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Reclaiming Agency: Interrogating Disability, Justice, and Legal Subjectivity in Kaabil and Neru

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Kaabil (2017) and Neru (2023) through the intersecting frameworks of Disability Studies, Crip Theory, and Legal Theory to explore how Indian cinema portrays blind protagonists not as passive victims but as agents of legal and moral transformation. Challenging traditional representations steeped in pity or cure narratives, these films reimagine blindness as a site of epistemic authority and juridical resistance. Kaabil enacts a form of extrajudicial justice through vigilantism, while Neru affirms legal advocacy within the courtroom. Together, they interrogate normative legal subjectivity, foreground intersectional experiences shaped by disability and gender, and advocate for a radical jurisprudence that centers embodied vulnerability and ethical agency. Through their aesthetic strategies and narrative arcs, the films do more than represent disabled characters—they invite viewers to reimagine justice itself. This paper contends that both films offer a cinematic blueprint for disability justice in legal and cultural spheres.

Keywords: Disability Studies**,** Crip Theory**,** Legal Subjectivity**,** Indian Cinema, Blindness, Justice**,** Vigilantism**,** Courtroom Drama

Introduction

Indian cinema over the years have adopted an egalitarian approach in its handling and representation of disability. From previous narrow depictions of a disabled individual as a creepy creep or a helpless geek, evoking either horror, or pity and pathos; portrayals of disability have become more nuanced in its investing of agency to the disabled self, keeping it aligned with resistance and justice. This shift is not unique to Bollywood, rather it's a part of a wider social re-evaluation that feels obliged to re-invest the disabled subject with familiarity, ethical import, and legal personhood. In this essay I would like to bring out this transformation through an analysis of two films Kaabil (2017), directed by Sanjay Gupta, and Neru (2023), directed by Jeethu Joseph. Though Kaabil adopts a revenge thriller format and Neru lines up as courtroom drama – both through the depiction of rape against blind individuals, interrogates the connection between disability and legal justice, using the disabled body not as a lack but as a site of epistemological and legal struggle.

This paper tends to critique the legal and political dimensions of crime on disabled bodies as depicted in these films, through an intersecting framework of Disability Studies, Crip Theories and Legal scenarios in India. The central crux of these movies, Kaabil and Neru, is that both subverts normal cinematic representations and even recent legal standpoints by positioning blind protagonists as not helpless

beggars waiting for our alms of sympathy to be thrown in their way by ableist society, but as active agents daring to challenge, reinterpret and reshape the legal system. Through an exploration of such narratives as depicted in the films, this essay seeks to grapple with a deep jurisprudential question: How do disabled individuals assert justice in a system structured to overlook them? The essay calls for reformatting of the legal structure to be more participatory in its accommodation of newer legal subjectivities invested with agency so far denied to them.

Disability in Indian Cinema: Change in perspectives

Bollywood had a history of rendering disability in inauthentic-stereotypical frames, that retrospectively appears to us as vehicles of melodrama, rather than being aligned to the lived conditions of disability. But this 'individual pathology model' (Shakespeare 2006, 24) of disability, wherein the crip is a problem to be fixed through cure, charity or sacrifice; has got challenged in recent movie depictions of disability. Recent themes do not strive for the pitiable beggar or the miraculous cure; rather they are becoming more focused on critiquing the ableist laws and customs that actually disables the crip individual more than his mental or physical challenges.

I am highly critical of movies like Koi Mil Gaya that through its dramatization of the miraculous overcoming of disability shamelessly reinforces the lure of the able body. Disability critics like Anita Ghai have argued that such normative craze or portrayals buttress systemic ableism by equating disability with a lack and in the process according a subaltern status to the very subject that we tend to represent on screen.

