companions. The film thus reinforces Rois's outsider identity by emblematically aligning him with wildlife rather than integrating him into mainstream society. Besides, his ability is portrayed as uncanny, mystical, and insane, with little semblance of reality. This deliberate placement identifies the widespread cultural attitude towards disability, where Rois, despite occasional challenges to prevailing beliefs about his mental state, ultimately finds refuge outside of the human societal structure. *Raat Jaga Phool* (2021) thus perpetuates the myth of otherness while emphasizing the ongoing obstacles individuals with disabilities face to be accepted and included in society. Barthes contends that myth functions to create an "immediate impression—it does not matter if one is later allowed to see through the myth" (Barthes, 1972: p. 130). It operates as a "factual system" (Barthes, 1972: p. 130), wherein viewers perceive the mythologized content as representative of reality while watching films. Moreover, myth relates to reality and "brings that reality into line with appropriate cultural values" (Fiske & Hartley, 1978: p. 42). Consequently, the way that disabilities are portrayed in films, whether they are speech impairment or mental illness, fits with the dominant norms and values of Bangladeshi society, which strengthens societal views and expectations toward disability within the cinematic narratives.

## 5.2. Disability as Spectacle

The historical tradition of rendering disabled people as spectacles dates back centuries, wherein such individuals are subjected to objectification, eroticization, or sensationalize for entertainment, curiosity, or voyeurism. Disability studies scholar Thomson (2002: p. 56) notes that from “antiquity through modernity, the bodies of disabled people considered to be freaks and monsters have been displayed for entertainment and profit in courts, street fairs, dime museums, and sideshows”. Foucault (2006) further explores this notion by highlighting how, during the Middle Ages, individuals regarded as mad were publicly exhibited where “madness became pure spectacle” (Foucault, 2006: p. 145). In the film *Shuva* (2006), the speech-impaired Shuva is portrayed in a manner that establishes this tradition of disability as a spectacle. Throughout the narrative, Shuva is depicted as insane and inconsolable and spends her days wandering around the village. When someone speaks to her, in most cases, she refuses to comprehend and acts like a crazy person. Despite her desire to play with her peers, she is met with rejection and subsequently engages in confrontations with them. Furthermore, upon being caught alongside Protap while stealing guavas from a neighboring garden, Shuva makes a face at the elderly owner. These representations fortify her characterization as an object of amusement rather than portraying the realities of speech impairment. Similarly, the mad “others” Pori and Rois from the films *Ostitto* (2016) and *Raat Jaga Phool* (2021) are shown as strange personalities. Pori has no knowledge of normalcy, while Rois always behaves ridiculously and talks mysteriously. Throughout the film, Pori is visually infantilized and dressed in juvenile attire, including a frock and hair ribbons, a costume inappropriate for her age. In contrast, Rois is presented in dirty clothing with unkempt long hair and a shaggy beard. Nevertheless, when these characters are integrated into typical social roles, such as a spouse (Shuva) and a lover (Pori), or when they engage with urban inhabitants (Rois), their portrayals align with the norms of normalcy set by society. In this process, “the (disabled) other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown” (Barthes, 1972: p. 152) who is shown to be as far removed from reality as possible. Besides, these mythical representation of people with disabilities, tells the audience, albeit with distortion, what disability is, what causes it, and how the disabled looks and behaves so that if one ever comes across such a person in reality, they can be identified from a distance.

Even the portrayal of medical treatment and remedies for disabilities in films is often ignored or romanticized, contributing to societal misconceptions. Within these cinematic narratives, attempts to treat disabilities are frequently depicted through emotions such as pity, love, and songs and dances, thereby engendering misunderstanding regarding the actual treatments that society has to offer. An illustrative example of such representation is the film *Ostitto* (2016), which features a special school for disabled children. Ironically, this thematic inclusion of a special school appears decades later in Bangladeshi films, where the

school's familial milieu is shown as the most compassionate setting to address disabilities. A special bond is portrayed between the disabled individuals in the school, where they not only support each other but are also mentally dependent on one other while remaining wholly segregated and isolated from the rest of society. Thus, it reestablishes the stereotypical ideas of disabled individuals as "abnormal" or "different" who need to be placed outside of society. Nonetheless, the film tends to focus on the "inspirational" narrative, depicting mentally disabled Pori as a hero overcoming her limitations through an incredible feat in the National Olympic Games. However, the ultimate hero is Itu, her instructor, who is shown as a figure of bravery, strength, problem-solver, and bring about justice for those with disabilities. According to Finkelstein (1980), "the use of such concepts is nothing less than the imposition of standards of able-bodied normalcy upon the meaning of disability for disabled individuals, partly engendered by the 'helper/helped' relationship" (cited in (Oliver, 1983: p. 21)). As a result, the hero-as-savior archetype overshadows the agency and autonomy of disabled characters, positioning them as passive recipients of help rather than active participants in their own lives.

