



***Saiyaara*: A Disability Studies Perspective on the Musical Romance Drama**

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Abstract

Cultural products have a massive influence on the minds of youth, constructing and often fixing their ideas about sensitive and ethically complex topics, such as disability. The paper analyses the musical romance drama, *Saiyaara*, through the lens of disability studies, and argues that the film reinforces the dominant stereotypes of disability by employing disability as a narrative tool to drive plot, presenting it as an individual problem and ignoring the social barriers that play a crucial role in an individual's lived experience with disability. Drawing on the medical model of disability and narrative prosthesis, the paper examines the plot to demonstrate scenes that align with the features of the two models. *Saiyaara* reinforces the medical model of disability by equating Vaani's impairment with her disability. Narrative prosthesis further shows the story's application of disability as a plot device to accentuate drama. While commercially successful, it fails ethically by blurring impairment-disability distinctions and perpetuating limiting portrayals.

Keywords: Disability Studies, Medical Model of Disability, Narrative Prosthesis, Sick-Lit, Indian Cinema.

Introduction

Entertainment culture plays a key role in germinating and establishing the youth's perspectives on disability. There has been a prevalence of plots in cinema over recent years that are in line with sick literature, with the trope of romance that especially caters to a young audience. The representation of disability in film narratives has seen considerable improvement over the

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years, and Indian cinema especially deserves a pat on the shoulder as it continues to lean towards a more authentic portrayal of disability (Abir & Robobionics Content Team, 2025). Narratives with elements of disability, physical or psychological, coalesce into a genre of sick-lit, which relishes a special ground of popularity among young adults in the literary world.

Within the arena of young adult entertainment, sick literature has gotten a stage as a genre that keeps illness and disability as a central element of emotional storytelling. In literary and cinematic narratives, disability is often employed as an emotional catalyst, a tool that becomes conducive to a romance that is deeper, tragic, and memorable. The cinematic extension of such a trend is sick cinema, where physical and psychological impairment are employed to elevate emotional intensity and sentimental appeal. Mitchell and Snyder evaluate disability narratives as functioning as narrative devices rather than authentic lived experiences, where disability extends meaning and dramatic direction to a story (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, p. 49). Mohit Suri's *Saiyaara* shows itself to be part of the same trend, where Vaani's Alzheimer's diagnosis becomes the primary source of emotional shift in the narrative. The narrative, which moves along an aspirational romantic-musical trajectory, suddenly shifts to a tragedy-oriented emotional arc upon the diagnosis. In this way, illness goes beyond being a lived medical condition to become an emotional spectacle.

The pattern is visible among global romantic narratives. In *The Fault in Our Stars*, cancer is used as an emotional medium of existential romance, while *Me Before You* places disability in a framework of tragic romantic impossibility. In such narratives, impairment frequently overshadows individuality and complexity. In *Saiyaara*, Vaani's identity gradually becomes Alzheimer's-centric; her ambitions, dreams, and career all become secondary to her impairment, and the audience's attention is diverted to her deteriorating condition and Krish's emotional suffering. The danger of such an approach is that youth start seeing disability primarily within a framework of pain, sacrifice, and doomed love. As a consequence, a nuanced social understanding of disability gets replaced by mere emotional consumption of narrative.

The current engagements with disability have also been fruitful in illuminating the independent identity of impaired characters and raising awareness about it. Yet, one can't turn a blind eye to the prevalence of oversentimentality and exceptionalism around the identity of a character with disability in such narratives, as opposed to a nuanced portrayal of their lived experience with their conditions. While the aspects of sentimentality and exceptionalism have been touched upon, there hasn't been critical engagement that addresses the distinction between impairment and disability. With this in view, the paper analyses the box-office breaker musical romance drama *Saiyaara* through the lens of disability studies and seeks to surface its reinforcement of stereotypes of disability. Cinema within popular media exercises a deep influence on youth consciousness. Youth frequently develop their primary understanding of disability, illness, and mental health through it, and hence the ethical dimension of representation becomes of utmost importance. Barnes argues that media representations strongly shape public attitudes toward disability and go on to normalize stereotypes (Barnes, 2012). A commercially successful film like *Saiyaara* has an even more significant influence on account of its emotional reach to mass audiences. When disability is repeatedly portrayed in the form of emotional burden or helplessness, there is a way in which viewers unconsciously internalize disability as a suffering-centric identity.