In contrast, Kaabil and Neru is atypical where the protagonists – Rohan and Sara – do not seek a cure, nor are they portrayed as helpless. Instead, their blindness becomes a central motif within the drama, that not only shapes the identity and agency of the lead characters, but also becomes the most important trope that pulls the plot forward. From incidental representations of disability in many movies, where disabled individuals are little more than movie props; here it becomes a key vector in interrogating the legal and political implications of being disabled. The narratives are built around the agency of the disabled protagonists who are capable enough to interpret and confront society, and its legal apparatus on their own terms. As Rohan and Sara navigate through ableist society, its cruelty and credulity, its lawlessness and its legal structures; and manages to negotiate their positions on their own terms; we understand disability to be a lived experience entrenched in social, legal and epistemic structures – not a aberration from the standard but a challenge to the standardizing itself.

Crip in the Act: Unsettling Prescriptive Ontologies

Crip Theory an offshoot from queer and disability studies, lends an essential tool for understanding the existential subversions enacted by Rohan and Sara. According to Robert McRuer, the very notion of 'crip' is a critiquing of "compulsory able-bodiedness" in its celebration of the non-standardized body as a source of agency, resistance and alternative futurities. In the writings of Alison Kafer, we see an extension of this idea in her floating of terms like 'crip time' and 'crip futurity' – perceptions that seek to dismantle ableist expectations from bodies and their capacities, or their being and becoming.

Rohan's actions are a classic example of what McRuer might label as 'crip insurgency'. Blindness does not debilitate his capabilities, rather it propels him to a different kind of spatial and moral cognition. His actions to avenge the rape of his wife is not simply a personal problem but juridical to its very core in that it is an indictment of the state's failure. Rohan's blindness allots him a place outside of normative

legal temporality, but the movie doesn't depict him to be a pariah, as far as ableist society is concerned; rather it creates a potential for the development of a parallel, extrajudicial form of justice. Rohan and his wife's testimonies are something that the law cannot depend on; their beliefs are warded off as mere conjectures. Yet, the movie exploits this very marginalization to show the emergence of a counter-legal mode of justice: vigilantism as a form of crip resistance. The cripple is the new post-colonial subject, and Spivak would have been very happy to see this movie, where the new-subaltern not only speaks in various tongues but also manipulates his position to chart out a gory path to revenge in a society that is sceptical of his very existence.

Sara on the other hand navigates her subaltern crip agency through the slippery corridors of the legal Institutions. Law is blind, but when a blind individual comes knocking for justice then ableist society becomes apprehensive, and it is only through intellectual rigor that justice can be negotiated. The very notion of subalternity is based in its rejection or relinquishing of the centre, but this movie is unique in that it shows how the subaltern manages to bend the Institutions of the centre in extracting justice for someone considered to be peripheral and expendable. Sara's blindness does not render her marginal within the courtroom but fundamental to its procedures. Her logical perspicacity and principled resoluteness redefine the normative prospects of legal exercise. She exemplifies Kafer's "crip futurity," where disability is not a restraint on becoming but a reconfiguration of what it means to inhabit and transform the future. Her presence in court destabilizes the presumed association between vision and perception, visibility and discernibility.

Legal Personhood and Jurisprudential Subjection

Legal theories, specifically from the perspectives of feminist and critical legal studies, offers abundant opportunities to analyse the legal subjectivities constructed in these movies. The conservative legal viewpoint delineates a subject as sovereign and cogent – historically coded as an able-bodied male. As Matha Fineman argues, this conception of the legal subject dismisses those who agency is personal, personified, or moulded by physical restraints.

In Kaabil, Rohan personifies the legal-subaltern. Drawing on Spivak's concept of 'epistemic violence', we can assume that Rohan's witness is dismissed not due to want of truth but because of his crip entity – a blind man's account always lacks credibility in the eyes of the ableist legal system. Repudiation of justice is not unintentional but deliberate and systemic, where his blindness is manipulated to dishonour his epistemic authority. The movie shows that such legal silencing is bound to prompt a radical turn: extrajudicial revenge, or rather we should say moral crackdown, as the only viable option for proclaiming personhood.

