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## Exploring “fat-positive” Mainstream Indian Cinema: An Analysis of their Structural Similarities

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### Abstract:

The representations of the body in popular mainstream Indian cinema have always been problematic due to the inherent biases within them. There is a long history of representing characters whose body weight does not adhere to the accepted measurements imposed by society in regular stereotypical portrayals. The practice continues even today. However, in recent mainstream Indian movies, a promising trend has been observed with fat characters presented as the protagonists. On the other hand, when we analyze the underlying structure of these movies, one cannot help but feel that they follow a cliched pattern. Even though the underlying motive behind the creation of these movies could be to increase the self-esteem and self-acceptance among fat people regarding their body image, it becomes apparent that the liberatory potential of these movies operates within certain limits. For instance, while these movies try to embrace the non-normativeness of fat bodies, ultimately, they tend to reduce fat characters to just their bodies, refusing to explore other indices of their identity beyond their body weight. This paper tries to situate the recent “progressive” trend in the representation of fatness in mainstream movies within the larger context of the stereotypical representations of the fat body and dig deep into the structural similarities of these movies to analyze the limits of this ‘liberatory’ discourse.

**Keywords:** fatness, fatphobia, Indian Cinema, structural similarities.

Is there any limit beyond which one cannot dream and aspire to greater heights? Are there any self-imposed restrictions that force us to exert control over our imaginations so that our feelings won’t get hurt in pursuance of those aspirations?

“When we started our career with Viva, we had it in our contract that we should not gain even a kilo extra on our existing weight. For us, fitness and looks were very important”.  
(Kameshwari)

“The industry is so focused on what dancers should look like. What happens to care about their talent? Why does it matter if a dancer is a size double zero or size six if it doesn’t affect her/his/their dancing?..... The focus is more on the physical appearance of the dancer, to somehow fit their body into a mould of conventional perfection overnight. Instead of trusting on the dancer’s capability and artistic essence, the focus is on what could be consumable and will be good for the market.” (Sharma)

The above-mentioned excerpts from the interviews of the famous singer Neha Bhasin and dancer Prachi Sharma respectively show how the rigorously imposed body standards in popular career choices such as singing, dancing, and acting undermine one’s excellence, demanding extra energy and effort if one wants to survive in their professions. Despite one’s talent or the intellect needed for particular roles, individuals often get judged based on preconceived notions regarding the appearance of their bodies. The faulty representations and the obsession over bodies in media and films play a vital role in synthesizing what society perceives as accepted or undesirable standards of the body, constructing unachievable body dimensions for people to fit in.

Many actors are doomed to be comedians in their movies only to be ridiculed by everyone, cracking body-shaming jokes. In the process of objectification of the body as a laughing stock, the gaze of the public and other actors falls on their “unwanted” bodily features, resulting in discriminatory binary oppositions of beautiful and ugly, diligent and lazy, and healthy and unhealthy. In the Lacanian sense, “to gaze implies more than to look at – it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze” (Stern et al. 2008), leading to the construction of dichotomies as inferior and superior bodies that the society and culture want either to maintain or to eliminate. LeBesco et al. point out that “fat is seen as repulsive, funny, ugly, unclean, obscene, and above all as something to lose” (2). Yogi Babu, the popular South Indian actor, is often depicted as disgusting and uncouth for the appearance of his fat body. For instance, he is constantly referred to as “Ilicha vaayan” (a simpleton) (Ashwin) or “Panni moonji vaayan” (pig-faced) (Priyadarshan) by other characters to show their privilege

of having bodily features that are fitting to the norm. The episode titled “Summer of 92” in the web series *Navarasa* shows that if a fat person cannot fit into the body standards by losing his “unwanted” weight, he cannot succeed in life unless he becomes a comic character who can remain tolerant of fat-shaming jokes by co-actors.

Fat-shaming appears to be an essential ingredient in mainstream films to validate popular stereotypes associated with fatness. The film titled *Mission Mangal (2019)*, which talks about the advancement of India in science and technology incorporates fat-shaming comments in which the abilities of a fat character, Tara (played by Nitya Menon), are being questioned based on her non-conformity to the ideal body standards. She is referred to as unproductive for her voluptuous body. Whereas the fatness of a woman becomes an unpardonable offence, a gigantic machine in the film is named Fat Boy for its efficiency. The obsession with thin actors and the contempt towards fat bodies maintain the existing hegemonic power structures of gender, class, and caste. The famous Malayalam film titled *Action Hero Biju (2016)* portrays a muscular police officer slapping a middle-aged man for loving a dark-skinned, lower-caste fat woman. Loving a fat woman belonging to the lower strata of society becomes a crime as she is “morally weak” and “ugly”, luring men for her sexual gratification.