Mohit Suri's recent release of a musical romantic drama, *Saiyaara*, has come out winning and hailing the title of the *Aashiqui 2* of the era of Gen Z, with an estimated box office collection crossing 321 cr in just 26 days (TOI Entertainment Desk, 2025). With such massive media success, it becomes imperative to scrutinize and be aware of the representation of disability, an aspect which proves to become a driving narrative arc in the second half of the story. This necessitates a critical approach to watching "sick-cinema," a little play on the phrase

of sick-lit, which holds stronger in view of its influence on young adults, who are at the stage of developing ideas that form the basis of their beliefs about disability. Drawing on the medical model of disability and narrative prosthesis, the paper analyses and illustrates the scenes that align with the features of the two models. There is a misrepresentation of the medical/psychological impairment of Alzheimer's, the occurrence of which in a young girl seems not only unlikely but also a convenient narrative strategy of a romance plot. In its presentation of ensuing disability as an individual medical problem, the medical model overlooks the social barriers that render the impairment a disability. Thus, the story shows reinforcement of the medical model by equating Vaani's impairment with her disability. Narrative Prosthesis further shows the story's application of disability as a plot device; the film employs Vaani's impairment as a narrative tool to clutch forward the narrative.

While commercially successful, it fails ethically by blurring the impairment-disability distinction and perpetuating limiting portrayals. With the female main lead getting diagnosed with Alzheimer's, which soon becomes synonymous with her identity, and the whole plot shifting around her disability as the force that drives the story, the movie shows reinforcement of the medical model of disability and narrative prosthesis. Cultural representation of a critical medical identity phenomenon is crucial, as it helps socially construct and further elevate prejudice against people with disabilities. The research aims to employ the two models of disability to demonstrate how the story hampers ethics while dealing with the lived experiences of a character with disability.

The Medical Model vs. The Social Model of Disability

In critiquing the simplistic impairment-focused views and showing how medicalization doesn't capture the lived experience of people, disability studies condone a nuanced view of disability (Davis, 2016). A step to the nuanced understanding of disability and its experiences is the attempt to make a distinction between impairment and disability. What the Social Model of Disability ventures to set is a clear distinction between impairment (biological or mental) and disability (the social barrier that one could face due to the impairment) (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2013). The distinction is ignored in the Medical Model, which sees disability as an issue with a person that needs cure or treatment. Also called the personal/individual model, the impairment of a person becomes synonymous with disability, a personal tragedy for them, in contrast with the social model which sees disability as the result of external conditions and the barriers that society subjects the person to. This model becomes the core obstacle that the disability rights movement takes to challenge.

Main features of the Medical Model

- Focus on disability as a personal/individual problem
- Impairment, physical or psychological, as being conducive to disability
- Emphasis on medical treatment as the only solution for the individual
- Focus on normalization or restoration of "normal" functioning
- Disability as a cause for disruption of individual identity

Main features of Social Model

- Acknowledgement of a distinction between impairment and disability

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- Focus on societal and environmental barriers
- Emphasis on accessibility and inclusion
- Disability as socially produced rather than individually caused

Narrative Prosthesis

The model shows how disability functions as a narrative device that does the work of advancing meaning, tension, and thematic impact of the narrative. In literature, the habit shows in ways that aim to define a character by their disability or make disability a symbol for ideas of weakness, ignorance, or wisdom⁴. The model comes in handy in identifying how a narrative makes use of disability to steer narrative development, as against attempting to present a realistic and nuanced portrayal of disability.

A concept by Mitchell and Snyder, narrative prosthesis explains the employment of disability in narratives as a structural device that lends the story tension, symbolism, and emotional progression (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000, p. 53). They argue that disability moves beyond being a character trait to become a tool that propels a narrative. The diagnosis of Vaani's Alzheimer's performs the same function in *Saiyaara*. The smooth romantic progression of the narrative suddenly dismantles upon the diagnosis, and the entire emotional architecture of the story shifts to center around disability. Disability here enters as a disruptive force that transforms the love story from an ordinary romantic success into a tragic emotional spectacle.

Mitchell and Snyder contend that literature and cinema frequently introduce disability as a problem that demands resolution ((Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, p. 57). This resolution may come in the forms of death, cure, sacrifice, disappointment, or emotional transcendence. In *Saiyaara*, the disappearance of Vaani from Krish's life reinforces the trope, where the disappearance becomes a symbolic sacrifice that renders Krish's musical career able to flourish. The process sidelines the authentic lived experience of disability. Audiences perceive less of the practical realities of Alzheimer's—those of therapy, rehabilitation, social accommodation, and caregiving systems—and instead become susceptible to the foregrounding of emotional suffering and romantic devotion. As a consequence, impairment becomes an emotional metaphor rather than a socially contextualized condition.

Main features of Narrative Prosthesis

- Dependence on disability to create tension, drama, or moral lessons
- Disability as a symbol or metaphor
- Focus on resolve by overcoming, eliminating, or explaining away the disability
- Sideline of authentic experiences of disability

Individual Problem Disrupting Vaani's Identity

The diagnosis of the female lead of *Saiyaara* with Alzheimer kicks off the countdown of fallout for her and the male lead, Krish, a phenomenon that becomes synonymous with Vaani's newly formed identity. Vaani's career, which looked on the brighter side up until her diagnosis, suddenly gets sidelined and the only screen space she gets is in emotional moments with Krish.