Kaabil poses the problem of the ableist society's monopoly on justice. It can be aligned to the ideas of Giorgio Agamben, who conceptualize the 'state of exception' – a legal vacuum where the sovereign both embraces and rejects subjects from the guard of law. Rohan's acts to avenge his wife's rape are outside the law but is very much within the purview of justice. His actions are a response to juridical refusal: if the system is narrow-minded to exclude certain subjectivities, then such subaltern entities will someday or the other create a parallel system where their voice matters; and Rohan is a classic product emerging out of the blind spot of the prejudiced legal system of the ableist society.

Neru indicates towards a different dynamic. Sara is integral to the legal system yet not fully integrated by it. She is blind, so her testimony is viewed with scepticism. He disability makes her an anomalous subject in the legal arena. Yet her grappling with the law creates possibilities to reclaim the courtroom as

a space for legal and ethical reconstruction. Drawing from Fineman's "vulnerable subject" framework, we see Sara not as a victim but as a subject whose forte rises from her relationality—her web of support, her skilled veracity, and her personified knowledge. Her legal subjectivity is self-assured, principled, and wholly capacitated.

Intersectionality: Disability, Gender and Power politics

The premise of being heard, or be silenced, within legal and cinematic discourse is additional complicated when gender meets disability. In both the movies the female entities offer vital understanding into how intersectionality silhouettes entree to justice.

Nirmala Erevelles has argued that the disabled female body is often perceived as doubly vulnerable—excessively dependent, overly exposed, and socially disposable. In Kaabil Supriya is rendered doubly vulnerable by being a disabled female entity, whose rape is not only a pivotal moment in the narrative, but also a representation of the centre's brutality. She commits suicide not only out of shame, but to break the pattern of exploitation inflicted on her by the ableist society. Her disillusionment and distrust in the judicial framework, reflects the compounded silencing that occurs at the intersection of gendered violence and ableism. Supriya's depiction circumvents complete reductionism: she is shown as affectionate, sensual, inspired, and proficient. But her fate accentuates the systemic depreciation of incapacitated women's voices, mostly in matters of sexual violence.

But Sara offers possibility and hope, in that she is not restrained by her disability or rape. Her fight for justice goes beyond the personal and offers possibilities of resistance with a highly masculinized legal Institution. Her victory is a symbolic one in that it unsettles ableist assumptions about who may or may not speak before the law, whose evidence to consider and whom to accord respect and legal subjectivity. Her's is a bumpy ride in the corridors of justice, not only because she is blind but because she is a woman trying to create a space traditionally marshalled by our abled bodied fathers and brothers and sons. Sara's triumph reconfigures the feminist-crip subject as one who flourishes not despite of her embodiment but through it.

Embodiment of Disability as Aesthetic Knowledge

Disability is not just thematic in these films; it is also artistic. Both Kaabil and Neru use cinematic form—camera angles, sound design, spatial mapping—to yield an embodied spectatorship. The viewers are not merely witnessing disability; they are experiencing the world through disabled insight.

In Kaabil, aural signals, ambiences, and spatial reminiscence are arrayed to line up the viewer with Rohan's embodied standpoint. The camera often curbs visual input, creating uncertainty and bafflement, which impersonate the protagonist's keen sensory cognizance. This technique invites a phenomenological reorientation—what Vivian Sobchack terms "the address of the body"—where the viewer's own sensorium is employed into the knowledge of blindness.

Neru on the other hand avoids sensationalism. Blindness is not a gimmick, instead the emphasis on language, rhythm, silence and gesture create a diverse spatial cognition of disability, where Sara's integrity arises not from overpowering her disability but from populating her dark world with precision, poise and logical vigour. Neru resists the aestheticization of suffering; rather it culls out the visual politics of dignity, resonating Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's call for "staring back"—a reversal of the standardizing look where incapacitated characters return the look, assert existence, and mandate acknowledgement.