The movies that promote fat positivity usher the vision of social inclusivity, respecting multitudes of existence. They often challenge the normative standards regarding unattainable notions of beauty that are rarely possessed by ordinary individuals in their real lives and continue to remain as a fantasy appearing only in films. Mainstream Indian movies like *Da Thadiya (2012)*, *Gippi (2013)*, *Laddu Babu (2014)*, *Dum Laga Ke Haisha (2015)*, *Inji Iduppazhagi (2015)*, *Thamaasha (2019)*, and *O.P.160/18 Ammini Pillai (2019)* subvert the normative body standards that valorise thin bodies by foregrounding fat people as protagonists of their stories. Though their approach is welcoming, the liberatory potential of such movies becomes limited due to their inability to deviate the narrative from the clutches of fatness. The movies often follow a formulaic pattern of narration. The representation of fat characters, the treatment of the theme, the progress of the narration, the plot, and even the climax show a similar pattern of delineation centred on the fat body alone. The obsession with the narratives centred only on fatness, together with the exaggerated depiction of the experiences of fat characters, makes it appear as if fat people do not have a story to tell except for their own lived experiences of fatness. Isn't there any possibility of

a fat-positive movie in which fat people appear as normal human beings who possess several stories to tell the world like everyone else without getting marginalized as the other in need of acceptance?

A close reading of the representations of fat characters and the scenes through which the stories unravels the structural similarities shown by the mainstream fat-positive movies. Paul Wake defines a narrative as “the ways in which we construct notions of history, politics, race, religion, identity and time. All of these things....might be understood as stories that both explain and construct the ways in which the world is experienced” (Nayar). As narratives become a medium for constructing realities, identities, and experiences, the narratives about fatness and fat positivity need to be analyzed to know the construction of fatness and the representations of fat subjects on screen.

As noted earlier, one of the notable similarities among mainstream fat-positive films is their treatment of the theme with its centeredness on fatness alone without exploring other aspects of the lives of fat protagonists. A closer examination of these movies shows the repetitive representations of several stock characters. Some of the recurrent representations include a fat hero or heroine who does not fit into the accepted standards regarding body weight, his or her parents who constantly worry about the large physique of their son or daughter, a grandfather or grandmother, or an elderly figure who is affectionate to fat characters, encouraging them to consume whatever food they like without any self-imposed discipline and concern for their “health” and a younger chubby boy who consumes an enormous amount of “unhealthy” food all the time, generating witty humour out of his eating habits.

In mainstream fat-positive movies, the fat protagonists rarely appear without a pack of fried edibles on which they keep munching or copious amounts of food to satisfy their cravings. In addition to several scenes showing the hero’s overconsumption of unhealthy food, the Malayalam film titled *Da Thadiya* (2012) contains a dining scene in which the lean heroine refuses “unhealthy” nonvegetarian food and prefers “healthy” raw vegetables. Everyone, including Luka, appreciates her “successful” coming out as a transformed lean figure through disciplined consumption and her stubbornness to remain on a diet. In the Malayalam movie, *O.P.160/18 Kakshi Ammini Pilla* (2019), everyone laughs at Kanthi, the fat heroine, for her demand for chicken

in a vegetarian restaurant, hinting at the stereotypical notion that fat people cannot contemplate anything other than food. In some instances, the representations of fat bodies end up comparing fatness with disabilities. In the Malayalam film, *Thamaasha* (2019), the hero starts loving the fat heroine when he meets his friend who eloped with his lover, who cannot speak. In the Telugu movie *Laddu Babu* (2014), Laddu Babu's father finds a bridegroom for him, who is extremely small. The pathological validation of fatness as a disorder to be wiped out by any means gets further complicated by such reductive, flawed portrayals.

One of the popular representations that recurrently appear in fat-positive films, involves the depiction of the parents of fat subjects who constantly worry about their consumption of food as their income may not be able to suffice the increasing demand of their kids. In *Laddu Babu*, the father sends his friends to collect food from the temple premises to satisfy the cravings of his son. At the same time, the elderly figures in the films seem to support the “unhealthy” food habits followed by the fat subjects. In *Da Thadiya*, Luka’s grandmother encourages him to consume whatever food he wants to fulfil his cravings. Similarly, in the Tamil Movie, *Inji Iduppazhagi*, Sweety’s grandfather permits her to eat sweets even though her mother forbids her. In addition to such formulaic representations of fat subjects as overeaters, the fat body is conceived as capable of inviting havoc to the “normal” people because their consumption of resources is shown as enormous, lacking any concern for others. For instance, in a comic scene, Laddu Babu's father cuts off the fan blades in his house to reduce the overconsumption of electricity by his son. The narratives indicate the excessive craving for food by the fat subjects and poor parenting as the root causes of fatness. Thus, in these representations, fatness becomes an outcome of one’s food choices and inability to resist one’s urges. The attribution of controllability to fatness leads to the legitimization of popular discourses concerning it. It also provides the agency for anybody to comment on the fat body.