The movie does portray the anguish of two lovers, with the entry of the element of Alzheimer's in their life and the impending doom that it consequences. However, it fails, or rather ignores, showcasing the anguish of a struggling young writer and journalist with early-onset Alzheimer.

Absence of Social Support, and Family/Community Groups Involvement

In view of the diagnosis of early-onset Alzheimer, and the prospect of Vaani losing the ability to remember events, incidents, and even known faces over time, Vaani's parents think in good stead to send their daughter right away on a vacation with her love interest. Rather than involving themselves in her care with the aid of social groups, Krish becomes the sole emotional and practical support for Vaani, putting the entire burden of the problem on the individual's body and their romantic caregiver. In such a turn of events, the narrative hides the social dimension of disability. It fails at a realistic portrayal of how family/ community involvement, inclusive/exclusive measures by people to support or hinder the disabled person can empower or disempower the individual. Vaani's psychological impairment becomes a source of private tragedy that must be navigated through a romantic devotion.

Though the doctor who diagnoses Vaani mentions how "medicine and treatment can slow down, but can't treat"¹ Alzheimer, thus declining to leave Vaani's fate purely on medicines and treatments as the sole option for her condition. However, the narrative erases the social model perspective, as it fails to depict any social support accommodating to a person's condition following the diagnosis, which become the general steps to follow in Vaani's condition. Also, the sole caregiving seeming to shift upon Krish's shoulders, instead of being an equal responsibility of parents and rehabilitation centres, reinforces the story's reliance on disability as an arc for sentimentalism where Vaani may well forget her primary caregiver and lover over time.

Cause of Disability Framed as Medical

There is no investigation or even mention of the root cause of Alzheimer in a 22-year-old girl, a prospect criticized by experts as highly improbable. The doctor in the movie mentions how the confusion between past and present can trigger Vaani's symptoms, but there is no exploration of environmental triggers or social pressures that may be lurking to come out and significantly shape experiences with her condition. Vaani's condition comes out as a pure medical one in the movie in its denial to portray it beyond its clinical manifestation.

Given Vaani's traumatic past with her fiancé, which became the cause of her severe depression and possibly psychological stress in the past, these prospective causes for her rare diagnosis are left unmentioned. Although the re-entry of the past lover and its triggering Vaani's symptoms do highlight to some extent the cause of disability as social, the story has the sole focus on the medical aspect of impairment as the root cause of the problem for lovers.

Disability Shown as Tragedy or Burden: Individual with No Voice or Agency

"You must inform everyone; you can't fight it all alone,"¹-the words by the doctor throw Vaani into an emotional abyss that she appears to fall further into when she meets Krish, who in his passionate plea declares never letting her go, "abhi nahi, kabhi nahi"¹ (now or ever). In the emotional declaration by Krish, and Vaani's knowledge of her impending fate, she is placed at the center of a tragedy from which she can't escape.

The movie progresses and the audience becomes a witness to sacrifices that Krish is willing to make for Vaani: he misses his musical shows, turns a deaf ear to his friends' pleas that remind him that Vaani isn't his sole responsibility, indicating the burden she could become to Krish at the beginning of his promising music career. Vaani's ultimate decision to disappear from Krish's life forever as the only way to help him reach the heights of his career only strengthens her identity as a tragic figure who must escape Krish's life for him to become *Saiyaara*, a solitary star that illuminates the whole world with his light-in the movie, with his musical talent.

Disability as Spark in the Story

With their latest music launch, Krish and his musical band start to see blooming support, evinced by a massive crowd cheering them, all amid Vaani also setting herself strong in her writing and journalism career. With everything seeming to be in line by the second half of the movie, the script may have demanded a need for a spark, and it appealed to none other than the looming entry of Vaani's diagnosis of Alzheimer.

The diagnosis single-handedly drove the plot, with Vaani's disability suddenly becoming a major antagonist in the character's love life, conflict, and tragedy. It became so important an element in the story that the assumption of any hypothetical alternatives of plot crutches raised questions as to whether they would have put it on the same pedestal of success without the sentimentality around disability.

Creation of Drama and Tension

A critical viewer may reflect on the possibility of a shared caregiving by Krish, the family and rehabilitation communities to Vaani, which may also have excused Krish to focus on his career while being the emotional support in her life. But what accompanies is the doubt that such a practical approach to Vaani's condition would have worked to present things in a more emotional, heart-breaking, or inspirational way-the elements which proved to work magic for the movie for young emotional, sentimental youth. As is the case with most drama driven romantic narratives, the elements of sentimentalism and melodrama get exploited in the movie, and there appears to be an exaggeration of the emotional aspect around disability as the ultimate hurdle for the couple.

