



Film Review: Simple tools can be empowering – just have a Margarita with a straw

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Before watching the film, when I shared the podium with the cast of ‘Margarita with a Straw’ at the NDTV studio, I heard them say, “Laila is a total prankster!” After watching the film the comment made complete sense to me; it is obvious that Laila – the protagonist – is just another enthusiastic, cheeky teenager.

The story is the coming-of-age of Laila who happens to have Cerebral Palsy (CP) and is a wheelchair user. The movie outlines her negotiations with life, with her family, and with her college and crushes. While Laila is busy growing up and determined not to miss the fun and the ambition that teenage brings, the film takes her through different phases of her life – her education in Delhi and New York, her discovery of her bisexuality, and her relationship with her mom who is her supporter, her pillar and her caregiver.

In a country where disability still evokes either pity or valor, the film is neither heart wrenching nor deifying. It is the simple story of the life of a young girl; but the beauty is that if one looks with a sensitive eye, there are many, many layers that could be peeled off. Scoring rock bottom on the melodrama

scale and without getting preachy, the film, by its very existence clears the fog of myths and assumptions that have become popular beliefs. It cracks the image that the disabled are innocent, asexual, super-human or child-like.

Leila’s active sexual desires, her eagerness to experiment, and the search for love is what Bollywood cinema is made up of; only it is differently configured here. Like many teenagers, Laila too has a mind of her own, and of course has her opinions; she is mischievous and naughty, thinks of sex, watches porn, abuses, cheats and does everything else you can think of. The film disrupts the ideas of normativity at various levels, and challenges many binaries of disabled-nondisabled, queer-straight, by linking what are assumed to be “normal activities and desires” with the life of a disabled. Yet, the film does not gloss over the challenges that disability brings to a person’s life. One is exposed to the real physical limitations faced by Laila with CP, as well as the prejudices of society. The latter stand out in moments like when her music band gets an award because she – a disabled person – has composed and written

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the song. These scenes, reflecting social prejudices, really force the nondisabled to sit up and run a scan on their own attitudes.

The beauty of the film is not only in the direction or picturisation of such a subject, but the simplicity of the portrayal. Any audience, disabled or nondisabled, won't be able to stop themselves from remembering their own days when they watch an excited Laila – because her crush has just called her a rockstar – fall off her chair smiling, or Laila agreeing to take the help of a writer because a glimpse tells her that he is cute. Honestly who would say no to a hot guy helping?

While the film is centered on Laila's life, it manages to showcase the stark difference between the infrastructural accessibility and university support abroad from that in India. In India, Laila had her mother as caregiver, while in New York there was a particular caregiving assistance provided to her, which probably gave her a greater sense of independence. It was almost that New York allowed her to explore, live and find her identity and independence.

In New York, Laila meets her lady love, Khanum (visually impaired), who delivers her out of her heterosexual mindset and gives her the opportunity to explore her own sexuality. Although Khanum's role is not so prominent, she commands attention in her own way. The first interaction between Khanum and Laila shows that this character has a sense of purpose and personality. Her life with blindness is as natural and as a part of her as is the wheelchair for Laila. The human moments between the two girls – when Khanum seduces Laila, or when she expresses her anger over being cheated and used – definitely surpasses their disabilities. It assures the cynical audience that theirs is a story of love and lust and not that of two disabled coming together out of loneliness, or of them cutting the chord because of their disabilities.

For the eager inquiring minds, the film is full of nuggets of thought provoking advice – when Laila's hired assistant in New York tells her that lovers don't like to be carers, or when Laila tells her mum to accept her bisexuality because it is as normal as her

disability. Very playfully, the film also brings up the role that an Indian wife is expected to play – when her mother calls herself a 'Bai' (maid) who is expected to cook and provide for everything at home. And it naturally highlights how the responsibility and stress of care giving is expected and obviously shouldered by mothers.

The beautiful relationship of Laila and her 'Ai' – as she calls her mom – is more than just a supportive strong bond. It very unsurprisingly projects the truth of the lives of innumerable persons with disabilities, where, in most cases, the mother feels or is made to feel that the disability is somehow either her fault or passed on by her. Despite her inner battle, more often than not, the mother is the rock who is instrumental for the success of her disabled child. When a child is born with a disability, the role of care giving is assumed to be gendered and hence taken up by the mother. This is exactly the situation in Laila's case. 'Ai' enables Laila, and watches out for her, but is not the kind of parent who smothers with overprotection or who restricts growth due to parental anxiety around letting go.

After Laila's mother is diagnosed to be terminally ill, we see a heartwarming role reversal with Laila doing the caregiving, which so obviously disrupts the presumptions surrounding a disabled family member. The film ends on a very poignant note where Laila decides to take herself out on a date and makes it special for herself. The scene leaves you not teary-eyed at her loneliness but warm and fuzzy at seeing her confident and independent, with the realization that all of us must stop looking for joy outside and delve into the happiness within and with ourselves!

This film kindles a dash of hope in the hearts of the marginalized, disabled group who wearily watch every other popular film and try to discover their lives, their romances, or their stories in it. And for the majority nondisabled, it is a film with a fresh perspective on life, and hugely discomfiting as it challenges preset ideas around disability and forces them into arenas (like sexuality in disability) that are mostly unthought of and definitely unspoken of.