A plausible explanation for such portrayal of disabled people in films could be because, since the beginning of the creation, we perceived diseases as a fearful, seemingly random aspect of the indeterminable universe that must be separated from ourselves. Our attempt to set boundaries between ourselves and the individuals we believe are the vessels holding diseases stems from our anxiety and sense of inadequacy about our diseases. In Gilman (1988)'s words, "the fearful is made harmless through being made comic; in some cases, it looms as a threat, controlled only by being made visible. How we see the diseased...the polluting is a reflex of our own sense of control and the limits inherent in that sense of control" (Gilman, 1988: p. 3). Media's stereotypical representations, ranging from pity and comedy to avoidance, serve as societal mechanisms to cope with the fear and discomfort associated with disabilities, reinforcing the boundaries between the able-bodied and the disabled while reaffirming a sense of control over the perceived threat. Consequently, disability is portrayed in Bangladeshi films more as mythological than as medical, and the causes, as well as cures, are more as objects of a spectacle than as means of palliative care.

## 6. Conclusion

Over the three decades, disability portrayal in Bangladeshi films is not ignored but heavily distorted. It is a myth used as a plot device, a kind of punishment, a metaphor for passive heroism and comedic character, or a way to solve crimes without being noticed by others. Consequently, disabled individuals find themselves unable to function normally that society has established, seeking solace in nature rather than conventional human relationships. Illustrative examples from Bangladeshi films shed light on this phenomenon. In films like *Shuva* (2006) and *Ostitto* (2016), the exploration of disability intersects with gender roles in a pa-

triarchal society. Characters such as Shuva and Pori, who are speech-impaired and mentally unstable, respectively, act as catalysts for social exclusion. Despite receiving family affection and support, they remain isolated and dependent actors. Shuva's narrative culminates in a forced marriage followed by abandonment, while Pori's status is reduced to one worthy of sympathy rather than autonomy. Nonetheless, these stories also highlight the intricate relationship between societal expectations and familial acceptance by juxtaposing family love with the stigma and shame associated with disabilities. Likewise, the narrative of *Raat Jaga Phool* (2021) examines the trope of disability as a spectacle, portraying Rois as a mythical figure whose perceived mental differences align with the societal understanding of madness and otherness. Presenting these phenomena as *natural* and *normal*, Bangladeshi films on disability thus highlight the societal prejudices that identify disabled individuals as the "other" who deserve to be isolated from mainstream culture. Society, however, puts the responsibility on people with disabilities for their isolation, not because society or the able-bodied separate them from society, but rather because "refusing to accept themselves with their handicaps, they (disabled individuals) have chosen isolation" (Longmore, 2003: p. 138). Besides, these films elucidate the portrayal of disability treatment and remedies, emphasizing the romanticization and misconceptions surrounding their lived experiences. From the madness and infantilization of disabled individuals to the heroic savior archetype embodied by the able-bodied, these narratives fortify societal norms favoring able-bodied and overshadowing disabled individuals' agency. In this process, Bangladeshi films propagate the myth of disability as a burden to be overcome rather than an integral aspect of diverse human experiences.

Media messages inherently embody preconceptions and ideologies, which together produce "cultural meaning" that aligns with and serves the objectives of a specific society. In the context of Bangladeshi films centered on disability, these preconceptions and ideologies are subtly, often melodramatically, woven into the cinematic narrative. However, certain recurring themes contribute to an incomplete and something inaccurate picture of disabled individuals. As the social model of disability advocates for equality, filmmakers are responsible for authentically depicting the real-life experiences of disabled individuals. This includes portraying their daily challenges and triumphs alongside providing entertainment. Besides, by presenting characters with disabilities as fully realized individuals with agency and complexity, films can dismantle stereotypes, foster empathy, and advance understanding. This can ultimately change how society views and perceives disability. Additionally, when films feature disabled actors, writers, or consultants, they contribute to realistic storytelling and provide platforms for marginalized voices. Thus, films can promote a more inclusive and empathetic culture toward people with disabilities.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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