Disability as a Symbol and Its Removal by the End

More than the disability being shown as a realistic portrayal of the lived experience of Vaani, it becomes a metaphor for doomed love or emotional burden in the story. By the end of the interval, one can't help but take Vaani's disability as the harbinger of tension and conflict in the second half of the movie and the seemingly smooth life of the couple. It's Vaani's victory over her major symptom of forgetfulness-though a temporal one given Alzheimer's being a progressive condition-and her recall of Krish Kapoor as the man she fell for that highlights the element of disability conducive to the love being doomed.

In Vaani's remembering Krish out of the blue upon his passionate speech in a scenic view of Shimla, and the follow-up of their marriage, the story shows another attempt to veil over, if not cure, the disability by the end.

3.8 Disability and the Erasure of Future Possibilities

One aspect of the film that receives no attention throughout the narrative is the gradual decaying of Vaani's professional career upon diagnosis. Prior to the revelation of Alzheimer's, the story portrays Vaani as a talented writer and journalist who is ambitious and driven to climb up the professional ladder. She is at par with Krish in being professionally active, decisive, and committed to a purpose. Once the anagnorisis of the impairment occurs, the part of her identity as an ambitious young woman dissipates with the narrative's increasing shift towards the looming condition that anticipates decline.

The sudden shift prompts a phenomenon, that of a gradual decline in future prospects for Vaani, which is noteworthy to study from the perspective of disability studies. Instead of endeavouring to showcase how she might go on with her career by adjusting to an environment that adapts for her and seeking support from institutions and groups, her condition is reflected

through the lens of deterioration. There is a way in which the narrative prompts the audience to anticipate Vaani's fall in terms of her career, memory, and romantic relationship with Krish, consequently and implicitly linking disability with an eventual and considerable threat to several aspects of life.

There is an alternate perspective on disability, one that goes along the lines of ethics, to be seen in the social model of disability. Rather than looking at impairment as the sole influence on a person's fate, it underscores the imperative role of social and institutional structures and accommodations in determining a person's participation in society. The narrative of Saiyaara fails to present the dimension in which Vaani navigates such challenges associated with society while continuing to retain her aspirations, instead focusing only on her gradual decline. This leads to an understanding of disability that is not only restricted but also misleading. Also concerning is the film's presentation of memory loss as the defining feature of Vaani's identity. This presentation tends to overshadow other aspects of her personality, with her talents, achievements, and aspirations all receding into the background. The result is a portrayal that risks perpetuating the misconception that disability is conducive to the loss of an individual's capacity for growth and meaningful social participation.

Conclusion

Saiyaara comes out as more than just another cinematic attempt at intoxicating the youth with its music and refreshing cast. The movie deals with disability at its core, representing the main characters' navigating an unprecedented condition that stands in a happy ending, of their life and the movie. The plot arch and the driving events leads to a success, the concern around which can't be overlooked in a critical methodological approach within contemporary disability studies and media criticism.

Given the fact of the representation of disability in any storyline making a great effect on the lifelong conception of the youth around disability, a critical eye can't but question the movie's take on the discourse. The narrative makes no implication of a distinction between impairment and disability as two distinct phenomena that shape an individual's lived experiences. It reinforces the medical model of disability in its portraying of Vaani's progressive condition as synonymous with the disability that she endures. This disability proves to be a hurdle not only to her but also to other characters who associate with her, especially her love interest, Krish. Also, upon diagnosis, the narrative progressively reduces her agency and individuality. Audiences perceive her less as an aspiring writer and more as a tragic patient. In this way, instead of representing disability as a form of human diversity, the narrative transforms it into exceptional suffering, into emotionally immersive narratives that youth audiences get deeply affected by throughout the course of the film's narrative progression. The use of the lens of sacrifice and doomed love in the portrayal of disability risks narrowing down and stereotyping its social understanding. Ethical disability representation, thus, is not merely an artistic concern; it is a social responsibility.

The plot also shows the use of disability as a crutch that successfully elevates the plot to the pedestal of a blockbuster romantic musical drama of 2025. The application of the disability models demonstrates that the movie's success at the box office doesn't speak for its success on ethical grounds. The paper calls for a nuanced portrayal of cultural texts that align better with medical facts, also adhere to the social model of disability and its broader sociocultural implications for audiences. A compromise on such a complex and sensitive discourse as disability for the sake of marketability and box office success risk hurting sentiments of people with impairments. A series of such portrayals and their massive consumption sets out to spread misinformation and false perception among young minds. The analysis also hints the possibility of using media and its vast exposure to one's favour, by

aiming to showcase what ought to be regarding disability and society's attitude towards it.

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Bio-note

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