In addition to the stereotypical representations, the fat-positive films also employ formulaic patterns of narration. Even though the makers of the films claim that their movies are liberated from the “tyranny of slenderness”, as coined by Kim Chernin (1982) to show the obsession with thin bodies in contemporary culture, these films end up showing scenes that utilise fatness as a subject of mockery. The films often fail to move away from the formulaic comedies made out of the essentialistic and reductive portrayals of fat subjects. For instance, in *Da Thadiya*, *Gippi*, and

*Inji Iduppazhagi*, laughter is generated by showing the fat protagonists falling from the chair on which they sit. Another common trope involves the attempts of fat subjects to reduce their body weight. As Fatphobia becomes a moral panic, demanding the intervention of socio-political and cultural institutions to correct "the flawed" behaviours of fat subjects, they had to undergo a weight loss transformation to get accepted in society. Sweety in *Inji Iduppazhagi* consumes harmful drugs provided by the Size Zero Clinic to burn her “unwanted” body fat. Whereas Luka follows “the miraculous” cure offered by an Ayurvedic clinic, Laddu Babu resorts to fat reduction surgery to lose weight. Such representations that construct fatness as a deadly disease provide legitimization to the diet industry and fitness centres to come up with any method that can cure “the pathological” fat body.

In these movies, fatness becomes a deviant, unfitting bodily attribute that creates trauma and trouble for those around them. As fat subjects internalize their bodies as ugly and unproductive as propagated by a fatphobic culture, they may remain indifferent to fat oppression for a while. For instance, Luka and Sweety are shown as carefree and easy-going individuals who are not bothered about their body weight at the beginning of the film. The common point at which fatness becomes problematic for fat subjects is at the juncture of their marriage or when they fall in love. Luka and Sweety start worrying about their fat bodies when they attempt to impress their lovers. In *O.P.160/18 Kakshi Ammini Pilla* and *Dum Laga ke Haisha (2015)*, the thin husbands find their fat wives ugly and sexually unattractive. Loving a fat woman becomes a benevolent act that demands them to perform their gender roles better than any other woman as their lean partners are too generous to choose them. In these movies, some fat characters become victorious in their attempt to reduce body weight and conform to the norms of society. However, most of the fat subjects fail to fit in as they are “inherently flawed” to control their bodies. Luka in *Da Thadiya*, Sweety in *Inji Iduppazhagi*, or Gippi Kaur in *Gippi* fails to reduce their body weight and come out only as fat. In the popular perception, to be a transformed self and a thin figure needs extraordinary effort and hard work, which a fat person is not capable of performing.

The linear progression of the plots in these movies involves the introduction of the fat hero or heroine followed by the reluctance shown by their partners or proposed matches for them and a formulaic climax that depicts the fat subject becoming acceptable to their partners. In *Thamaasha*, *Dum Laga ke Haisha*, and *O.P.160/18 Kakshi Ammini Pilla*, the fat bodies of the protagonists are

shown as abject, which makes their partners develop disgust towards them. The plot of *O.P.160/18 Kakshi Ammini Pilla* aligns with the long tradition of narratives in cinema backed by patriarchy, in which the wife silently suffers humiliation by her husband and relentlessly pursues him only to reunite with him in the climax. The discovery of the inherent goodness of fat characters, which is shown as masked by their body size, is another common trope in these plots. The fat characters have to prove their worth to win the lean protagonist's love and trust. Kanthi, the fat heroine in *O.P.160/18 Kakshi Ammini Pilla*, has to perform the role of an ideal wife to convince her role in her husband's life. When Luka becomes Mayor of Kochi, his lover returns to him, realizing the errors in her judgment about him. The climaxes of the films often incorporate an emotional note of the fat characters in which they confess their cravings for unhealthy food and their experiences of bullying and fat oppression. They may talk about their failed attempts at conformity that led them to accept their bodies as such with pride (fat pride). The climaxes that embrace fat positivity often serve as resistance by the fat community against the fat-phobic socio-political and cultural institutions validated by medical discourses. However, the similar formulae adopted for the climaxes and the inherent contradictions within the narratives diminish the potential of these movies to liberate fat subjects from an identity centred on the body alone.

The representations in films and media create normative discourses about how a body should look and appear in public and private spaces, marginalizing non-conforming bodies as aberrant. The faulty representations in films and the formulaic comic episodes that portray fat bodies as essentially funny for the amusement of the audience negate the scope for alternative discourses capable of destroying the socio-cultural status quo. While mainstream fat-positive movies try to embrace fat bodies as non-normative, they often tend to reduce fat characters to just their bodies, refusing to explore other indices of their identities beyond their body weight. The diverse bodies need acceptance. But recurrently constructing them as the other and universalizing their traumas and experiences undermine the fat-positive body ideals. Fat people have many stories to tell the world, not only about their fatness.

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