Vigilante Justice vs. Institutional Justice: Two Models of Resistance

The crux of this essay is to represent the dialectics between the two films in their contrasting approach to justice. Kaabil stages the collapse of juridical system and the ascend of vigilante reckoning. The movie critiques the law's failure in protecting the marginalized and raises questions about legality, usefulness and moral authority of the Indian legal Institutions. Rohan's activities haze the frontier between heroism and criminality, between righteousness and retribution. We are invited to question not only what is legal but what is fair.

Neru, on the contrary, though far from being naively optimistic, aspires towards a vision of justice that seems attainable within the bounds of law. The courtroom is typically hegemonic in being biased, rigid and sporadically cruel; symptomatic of the bond between ableism and inflexible legal systems. Sara's journey can't be smooth; but is endured with emotional fortitude, legal discretion and oratorical suave. Finally, her success signals the prospect of systemic transformation. It lines up with critical legal theorists who harbours confidence in the fact that while law is rooted with power pyramids, it can also be a topography of struggle and redefinition.

Together, these films float a rich dialectic: while Kaabil embodies what could be called 'crip insurgency from outside,' Neru enacts 'crip advocacy from within.' Both are needed stratagems in the bigger fight for disability justice.

On the way to a Sweeping Legal philosophy of Disability

These cinematic texts go beyond mere visual entertainment in pointing towards radical jurisprudence – one that can reconfigure legal personhood not as disembodied rationality but as embodied vulnerability, interdependence, and ethical action. The protagonists force us to expand our field of vision in accommodating who counts as a legal subject, what counts as justice, and how disability can be a foundation of legal and moral insight.

The message of these movies is in line with newer stands in disability legal studies, like that of Arlene Kanter's work on inclusive legal theory, which insists that juridical frameworks must be reconceptualized through the lived experiences of crip entities. Neru particularly aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which sustains full legal capacity and autonomy of persons with disabilities. Kaabil and Neru offers metamorphosis of not our perspective but also of our Institutions. They push Indian cinema – and Indian jurisprudence – towards a broader, embodied, and unprejudiced vision of justice.

Conclusion

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder contend that disability has frequently been used to emphasize the marginalization of certain groups—such as those defined by gender, class, race, or nationality—by visually reinforcing their devalued social status (1997, 21). Similarly, Douglas Baynton points out that in the history of the United States, exclusionary practices toward women, immigrants, and people of colour have often been legitimized by portraying them as disabled. Although these communities have made progress in challenging discrimination, linking their identities to disability reopens avenues for renewed bias. Disability thus remains a potent symbol of unquestioned inferiority, as societal preference for able-bodiedness continues to make it exceedingly difficult to accept disabled individuals and to acknowledge the unjust and often violent ways they are excluded from mainstream life.

Kaabil and Neru are not merely stories about blind individuals; they are cinematic interventions into the very foundations of justice, legal personhood, and disability politics. By centering characters who challenge the legal system either from within or without, the films expose the systemic failures of law while also gesturing toward new possibilities of justice shaped by disability, gender, and moral courage.

Through the theoretical lenses of Crip Theory, Legal Theory, and intersectionality, this paper has argued that both Rohan and Sara embody forms of agency that demand to be seen not as exceptions but as radical normatives. These films are not narratives of inspiration but blueprints for resistance. They remind us that law is not neutral, that justice is not automatic, and that disabled persons are not objects of policy but subjects of rights, reason, and revolution.

As our understanding of disability deepens, it becomes increasingly clear that, in the current historical context, disability operates symbolically in a manner distinct from other forms of minority representation. It functions as an "othering other"—a marker of difference that reinforces marginalization and minority status. Yet, this symbolic role often goes unacknowledged. Instead of being recognized as a structural signifier, disability is pathologized, seen as inherently flawed. In this way, the symbolic link to disability not only stigmatizes but also delegitimizes other minority identities, reinforcing their negative and subordinate social positions. In a time when cinematic representation often veers toward tokenism, Kaabil and Neru challenge us to reimagine not only what disability means but what justice requires.

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